

'Media detective' tool empowers children to skirt alcohol and tobacco marketing messages

August 23 2010

Playing "media detective" allows children to understand the intentions of marketers and the goals of advertising while empowering them to resist messages that encourage alcohol or tobacco use.

A study published in the current journal *Pediatrics* shows that teaching [children](#) as early as third grade to be more skeptical of media messages can help prevent substance use. The study, based on the research of Erica Weintraub Austin, director of the Murrow Center for Media and Health Promotion at Washington State University, reveals that a brief, two-week course boosted the critical thinking skills of third through fifth graders and reduced their intentions to use alcohol and tobacco while increasing their belief that they will be able to resist them.

"We underestimate the extent to which young children internalize advertising messages," Austin said. "This can affect their consumer decisions later on. For example, children who associate [tobacco use](#) with popularity and independence may want to use tobacco when the opportunity arises.

"Message designers put a lot of proprietary research into making their messages appealing to young people, and children need to understand early on that messages are not always developed with their best interests in mind. This means children must and can learn to discount appeals to their emotions."

According to the research of Austin and colleagues, people internalize or

reject media messages through a process that is partly logical and partly emotional. [Teaching children](#) to recognize that message makers want them to react with their emotions can help them react more logically instead.

The study was conducted by Innovation Research Training, Inc, based in North Carolina. Elementary schools were randomly assigned to receive the "Media Detective" program or to serve in a control group. The 344 children who had the Media Detective lessons showed less interest in alcohol-branded merchandise than the 335 in the control group. Also, students in the Media Detective group who had used alcohol or tobacco in the past reported significantly less intention to use and a greater ability to refuse substances than similar students who were in the control group. The lessons especially helped boys.

Previous research by Austin and the team of researchers in The Edward R. Murrow College of Communication's Center for Media & Health Promotion have shown that media literacy can serve as a valuable tool for preventing substance use, for teaching sex education, and for getting young people interested in public affairs and voting. Most previous work has been done with adolescents, however, and the study in "Pediatrics" is among the first to verify that teaching younger children can be useful as well.

Austin says, "Media literacy has the potential to help reduce health disparities in the future, because individuals who need it the most seem to benefit the most. We think that is quite exciting."

More information: The study, "Media Literacy Education for Elementary School Substance Use Prevention: Study of Media Detective," by Janis Beth Kupersmidt, Tracy Marie Scull and Erica Weintraub Austin, appears in the issue of Pediatrics published on Aug. 23.

Provided by Washington State University

Citation: 'Media detective' tool empowers children to skirt alcohol and tobacco marketing messages (2010, August 23) retrieved 16 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-08-media-tool-empowers-children-skirt.html>

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