

Children, Adolescents, and the Media: Health Effects

Victor C. Strasburger, MD^{a,*}, Amy B. Jordan, PhD^b,
Ed Donnerstein, PhD^c

KEYWORDS

• Media • TV • New technology • Internet • Cyberbullying • Sexting • Media literacy

KEY POINTS

- Young people now spend 7 to 11 hours per day with a variety of different media—more time than they spend in school or sleeping.
- Research has shown that children and teenagers learn from the media, and their behavior can be influenced by media.
- Media can have significant effects on health: eg, obesity, aggressive behavior, substance use, early sexual activity, eating disorders.
- Media can be powerfully prosocial at times.
- Parents, clinicians, and schools need to adapt to the world of new technology and understand the influence that media can have on young people.

True, media violence is not likely to turn an otherwise fine child into a violent criminal. But, just as every cigarette one smokes increases a little bit the likelihood of a lung tumor someday, every violent show one watches increases just a little bit the likelihood of behaving more aggressively in some situation.

—Psychologists Brad Bushman and L. Rowell Huesmann^{1(p248)}

“Something’s in the air, and I wouldn’t call it love. Like never before, our kids are being bombarded by images of oversexed, underdressed celebrities who can’t seem to step out of a car without displaying their well-waxed private parts to photographers.”

—Lead article, *Newsweek*, February 12, 2007²

One erect penis on a US screen is more incendiary than a thousand guns.

—*Newsweek* critic David Ansen^{3(p66)}

^a Department of Pediatrics, Division of Adolescent Medicine, University of New Mexico School of Medicine, MSC10 5590, 1 University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM 87131, USA; ^b Media and Developing Child Sector, Annenberg Public Policy Center, University of Pennsylvania, 202 South 36th Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104-6220, USA; ^c Department of Communication, University of Arizona, 1103 East University Boulevard, PO Box 210025, Tucson, AZ 85721, USA

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: VStrasburger@salud.unm.edu

A cigarette in the hands of a Hollywood star onscreen is a gun aimed at a 12- or 14-year-old.

—Screenwriter Joe Eszterhas⁴

Research shows that virtually all women are ashamed of their bodies. It used to be adult women, teenage girls, who were ashamed, but now you see the shame down to very young girls—10, 11 years old. Society's standard of beauty is an image that is literally just short of starvation for most women.

—Best-selling author Mary Pipher⁵

[My doctor's] only gone to one medical school, but if you go online, you can get advice from all over the world.

—Teenager quoted in *TECHsex USA*, 2011^{6(p17)}

We are doing our youth a disservice if we believe that we can protect them from the world by limiting their access to public life. They must enter that arena, make mistakes, and learn from them. Our role as adults is not to be their policemen, but to be their guide.

—danah boyd, 2007⁷

Media represent one of the most powerful and underappreciated influences on child and adolescent development and health. More than 50 years of media research and thousands of media effects studies attest to the potential power of the media to influence virtually every concern that parents and clinicians have about young people: aggressive behavior, sex, drugs, obesity, eating disorders, school performance, suicide, and depression.⁸ Although the media cannot be accused of being the leading cause of any of these health problems, they can make a substantial contribution. Yet media can also be powerfully beneficial in the lives of children and adolescents. Not only can they teach young children numbers and letters and increase school readiness (eg, *Sesame Street*),⁹ the media can also teach more abstract concepts like empathy, acceptance of diversity, and respect for the elderly.^{10,11} Clearly, much more research is needed,¹² but clinicians, parents, school administrators, and government officials all need to be aware of the research on the effects of modern media and act accordingly (**Fig. 1**).

“OLD” VERSUS “NEW” MEDIA

According to a recent report, media represent the leading leisure-time activity for both children and adolescents (**Fig. 2**).¹³ Young people spend more than 7 hours a day with a variety of different media, but despite the onslaught of new media “gadgets”



Fig. 1. (Copyright © Patrick O'Connor/The Kent-Ravenna, Ohio Record Courier. Used with permission.)

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