

## IMPACT OF MASS MEDIA ON ADOLESCENT HEALTH

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines the relationship between the mass media and the health of young adolescents in terms of nutrition, sexual information, alcohol and tobacco, violence and stress. This discussion will address how the concept of media literacy can be used to reduce the negative influences mass media are believed to have on young people's health-related attitudes and behaviors.

### INTRODUCTION

Teens today grow up in a world saturated with the mass media. In general, the media depict a world in which unhealthy behaviors such as physical aggression, unprotected sex, smoking, and drinking are glamorous and risk-free. We summarize what is known about the media's effects on four adolescent health issues that have been studied most comprehensively: violence and aggression; sex; obesity, nutrition, and eating disorders; and alcohol and tobacco use. A number of approaches that have potential for helping turn the media into more positive forces for adolescents' health are discussed. Adolescents are engaging activity at early ages and with multiple partners. The mass media have been shown to affect a broad range of adolescent health-related attitudes and behaviors including violence, eating disorders, and tobacco and alcohol use. Given the focus of this paper it is important to establish the relationship between the mass media and the health of young adolescents. Many would agree that the media are the biggest educators in today's society (Strategies, 1992). "By age 18 a young person will have seen 350,000 commercials and spent more time being entertained by the media than any other activity except sleeping" (Davies, 1993, p. S-28).

Such media-saturation is cause for concern, especially in the area of health. Davies (1993) discussed the impact of the media on

adolescents in terms of nutrition, sexual information, alcohol and tobacco, violence, and stress. A brief review of each topic will offer some insight into the influence of mass media on the health of America's youth. More importantly, the discussion will address how the concept of media literacy can be used to reduce the negative influences mass media are believed to have on young people's health-related attitudes and behaviors.

**Nutrition:** Proper nutrition is especially important for adolescents because of their accelerated body growth. In addition, their early dietary decisions can have lifelong health implications, e.g., obesity, poor nutrition, inadequate female reproductive development (Davies, 1993). Unfortunately, adolescents are susceptible to poor nutritional habits. They often eat with peers, rather than family. Because they are growing physically they snack a lot, but the snacks are usually high in fat and calories. Adolescents also are very busy, and they argue they do not have the time to eat properly (Davies, 1993).

The media perpetuate poor diet decisions. One study estimated that early adolescents between two and 12 contributed \$82.4 billion in food and beverage purchases in 1990 (McNeal, 1992). This figure is alarming when studies show most of the advertised foods contain little nutritional content (Dwyer, 1982; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1982). Even more