DRAWING THE CONNECTION BETWEEN MEDIA LITERACY AND HEALTH

1. Consumption of media by children and youth is at very high levels.

A Kaiser Family Foundation study found that the amount of time young people spend with entertainment media has risen dramatically over the past five years, especially among minority youth. Today, 8-18 year-olds devote an average of 7 hours and 38 minutes to using entertainment media in a typical day – more than 53 hours a week. And because they spend so much of that time ‘media multitasking’, they actually manage to pack a total of 10 hours and 45 minutes worth of media content into those 7½ hours.

A Pediatrics journal study found the average US child aged 8 months to 8 years was exposed to almost 4 hours of background television on a typical day. Younger children and African American children were exposed to more background television. The American Academy of Pediatrics has warned against “background television,” because it can harm children’s cognitive functioning and social play.

2. In the media, children are exposed to sexualization, violence, bullying, marketing of unhealthy foods, alcohol and tobacco, and unhealthy body images and gender stereotyping. Media consumption influences children’s behavior and can contribute to aggression, violence and bullying, depression, body image issues, obesity, substance abuse, and other negative effects on physical and mental health.

American Academy of Pediatrics:

Children and adolescents are particularly vulnerable to the messages conveyed through television, which influence their perceptions and behaviors. Many younger children cannot discriminate between what they see and what is real. Research has shown primary negative health effects on violence and aggressive behavior; sexuality; academic performance; body concept and self-image; nutrition, dieting, and obesity; and substance use and abuse patterns. (link)

The Center on Media and Child Health at Children’s Hospital Boston, Harvard Medical School, and Harvard School of Public Health:

The media that children use and create are integral to their growing sense of themselves, of the world, and of how they should interact with it. These pervasive, persuasive influences have been linked to both negative health outcomes, such as smoking, obesity, sexual risk behaviors, eating disorders and poor body image, anxiety, and violence, and to positive outcomes, such as civil participation, positive social behavior, tolerance, school readiness, knowledge acquisition, and positive self-image. (link)
SEXUALIZATION

American Psychological Association Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls in the Media found that the sexualization of girls and women in the media is increasingly common and virtually every media form studied provides ample evidence of the sexualization of women, including television, music videos, music lyrics, movies, magazines, sports media, video games, the Internet and advertising. The APA found that girls’ exposure to such content is linked to mental health problems such as eating disorders, low self-esteem and depression, among other negative consequences.

More general societal effects may include an increase in sexism; fewer girls pursuing careers in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM); increased rates of sexual harassment and sexual violence; and an increased demand for child pornography.

Parents Television Council found a high level of sexualization of young teenage girls on broadcast television shows aimed at 12 to 17 year olds. Among the findings, many more underage female characters than adults are shown in sexual depictions, and almost all of those are unhealthy sexual situations. At the same time, almost all of the underage female characters are portrayed as accepting their sexualization.

SEXUAL CONTENT

According to the Center on Media and Child Health, research shows that when teens are exposed to a lot of sexual content in the media, they are more likely to engage in sexual behavior and more likely to start having sexual relations at an early age.

Studies show that the amount of sexual content on TV has continued to increase over the past decade. Among the top 20 TV shows watched by teens:
- 70% contain sexual content of some kind
- 45% contain sexual behavior itself
- 10% contain a reference to sexual risks or responsibilities

Studies show that 40% of music content is sexual.

In addition, research by the Geena Davis Institute on Media and Gender, and others, finds that the unrealistic images prevalent in media lead to increased body dissatisfaction for both male and female adolescents, body image issues, anorexia, and unhealthy and unrealistic relationship expectations.

GENDER STEREOTYPES

Research by the Geena Davis Institute on Media and Gender showed that females are highly underrepresented in children's media. For example, males outnumber females 3 to 1 in family films. And when female characters do exist in media, most are stereotyped and/or hyper-sexualized. Female characters in G-rated films wear virtually the same amount of sexually revealing clothing as female characters in R-rated films, and studies show that the more television girls watch, the more limited they consider their options in life; the more boys watch, the more sexist their views become. From 2006 to 2009, not one female character was depicted in G-rated family films in the field of medical science, as a business leader, in law, or politics. In these films, 80.5% of all working characters are male and 19.5% are female.
BODY IMAGE:
Research by the Geena Davis Institute on Media and Gender, and others, finds that the unrealistic images prevalent in media lead to increased body dissatisfaction for both male and female adolescents, body image issues, anorexia, and unhealthy and unrealistic relationship expectations.

A Pediatrics study found media images of ideal male bodies have evolved to be more muscular than even the largest human body builders and that boys’ body dissatisfaction has simultaneously increased. Among boys in middle school and high school:
- 35 percent have used protein powders or substances to get bigger
- 11 percent used growth hormones or other muscle enhancing substances
- 6 percent have tried steroids
- 90 percent exercised to gain muscle size

VIOLENCE AND BULLYING
According to the American Academy of Pediatrics: In the scientific literature on media violence, the connection of media violence to real-life aggressive behavior and violence has been substantiated. As much as 10% to 20% of real-life violence may be attributable to media violence. A National Television Violence Study found the following: 1) nearly two thirds of all programming contains violence; 2) children’s shows contain the most violence; 3) portrayals of violence are usually glamorized; and 4) perpetrators often go unpunished. (link)

According to the American Psychological Association: The conclusion drawn on the basis of over 30 years of research and a sizeable number of experimental and field investigations is that viewing mass media violence leads to increases in aggressive attitudes, values, and behavior, particularly in children, and has a long-lasting effect on behavior and personality, including criminal behavior. (link)

A study published in the Journal of Communication found that of the 50 most popular television programs among 2- to 11-year-old children, 92% of the programs contained some social aggression. On average, there were 14 different incidents of social aggression per hour in these shows.

“Compared to the portrayals of physical aggression, social aggression was more likely to be enacted by an attractive perpetrator, to be featured in a humorous context, and neither rewarded or punished. In these ways, social aggression on television poses more of a risk for imitation and learning than do portrayals of physical aggression.”

JUNK FOOD
An American Academy of Pediatrics study concluded that branding food packages with licensed characters substantially influences young children’s taste preferences and snack selection and does so most strongly for energy-dense, nutrient-poor foods.

According to the Center on Media and Child Health, between 35% and 45% of all commercials on children’s television are for food, most of it unhealthy. One study found that 91% of foods advertised to children are high in fat, sugar and/or salt. The ads are cartoony and fast-paced and difficult for children to look away, and often misleading, showing magical powers, or associating health and physical activity with junk foods. And most studies on the topic show that children who spend more time with media are more likely to be overweight than children who spend less time with media. (link)
ALCOHOL AND TOBACCO

According to the Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth (CAMY) at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, numerous studies have found that the more young people are exposed to alcohol advertising and marketing, the more likely they are to drink, or if they are already drinking, to drink more. (link)

On March 8, 2012, the U.S. Surgeon General concluded that there is a causal relationship between depictions of smoking in the movies and the initiation of smoking among young people.

According to a content analysis by the AAP, mainstream television programming contains large numbers of references to cigarettes, alcohol, and illicit drugs.

African-American youth ages 12-20 see more advertisements for alcohol in magazines and on TV compared with all youth ages 12-20, according to the CAMY. According to CAMY, alcohol is the most widely used drug among African-American youth, and is associated with violence, motor vehicle crashes and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. (link)

MATERIALISM, CONSUMERISM, COMMERCIALIZATION

From the Campaign for a Commercial Free Childhood fact sheet:
“The primary message of commercial culture is that the things we buy will make us happy. In fact, that’s not true. Research tells us that our sense of wellbeing depends on relationships, a sense of community, spiritual nourishment, and/or job satisfaction, not on acquiring “things.”

Children who are more materialistic are less happy, more depressed, more anxious and have lower self-esteem. Exposure to media and marketing promotes materialistic values in children and is stressful for families.

Conflict between parents and children is directly related to children’s exposure to advertising. This generation of children is the most brand-conscious ever. Teenagers today have 145 conversations about brands per week.

44% of 4th through 8th graders report daydreaming “a lot” about being rich.

Marketers deliberately encourage children to nag their parents for products. Nagging accounts for one in three trips to fast food restaurants.

A study on commercialism in schools at Arizona State University found: "Overall, marketing activities in schools actively threaten high-quality education by causing psychological, health-related, and academic harm to students. Commercial activities offer children experiences primarily intended to serve the sponsors and not the children themselves; they are therefore inherently “mis-educative,” because they promote unreflective consumption rather than critical thinking and rational decision making."
3. **Media Literacy education is a key part of the solution**

   Media Literacy is a skill that students need to be critical thinkers, effective communicators and active citizens in today’s media-saturated world.

**American Academy of Pediatrics**

AAP **recommends** that pediatricians:

- Work with local schools to implement comprehensive media-education programs that deal with important public health issues.
- Work with the US Department of Education to support the creation and implementation of media-education curricula for school children.

**American Psychological Association**

In its **resolution on violence in the media**, the American Psychological Association supports the development, implementation, and evaluation of school-based programs to educate children and youth regarding means for critically viewing, processing, and evaluating video and film portrayals of both aggressive and prosocial behaviors.

The APA sexualization task force **recommends** that the APA advocate for funding to support the development and implementation by public agencies and private organizations of media literacy programs, including interactive media, in schools that combat sexualization and objectification.

**Recent research in support of Media Literacy education:**

**Journal of Injury Prevention, August 16, 2013:**

A longitudinal **evaluation** of the Center for Media Literacy's *Beyond Blame*: Challenging Violence in the Media curriculum by UCLA researchers shows that students of trained teachers who delivered the curriculum: a) agree that media violence may cause adverse effects b) understand CML’s Five Core Concepts* of media literacy c) mitigate their media use and d) reduce their aggression. These significant findings demonstrate that media literacy is an effective health intervention strategy as well as a proven way to enable students to acquire content knowledge.

*Five Core Concepts
1. All media messages are ‘constructed.’
2. Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules.
3. Different people experience the same media message differently.
4. Media have embedded values and points of view.
5. Most media messages are organized to gain profit and/or power

**Journal of Communications, April 24, 2012:**

Researchers reviewed fifty-one studies of media literacy interventions that were intended to enhance students’ critical analysis by increasing knowledge of the media, awareness of the influence of the media, and the ability to assess the realism of the media representation of reality.

Media literacy education was **found** to reduce risky or antisocial behaviors, increase negative beliefs about and negative attitudes toward such behaviors, and increase belief in oneself to avoid negative behaviors. Media literacy education was found to be effective for children and youth of all ages, for all topics – e.g. tobacco, violence, sex.

**Journal of Children and Media, Feb. 27, 2012:**

Center on Media and Child Health **found** that a media literacy curriculum for elementary students developed by Media Power Youth of Manchester, New Hampshire, is substantially effective in achieving its goals of helping young people understand and reduce the impact of unhealthy media messages regarding tobacco, alcohol, fast food and violence.