

***Media literacy and health behaviour among
children and adolescents***

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“We must prepare young people for living in a world
of powerful images, words and sounds.”

UNESCO, 1982

What is media literacy?

“Media literacy is education for life in a global media world.”

The notion of ‘media literacy’ has been in common use for at least a quarter of a century, although there is still some confusion and disagreement about how it is to be defined. It was originally established as an educational tool to protect people from what many perceived to be mass media’s ill effects.

The earliest country known to use this inoculative paradigm was Great Britain in the 1930’s. In North America, the concept of media literacy as a topic of education first arose in 1978 with the formation of the *Ontario Association for Media Literacy*. Canada is the foremost country to require media literacy in North America and has pioneered the development of this field in many ways.

* Center for Media Literacy (2003). Literacy for the 21st Century. An Overview & Orientation Guide to Media Literacy Education. Download document (available in English and Spanish) from: http://www.medialit.org/reading_room/article540.html

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During the last decades the concept has gradually moved away from moralizing attitudes towards a more comprehensive and empowering approach. In 1989 the *Ontario Ministry of Education* proposed the following definition[†]:

“Media literacy is concerned with helping students develop an informed and critical understanding of the nature of mass media, the techniques used by them and the impact of these techniques. More specifically, it is education that aims to increase students’ understanding and enjoyment of how the media work, how they produce meaning, how they are organized, and how they construct reality. Media literacy also aims to provide students with the ability to create media products”.

Ofcom, the independent regulator for the UK communications industry, defines media literacy as *“the ability to access, understand and create communications in a variety of contexts”*[‡]. This definition involves three different dimensions of media literacy:

- **Access.** Refers to the ability to *locate media content* that is appropriate to one’s needs (and to avoid content that is not). It involves the *manipulation* of hardware and software, and the *gathering and application of information* about what is available.

- **Understand.** Refers to *what users do* when they have located content and are *able to apply critical thinking skills* in their understanding of media.

- **Create.** Extends the notion of literacy from “reading” to “writing” in media, although it also entails abilities both to access technology and to understand media forms and conventions.

[†] Ontario Ministry of Education (1989). Media Literacy Resource Guide.

[‡] Buckingham, David. The Media Literacy of Children and Young People. Download document from: http://www.ofcom.org.uk/advice/media_literacy/medlitpub/medlitpubrss/ml_children.pdf

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Definitions evolve over time and, in the view of the *Center for Media Literacy*, a more robust definition is now needed to situate media literacy in the context of its importance for the education of students in a 21st century media culture. They propose the following definition:

“Media literacy is a 21st century approach to education. It provides a framework to access, analyze, evaluate and create messages in a variety of forms,

A media literate person

Uses media wisely and effectively;
Engages in critical thinking when evaluating media messages;
Evaluates the credibility of information from different sources;
Understands the power of visual images and knows how to “read” them;
Is aware of a diverse cultural universe and appreciates multiple perspectives;
Expresses him/herself clearly and creatively using different forms of media;
Recognizes media’s influence on beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviours and the democratic process.

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from print to video to Internet. Media literacy builds an understanding of the role of media in society as well as essential skills of inquiry and self-expression necessary for citizens of a democracy.”

What is important to understand is that media literacy is not about protecting kids from unwanted messages. It is about *empowering them to use the media and information in critical and*

creative ways for their personal and social development.

The big picture about media literacy

The concept of media literacy should not be restricted only to the idea of helping young people to become critical media consumers and mitigating the potential adverse effects of media in their behaviour and lifestyles. There is a *need to understand media literacy within the wider frame of health literacy[§] and empowerment of youth for lifelong learning, and personal and social de-*

[§] There are many ways of understanding the concept on “health literacy”. The WHO health promotion glossary defines it as: “the cognitive and social skills which determine the motivation and ability of individuals to gain access to, understand and use information in ways which promote and maintain good health.”

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velopment. These are important common threads in both health promotion and quality education today.

Media literacy, which has been identified by the *Canadian Education Research Information System* as one of the skills included in literacy as a whole^{**}, is essentially about developing life skills and competencies that are needed to live a healthy life, and to contribute to society in today's world in which is virtually impossible, nor desirable, to ignore or avoid everyday media.

From an educational perspective, there is wide international agreement that in light of the complexity of today's rapid changes and challenges, the skills and competencies that have been traditionally taught at school are no longer sufficient to meet the needs of young people. Many experts and scholars agree that dealing flexibly with novelty and change and coping with the complex demands of modern life, call for the development of a higher level of mental complexity that implies critical thinking and a reflective and holistic approach on the part of the individual^{††}.

Quality education must understand the past, be relevant to the present and look into the future. One of the main challenges of contemporary education is to prepare present and future generations for a *wider range and diversity of skills and competencies*, all those that are needed for *sustainable development, social welfare, cohesion and justice, as well as personal well-being*.

In the Information Age and globalized world in which we live, the competencies that are needed to effectively use the information, media and media tech-

^{**} Canadian Education Research Information System (CERIS) (1999). Literacy: Definitions. <http://www.schoolnet.ca/ceris/e/Literacy1.html> CEA, Ontario, Canada.

^{††} Rychen, Dominique Simone (2002). Key Competencies for the Knowledge Society. A contribution from the OECD Project Definition and Selection of Competencies (DeSeCo). Download the document from: http://www1.worldbank.org/education/stuttgart_conference/download/5-2-1_doc2_rychen.pdf

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nology that surround our daily lives, should certainly be considered skills for today's life and a component of quality education. The media, which is increasingly becoming a key source of health information to most people, is re-shaping and influencing the cultures of both developed and developing countries^{††}.

The World *Conference on Education for All* (Jomtien, 1990) underscored the importance of teaching *skills that are relevant to life*. Although there are big differences between countries and amongst social groups in the access to the media and the ways in which people use information, the bottom line is that the influence of the media is quite pervasive.

The ability to access, analyze, and evaluate messages from a variety of media forms, and to interact constructively with different media is not only relevant to everyone's life today, but a trademark of what being a citizen of the world really means. *Without this fundamental ability, an individual cannot have full dignity as a human person or exercise citizenship in a democratic society where to be a citizen is both to understand and contribute to the debates of the time*^{§§}.

Obviously, research has shown that media literacy is multi-dimensional. The nature and extent of the media literacy that individuals need and develop depends very much on the purposes for which they use the media in the first place. Different social groups may also develop and require different forms of media literacy in line with their motivations and preferences in media use.

^{††} Kickbusch, Ilona. Health literacy: addressing the health and education divide. Download document from: <http://heapro.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/content/full/16/3/289>

^{§§} Center for Media Literacy (2003). Literacy for the 21st Century. An Overview & Orientation Guide to Media Literacy Education. Download document (available in English and Spanish) from: http://www.medialit.org/reading_room/article540.html

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It is worth mentioning that many European countries have already incorporated this view in their definition of the key competencies that are needed for the knowledge society. The international *Project for Definition and Selection of Competencies*, sponsored by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)^{***}, identified the *ability to manage knowledge and information and to use it as a basis for understanding options, making decisions, and taking actions*, as one of the key competencies that should be taught to European citizens today.

From the perspective of public health, the notion of empowerment is deeply rooted in the Ottawa Charter and the health promotion objective of strengthening people's capacity to have control over their health and its determinants. Information, values and life skills are needed for personal and social development. *They increase the options available to people to exercise more control over their own health and environments, and to make choices conducive to health.*

The media and media technology are deeply embedded in our cultures and act as *social and cultural determinants of health*. They can have both a detrimental or positive influence on the behaviour and lifestyles of people in general. The media we consume has the ability to create very powerful images of the world influencing our values, attitudes and behaviours. Words and images construct worlds and stereotypes about life, health and illness.

If women or minorities are consistently portrayed as lacking power and authority, young viewers may absorb that message. If scenes with smoking, drinking, violence or casual sex are repeatedly shown, young people may believe these behaviours are normal and appropriate.

^{***} Rychen, Dominique Simone (2002). Key Competencies for the Knowledge Society. A contribution from the OECD Project Definition and Selection of Competencies (DeSeCo). Download the document from: http://www1.worldbank.org/education/stuttgart_conference/download/5-2-1_doc2_rychen.pdf

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People, particularly children and adolescents, need to be empowered with the skills and competencies that will allow them to have more control over the influence of the media, and to use knowledge and information for a healthy personal and social life.

Effectiveness of media literacy

Media literacy is increasingly being integrated into educational programs for school children, college students, parents, educators and health practitioners, and although the efficacy of many of these programs is not usually explicitly measured, there is growing evidence that it can be an effective approach in areas as different as aggression, anti-social behaviour, body image, or alcohol and drugs.

Media violence, Aggression and Anti-Social Behaviour

- Several studies have indicated that media literacy lessons incorporated into standard curriculum can help reduce potentially harmful effects of TV violence on young viewers. In one study, 3rd and 4th graders given a course in media literacy decreased their time spent watching TV and playing video games, and reduced their use of verbal and physical aggression as judged by their peers^{†††}.
- Other studies have concluded that media literacy interventions can help high-risk youth develop more responsible decision-making skills in their own lives^{†††,§§§}.

[†]Thomas Robinson et al., "Effects of Reducing Children's Television and Video Game Use on Aggressive Behavior," *Archives of Pediatric Adolescent Medicine* 155(2001) 1:17-23.

^{†††}Jane Moore, Neal DeChillo, Barbara Nicholson, Angela Genovese, and Stephanie Sladen, "Flashpoint: An Innovative Media Literacy Intervention for High-Risk Adolescents," *Juvenile and Family Court Journal* (Spring 2000): 23-33.

^{§§§}Joe Behson, "Media Literacy for High-Risk Children and Youth," *Telemedium: The Journal of Media Literacy* 48 (Fall 2002) 2:38-40.

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Body Image, Nutrition and Fitness

- An evaluation of a media education program created by the National Eating Disorders Association (USA), found that media literacy skills can help high school girls enhance their sense of self-acceptance and empowerment regarding media images of women's bodies^{****}.
- Other studies have found that even brief peer-guided workshops can be effective in counteracting messages that perpetuate unrealistic body images and promote unhealthy eating^{†††}.
- A study of the effectiveness of *ATLAS*, a team-centred media literacy intervention for high school male athletes, found that the program helped develop scepticism about steroids and supplements while building knowledge about strength-training. After one year male teen athletes reported less intention to use steroids and a reduction in their use of illicit drugs such as marijuana, amphetamines, and narcotics. Other long-term health effects included less supplement use, improved nutrition behaviours, and fewer reports of drinking and driving^{††††}.

^{****} Nirva Piran, Michael Levine, and Lori Irving. (2000). "GO GIRLS! Media Literacy, Activism and Advocacy Project." *Healthy Weight Journal* (November/December): 89-90. Similar programs such as *Free to be Me* developed by the Girls Scouts and *Full of Ourselves* developed by Harvard Eating Disorders Center also use media literacy as a prevention strategy for disordered eating. See, Dianne Neumark-Sztainer et al., "Primary Prevention of Disordered Eating among Preadolescent Girls: Feasibility and Short-term Effect of a Community-based intervention," *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* (December 2000).

^{†††} Lori Irving, Julie DuPen, and Susan Berel, "A Media Literacy Program for High School Females," *Eating Disorders: The Journal of Treatment and Prevention* 6(1998): 119-131; Lori Irving and Susan Berel, "Comparison of Media-Literacy Programs to Strengthen College Women's Resistance to Media Images," *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 25(2001): 103-111.

^{††††} Linn Goldberg, David MacKinnon, Diane Elliot, Esther Moe, Greg Clarke, and JeeWon Cheong, "The Adolescents Training and Learning to Avoid Steroids Program," *Archives of Pediatric and Adolescents Medicine* 54(April 2000): 332-338.

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Alcohol, Tobacco and Drugs

- An evaluation of a classroom-based intervention found that media literacy education increased children's understanding of the persuasive intent of alcohol ads and influenced their decision-making about alcohol. Participants were less likely to expect positive consequences from drinking, choose alcohol-related products, and desire to be like characters that drank^{§§§§}.
- Government agencies in the United States such as the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy, The Centre for Substance Abuse Prevention, and Centres for Disease Control (CDC) endorse media literacy as a component of youth drug prevention strategies and have sponsored curricula that have been widely implemented but not formally evaluated.

The *Center for Media Literacy* highlights additional benefits of media literacy education such as^{*****}:

- Meets the needs of young people to be wise consumers of media, managers of information and responsible producers of their ideas using the powerful multimedia tools of a global media culture.
- Engages students. Bringing the world of media into the classroom connects learning with real life and validates their media culture as a rich environment for learning.

^{§§§§} Erica Austin and Kristine Jonson, "Effects of General and Alcohol-Specific Media Literacy Training on Children's Decision Making about Alcohol," *Journal of Health Communication* 2(1997): 17-42.

^{*****} Center for Media Literacy (2003). Literacy for the 21st Century. An Overview & Orientation Guide to Media Literacy Education. Download document (available in English and Spanish) from: http://www.medialit.org/reading_room/article540.html

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- Gives both students and teachers a common approach to critical thinking that, when practiced and internalized, could be applied to other areas of life.
- Increases the ability and proficiency of students to communicate (express) and disseminate their thought and ideas in a wide (and growing) range of print and electronic media forms, an even international venues.
- By focussing on process skills rather than content knowledge, students gain the ability to analyse any message in any media and thus are empowered for living all their lives in a media-saturated culture.
- Not only benefits individual students but benefits society by providing tools and methods that encourage respectful discourse that leads to mutual understanding, and builds the citizenship skills needed to participate in and contribute to the public debate.

How to educate in media literacy?

“The heart of media literacy is informed inquiry⁺⁺⁺⁺.”

Children develop media literacy even in the absence of explicit attempts to encourage and promote it. Parents and teachers (both in schools and in informal educational settings) can be *potential enablers* of media literacy. Among the barriers to media literacy are several inter-related factors, of which *social class and economic status* are the most well-established.

⁺⁺⁺⁺ Center for Media Literacy (2003). Literacy for the 21st Century. An Overview & Orientation Guide to Media Literacy Education. Download document (available in English and Spanish) from: http://www.medialit.org/reading_room/article540.html

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Less is known about other potential barriers such as disability and ethnicity, or about the role of individual dispositions or motivations. It is important to recognize that such barriers may affect the *quality* of access as well as the *quantity*. It should also be acknowledged that different social groups may have different orientations towards particular media – or different forms of ‘cultural capital’ – that may influence the nature and quality of access^{****}.

Since home is where children spend most of their time using media, it is important to help parents develop their children’s media literacy skills through *active mediation*, including using media together, and discussing media content with children. Research suggests that *parental mediation* can play an important role in developing younger children’s media literacy, for example in understanding the relationships between representation and reality.

Media literacy starts with simply talking about the media we are consuming. Simple questions about the media can start at the toddler stage, planting important seeds for cultivating a lifetime of interrogating the world around us. Parents, grandparents, even babysitters can make a game of “spot the commercial” to help children learn to distinguish between entertainment programs and the commercial messages that support them.

As children grow and are able to distinguish the world of fantasy from the real world they live in, they can explore how media are put together by turning the sound off during a cartoon and noting the difference it makes, or even create their own superhero story using a home video camera. When students begin to use the internet to research school projects, they can compare different websites and contrast different versions of the same information in order to detect bias or political “spin”.

^{****} Buckingham, David. The Media Literacy of Children and Young People. Download document from:
http://www.ofcom.org.uk/advice/media_literacy/medlitpub/medlitpubrssi/ml_children.pdf

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For media literacy education to be effective it has to be *skills-based*. The true essence of the life skills approach to education in general, and to health education in particular, implies *individual empowerment and fulfilment as well as the capacity to contribute to social development and the transformation of environments*.

The World Health Organization (WHO)^{§§§§§} defines skills-based health education as “*an approach to creating or maintaining healthy lifestyles and conditions through the development of knowledge, attitudes, and especially skills, using a variety of learning experiences, with an emphasis on participatory methods.*”

Skills-based media literacy education involves the application of the life skills approach to media literacy in terms of the content, the methods and the role of the person who facilitates the educational process. The teaching of critical and creative thinking skills is, obviously, the cornerstone of the process.

Media literacy is about helping young people become competent, critical and literate in all media forms so that they control the interpretation of what they see or hear rather than letting the interpretation control them. To become media literate means learning to *raise the right questions about what you are watching, reading or listening to*.

Advocates of media literacy nowadays emphasize five basic principles that can be applied to the critical analysis of media messages^{*****}, which were derived from the original *Key Concepts of Media Literacy* that a group of teach-

^{§§§§§} OMS (2003). Skills for Health. Skills-based health education including life skills: An important component of a Child-Friendly/Health Promoting School. Information Series on School Health. Document 9. Download document from: <http://www.unicef.org/programme/lifeskills/>

^{*****} Center for Media Literacy (2003). Literacy for the 21st Century. An Overview & Orientation Guide to Media Literacy Education. Download document (available in English and Spanish) from: http://www.medialit.org/reading_room/article540.html

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ers from the *Ontario Association for Media Literacy (AML)* drew up in 1987 for the Government of Ontario:

- Media messages are constructed.
- Messages are representations of reality with embedded values and points of view.
- Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules.
- Individuals interpret media messages and create their own meaning based on personal experience.
- Most media messages are organized to gain profit or power.

A simple tool, in the form of five questions, can be applied to the above principles and be used by teachers to stimulate this critical thinking process:

	Principle	Key question
1	All media messages are constructed.	Who created this message?
2	Messages are representations of reality with embedded values and points of view.	What lifestyles, values and points of view are represented in, or omitted from, this message?
3	Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules.	What techniques are used to attract my attention?
4	Individuals interpret media messages and create their own meaning based on personal experience.	How might different people understand this message differently from me?
5	Most media messages are organized to gain profit or power.	Why was this message sent?

In the context of formal education, media literacy education can be incorporated in the curriculum as a component of health education or in other major subject areas such as language, social studies, arts or civics. Many countries around the world, including Canada, have advanced in their efforts to include media literacy standards and curricula in their educational systems.