

# ENHANCING ABSTINENCE EDUCATION WITH MEDIA LITERACY

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## Introduction

One of the most influential shared reasons among all adolescents for sexual involvement is a social climate in which the media dominates in the provision of knowledge, shaping of attitudes, and role modeling of behaviors. When it comes to sex, the media rarely promotes medically accurate and health-enhancing images—instead it often presents an influential portrait of sexuality in which sexual risk behaviors are consequences-free. The premise of the project is that the immediate gains of abstinence programs and other related health education efforts are likely to be substantially undermined over time unless youth and their parents are helped to “get the rap on the media.” The purpose of the DHHS-OAPP intervention is to increase the efficacy of existing abstinence programming statewide in Georgia through testing and dissemination of an intervention aimed at reducing the harmful influence of the media on adolescent sexual attitudes and behaviors.

*Approach: Media Madness* is a two-prong intervention. The five-session youth curriculum is aimed at helping youth develop the ability to distinguish between harmful and helpful media messages about sex and learn ways of acting constructively in relation to those distinctions. The two-session parent curriculum is aimed at helping parents better understand the media’s impact on their children and engage in effective parent/child communication about it and its sexual messages. The five-year project includes testing of the intervention, along with offering training and intervention materials to all 180 Georgia school systems with the objective of reaching a minimum of 25,000 youth, and 2,500 parents across the state with the youth and parent curriculums.

## Methods

The theory-driven youth *Media Madness* intervention is aimed at the middle school. Testing is being undertaken locally at all three middle school grade levels—8<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 6<sup>th</sup>. Under treatment and control conditions, the eighth grade group was tested pre and post and at a 6<sup>th</sup> month follow-up and compared to an 8<sup>th</sup> grade group receiving an existing program that has a media component (425 intervention students, 764 control students). This was done to determine the relative usefulness of the media intervention program when compared with regular programming. Under treatment and control conditions, the 7<sup>th</sup> grade group was tested pre and post in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade and is being followed up in 8<sup>th</sup> grade (268 intervention students, 497 control students). This is being done to test the project’s primary tenet—that education focused on the media’s sexual messages can enhance existing abstinence education. Under treatment and control conditions, the 6<sup>th</sup> grade group is to be tested pre and post intervention and followed up in 7<sup>th</sup> grade (400 intervention students planned, 400 control students planned). This is to further test the project’ main tenet and also to determine the best middle school grade placement for the intervention. Findings from these local studies are being compared with intervention data collected from 20 school systems statewide.

## Results

The project has made significant progress in meeting its twofold objectives of (1) identifying the potential contribution of the intervention and determining the best grade placement for it, and (2) disseminating the intervention through training 500 adults to reach 25,000 Georgia youth with the *Media Madness* program for youth and training 250 adults to reach 2,500 Georgia parents with the *Media Madness* program for parents.

### First Objective:

#### *Local Preliminary Findings*

Local studies have resulted in 97% of intervention youth reporting that they learned new information, 86% thinking they will be less influenced by the media, 89% believing the information and skills they learned will help them make decisions about sex. At the 6<sup>th</sup> month follow-up, in contrast to their initial responses, youth who were given the intervention showed that positive pre-existing knowledge, attitudes, and self-efficacy had been reinforced and strengthened significantly on all key measures. The data also showed significant changes on nearly three-quarters of the key measures for youth who did not have positive pre-existing knowledge, attitudes and self-efficacy. In contrast, the control group of 207 students who had some media information as part of their regular abstinence program showed significant differences on less than half of the key measures.

### *State Preliminary Findings*

Data collected from 20 school systems statewide indicate findings similar to those obtained during testing in the local school study. State youth had statistically significant gains pre and post intervention ( $p < .05$ ) in knowledge, attitudes, and self-efficacy on all seven (7) of the key measures related specifically to the media. Youth increased understanding that: a) the goal of the media is to make money b) everything in the media is edited or changed one way or another, and c) the media can influence teens to make choices about sex that they may regret. Also, youth increased personally knowing: a) when a sexual message in the media is not good for them, and b) the difference between what they believe and what the media has told them to believe about sex. Finally, youth increased the ability to: a) do what is best for them about sex even if the media tells them to do the opposite and b) resist harmful messages about sex that their friends repeat from the media. Of importance, the proportion of statewide youth choosing not to wait (11.3% at pretest and 10.4 % at post-test) did not differ significantly. However, at post-test, those choosing to wait were significantly more likely to state that they would wait longer (to age 18 or 21) and wait until until they were married.

### **Second Objective:**

Training and dissemination of the intervention thus far has resulted in 209 trained adults who have agreed to reach 9,500 youth with the Media Madness Youth Series and 87 trained adults who have agreed to reach 1,235 parents with the Media Madness Parent Series, indicating the program is nearly half-way to reaching its targeted dissemination numbers.

## **Discussion**

At the beginning of the project, an attempt was made to add the media intervention to an ongoing abstinence program to strengthen the media aspect. Teachers in the target school system ultimately felt that too much time was being given abstinence out of their scarce health class time. Talks with other school systems indicated that would be a problem for them as well. As a result of that experience, although the media intervention can be used as a proximal “add-on” in schools, it was decided to test out the intervention as a distal “add-on”, giving the intervention in health classes the year before a regular abstinence program. Prior to this further testing, however, the intervention was compared with a regular abstinence program to assure that it was adding an important media dimension. Positive findings indicated this was so.

## **Implications**

Data being collected during the 2008-2009 school year will help determine the value of using the media intervention the prior school year as an enhancement to regular abstinence programming. It will also point to whether or not attention given to media influences can assist young people in resisting harmful media messages about sex. Initial state data tends to suggest that adding the positive outcomes of *Media Madness* to positive results of already existing abstinence programs in Georgia, should increase youth abstinence in the state through delaying start of sexual behavior and thus enhance and strengthen the state’s abstinence programming.

## **Contact Information**

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