**Testimony of Amy B. Jordan, Ph.D.**

**To the Committee on Public Health and Human Services of the Council of the City of Philadelphia**

**February 24, 2010**

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak to you today.

My name is Amy Jordan, I hold a Ph.D. in Communication, and I direct the Media and the Developing Child Sector of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania. Our research has documented the great potential of media to connect, educate, and inspire individuals and communities; yet our studies have also shown that too much time spent with media can be harmful for health.

From a national survey of over 2,000 8 to 18 year olds released just last month we learn that the average child uses media for 7 ½ hours a day. Excessive media use isn’t just a problem for children. Studies show the average adult watches TV for five hours a day. These studies, like virtually every published study, find that those who spend the most time with media are low-income and minority – the very same people who are most at risk for obesity.

Researchers are now convinced by the evidence that there is a strong link between heavy screen media use and obesity. You might ask which comes first: does heavy media use lead to overweight or do overweight people use more media? Longitudinal studies of children show, particularly with television, that the heavy viewing precedes the weight gain. As with most relationships, however, it is complicated. Here are some of the mechanisms that underlie the relationship.

First, it appears that eating while viewing leads to greater energy intake. Research funded by the CDC at the Annenberg Public Policy Center indicates that snacking and eating meals with the TV on is a common practice in homes with school age children. Indeed, almost half of the families in our study had a television in the dining room or kitchen. Experiments with both children and adults show that people eat significantly more in conditions where the TV is on than when it is off. Researchers at Penn State have found this phenomenon to be particularly problematic for children who are already overweight.

Second, the marketing of food that is high in fat, sugar and/or salt and low in nutritional value – what we would call “junk food” – has affected what we eat. In experiments, children who are exposed to ads for junk food are more likely to think positively about these foods and request these foods than children who aren’t exposed. Researchers also recently found evidence that it is really the viewing of commercial television that affects children’s weight – children who watched DVDs and PBS seemed not to be affected. This doesn’t surprise me, since there is a preponderance of food advertising on broadcast and cable television, the vast majority of which is for nutritionally poor products. Our own studies at Annenberg have shown that advertising for food we would actually want our children to eat – low-fat dairy, vegetables, fruits, whole grain foods – is virtually non-existent.

Finally, heavy media use affects how we expend energy. Media use is almost always a sedentary behavior – and being sedentary leads to increased adiposity and higher body mass index. The time we spend looking at a screen may be displacing more energy-burning pursuits. A recent experiment restricting TV time in overweight and obese adults successfully produced increases in physical activity among these subjects. In children, interventions that reduced children’s media time were found to be effective in helping overweight children lose weight and preventing normal weight children from gaining weight.

Entrenched media habits will be challenging to change, but not impossible. Media are so woven into the fabric of a family’s day-to-day routine that it may be hard to imagine what they could do instead. We certainly don’t want reducing screen time to feel like a punishment, so we need to offer attractive alternatives that are not sedentary to parents and children. Additionally, parents themselves are often heavy media users. They recognize the hypocrisy in telling their children to turn off the TV or the computer when that’s how they are spending their own free time. If we want to reduce excessive screen time use, then it is clear that we have to work on encouraging the whole family to adopt healthy media habits.

The good news is that there is now research to suggest that media can be part of the solution. The CDC’s VERB campaign – which reached children via the media -- was effective at giving middle school children the message that physical activity is healthy, fun, and can be done anywhere. And though research has shown that advertising junk food to children makes them want to eat junk food, studies have also shown found that exposure to ads for healthy foods – like apples – makes children more likely to want to eat apples. We are encouraged the strategies marketers use can be leveraged to help families adopt habits that are actually good for them.

I don’t want to suggest that obesity in America is the result of excessive media alone. It is a very complicated problem and has many roots – including genetics, changes to the built environment, and the inability of some populations to access affordable fresh food. What I do want to suggest is that in so many of these domains the individual feels very little power to effect change. In media use, we have a behavior that individuals and families can change, and we have research that suggests that making these changes help improve the health of our community.

Thank you.