

## SUPPLEMENT ARTICLE

## The Mass Media and American Adolescents' Health

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**Abstract:** American 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 © Society for Adolescent Medicine, 2002

## KEY WORDS:

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Alcohol  
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Nutrition  
Obesity  
Sexuality  
Violence

Americans always have worried about the harmful effects of the mass media on children and adolescents. In the 1920s, parents were concerned about

how Hollywood movies viewed in theaters allowed young people to be together unchaperoned in the darkness watching bigger-than-life scenes of kissing and romance. Our concerns have simply broadened since then as each new medium—radio, comic books, television, music videos, video games, and now the Internet—has been introduced. How do our children make sense of all these images, these ideas about how the world works? Do the media teach our youth that violence is an appropriate way to resolve conflict, that sexual intercourse comes before love, that only thin girls can be popular, that smoking, drinking, and using other drugs are cool?

The answer is not a simple one, primarily because American youth are such diverse audiences and because they have increasing opportunity to choose which media and aspects of those media they will attend to and perhaps learn from. But, 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. It would be hard for teens today not to be seduced by this media view.

The social scientific evidence investigating the effects of the media on adolescents' health is more robust for some health issues and some media than others. Although a great deal of research has been conducted over the past 40 years on the effect of televised violence on aggressive behavior, for example, we have only a few studies that have investigated the impact of any of the media on youth suicide or illicit drug use. Here we look briefly at what is known about the media's effects on four health issues that have been studied most comprehensively: violence and aggression; sex; obesity, nutrition, and eating disorders; and alcohol and tobacco use. We also consider a number of approaches that have potential for helping turn the media into more positive forces for adolescents' health.

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