



## *Developing healthy evaluators, not just passive consumers of mass media!*

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# **An Introduction To Media Literacy**

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. 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.

*"We are drowning in information, but starved for knowledge."*

--John Naisbit  
*Author/Futurist*

For centuries, "literacy" has referred to the ability to read and write text. But in the past century, we have replaced text-based discourse with image-based discourse. Most Americans now get most of their information from television, and increasingly, from the Internet. Textual literacy is no longer an adequate measure of one's ability to understand and use communications media. 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 survey 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.

**"Media Literacy" – the ability to critically consume and create media** – is becoming an essential skill in today's world. Media literate individuals are better able to decipher the complex messages they receive from television, radio, newspapers, magazines, books, billboards, and signs, packaging and marketing materials, video games, and the Internet. Media literacy skills can help one understand not only the surface content of media messages but the deeper and often more important meanings beneath the surface. Media literacy education seeks to give media consumers greater freedom by **teaching them to analyze, access, evaluate, and produce media**. 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. It is particularly important to use media literacy skills to analyze advertising messages. The hunt for consumer dollars is on, and teens are a prime target. Many advertisers view teens as a uniquely profitable three-in-one market: as buyers themselves, as influencers of their parents' purchases, and as future adult consumers. America's 31 million teenagers spent \$153 billion in 1999, according to the marketing firm Teenage Research Unlimited. The U.S. Census Bureau projects the number of teens to hit nearly 35 million by the year 2005, and experts expect their purchasing power will increase as well. Teens also have tremendous influence over their family's spending on everything from computer equipment and vacation destinations to fast food and supermarket purchases. Manufacturers and retailers have taken notice. A variety of products—from soft drinks to athletic shoes to CDs— are marketed directly to teenagers and preteens. However, young people also see advertising for products that aren't for them, like **cigarettes** and **alcohol**—ads that can be pervasive and convincing.