The Effects of Media on Child Health

In September of 2011, the City of Manchester Health Department and the Manchester Weed & Seed Strategy released *"The City of Manchester Blueprint for Violence Prevention,"* a set of comprehensive recommendations to create a safer, more resident-driven and involved community. Included is the need for community understanding of media's role in influencing child health and behavior with approaches to help children and families use media in responsible, healthy ways. To view or download the full report, or to get involved, please visit:

http://www.manchesternh.gov/website/Departments/Health/Services/NeighborhoodHealth/WhatsNew/tabid/3154/Default.aspx

MEDIA AND CHILD'S HEALTH
In late October of 2011, the City of Manchester Health Department partnered with Media Power Youth, a Manchester-based 501C3, that collaborates with public health and prevention programs, school districts and communities to create and implement evidence-based programs with positive results that help parents, professionals and youth understand media's role in influencing behavior, to hold a community workshop on the effects of media on child health. To learn more about what Media Power Youth has to offer, please visit: http://www.mediapoweryouth.org/
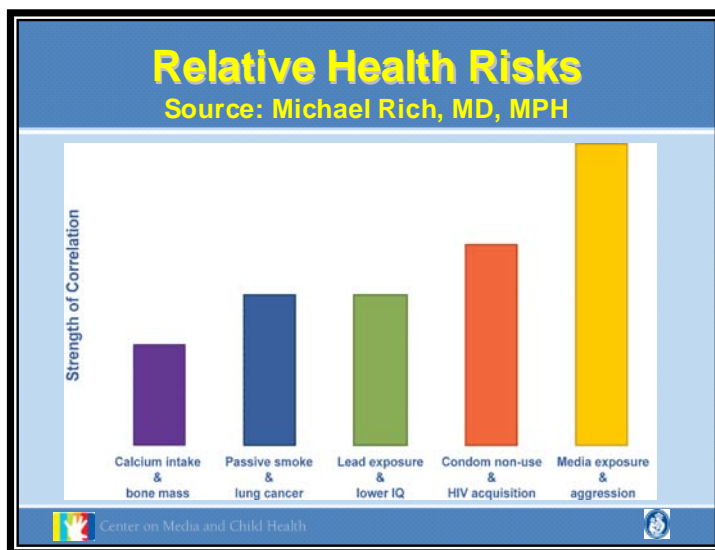
The partnership brought Keynote Speaker Dr. Michael Rich to Manchester to present the latest research available in this field. Dr. Rich is an Associate Professor of Pediatrics at Harvard Medical School, an Associate Professor of Society, Human Development, and Health at Harvard School of Public Health, and the Director of CMCH, the Center on Media and Child Health, Children's Hospital, Boston. His team is currently conducting media exposure research with middle and high school students from the Manchester School District. Over 150 participants attended in person and live stream and were given the opportunity to learn the following:

Relative Health Risks
Source: Michael Rich, MD, MPH

More research has been done on media violence than on any other media topic. Of the many relative health risks explored with poor health outcomes, media exposure and aggression consistently demonstrate the strongest correlation (please see graph). Over 50 years of research have shown three main effects of media violence:

- *Fear and anxiety* - many children become scared or nervous by what they see in the media
- *Desensitization* - the more a person sees violence, the less they are shocked by it over time
- *Aggression* - children learn that violence is a good way to solve conflicts

Young people spend more time using media—TV, movies, music, computers, Internet, cell phones, magazines, and video games—**than engaging in any other single activity except sleep.**

The media that children use and create are integral to their growing sense of themselves, of the world, and of how they should interact with it. These pervasive, persuasive influences have been linked to both negative health outcomes, such as smoking, obesity, sexual risk behaviors, eating disorders and poor body image, anxiety, and violence, and to positive outcomes, such as civil participation, positive social behavior, tolerance, school readiness, knowledge acquisition, and positive self-image. For any given child, which effects occur depends largely on the media's content, the child's age, the context in which the child uses media, the amount of media the child uses, and whether that use is active and critical.

MISSION STATEMENT
To improve the health of individuals, families, and the community through
disease prevention, health promotion, and protection from environmental threats.

The Center on Media and Child Health at Children's Hospital Boston, Harvard Medical School and Harvard School of Public Health http://cmch.tv/ recommends the following tips for media use to parents and caregivers of children:

o **CONTROL TIME.** Research shows that when parents create rules and limits about TV, children listen. We suggest creating limits not only for television, but for all screen-time (television, computers, and video games). Too much media use (more than 1-2 hours daily, depending on age) may be harmful for your child's health and development. The American Academy of Pediatrics makes these specific recommendations:

   Children younger than two: No screen media
   Children over two: Two hours or less per day

   The key is to approach the issue in the same way you do seat belts or nutrition; as an expectation, not a request. While you should discuss the reason for screen-time limits and appropriate media content with your children, these rules should not be up for negotiation.

o **CONTENT MATTERS.** All media are educational. Some teach accurate, healthful lessons, while others teach misleading and harmful lessons. Parents should study the nature, content, and age-appropriateness of media products before children use them. When you think about media for your children, you will want to consider what is appropriate for their ages. A good place to start is the ratings systems. You can also check out screen shots from games, lyrics from songs, and reviews from other parents before you make decisions about which media to use. Parents should use their judgment to consider what will be best for their own child's development.

o **CONTEXT IS IMPORTANT.** Where, when, how, why, and with whom young people use media strongly influence whether media enrich or harm them. In addition, the kind and amount of media parents use influences their children in many ways. Studies have shown that when children are very young, they may get distracted from their play if television is on in the background. Also, parents might not respond to their children as best they can if they are distracted by media. Become a "media role model" by modeling alternative activities, such as reading, playing sports, or participating in community activities. All of these decisions strongly influence their children's exposure to media. Parents can promote healthy media use by keeping TV sets and computers in central locations and out of children's bedrooms and by turning TV sets off during mealtimes and when no one is watching.

o **CRITICAL THINKING.** Teaching kids active, critical media use is essential for healthy development. One way of doing so is to practice media literacy. Teaching your children to question the media messages they see and hear is important. Since they are surrounded by media every day, knowing how to see behind these messages will allow them to grow up safe and healthy in the Information Age.

o **CREATE AND MODEL MEDIA MASTERY.** What we feed children's minds is as important as what we feed their bodies. Teach children to develop a healthy media diet, and engage them in the process of thinking about the media they use, rather than passively consuming it. Since 1996, the American Academy of Pediatrics has officially recommended that parents "co-view" television or movies. This means that parents are encouraged to watch television and movies along with their children. Studies about co-viewing have shown this practice:

   Increases Learning: Young children learn better from educational media when watching it with their parents. Parents can point out things on screen and label objects. With a pre-recorded program, parents might pause the VCR or DVD and ask children "What do you think will happen next?" Parents can also elaborate on lessons from TV programs or videos by pointing out similar objects, people, and situations in the child's own environment.
   Reduces Fear: Talking about scary scenes together can reduce children's fear. Younger children tend to be scared of fantasy elements like ghosts, witches and monsters, while older children tend to be most fearful of things that could happen in real life, such as terrorism or natural disasters.
   Reduces Aggression: Co-viewing can reduce aggression if parents make comments about the violence they see that is unacceptable. When parents see violence that is rewarded, they should point it out to their children. If a person is hurt but the consequences are not shown, it is helpful to say things like, "Wow, that person must have been really hurt. How do you think you would feel if that happened to you?"
   Increases Discussion: Parents of older children can use the content they see, especially violence or sexual behavior, as a starting point for discussion about these topics.