

Is Big Tobacco Out to Hook Kids?

By Dan Risch

Teens are working to make underage smoking a thing of the past.

Teens across the nation are burning up about the number of young people who start smoking each year.

“Whether tobacco companies admit it or not, they do market to kids,” says Jeffrey Tice, a West Virginia teen fighting against tobacco use. You might say Tice’s proof is in the puffing. In his state alone, more than 2,000 kids younger than 18 become smokers each year, statistics show, and the situation there is not that different from other areas of the country.

Teens start smoking even though national and state laws forbid the marketing and sale of tobacco products to youths. Tobacco companies, sometimes known collectively as Big Tobacco, cannot use cartoon characters or celebrities to advertise their products to kids, nor can stores sell tobacco products to kids.

Tobacco companies say they follow the laws, and some information supports that. Since 1997, for instance, when as part of a big legal settlement cigarette manufacturers said they wouldn’t advertise to kids, cigarette sales have dropped 21 percent.

Although direct, obvious advertising to kids doesn’t happen today, some people think something is going on.

“We believe that marketing is geared toward youth,” says David Deutsch, manager at the West Virginia Division of Tobacco Prevention. Deutsch explains that although tobacco advertising is not aimed at children, it can still catch their attention.

Trouble in Disguise

Many of Big Tobacco’s newer products come loaded with kid appeal, say teen advocates. Young people sometimes buy them because they’re packaged to look like candies, mints, and gum. Some even taste like candy.

“It’s really sneaky,” claims Judy Hou, 17. Judy is spreading the word in Virginia about how kids can get hooked on tobacco products such as snus, rubs, orbs, and sticks. Those products are either rubbed on the skin or

dissolved in the mouth to deliver nicotine, the addictive chemical in tobacco. And because they are smokeless and spit-free, they can be used anywhere, anytime.

In his own school, Jeffrey Tice sees how easily teens can use and become addicted to nicotine with the new products. "Kids sit in school 180 days out of the year. If you have an orb or a stick, you can pop it in your mouth and get your nicotine fix. No one ever knows," he says.

Why does the tobacco industry need people to get addicted to its products? "If tobacco companies gave up on getting new customers, they would soon be out of business," says tobacco ad expert Connie Pechmann, a professor at the Paul Merage School of Business at the University of California, Irvine.

Judy puts it more bluntly. "What they are trying to do is create a new generation of smokers," she says. "Tobacco companies need a new generation of smokers to buy their products. It's all about making money."

Making a Difference

Making money off teens is a little harder now thanks to Calitta Jones, Brian Bell, Jeremiah Carter, and Shanicee Dillon. As part of a tobacco prevention program in their hometown of St. Paul, Minn., the students surveyed neighborhood stores for tobacco advertising and products they felt were aimed at kids.

Instead of advertising, however, they stumbled upon something that left the group horrified. Dillon's 2-year-old sister got her hands on some candy cigarettes and toy cigarette lighters. She thought it was fun to "play" at puffing and blowing smoke. A video produced by the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids captures the team's reaction: "Candy and cigarettes together? Seriously not OK," Dillon says in the video.

So Dillon and her teammates powered up. With the help of St. Paul Councilmember Melvin Carter III, they worked to pass a city law banning the sale of candy cigarettes and toy lighters. With Carter's encouragement, the students met with the St. Paul city attorney to draft the law. They then asked for support from the mayor and the other members of the city council, and packed a public hearing about the proposed law with 150 of their friends.

Thanks to Dillon and her friends, it passed—easily. Other cities are considering following St. Paul's example.

Melvin Carter says he is proud they were able to put the ban in place. And, he insists, all the credit belongs to the teens who came to him. "My office guided them through the process," he says. "I wanted them to learn they can change the law."

"Kids have power when it comes to public policy ... if they're willing to roll up their sleeves and get at it," Melvin Carter adds. "Young people have the ability to look around their community, figure out the problems, and solve them."

Get Involved

Judy Hou's grandfather, a smoker for many years, died of lung cancer. Judy has never forgotten what she believes took her grandpa away from her. "I saw how horrible tobacco products are, not just for the smoker, but also for our family," she recalls.



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Judy Hou is a teen
activist.

When she got to high school, Judy joined Virginia's youth-led campaign to fight tobacco use and promote healthy living, Y Street. Recently, Y Street focused on halting the spread of nicotine products aimed at children. "These products are packaged like candy, mints, or gum and made to appeal to kids. The tobacco companies know they can take advantage of us," says Judy. "That needs to end!"

As a seventh grader, Jeffrey Tice learned what cigarettes do to people's lungs. Teen volunteers with RAZE, a West Virginia program that fights

tobacco use, visited his class. (The word *raze* means “tear down.”) They showed students pig lungs that were supposed to mimic smokers’ lungs. “They’re discolored,” he recalled. “They don’t inflate all the way and not quickly. They’re disgusting!”

Tice, now 18, is a youth leader with RAZE, taking up the campaign against tobacco use. “Our main goal at RAZE is to tear down the lies of the tobacco industry,” he explains. Tice believes that young people, when told the truth, will see how harmful tobacco is.

Judy agrees. “Kids need to take a stand,” she says. “Kids need to know they can make a difference. I’ve learned that I can make a difference.”

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. All of the following are tobacco products EXCEPT
 - A snus
 - B orbs
 - C sticks
 - D gloms

2. The passage describes the problem of underage smoking. Teens in St. Paul, Minn. did all of the following to address this problem EXCEPT
 - A they worked to pass a city law banning the sale of candy cigarettes and toy lighters
 - B they surveyed neighborhood stores for tobacco advertising and products aimed at kids
 - C they ran for public office with support from the mayor and joined the city council
 - D they took part in a video produced by the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids

3. After reading the passage, what can you conclude about tobacco products?
 - A All tobacco products contain nicotine and are addictive.
 - B Smokeless and spit-free tobacco products are not addictive.
 - C Teens can't get hooked on certain types of tobacco products.
 - D Cigarettes that contain less nicotine are not that addictive.

4. Read these sentences from the passage: "Judy puts it more bluntly. 'What they are trying to do is create a new generation of smokers,' she says."

In this sentence, the word **bluntly** means

- A directly
 - B innocently
 - C wishfully
 - D eagerly

5. Which statement supports the main idea of the passage?
 - A Tobacco companies want to gain new customers to buy their products.
 - B Teens are working to make underage smoking a thing of the past.
 - C In West Virginia, more than 2,000 kids are becoming smokers each year.
 - D Some kids get hooked on tobacco products that dissolve in the mouth.

6. According to the passage, what happened to cigarette sales when cigarette manufacturers agreed to stop advertising to kids?

7. The first paragraph starts with this sentence: "Teens across the nation are burning up about the number of young people who start smoking each year." What did the writer mean by the words "burning up"? Why do you think the writer chose those words?

8. The question below is an incomplete sentence. Choose the word that best completes the sentence.

Instead of remaining silent, _____, many teens across the nation are speaking out about the dangers of tobacco products.

- A because
- B although
- C however
- D otherwise

9. Answer the following questions based on the sentence below.

When she got to high school, Judy Hou joined a youth-led campaign called Y Street to fight tobacco use and promote healthy living.

Who? _____

(did) What? _____

When? _____

Why? to fight tobacco use and promote healthy living

10. **Vocabulary Word:** mimic: to resemble.

Use the vocabulary word in a sentence: _____

Teacher Guide & Answers

Passage Reading Level: Lexile 1060

Featured Text Structure: Problem/Solution – the writer poses a problem and suggests possible solutions

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6. According to the passage, what happened to cigarette sales when cigarette manufacturers agreed to stop advertising to kids?

Suggested answer: Cigarette sales dropped 21 percent. [paragraph 4]

7. The first paragraph starts with this sentence: "Teens across the nation are burning up about the number of young people who start smoking each year." What did the writer mean by the words "burning up"? Why do you think the writer chose those words?

Suggested answer: The writer meant that the teens are angry. The writer probably chose those words because they are a reference to smoking and burning, or getting rid of, cigarettes.

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When she got to high school, Judy Hou joined a youth-led campaign called Y Street to fight tobacco use and promote healthy living.

Who? **Judy Hou**

(did) What? **joined a youth-led campaign called Y Street**

When? **when she got to high school**

Why? to fight tobacco use and promote healthy living

10. **Vocabulary Word:** mimic: to resemble.

Use the vocabulary word in a sentence: answers may vary.