

**This Just in...** are quick summaries of new health marketing and communication research and trends. These brief "nuggets" spotlight new findings with communication practice implications for CDC and its public health partners.

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## Children don't just learn about junk food from television, new study shows they also learn from health-related messages.

**Research objective:** Children learn from a variety of televised programs, including the short public service announcements (PSAs) that air between children's programs. PSAs are designed to repetitively expose children to important content ranging from the benefits of reading to health-related messages. This study examined whether preschoolers learned health-related knowledge from short PSAs, whether they applied that knowledge in the same way featured by the host character, if they transferred that knowledge to novel choice situations, and whether the child's familiarity with a host character changed these effects.

**Methods:** Initially, 115 preschool children attending four child care centers located in the downtown areas of two midsize cities whose parents provided written consent participated. Two children were dropped from the treatment group and five from the control group due to incomplete data. Five of the children had identified disabilities and were equally spread across the two viewing conditions. Using an experimental design, 108 preschool children (58% boys with an average age of 3.7 years) viewed either five health-related PSAs (fruits/vegetables, indoor exercise, healthy breakfast choices, healthy snacks, and hand washing) or five non-health messages (i.e., animal PSAs) that were similar in length to the health messages interspersed in an episode of Clifford, the Big Red Dog. The measures included: (a) Demographic information of parents' years of education, family size, and income; (b) parent reports of child's ability to engage in and frequency of health-related behaviors; (c) children's comprehension of entertainment content measured by their recall of superficial elements (i.e., auditory or visual elements that were irrelevant to the plot of each message) unique to the PSAs viewed; (d) children's comprehension of educational content measured by their recall of the primary message of each PSA; (e) near-transfer choices which measured understanding of the underlying message by evaluating a child's ability to apply this understanding to choices similar to those found in the original PSA; and (f) far-transfer choices which measured a child's ability to extend understanding of the underlying educational message to new problems in novel situations.

**Findings:** Overall, as compared with their preschool classmates who viewed the animal PSAs, the preschool health PSA viewers were better able to identify the educational content found in each message (87% correct for health PSA viewers vs. 64% correct for animal PSA viewers), successfully imitate the near-transfer choices modeled in each message (83% correct for health PSA viewers vs. 64% correct for animal PSA viewers), and then transfer both the educational content and near-transfer knowledge to novel learning choice situations (74% correct for health PSA viewers vs. 54% correct among animal PSA viewers). However, both groups' scores were fairly high, most likely reflecting prior knowledge. There were no differences between the two groups on entertainment comprehension questions.

### Practice implications for health communication professionals:

The results of this study confirm that children can learn from well-constructed televised messages promoting positive health behaviors. Children familiar with host characters are able to retain the host character's message when delivered in the child's natural environment, and to pull out that information when needed. Given these results, consider incorporating health-related PSAs in children's programming with repeated exposure to both the host character and the message. Repeated exposure allows children to store and retrieve relevant health information. It is most effective to either repeatedly air the same PSA or pair the PSA with a program episode that features the same themes as the PSA.

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For additional information, contact Lynn Sokler, SPCB, at [Lsokler@cdc.gov](mailto:Lsokler@cdc.gov) or send comments and questions to [SPCBHealthMktg@cdc.gov](mailto:SPCBHealthMktg@cdc.gov).