

# 'Operation Outbreak': CDC Grooming Teens, Kids to Fear Pandemics, Critics Say

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The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) educational [resources for K-12 students](#) on disease outbreaks, the transmission of pathogens and how to trace their spread, on the surface, appear well-intended.

However, critics said the materials — which include lesson plans and classroom activities titled "[Operation Outbreak](#)" and a [graphic novel](#) targeting teens — also could be interpreted as

propaganda designed to encourage compliance with public health policies and initiatives.

The materials present hypothetical scenarios necessitating a public health response to the outbreak and spread of a disease with a zoonotic — or animal — origin. Students are asked to employ a “[One Health](#)” approach and methods such as contact tracing to respond to these hypothetical outbreaks.

According to [the materials](#), “One Health recognizes that human health, animal health, and the environment are connected.”

The One Health approach “requires human, animal, and environmental health professionals to work together at the local, state, federal, and global levels to improve the health of people, animals, and their shared environment.”

[Dr. Michelle Perro](#), a pediatrician, said the CDC’s educational initiatives “appear to be a well-intentioned educational effort under the One Health framework.” But instead, “a closer examination suggests it may also serve to acclimate

students to compliance during future public [health](#) crises.”

Perro said:

“By emphasizing the inevitability of [‘the next pandemic’](#) and reinforcing a specific perspective on zoonotic transmission, these materials can condition naive minds to accept certain public health policies without room for opposing discussions. ... This initiative prioritizes messaging over genuine scientific inquiry.”

[Dr. Margaret Christensen](#), a clinical educator called the materials “propaganda,” that “groom the younger generation early to believe our biggest threat is from some disease jumping out of an animal, whether birds or cows or pigs, and attacking us without defense, unless we’ve been vaccinated.”

According to attorney Sheri Snow Powers, the educational resources are intended to foster an uncritical attitude toward public health authorities.

“These materials are inappropriate for teenagers and children because they

promote and idolize public health authorities as heroes and saviors,” Powers said. “This is detrimental to young developing minds and conditions children to be future compliant citizens.”

### **CDC educational resources use ‘a fear-based narrative’**

The [CDC’s educational resources](#) include material meant to teach students “about the roots of American public health,” including the [history and role of the CDC](#) in domestic and [global](#) disease outbreaks.

The materials include modules on “lessons learned” during the 1976 swine flu outbreak, the CDC’s role in [food](#) and [water safety](#), and in responding to the “21st century public health challenge” of [chronic diseases](#).

However, the main focus of the materials for high school students is the “Operation Outbreak” series of classroom activities, centered around a graphic novel targeting teenagers.

Featuring a cover page reminiscent of the popular series “[Stranger Things](#),”

### "The Junior Disease Detectives:

Operation Outbreak a novel produced in conjunction with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, presents a fictional disease outbreak scenario involving teenagers and animals. It's connected to three in-class activities focusing on "zoonotic disease prevention and response."

The first activity, "The Outbreak Team," focuses on the "various roles and responsibilities of the professionals involved in an outbreak response. The next two activities, "Eddie's Story" and "Hamlet's Story," focus on investigating a disease outbreak and its subsequent spread from a pig (Hamlet) to a teenager (Eddie).

According to the CDC, upon completion of the activities, students should be able to "identify steps in an influenza outbreak investigation," "identify roles and responsibilities of public health, animal health, environmental health, and other relevant professionals" and "describe why using a One Health approach ... is best when investigating or preventing zoonotic diseases."

Students are also expected to learn how to define a series of terms, including “zoonotic influenza virus,” “novel influenza virus,” and “case” — including the differences between “suspected,” “probable” and “confirmed” cases.

“Most human infections with novel influenza A viruses have occurred after close contact with infected animals,” the materials state, noting that “[global surveillance](#)” is necessary “to detect the emergence of novel influenza A viruses that could trigger a pandemic.”

The materials also state, “There are associations between zoonotic influenza viruses and pandemics.”

But according to Dr. Sherri Tenpenny, the graphic novel and activities use a “fear-based” narrative. She said the materials lack “a balanced and factual approach that pathogens, viruses and bacteria are a natural part of life that can be mostly handled by each person’s immune system.”

[Vaccination](#) also is prominently featured in the educational materials. According to the graphic novel:

“As we learned during [Disease Detective Camp](#), our bodies’ immune system produces antibodies to fight against infection, and the safest way to get antibodies is through vaccination.

“Although the flu vaccine isn’t designed to protect against variant flu, it is still important to get, because it can help protect us from getting the flu and spreading it to others.”





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**One Health approach 'subtly promotes compliance over critical thinking'**

Perro questioned the CDC's focus on the One Health approach, "due to its biased, one-sided narrative."

"By focusing solely on zoonotic transmission, it ignores key factors like environmental [toxicants](#), industrial farming and genetic engineering risks," Perro said. This promotes "compliance



over critical thinking” and serves as “institutional propaganda,” she said.

The materials ultimately “shape narratives about the origins of pandemics — particularly regarding [COVID-19](#) having emerged ‘naturally’ rather than from a [lab-related incident](#),” Perro said.

Powers the materials “condition” children to fear specific pathogens and “to be ignorant of their own bodies’ amazing immune system, by not mentioning it.”

“Teaching children how to take care of themselves with healthy food, exercise, and sunshine is a much more valuable lesson,” Powers said.

The CDC’s focus on the flu and children is not new. Documents [Children’s Health Defense](#) obtained in 2023 through a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request revealed that the [agency](#) hired an [advertising firm to write “news” articles](#) promoting flu shots for kids and the elderly.

The CDC's "Operation Outbreak" materials appear to be unrelated to an [online simulation](#) activity by the same name, developed by the Broad Institute, UMass Chan Medical School and The Inspire Project — funded by the [Rockefeller Foundation](#).

This simulation, introduced in 2017 and described as an "infectious way to learn," operates through a mobile app and "unleashes a virtual pathogen through Bluetooth across participant devices, prompting a contagious outbreak that participants strive to contain."

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