During adolescence, young people experience a vast amount of changes in their physical, emotional, and social maturity. During this stage, outside influences are particularly capable of affecting teenagers’ thoughts and behaviors. One influence that has proven to have a considerable effect on teenagers is the media.

**TYPES OF MEDIA ADOLESCENTS ACCESS**

Adolescents are spending more and more of their free time interacting with different types of media. For example, young people spend almost three hours per day watching television (U.S. Department of Education [DOE], 2002). Unfortunately, many of the shows they watch contain alcohol advertisements, acts of violence, and unrealistic body images. Consider this:

- The most popular form of media that adolescents use is the Internet. Web sites that adolescents regularly visit include Yahoo, AOL, MSN, and Microsoft. Several of these Web sites have minimal restrictions and contain information regarding drugs, alcohol, sex, and violence (Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation [KFF], 2002).

- Television is another type of media that has become increasingly popular, as adolescent programming is now more common (KFF, 2002). Unfortunately, alcoholic beverages are frequently advertised during youth-oriented programming. In fact, young people see more commercials for alcohol than for clothes or any other product (Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth [CAMY], 2005). Furthermore, several television shows portray forms of violent behavior as glamorous and powerful with little or no consequence (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [HHS], 2001).

- Movies are another form of media that is admired by adolescents, especially those that contain scenes where characters are violent. This material can initiate aggressive behavior (i.e., robbery, assault, rape, or homicide) and thoughts in adolescents, especially right after they witness the violent act portrayed on film (HHS, 2001).

- Magazines are also frequently viewed by adolescents. However, many magazines, especially those geared towards adolescents, often contain pictures of models with unhealthy body weights (Mediascope, 2000).

**SPECIFIC ISSUES INFLUENCED BY THE MEDIA**

The media can influence adolescent health in a variety of ways. Media images frequently have an impact on body image, alcohol, tobacco, and drug use, and potential violent behavior.

**Eating Disorders**

During adolescence, many teenagers desire an ideal weight, which relates to their image, something that is very important to them. The media and advertisers reinforce unrealistic body weights as they convey to women and young girls that 10 percent body fat is the ideal, when 22 percent body fat is actually considered healthier (Heilman, 1998). This may be the reason why 95 percent of people with eating disorders are between the ages of 12 and 25 (Screening for Mental Health, 2005).

Magazines are another form of media that influences attitudes about body image, as they contain numerous photos of models and teenage idols. Frequently, adolescents want to look like these models and teen idols and may try to replicate them in unhealthy ways. The images seen in magazines are often unrealistic as most are airbrushed and enhanced by the computer. Pictures that are authentic may be of models that meet the clinical diagnosis threshold for eating disorders (Richardson, 2003). As a result, media images can influence unhealthy eating habits among adolescents.
Focus on Substance Abuse, Alcohol Abuse, and Smoking

It is customary today to witness information or advertisements in the media pertaining to drugs, alcohol, and smoking. Alcohol advertisements are frequently placed during youth-oriented television programs and in magazines (CAMY, 2005). Furthermore, many “blockbuster”movies and popular television programs depict individuals using and/or abusing alcohol, tobacco, and drugs (Ericson, 2001). The characters depicted are usually the rebellious roles in movies and television. Adolescents are more prone to identify with them since, during this stage of development, they are typically “impressed by individuals who take risks” (Mediascope, 1999).

Focus on Violence

Studies have shown that violence is now on two-thirds of all television programs and it is often glamorized (KFF, 2003). Villains become heroes and often get rewarded instead of facing consequences (HHS, 2001). Furthermore, violence on television can increase aggression and anti-social behavior for teenagers, and therefore, adolescents who watch a lot of television violence face increased risks for dangerous and criminal behavior (KFF, 2003).

Social Work Implications

To make teenagers’ experience with the media more positive, it is important for social workers to consider a variety of factors in adolescents’ environments. These factors include, but are not limited to, parents/guardians, individuals and groups, and schools and communities (National Institute on Drug Abuse [NIDA], 2003).

Parents/Guardians

- Social workers can help parents learn about and use programs that can filter out harmful media content. A popular filter is the V-chip, which can detect if TV movies are rated PG, PG-13, R, or X. Also, computer filters similar to the V-chip can determine which Web sites their teenagers are visiting (DOE, 2002).
- Social workers can work with parents to improve their communication skills with adolescents regarding the television shows and movies they watch, as well as the books they read (HHS, 2001).
- Social workers can encourage parents to become familiar with programs their adolescents are watching on television and to monitor them as needed (DOE, 2002).
- Social workers can also encourage parents to discuss with their teenagers the dangers of chat rooms, including the lack of screening involved in them and their potential threat (DOE, 2002).

Individuals and Groups

- It is important to understand how peers can affect each other during adolescence. Social workers can discuss with teenagers what they are hearing from each other concerning media images (NIDA, 2003).
- Social workers can conduct groups that help adolescents explore their own personal identity issues by discussing these issues in a peer setting. Methods used in these groups can include role-playing, communication techniques, social skill building, and anticipatory guidance (Walsh-Burke & Scanlon, 2000).
• Social workers can help teens develop the skills to critique media messages by analyzing television programs, movies, and magazines that contain violence, substance abuse, and unhealthy body images in groups or classroom discussions (Walsh-Burke & Scanlon, 2000).

Schools and Communities

• Schools have increasingly become the place where adolescents interact with adults (Heilman, 1998). Teachers, administrations, and school staff need to be aware of current media trends and how they affect adolescents (Beresin, 1999).

• Teachers and school social workers can request materials to conduct classroom activities regarding media messages (Beresin, 1999).

• Social workers can advocate for reductions in negative advertising by actively collaborating with other professionals and parents. For example, social workers can build a coalition of community organizations and associations that advocate as a group (Wartella & Jennings, 2000).

• Social workers should lobby organizations about the negative effects of the media. For example, they can lobby the Federal Trade Commission on increasing restrictions on alcohol advertising (CAMY, 2005).

• Community agencies need to advocate for counter-advertising, which discusses the negative effects of drugs and alcohol (Agostinelli & Grube, 2002).
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