

Seeing Through the Smoke

BY ELIZABETH PAGEL-HOGAN

EVERY DAY, 2,000 TEENS BECOME REGULAR SMOKERS, AND ABOUT HALF WILL EVENTUALLY DIE FROM A SMOKING RELATED DISEASE. BECAUSE THEIR CUSTOMERS ARE LITERALLY DISAPPEARING, TOBACCO COMPANIES ARE ALWAYS LOOKING TO FIND NEW ONES AND THEY ARE TARGETING OUR KIDS.

"Tobacco companies are looking for kids to start smoking to replace their lost revenue from consumers who have died," says Nancy Joyce from Tobacco-Free Allegheny.

Parents know they need to talk to their kids about smoking. But tobacco companies are enticing kids to try tobacco with magazine ads and cigarette placement in movies. The Centers for Disease Control found in the past eight years, 90 percent of the top grossing R-rated films featured tobacco and 70 percent of the youth films, (rated G, PG or PG-13) also included tobacco.

Many parents wonder, can they really help their kids avoid tobacco?

"Yes," says Dr. Brian Primack, author of a study at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine. "Parents can teach 'smoking media literacy' (SML) to their kids. The techniques are simple. There is always opportunity to practice, since at nearly every moment of the day you are surrounded by advertisements."

Smoking Media Literacy can help



parents fight the influence of advertising. Primack's research showed that teens with better SML understood that advertising is a tool. These teens were less likely to smoke and agreed with statements like, "Most movies and TV shows that show people smoking make it look more attractive than it really is," and "Advertisements usually leave out a lot of important information."

Primack uses a mnemonic device called "Ad It Up." For instance, "A" for "author" encourages teens to think about the author and motives of the ad

(to get you to buy the product) while the "T" for "technique" shows kids that lighting, cropping and editing techniques can make something appear more attractive than it actually is.

Many current prevention programs in schools fail because they rely too much on negative messages. "It's in the developmental nature of a normal teenager to rebel against 'don't' messages," says Primack. "SML taps into this inherent rebelliousness by encouraging rebellion against the wealthy and manipulative tobacco industry."

Elizabeth Pagel-Hogan is a Community Cancer Control Specialist for the American Cancer Society, Western Region. To learn about bringing this program to your child's school, contact Dr. Primack at primackba@upmc.edu. Parents can visit the Center for Media Literacy (www.medialit.org) and the Alliance for a Media Literate America (www.aanlinfo.org) for more information.



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