

Anticipatory Guidance: Media and Substance Use

Depictions of substance use are prolific in media, and usually appear in one of two forms: advertising, in which alcohol, tobacco, and vaping products are marketed towards youth, and media messages, in which alcohol, tobacco, and drugs are often glorified without showing the consequences. Research shows that certain types of media can influence the way youth think about substance use, which in turn can affect their relationships with them. Subsequently, it is important to understand how substance use portrayals in media affect children.

What the Evidence Says

- Commercials for alcohol can be found in almost all forms of media, and can have a lasting effect on youth. Longitudinal studies show that exposure to alcohol advertising leads to future alcohol use.¹
- Substance use in TV and movies can affect children's beliefs and behaviors. Studies show that approximately 80% of a child's smoking exposure was in movies rated G, PG, or PG-13.²
- Studies have shown a causal relationship between media exposure and substance use, with the strongest link between media and tobacco use.³
- Many forms of lyrical music contain references to substance use, especially alcohol and marijuana.⁴
- Exposure to these types of media messages that show substance use being normative and without consequences may lead to adolescents accepting these messages as their beliefs, fueling the potential for them to experiment with substance use.

Recommendations

- Educate parents about how portrayals of characters and celebrities drinking, using drugs, vaping or smoking in media can directly affect how their child views these activities. Subsequently, recommend that parents monitor and limit (when possible) their child's exposure to media containing glorified substance use.
- Describe how parents can teach media literacy skills to children and teens in order to recognize and respond to advertisements and other depictions of substance use.
- Encourage parents to set a good example by avoiding media use in front of their children that glorifies alcohol, tobacco, or drug use.
- During the well child visit, talk about media in relation to substance abuse. This opens the door for conversation and offers a way for the patient and/or parents to bring up any questions they might have.

Future Directions

As the body of research grows, there is more evidence that suggests that the media can play a role as to whether a child or teen will experiment with drugs, alcohol, and tobacco. We need to consider more innovative ways to reach youth with anti-substance use campaigns, and to use media to promote practical skills for dealing with peer pressure.

References

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Suggested Reading

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