

Program Helps Girls To Resist Media Messages on Alcohol, Tobacco

Five 7th-grade girls are sitting at school desks arranged in a circle, showing one another their works in progress. Sarah Palumbo bounces up and down in her chair and eagerly holds up a picture of a car that has run off the road into a tree. Nearby, three green frogs croak the letters "D.U.I." Molly Woodzell shows a drawing of a huge liquor bottle with a familiar silhouette. The caption says "Absolut Stupid."

What are these middle-school girls doing? They're all part of a program called GirlSpeak, run by the Institute for Substance Abuse Studies (ISAS) at the University of Virginia. Funded by a grant from the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention (CSAP), the project hopes to demonstrate that giving adolescent girls hands-on training in media literacy and media advocacy will help them resist media messages and peer pressure to use alcohol and tobacco. The program singles out middle-school girls because recent research shows that girls this age often experience a kind of crisis in self-confidence, which is fueled by mass media and our commodity culture. The metaphor of voice implicit in the title "GirlSpeak" demonstrates the belief that helping girls to speak up, to retain their feisty voices rather than subsiding into uncommunicative adolescence, is itself an important substance abuse prevention method.

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way away from their mouth," points out Elizabeth Lawwill. "And they never show someone (actually) smoking — that makes me angry," Crystal Popovich says assertively.

Like the other groups at the Crozet school, Shayna Davis' 8th-grade group has seen several examples of professionally designed "counter ads," which point out the fallacies of the messages in typical alcohol or tobacco ads. A professional counter ad based on "Kool" brand cigarettes, for example, depicts a leather-jacketed young man leaning nonchalantly against a wall, holding a cigarette. Only when we notice that the large letters next to him read "FOOL," do we realize this ad is a critique of a real one.

Eighth-grader Jessica Smith is designing an ad based on the "Newports" brand. Hers will read "NewDorks," and will mock the original slogan, "Alive with pleasure," by saying "Dead with pleasure." Brandy Wood's ad will be for a new brand of cigarette called "G.A.C.," which stands for "Get A Clue."

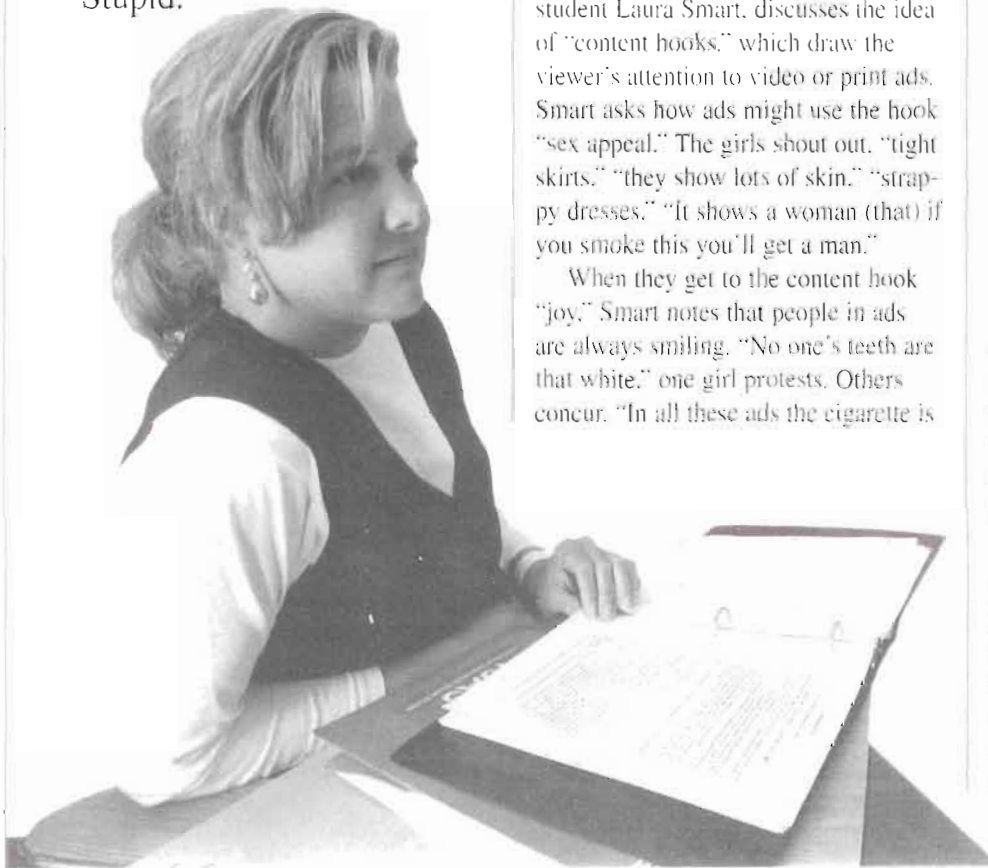
age girls tear out of magazines and collect. "Kids love this kind of satire," says Elizabeth Thoman, executive director of the Los Angeles-based Center for Media and Values.

At the same time that it appeals to kids' affinity for satire, the design of the GirlSpeak program is based on extensive research that documents:

- the alarming rise in alcohol and tobacco use by young adolescents
- the particular vulnerability of kids in rural areas where there are fewer supervised after-school activities, and
- the dangerous dive in self-esteem and ability to speak out experienced by most girls between the ages of 9 and 14.

According to the National Survey Results on Drug Use from the Monitoring the Future Study 1975-1992, 69 percent of 8th-graders have tried alcohol, and active use is widespread. The 1994 Surgeon General's Report, titled "Preventing Tobacco Use Among Young People," notes that by age 18, about two-thirds of adolescents in the United States have tried smoking

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In a room next door to the first, another group of Henley Middle School 7th-grade girls, led by UVa graduate student Laura Smart, discusses the idea of "content hooks," which draw the viewer's attention to video or print ads. Smart asks how ads might use the hook "sex appeal." The girls shout out, "tight skirts," "they show lots of skin," "strap-py dresses," "It shows a woman (that) if you smoke this you'll get a man."

When they get to the content hook "joy," Smart notes that people in ads are always smiling. "No one's teeth are that white," one girl protests. Others concur. "In all these ads the cigarette is

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The organizers of GirlSpeak hope that these media literacy activities and projects will help the girls learn how to decode commercial advertising, analyze its implicit messages, and understand how teens are targeted. "Media advocacy" is the process of using the media to promote messages that are in the public interest, treating health or other social welfare issues. Old-fashioned public service announcements (PSAs) tended to make direct pleas, such as "please don't smoke." The new trend in media advocacy is exemplified by the "Fool" ad.

One of the best-known counter-ad campaigns was developed by the Media Foundation "Adbusters" in British Columbia, Canada. They produced ads based on the Absolut Vodka campaign, using the slogans "Absolut Nonsense" and "Absolut Death," which lampoon the popular print ads that many teen-

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While all adolescents are at risk for experimentation with alcohol and tobacco and consequent use of these drugs, it is particularly important to do prevention work with girls beginning around age 12. In 1991 a study by the American Association of University Women (AAUW), titled "Shortchanging Girls: Shortchanging America," declared that "popular culture helps deflate girls' self-esteem by marginalizing women and stereotyping their roles." In the wake of this groundbreaking study, many researchers have elaborated on the difficulties and inequalities faced by American schoolgirls. They note that in early adolescence, many girls lose their confident ability to speak out — their voices seem to go underground.

A recent bestseller, Mary Pipher's "Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls," argues that the



UVa student Clare Chapoton, opposite page, serves as moderator and group leader. At left, three of the Henley students work on their counter ads.

mass media, sexism, and our consumer culture contribute to this crisis. According to Pipher, "It's important for girls to explore the impact the culture has on their growth and development. They all benefit from, to use an old-fashioned term, consciousness-raising. Once girls understand the effects of the culture on their lives, they can fight back. They learn they have conscious choices to make and ultimate responsibility for those choices. Intelligent resistance keeps the true self alive."

The GirlSpeak program is designed to do just as Pipher suggests: raise

consciousness and empower girls. It was designed for them by graduate students in the Curry School's Department of Curriculum Instruction. At this workshop the high-school mentors learned about group process strategies, media production and critical viewing skills. Once trained, each pair of mentors leads the middle-school girls through a fun and activity-filled program in media literacy and media advocacy.

Everyone involved with the project agrees that the role of the high-school mentors is crucial. Susan Grossman, associate director for Prevention Programs at ISAS, and the principal

there. "It's just that everyone does it," she says.

While she thinks the program is beneficial, Kim hopes it will eventually encompass more discussion of body image and the media. "One thing I thought we were going to talk a lot about was the image of girls in the '90s and the whole anorexia/bulimia question. A lot of girls have been affected by that. It's really startling at Western."

GirlSpeak was originally designed to run for three years. Squeezed by budget cuts and under threat of even further reductions, the granting agency gave ISAS one year's worth of funding for a pilot project. ISAS still hopes to find other funding sources to allow the project to continue. In the three-year program topics such as the media treatment of the female body could be addressed in more depth. The full program would have other advantages, including giving the groups time to build the trust and cohesiveness necessary for the mentoring relationship to

"It's very frustrating."

Does getting a bunch of 7th-grade girls together after school to share snacks, talk about the media, and make anti-tobacco or alcohol ads really have any effect on whether these girls feel more self-confident as they face the pressures of adolescence?

GirlSpeak consultant Peter Sheras, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist at UVa and an expert on adolescence, describes this period in girls' lives as "a rat's nest of pressures and counter-pressures." Nevertheless he is very upbeat about the potential of the GirlSpeak program: "My belief is that if you can get the girls to come and even get limited exposure to this (program), it's going to have some effect — just because the very inquiry into what influences you is important." □

Works Cited and Further Reading

By Beverly Low Michel and Carol

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The GirlSpeak program is designed to do just as Pipher suggests: raise girls' awareness about the media and its messages — particularly about tobacco and alcohol. To help inoculate young girls against peer and media pressure to use alcohol and tobacco, and to help them maintain their forthright voices, the project provides an after-school forum for girls to speak out about these issues.

According to program coordinator deKoven Fernandez, more than 180 7th-grade girls (and a few in 8th grade) at six middle schools in the counties of Albemarle, Louisa, Nelson and Orange are participating in 16 GirlSpeak clubs. Each club is guided by a pair of trained graduate student and high-school student mentors. The graduate students are all degree candidates at UVA's Curry School of Education. They received training from ISAS staff, while the high-school students benefited from a "Middle Sister" training workshop

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Everyone involved with the project agrees that the role of the high-school mentors is crucial. Susan Grossman, associate director for Prevention Programs at ISAS and the principal investigator for the project, points out that cross-age mentoring has been used in all kinds of prevention programs with good results. "The role model isn't so old as to be someone (the girls) can't identify with, and the girls are fascinated to know about high school."

"This was an age at which I felt I should have been more aware of these issues," says Laura Coleman, one of the high-school mentors at Henley.

Elizabeth Kim, another mentor at Henley who attends Western Albemarle High School, hopes she can help prepare the 7th-graders for the social and drug scene at high school. Before she entered high school, she says, "I didn't really realize how many people were actually (smoking and drinking)." Kim says she avoids the parties where this behavior happens, and doesn't observe much direct peer pressure, but the unspoken pressure of the culture is

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About the ongoing search for funds, Grossman says she feels "an air of desperation" after the long, difficult period to get the program up and running, and doesn't want to see it halted. "It's just such a waste of everyone's efforts, enthusiasm and new knowledge to stop it in its tracks," she says. "We don't have any of our usual funding sources. All the government agencies, both federal and state, have no prevention money available — there's more money being put into the criminal justice system. Our whole thrust is to do education and prevention with kids before they're in any system except the school system."

Commenting on the trend toward spending money after crimes have been committed rather than helping kids before they endanger their health or mess up their lives, Grossman says,

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Works Cited and Further Reading

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