

Media & Health

The world of the adolescent cannot be understood without considering the profound influence of the mass media, especially television, but also movies and popular music... shaping young people's attitudes and values about acceptable behavior, their perceptions of what kind of society they live in, their place in society, and their expectations of the future.

-The Carnegie Council, "Great Transitions:
Preparing Adolescents for a New Century"

We are drowning in information, but starved for knowledge.

-John Naisbit

Every day, we're bombarded with information and images from a wide variety of media, including television, radio, newspapers, magazines, books, and the Internet. If information were knowledge, we'd all be geniuses.

Most of us use the information we receive from media to make decisions about our own lives, and the revolution in media and information technology has certainly improved the lives of many people. Yet much of the information we receive from media is biased, incomplete, misleading or downright false. When this faulty information motivates the purchase of a new consumer gadget, we might get stuck with a shoddy product. When it motivates a decision that affects our health, the consequences can be far more serious.

Nowhere is this problem more urgent than in the choices our children make about their health. The foods they eat, the amount of exercise they get, whether they smoke or drink alcohol, their sexual behavior, their handling of anger and violence – all of these choices are greatly influenced by the messages young people receive from media.

A recent survey¹ by the Kaiser Family Foundation and Children Now found that 38% of children aged 10-12 say their peers find out "a lot" about issues like alcohol, drugs, sex and violence from TV, movies and other entertainment media. (Media are tied with mothers, teachers and schools -- and ahead of fathers -- as a source of information on these issues.) Among 13-15 year olds, a full 61% say their peers find out a lot about these issues from entertainment media – way ahead of parents, teachers and schools, and trailing only friends (64%) as a source of information. (And where do you think the friends get their information?)

These are troubling findings. Even a cursory look at today's entertainment media reveals at best a confusing set of contradictory messages, and at worst a powerfully seductive appeal to engage in unhealthy, compulsive and addictive behaviors, regardless of the risks to health, safety and sanity.

Traditional approaches to health education often ignore the media environment in which all of us -- especially young people -- are immersed. But we can't prepare students to make better decisions about their health simply by providing them with accurate health information. They also have to learn how to decode and rebut the inaccurate and harmful media messages they receive every day.

Once kids learn how to see through the surface of today's media, to understand how and why they're being manipulated, they become more critical consumers of media, more receptive to other ideas and information, and better able to tell their own stories with modern media. A media literate child can be, we think, a healthier child.

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¹ Kaiser Family Foundation/Children Now, "Talking With Kids About Tough Issues: A National Survey of Parents and Kids" (1998). Available at www.kff.org/content/archive/1460/kids_t.pdf