



LESSON PLAN

Level: Grades 4 to 8
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Kids, Alcohol and Advertising: Messages About Drinking

Overview

In this lesson, students look at the different groups in our society that deliver messages to the public about drinking and consider the influence of each of these groups on the attitudes and perceptions of young people. Beginning by brainstorming words or ideas associated with the word “beer,” the class develops a mind map of people and organizations that deliver messages to us about alcohol and drinking and the different messages that each provides.

Learning Outcomes

Students will demonstrate:

- a beginning awareness of their own attitudes toward drinking
- an understanding of the different groups that deliver messages about alcohol
- an understanding of the specific messages that are expressed within these groups
- an awareness of the influence of specific groups or individuals on their own attitudes and beliefs about alcohol

Preparation and Materials

- Before beginning this lesson, read the teaching backgrounder *Alcohol Advertising and Kids*
- For the mind map exercise, refer to the handout *Mind Map: Where Do We Get Messages about Alcohol?*

Procedure

Tell students they will be looking at all the different messages that kids receive about alcohol.

Begin with a simple word association game. On the board, write the word BEER in big letters. Ask students to write down the first word or expression that comes into their minds when they see that word. Elect two students to record responses on one side of the board and then ask the class to share the words or expressions that came into their heads. Once their responses have been recorded, take a moment to step back and discuss them with students. Are they generally favourable, neutral or negative?



Every day we are surrounded by countless messages about drinking. (This should be reflected in the wide range of words and expressions that students associate with BEER.) Ask students to think about the questions: "Where do we get messages about alcohol? Who are the people and the organizations that try to influence our attitudes about drinking?" (See the *Mind Map* handout for an overview.) Based on the model provided, and your students' suggestions, create a mind map on the board. (For younger grades, you may want to use a simplified version.) Once your mind map is completed, review the BEER words that students have provided.

Ask students to match various words or messages about beer with appropriate groups in the mind map. (*Words can be connected to more than one group. For example, "party" and "fun" might be associated with media or friends and peers; "drink responsibly" and "don't drink and drive" might be associated with school, government or medical and anti-drinking groups; "tasty" and "cold" might be associated with alcohol industry, media, government liquor stores, and so on.*)

Once this is done, take a look at each of these groups and ask students to think about the different messages each group delivers about drinking. Be prepared for a wide range of answers, and don't be surprised to find conflicting messages from within the same group. For example, under *family*, the general message from parents might be that drinking is for adults and that kids shouldn't drink; from older siblings, it might be that drinking is fun.

Once this is done, ask students:

- Which of these groups gives us the most positive messages about drinking? Why might this be so? (*Guide them to consider motivation – for example, the media and alcohol industries make money from advertising and selling alcoholic beverages.*)
- Which of these groups gives us the most negative messages about drinking? Why might this be so?
- Do any of these groups have conflicting messages about drinking? (*For example, the alcohol industry creates both ad campaigns and social responsibility messages; some friends and peer groups may support drinking, others may not.*) How do you feel about these "mixed messages"?

Thinking about Messages

Discuss:

Every day, we are surrounded by thousands of messages that inform, entertain and educate us. Some of these messages try to sell us things, some want to influence how we think and behave, while others try to keep us safe. All want to persuade us one way or another.

Before deciding whether or not to listen to or believe a particular message, we need to ask some questions.

- Think about everything we've discussed today. What are some questions that you should ask about messages?

Answers might include:

- Who is behind this message? (*A company? An advertiser? A health practitioner? My parents? A friend?*)
- What is the message? (*"Buy my product"? "Don't participate in high-risk activities"? "Learn about this so you can be better informed"? "Do this because it's fun"?*)



- How is the person or organization trying to convince me to listen to their message? (*Making it sound like fun? Stressing that this is really important? Making it appear to be a cool thing?*)
- Is the person or organization qualified to tell me what to do? (*For example, is my friend experienced enough to help me make decisions that might affect my health? Should advertisers have a say in what foods we need? Is this website a credible source for my homework assignment?*)
- And, most importantly, why is this person or organization sending me a message? What is their motivation? (*To sell me things? To get me to influence other people? Because they care about my safety and well-being?*)

Homework

In their notebooks have students write a short paragraph outlining the word or expression they associated with BEER at the beginning of the class, and what they think may have influenced their word choice.



Alcohol Advertising and Kids

The number of alcohol ads that young people are exposed to on TV is actually rising, from 216 in 2001 to 366 in 2009.¹ Add to these other forms of advertising (magazine ads, billboards, websites and brand-related clothing and products), signage at sporting events, sponsorship of professional and college teams and sports TV and radio programs, and most young people will have seen approximately 100,000 alcohol ads by the time they turn 18.

Ad spending by the alcohol industry has risen too: in 2009 the alcohol industry spent almost a billion dollars on TV advertising in the US.² Although Canada represents a much smaller market, AC Nielsen estimates that in 2002 Canadian brewers and distillers spent more than \$160 million to advertise their beverages. (This number does not include advertising expenditures by provincial liquor boards – which are also significant.)

Should we be concerned? It's well established that alcohol use plays a substantial role in the three leading causes of death among teens and young adults: accidental injuries, suicides and murders.³ One in five young Canadians who drink regularly drink to excess.⁴

Young people ages 12-20 saw more television advertising for beer and ale in 2001 than for fruit juices and fruit-flavoured drinks; gum; skin care products; cookies and crackers; chips, nuts, popcorn and pretzels; sneakers; non-carbonated soft drinks; or sportswear jeans.

Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth
Television: Alcohol's Vast Adland

Add to this the engaging, interactive and unregulated milieu of the Internet, and marketers have a potent mix of platforms from which to target youth.

Child development experts have voiced concerns about the possible links between children's exposure to alcohol advertising and the development of attitudes about alcohol and drinking habits. The countless alcohol-related media young people are exposed to reinforce the idea that alcohol consumption is an everyday activity – nothing more than harmless, rebellious fun.

Constant exposure to alcohol products – especially at an early age – increases positive expectations about drinking.⁵ For example, a 2007 study found that two-thirds of Canadians under 18 had “often” seen beer commercials, and were as likely (in some cases twice as likely) to remember having seen particular liquor and beer commercials as adults.⁶

Sports are another way that alcohol ads reach kids. During an average hour of sports programming, children see 3.7 ads for alcohol. Alcohol promotion through commercials in sports programming or sponsorship of sports teams and events provides companies with tremendous exposure – before, during and after an event. It creates positive associations between drinking and the traits associated with athletes and teams: strength, loyalty, endurance, success, health, vitality, fun, fitness and speed. Promotion of youth-oriented events such as snowboarding, extreme sports and biking create an aura of “coolness” around a product – and grab the attention of a new generation of future drinkers.

Many alcohol ads play on the theme that drinking is the primary ritual into adulthood in our society. Others turn soft drinks into alcoholic drinks. In 2001 the alcohol industry introduced 130 new spirits, 46 new beers and 103 new wines. Many of these were sweet products clearly designed to appeal to new drinkers, that is, young people. These included chocolate and raspberry beer, gelatin shots, hard cider, hard lemonade, liquor popsicles, and drinks with alcohol premixed with milk, cola, jello and ice cream.



Although most children don't start drinking until the pre-teen or teen years, belief in media messages that drinking is a positive or desirable activity is already developing by age six.

Children who receive little or no information about alcohol from other sources are most likely to believe the messages in alcohol ads.⁷

Three factors affect the influence of alcohol advertising on pre-adolescents:

- a) the context in which the advertisements are viewed
- b) the support of significant others
- c) the extent to which alcohol is glamorized⁸

The extent of media exposure can also play a role. It's believed that children who watch more television – especially during weekends and prime time – are more receptive to the messaging in alcohol ads than children who are less frequent viewers. This is especially true for advertisements that appear during favourite shows and sports programming.⁹ Alcohol also appears in two thirds of the most popular programming for teens – sports, sitcoms, music videos, horror movies and dramas – and is most often depicted in a positive light.¹⁰

The pervasiveness of alcohol advertising extends beyond television and movies. Alcohol companies routinely place ads in magazines with large youth readerships, such as *Rolling Stone*, *Vibe*, *Spin*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Allure* and *Glamour*.¹¹ In 2009, a third of radio ads for alcohol were more likely to reach youth than adults.¹² Cross-marketing, through clothing, brand-related products and special promotions, ensures that alcohol brands and slogans are firmly entrenched in the popular culture.

Research suggests that children and adolescents tend to learn more about alcohol from television and beer advertising than from more balanced sources such as parents, leaving them more knowledgeable about brands of beer than about potential health risks associated with drinking.

The Role of Interpretation Processes and Parental Discussion in the Media's Effects on Adolescents' Use of Alcohol, 2000.

An Educational Response

Advertising is just one part of a continuum of factors that contribute to a young person's inclination to drink. Other contributing factors are heredity, personality and behavioural traits, peer and family influences, environment and societal attitudes.

An educational response to this issue must consider each of these potential influences in order to help students better understand and contextualize the multiple – and often conflicting – messages they receive about drinking. Equally important is parental involvement at home in encouraging discussion about alcohol messages in media. Studying these messages gives young people the opportunity to consider all the factors that contribute to underage drinking habits, and to compare and contrast their own attitudes and perceptions of young people with those projected by marketers.

Early years: Current research suggests Grades 3 and 4 are critical years in the formation of expectancies about alcohol,¹³ so this is a good time for parents and teachers to start helping children think critically about what they see and to introduce them to the marketing strategies advertisers use to create positive associations with alcoholic beverages.



Middle years: This age group represents a critical period for decision-making about alcohol consumption. Today, roughly half of intermediate and high school students report having drunk alcohol in the last year – a figure that rises to four in five by Grade 12. In Ontario, almost half of Grade 12 students say they have had more than five drinks in one sitting in the last month.¹⁴ Although young teens may lack the life experience to judge mass media messages, with guidance they can develop the critical skills they need to understand: explicit and implicit messaging in ads, the perspective and intentions of programmers and characters, and the impact of production techniques.¹⁵

Older teens: As teens grow older, they associate drinking more and more strongly with things such as fun, socialization and sex, and less and less with negative experiences.¹⁶ Students have found that wine and alcohol consumption by 18-year old girls is directly related to television viewing between the ages of 13 and 15,¹⁷ and that young men who are good at remembering beer ads at 15 years of age, tend to be heavy drinkers when they are 18.¹⁸

Because of this, older teens need to question the broader, societal ramifications of the alcohol industry and alcohol advertising: their rights and roles as consumers, the true cost of alcohol consumption, and the tension between current regulations relating to the marketing of alcohol to minors and advertising strategies that fly in the face of these laws. They need to be given the opportunity to measure the effectiveness of anti-drinking campaigns and assume a proactive stance by creating their own strategies for providing realistic messages about drinking to peers and younger children.

- 1 The Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth. "Youth Exposure to Alcohol Advertising on Television, 2001 to 2009." <<http://camy.org/research/tv0608/>>
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 "Summary: Youth Exposure to Alcohol Advertising" 2003. Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth <<http://camy.org/factsheets/index.php?FactsheetID=18>>.
- 4 Health Canada. "Canadian Alcohol and Drug Use Monitoring Survey, 2004-2001." <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hc-ps/drugs-drogues/stat/_2011/tables-tableaux-eng.php#t9>
- 5 E. Moreau, E.W. Austin and C. Knaus, "Effects of Advertising and Sponsorships in Sports and Children's Expectations about Alcohol," 2000. Edward R. Murrow School of Communication, Washington State University.
- 6 Marvin Crank. "It Starts Here: Alcohol Advertising to Youth." University of British Columbia, 2007.
- 7 E. Moreau et al., 2000.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 D. McKenzie, 2000.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Executive Summary of "OverExposed: Youth a Target of Alcohol Advertising in Magazines," 2002. Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth <<http://camy.org/research/mag0902>>.
- 12 "Alcohol ads still reaching youth on the radio." Medical Xpress, September 14, 2011.
- 13 E.W. Austin and K.K. Johnson, "Effects of General and Alcohol Specific Media Literacy Training on Children's Decision Making about Alcohol." *Journal of Health Communication*, 2, 1997.
- 14 Matthew M. Young. "Cross-Canada Report on Student Alcohol and Drug Use." Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse, 2011.
- 15 E.W. Austin and K. K. Johnson, 1997.
- 16 Marvin Crank. "It Starts Here: Alcohol Advertising to Youth." University of British Columbia, 2007.
- 17 G.M. Conolly, S. Casswell, J. Zhang and P.A. Silva, "Alcohol in the Mass Media and Drinking by Adolescents: A Longitudinal Study." *Addiction* 89: 1255-1263, 1994.
- 18 D. McKenzie, 2000.



Mind Map: Where Do We Get Messages about Alcohol?

