

## Media Literacy for Prevention:

### A Science-Based Rationale

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Media literacy is a prevention strategy used by the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention, the Centers for Disease Control, the American Academy of Pediatrics, and the Safe and Drug Free Schools and Communities Program. National PTA's, Teachers' professional organizations, and the President have all endorsed media literacy. The first lady, Hillary Clinton wrote to the 1996 Conference on Media Education:

*Media has a powerful influence on our lives, and especially in the development of our children. It can shape young people's beliefs and aspirations, their sense of self and understanding of the world around them. . . By empowering our young people with a better understanding of the media, we can help them control their relationship with the vast array of media messages they receive in their everyday environment.*

Research: National PTA's, Teachers' professional organizations, and the President have all endorsed media literacy. Children who understand that the media are not real are less likely to adopt unhealthy attitudes or behaviors that are depicted in the media. (1,2) Media education represents a new and exciting approach to protecting children and adolescents from unhealthy effects of media—an approach which is not dependent on Madison Avenue's willingness to accept responsibility for its advertising.

A media-literate child or adolescent can access, analyze, evaluate, and even produce media. Many studies suggest that such education can, in fact, produce less vulnerable children and adolescents. (3,4,5) Studies of media literacy programs which attempt to educate children about advertising, for example, have been shown to be effective in increasing their critical viewing skills of advertising. (6,7) Slater, *et. al.* found that classes about resistance to advertisers' persuasive appeals have both short and long term effects. Exposure to such classes predicts cognitive resistance and counter-arguing of persuasive beer advertisements months and years after completion of the class. (8) Many other countries, including Canada, Great Britain, Australia, and several Latin American nations have successfully incorporated media education into school curricula. (2)

Media Literacy can revitalizing students' commitment to school by including in curriculum materials relevant to the culture students are immersed in. The critical need to do this was listed as a finding in the 9 year "Transitions" study by the Carnige Foundation on youth at risk. (15) This study found that education becomes increasingly irrelevant to children when they come home to a media culture that systematically devalues education. With Channel One now infiltrating many schools, media's devaluation of education has been incorporated into education itself.

Post-tests I received from more than 500 students across New Mexico that attended anti-tobacco presentations found tremendous impact. One-third of smokers reported making an attempt to quit, 70% of nonsmokers reported being less likely to smoke, and half the sample reported being angry at tobacco companies and would consider taking action to rebel against them.

A recent study found a change in children's intention to drink alcohol after a media education program. It showed that 3<sup>rd</sup> graders given media literacy training around alcohol ads showed significant attitudinal changes. They were less likely to rate alcohol ads positively, were less attracted to alcohol promotional material, and showed greater disdain for alcohol commercials. (9) Researchers looking at 9<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graders found that "the potential risk of frequent exposure to persuasive alcohol portrayals via late-night talk shows, sports, music videos, and prime-time television for underage drinking is moderated by parental reinforcement and counter-reinforcement of messages." (16) Giving parents and students the media literacy skills to "talk back" to television reduces underage drinking.

A Berkeley study found a direct correlation between the amount of exposure and the receptions children give to alcohol ads and the incidence of their drinking. (10) Media literacy training exposes the techniques tobacco and alcohol companies use to target adolescents, building their resiliency.

As with tobacco and alcohol prevention, research using media literacy to prevent eating disorders is in its infancy. Stormer & Thompson found (11) and replicated (12) that very brief instruction in media literacy produced significant pre-to-post program reductions in appearance- and weight-related anxiety, and in idealization of the slenderness embodied by fashion models and actresses among women in college. Irving, DuPen & Berel theorize that "teaching girls and women to become more active, critical consumers of appearance-related media may help to prevent the internalization of societal beauty standards, the development of body dissatisfaction, and ultimately, the development of disturbed eating practices." (p. 119) Their study of high school sophomores found that girls who watched and discussed "Slim Hopes" reported less

internalization of the thin beauty standard and lower perceived realism of media images. (17)

Media literacy education can also reduce children's susceptibility to violence. A study conducted with English 8-9 year-olds demonstrated changes in children's comprehension and awareness of media violence. (13) In 1983, Huesmann, *et al.* found statistically significant changes in children's attitudes about media violence and peer and teacher ratings of violent behavior after using media literacy. Their treatment consisted of two training sessions within a 2-week period where third graders wrote essays for a video about how harmful television violence can be. (14)

Research on the power of media literacy to promote cognitive and behavioral changes appears promising. Given the positive indications or the studies cited here, using media literacy as a prevention strategy is realistic. It can be argued that researchers are finding a media literacy approach to substance abuse effective because it works to reduce many risk factors and promote several protective factors correlated with at-risk youth. A media literacy approach to prevention can counteract the following risk factors:

- *Changing the community norms that favor at-risk behaviors* though raising a compelling awareness that debunks the glorification of the risky teenage behaviors taught in commercial media.
- *Revitalizing students' commitment to school* by including in curriculum materials relevant to the culture students are immersed in. The critical need to do this was listed as a finding in the 9 year "Transitions" study by the Carnige Foundation on youth at risk. (15) This study found that education becomes increasingly irrelevant to children when they come home to a media culture that systematically devalues education. With Channel One now infiltrating many schools, media's devaluation of education has been incorporated into education itself.
- *Reducing chances for academic failure* by teaching critical thinking; deglorifying the anti-intellectual mass media activities that consume so much of a student's time outside of school; and bringing into the curriculum exercises on topics that even the least motivated students may find more attractive.
- *Infiltrating the peer domain* by discrediting friends who engage in risky behaviors. This is done by showing teens how their friends have been manipulated by entertainment and advertising media.
- *Counteracting the pressure of friends who use drugs* by removing the power of media to endorse drug use. The classic two-step flow theory of communication identifies about 15% of the population as opinion leaders

attending to mass media to form attitudes, with 85% of the population drawing most of their attitudes from their relations with opinion leaders. Media literacy for prevention creates new sources for teen opinion leaders to form attitudes around. These new opinions opposing drug use will filter into their friends' attitudes.

- *Intervening in the individual domain* by improving students' low sense of self-efficacy. Media literacy education counters the constant bombardment of children's psyches with messages telling them they are fat or ugly and must engage in high risk behaviors in order to be valued by their peers.
- *Redirecting student's natural tendency to rebel* against the industries manipulating them into addictive lifestyles. Post-tests received from 500 students at 9 difference schools in New Mexico found that 49% of the students receiving a single media literacy presentation about tobacco advertising reported being angry at tobacco companies and considering taking action to rebel against tobacco advertisers.
- *Postponing initiation into early drug use* can also be accomplished by using media literacy as a substance abuse prevention strategy. The aforementioned survey found that 70% of non-smoking students reported being less likely to smoke, and a third of smokers attempting to quit after attending a single media literacy presentation.
- *Reversing the underestimation of the consequences and harm of drug use.* A media literacy approach to prevention tells the stories that news media and legal drug advertisers censor.

A media literacy approach to prevention can promote the following protective factors:

- *Bonding to schools and communities* can increase. As students understand how their lives become trivialized through mass media, many will be drawn to school activities. A purpose of media literacy is to communicate the understanding that corporations promote identification to their products. Looking at the number of students who wear advertising because they believe it is fashion, it is clear how prevalent this type of identification has become. Media literacy exposes the false, destructive nature of mediated identification, allowing more true, nourishing school and community bonds to be formed.
- Media literacy education tends to promote citizen activists, having a rippling effect that will *establish community norms opposing substance use*. Much of the movement to ban tobacco and alcohol billboards was spawned through media education.

- Media literacy activism also creates venues *for rewarding participation in family, school, and community activities*. Media literate activists often produce media such as counter ads or stories about topics relevant to their personal lives—stories about their families, communities, or school activities. Many media literacy teachers report that their least motivated, sometimes most troublesome students, often excel when given the opportunity to produce media about topics of interest to them.

Please feel free to use any of this analysis when writing grants. Carrying the message of media literacy's power to promote prevention, critical thinking and self-esteem is the next step towards creating a healthy culture that is not for sale.

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