Public health practitioners can do a better job selling the benefits of healthy living whether the topic is distracted driving or body image.

Empowering students to speak up when they see their friends getting into unhealthy situations or behaving inappropriately is a common component of college antiviolence workshops. Now Rob Buelow, SM’12, a former violence prevention educator and antisexism activist studying health communications at Harvard School of Public Health, wants to know whether this type of positive peer pressure can be tapped to interrupt disparaging conversations about body image and weight. It’s one of several tactics the high-energy master’s student is exploring in his quest to spread the positive message of public health.

“I have a passion for helping people and also for understanding what makes them tick,” Buelow says. “It’s exciting for me to try to understand who my audience is and how I can most effectively reach them.”

Working with colleagues from the HSPH Strategic Training Initiative for Accentuating the Positive, Buelow uses unconventional methods to reach people everywhere in their daily routines—including the bathroom—with upbeat public health messages.

It’s an all too common scene: A girl looks at a photo in a fashion magazine and compares the model’s thin, airbrushed figure to her own rounder shape. She tells her friend, “I am so fat. I hate my body.” But what if, instead of playing along as usual, the friend flips the script and compliments her on something other than her looks? Could changing the conversation be a first step toward improved self-esteem and healthier behavior?
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but you get the biggest return on investment by focusing on KIDS before they’ve had a chance to develop bad habits.

Ideally, positive messages about healthy living should start in childhood, Buelow says. “Teenagers and adults have health needs that must be addressed. But you get the biggest return on investment by focusing on kids before they’ve had a chance to develop bad habits.”

After recently taking an intensive course in informal learning for children, Buelow is excited to pilot another outside-the-box idea: a health newsletter that will be posted where all kids must go eventually—the restroom.

Buelow, HSPH’s vice president of student life, launched the Stall Stories newsletter at HSPH earlier this year. Its mix of student-oriented news with fun features proved popular with its captive audience, and that got him thinking about real-world applications for both child and adult audiences.

For Buelow, reaching people where they are is what public health is all about. “The pursuit of knowledge is really important, but what good is data and theory if they don’t have practical application? You’re not going to change the world if research stays in your lab and knowledge stays in your head.”

Amy Roeder is assistant editor of Harvard Public Health.