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"Too Cool to Smoke": Using Puppets to Make Learning Fun

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"Too Cool to Smoke": Using Puppets to Make Learning Fun, Cassandra Harris, MS. MDACC, Houston, TX, 77030.
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Introduction
According to the American Cancer Society, each day, more than 4,000 teens try cigarettes for the first time, and another 2,000 become daily smokers. One-half of these teens eventually will die from a smoking-related disease.

Purpose
One of the first and most widely recognized characters in the tobacco industry is Joe Camel. In 1991, a research study showed that more five and six year old children could recognize Joe Camel than Mickey Mouse or Fred Flinstone, suggesting that the campaign targeted children.

Tobacco use, particularly cigarette smoking is the single most preventable cause of death in the United States. However, there are few programs aimed at educating children about tobacco. To address this issue, the Public Education Office at the University of Texas
M. D. Anderson Cancer Center has launched “Too Cool to Smoke,” a tobacco awareness program show for children.

Methods
A lively and upbeat script performed by college students creates an environment of open communication for children. The program uses puppetry to educate children about the dangers of tobacco and the importance of making healthy lifestyle choices. It reaches children age five to nine before they are confronted with the decision to smoke. Each performance includes a question-and-answer period during which children ask questions directly to the puppet characters, who address myths and misconceptions about tobacco use.

Current Status
Since the inception of the program in 2004, more than 16,000 children have seen the puppet show. The shows primarily take place at schools, libraries, churches, daycare and community centers.

Conclusion
Combining education with entertainment has been an effective tool in educating the youngest students about tobacco. Fan mail and hand-drawn pictures received from the students after they have seen the puppet show confirms their understanding of tobacco dangers.