

Video games a prime vehicle for delivering health messages

Can young people benefit from positive health behavior messages delivered via video games?

The early evidence is promising, said Dr. Tom Baranowski a professor of pediatrics at the Baylor College of Medicine.

Baranowski was the featured speaker at the fourth annual "Healthy Eating in Context: Communicating for Change and Sustainability" symposium, sponsored by the Arnold School's Center for Research in Nutrition and Health Disparities and USC's Environment and Sustainability Program. The symposium drew approximately 130 faculty members, graduate students, and community partners.

Dr. Sonya Jones, director of the Center said, "The symposium was a great success this year. There was a lot of energy around the utilization of technology in improve nutrition and physical activity. Importantly, there were multiple disciplines represented at the symposium from USC, other universities, and across SC. This annual event continues to provide an opportunity for meaningful conversations to take place between scholars and community leaders, which is necessary to address multi-level strategies for nutrition issues on a local, statewide, national, and international level."

A faculty member in the Children's Nutrition Research Center, Baranowski has conducted extensive research on video games as an innovative medium for delivering health education messages to young people to combat the increase in diabetes and obesity in youth.

Baranowski's presentation is timely. The numbers vary, but national research findings show that more than 90 percent of America's youth play some type of video game.

And that makes video games a prime vehicle for delivering health messages.

Baranowski discussed two video games, "Escape from Diab" and "Nanoswarm: Invasion from Inner Space," which he and his research team have developed with Archimage design studio to study video games' impact on changing children's diet, physical activity and levels of fatness. The games were tested on sixth- and seventh-grade boys from inner-city Houston, Texas, and rural North Carolina.

A video game about healthy eating and exercise, "Escape from Diab" (Diab being short for diabetes) was comparable to the games that pre-teens are likely to buy in stores and play on home computers and video game consoles. In a clinical trial, Baylor researchers found that study participants increased their fruit and vegetable intake by approximately a full serving a day and were more physically active than those who tuned in to more traditional health websites for young people.

In "Nanoswarm: Invasion from Inner Space," the video game adventure also focused on healthy lifestyles through diet and physical activity. The game featured a female U.S. President and characters that spoke to the viewers.

"The study participants reported that they found the games to be challenging and interesting," Baranowski said.

The researchers will begin evaluation of the games' impact on youth this month and are looking ahead to future distribution, he said.

Improving the health of youth may have become a whole new game!