

Media-Smart Youth

Eat, Think, and Be Active!

★ What is the Media-Smart Youth program?

Media-Smart Youth: Eat, Think, and Be Active! is an interactive after-school education program that helps young people ages 11 to 13 understand the complex media world around them, and how it can influence their health—especially in regard to nutrition and physical activity. The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), part of the National Institutes of Health within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, created **Media-Smart Youth** to empower young people to think critically about media and make thoughtful decisions about nutrition and physical activity.

★ Why is Media-Smart Youth needed?

Every day, 11- to 14-year-old youth spend nearly 7 hours using media, including television, computers, and video games. They encounter a barrage of marketing and advertising messages.¹ In fact, over the last 3 decades, the number of television commercials children viewed rose from about 20,000 per year (in the 1970s) to more than 40,000 per year.² The majority of these advertisements are for food, primarily candy, cereal, and fast food.³

Health experts are calling for nationwide action to stem the rising rates of childhood overweight and obesity. According to a 2005 report from the Institute of Medicine, more than 15 percent of young people in the United States are obese, and many more are at risk for becoming overweight or obese.⁴ Youth take in more calories than they need, but most don't meet recommended intakes for several essential nutrients, including calcium, potassium, and dietary fiber.⁵ Nearly half of American youth ages 12 to 21 are not physically active on a regular basis.⁶

In response to these trends, congress asked four federal agencies within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to develop education programs that reinforce positive behaviors, such as being physically active and eating nutritious foods.

Through media awareness
and media production,
Media-Smart Youth
motivates young people to
think about nutrition and
physical activity and helps
them become aware of
the connections between
media and their health.



What do youth do in the Media-Smart Youth program?

Through 10 structured lessons and numerous helpful resources, young people become media savvy by doing fun, hands-on activities.

The curriculum focuses on four key areas:

- ◆ **Media awareness:** Using the 6 Media Questions, young people learn to analyze and recognize techniques that media use to get their attention, and to evaluate obvious and subtle media messages for accuracy and for consistency with their ideas about being healthy.

- ◆ **Media production:** Youth express what they learn by creating a *Mini-Production*, in which they develop their own media messages. The *Big Production*, the program's culminating project, enables youth to create media products that promote healthy nutrition and physical activity to their peers.

- ◆ **Nutrition:** A variety of activities encourage youth to choose fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and calcium-rich foods, and to reduce their consumption of fat and added sugar. Lessons also encourage youth to be thoughtful when choosing snacks and include a *Snack Break* when youth enjoy nutritious foods they may not have tried before.

- ◆ **Physical activity:** Participants learn the importance of daily physical activity in promoting health and develop strategies for becoming more active in their daily lives. Physical activity, they discover, is anything that gets their bodies moving, including

walking the dog, dancing, or helping carry groceries. A 10-minute *Action Break* during each lesson engages youth in a fun physical activity.

Each **Media-Smart Youth** Kit includes:

- ◆ The **Facilitator's Guide**, outlining the 10-lesson after-school curriculum and the *Big Production*.
- ◆ A **poster** of the 6 Media Questions that youth learn to ask.
- ◆ A **video** and **DVD** with segments to supplement the lessons and provide an overview of the program for adult facilitators and youth participants.



References

- 1 Roberts, D., & Foehr, U. (2004). *Kids & media in America*. United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.
- 2 Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation. (2004, February). *The role of media in childhood obesity*. (Publication 7030). Available at www.kff.org
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Institute of Medicine. (2005). *Preventing childhood obesity: Health in the balance*. (pp. 55-56). Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.
- 5 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Agriculture. (2005). *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*. Available online at www.health.gov/dietaryguidelines/dga2005/document/
- 6 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion. (1996). *Physical activity and health: A report of the Surgeon General*. Available online at www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/sgr.htm
- 7 Mediascope. (2003). *Media use in America*. (Issue brief). Universal City, CA: Mediascope Press. Available at www.mediascope.org/pubs/ibriefs/mua.htm

★ What are the program's goals?

Media-Smart Youth was designed to:

- ◆ Help 11- to 13-year old youth become aware of—and think critically about—media's role in influencing their nutrition and physical activity choices.
- ◆ Assist young people in building skills that help them make informed decisions about being physically active and eating nutritiously in daily life.
- ◆ Encourage young people to establish healthy habits that will last into adulthood.

★ Why does the program focus on media?

Different forms of media (such as television or the Internet) are among the influences on young people's attitudes about many topics, including health. By exposing youth to messages about what, when, why, and how to eat, media present powerful, and sometimes confusing, models of health behaviors. Media also send both subtle and obvious messages about body image and prevailing societal attitudes. Additionally, most media provide passive entertainment, which often comes at the expense of physical activity. In fact, each hour of television children watch increases the probability that they will become obese by 2 percent.⁷

Media education can counteract these effects by helping young people become critical, creative thinkers. **Media-Smart Youth** teaches young people to analyze, evaluate, and create media messages—knowledge that can help youth make smart and positive choices about nutrition and physical activity every day.

★ How was the program developed?

The NICHD developed the **Media-Smart Youth** curriculum and then conducted a rigorous review and testing of the concepts and materials. The initial program was implemented by youth-serving organizations across the nation. Facilitators and youth participants provided feedback, which was incorporated into the program materials.

Media-Smart Youth combines youth-development principles and practices with the most current research findings and general recommendations about nutrition and physical activity. The program is consistent with national learning standards, and the curriculum includes a chart that describes how the lessons and activities meet these standards.

★ How will the program be evaluated?

The NICHD is conducting a formal evaluation of the **Media-Smart Youth** curriculum designed to show whether, upon completion of the program, youth have gained: skills in analyzing media messages; knowledge of basic principles of healthful and nutritious foods, and awareness of healthful food choices in real-life settings; and knowledge of the importance of daily physical activity in promoting health, and new ideas for how to be more active in their daily lives.

★ How can I learn more about Media-Smart Youth?

For more information, or to order free copies of the **Media-Smart Youth** after-school program materials, contact:

NICHD Information Resource Center

Mail: P.O. Box 3006, Rockville, MD 20847

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