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CHILDREN ARE STILL MAKING THE DECISION TO SMOKE

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If you ask the average eighth-grader whether smoking is unhealthy, the vast majority would say yes. Chances are, they've learned all about the dangers of smoking in a health class or at home from mom and dad.

But according to statistics from the federal Substance Abuse & Mental Health Administration, today alone, more than 4,400 U.S. teens will take up the habit.

It seems that somewhere between health class, family discussions about healthy behaviors and adolescence, kids are still making the decision to light up. Although teen smoking rates are lower than in the past, they're not low enough. By the time they graduate from high school, about 25 percent of teens will smoke.

The reasons young people smoke vary. Past research has shown that teens may be especially likely to start because many of their celebrity role models and favorite movie characters smoke. Trendy ads and event sponsorships also send a message that smoking is cool.

But a recently published study from the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine indicates that there's a skill we can teach our children to help combat stylish images of smoking, inform and empower them, and decrease the likelihood that they'll light up.

It's called Smoking Media Literacy (SML) - the ability critically to evaluate advertisements and other images and messages related to smoking.

"When it comes to determining which factors influence a teen's decision to smoke, media influences are as important - or even more important - than we previously thought," said Dr. Brian Primack, lead author and assistant professor in the School of Medicine's Division of

General Internal Medicine.

When children learn to question the motives and methods of advertisers, Primack said by phone, they'll be less susceptible to the images they see in magazines and movies.

"They can learn how the industry specifically markets to kids," Primack said. "They can notice ads more carefully and pick up subliminal messages like why a 'slim' font is chosen for a cigarette that appeals to young women. And they can learn how they're being manipulated by the industry."

Primack said that visual images are very powerful.

"They're processed in the part of the brain that's connected to emotions," he said. "We hope to give children the skills to invoke the thinking part of their brain."

According to recent statistics, the tobacco industry spends about \$26 million a day on advertising and marketing. So the positive images associated with smoking aren't likely to go away anytime soon. While we can't shield our kids from the images, Primack suggests we can help them look at the messages with a critical eye.

Here are some suggestions:

- * Go behind the scenes. Primack encourages parents to help children think about what they see, as well as what they don't see. There's a lot that goes into creating an advertisement, he said, and each part can influence whether or not a person decides to purchase a product. Questions to consider include: What is this ad trying to say? How does it differ from reality? How are ad executives trying to get their message across?

- * Look for teachable moments. "If you pass a billboard or flip through a magazine and notice an advertisement for cigarettes, talk about it with your child," Primack suggested. "Media and ads can be great springboards to education because you're starting with something that's familiar." The goal, he says, is to help kids pay more attention to the people who created the ad than the model or actor hired to promote the product.

- * Share the facts. Kids need to know the dangers of smoking, but it's best to present them in an open, honest manner - not a judgmental one, Primack said. You're more likely to capture your kids' attention when you create a "talk to me" atmosphere.

- * Start early. "Middle school is a good time to start teaching smoking media literacy because that's when critical thinking skills and formal logical thought are rapidly developing," Primack said.

But there are things we can do even earlier. "Talk to your kids about the advertisements they see on television," he suggested. "Even when the ads have nothing to do with smoking, encourage your children to notice the differences between what they see on TV and what they see in real life." This can help develop good critical thinking skills later on, he said.

* Keep it interesting. Although the issue of teen smoking is a serious one, the process of understanding how media might influence behaviors can be a positive experience for families.

“The media are meant to be enjoyed,” Primack said. “The key is to watch them critically.”

Primack hopes parents and kids will enjoy looking at ads together and figuring out how they're created to send a message. “Make it fun,” he said.

Instead of looking at ads and becoming more likely to smoke, Primack hopes teens will think about how the images and messages differ from reality.

“Hopefully, this insight will influence their decision to make healthy choices for themselves,” Primack said.

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