

OVERVIEW OF THE KIT

How to Use these Materials

Grade Level Lessons

These lessons have been organized into units for kindergarten and first grade based on their implementation in the Ithaca City School District (in Ithaca, NY), and reflect the formative and summative evaluations of their effectiveness conducted over the past three years. However, all of these lessons are likely to be effective with children in late preschool and early elementary grades, and they can be combined or modified in any way that makes sense for the particular class.

Leading Media Analysis Questions

These lessons are designed to involve whole class discussions of videotaped media content. The core of the lessons lies in the critical analysis of media messages, and the follow-up discussions about health and TV commercials (including misleading nutritional messages and persuasive techniques used to make products look better than they may really be). In leading these discussions, educators should try to do a minimum of “telling” or presenting information to the students. Instead the emphasis is meant to be on asking questions about what the students saw and heard in the commercials, with follow-up probe questions to encourage a “deep reading” of the message.

This interactive decoding process is detailed in the **Teacher Guide** for each lesson. Content written in **bold** is meant to be said or asked by the teacher. Following a brief introduction, students are shown a TV commercial with instructions to look for particular information. Probe **Questions** ask students to think and analyze what they have seen and heard in the commercial, and are designed to evoke the relevant understanding of persuasive techniques and nutritional messages. **Possible Answers** are included as model evidence-based responses that will further the discussion.

However, there is rarely one right answer to any of these interpretative questions, and teachers should encourage multiple readings and a diversity of responses as long as students present “evidence” to back up their interpretations. It is important that students recognize that all people do not interpret media messages in the same way. It is also important to encourage students to begin to ask their own media literacy questions, especially at home when they are most likely to be exposed to these types of advertising messages.

Keeping the Discussion Focused

When first starting to use these lessons, teachers may find that the discussion quickly gets into children’s personal experiences with these toys or foods and how much they like them. It may be important to allow a little of that kind of discussion at first, but teachers will need to keep the focus on the analysis by coming back to the key questions when the discussion gets sidetracked.

The Importance of Practice

As laid out in the **Teacher Guide** for each lesson, each commercial should be shown multiple times : children can practice looking for misleading images and verbal messages, and to identify tricks used to persuade. This opportunity for practice is crucial for the effectiveness of the lesson, and it also allows children to get beyond their initial excitement over the products advertised in the commercial to focus on the questions at hand. The more practice students have in applying their critical thinking and analysis to these commercials, the less likely they are to get caught up in the persuasive message itself.

There are additional commercials provided for practice at the end of the kindergarten and first grade units and we encourage teachers to revisit these lessons periodically over time.

Working with Families

If at all possible, we encourage teachers to work with parents and guardians to follow through on these lessons at home when children are watching television. At the end of this kit, there are suggested activities for families to use when watching television, or are at the toy or grocery store. These will deepen the lessons and provide additional opportunities for the children to practice their critical thinking and media analysis skills. We are often told by parents that their children come home and talk about what they learned in these lessons (“Did you know that commercials use tricks?”), and that they raise the issues of sugar and 100% fruit at the grocery store.

Using Examples and Manipulatives

Young children learn best through active manipulation and exploration. These lessons will be enriched if the teacher can provide actual foods and food containers for the children to analyze and discuss (e.g., different types of real fruit, cereal boxes, drink containers). Real or plastic foods could be used for children to sort into different food groups, and the lessons can be extended through discussions about nutrition during snack, lunch time, or on class trips.

Avoiding Value Judgments

When doing this kind of media analysis, it is very tempting to present the TV commercials as “bad” or “harmful,” and to describe certain foods as “good” or “bad” for you. We strongly urge educators to avoid making these kinds of value judgments; the point isn’t to make students (or their families) feel bad or guilty about the foods they like and eat, or the media they use, nor is it to replace the students’ existing opinions and values with our own. Instead approach the discussion and analysis of the media messages from the perspective of what is “true” or “misleading,” and to identify foods as “healthy” or having ingredients that are “unhealthy,” especially if you eat a lot of them. The point is not to portray Froot Loops as bad for you, but for students to understand that it’s a cereal that contains a lot of sugar and no fruit at all.

Modifying the Lessons to Meet Your Needs

The specific questions and TV commercials in this kit are designed to provide an easy-to-use guide for teachers to introduce the concepts and provide practice for children in order to reinforce the lessons. However, feel free to modify the lessons to meet your specific needs and values. For example, the first set of lessons in the Kindergarten Kit include TV commercials for toys targeted to girls or boys (which is very common on children’s television). This can provide a context for discussing the narrow gender-typing of children’s toy commercials (see suggested questions in those lessons) but you may feel that you’d rather not show gender-typed messages in your classroom, in which case you can substitute other commercials from the additional practice set at the end of the kit.

For more information about the principles of media literacy and their relevance for education, we encourage you to read the section on **Media Literacy** in this overview of the kit.