

Years of research have established a link between childhood exposure to televised violence and later adult aggression.

School Safety

UPDATE

To see or not to see: the childhood TV viewing dilemma

Students today are products of electronic media-saturated environments. Television is the focus of much of the research about media impact, essentially because it is so pervasive, although movies — including home viewing on VCRs — and recordings also receive extensive research attention as to impact upon children and adolescents.

Much concern exists over the degree to which exposure to television and other media violence may affect young viewers' personalities and behavior patterns. Detractors are quick to attribute much of the blame for the overall problem of youth violence in the United States to the adverse influence of television and other mass media. Entertainment industry personnel are just as quick to point out that interpersonal violence existed for millennia before television was invented.

Over 3,000 studies have contributed to the expanding body of information regarding TV's influence on societal aggression and violence. In 1972, a surgeon general's report established a link between teen-age aggression and the viewing of televised violence. A 1982 National Institute of Mental Health report concluded that exposure to television violence increased aggressive behavior. An American Psychological Association (APA) study in 1985 acknowledged the same link — televised violence leads to aggression.

Another APA report in 1992 compared prime-time and Saturday morning televised entertainment. Prime-time TV exposed children to five acts of violence per programming hour; Saturday morning viewing contained 25 acts of violence per programming hour. A 1992 study commissioned by *TV Guide* monitored network and cable channels in Wash-

ington, D.C., for one day: All programming tallied 1,846 acts or scenes of violence.

Television reception was missing from an isolated Canadian town as late as 1973. Psychologist Tannis MacBeth Williams conducted a study of the town's school-age children just prior to television programming being beamed into the town for the first time, and followed up the study two years later. Rates of both physical and verbal aggression among the children had increased dramatically. However, a new interstate highway made the town more accessible during the same time period, so the increased aggression could also be linked to other influences.

Most revealing is a longitudinal study conducted over a 22-year period. In 1960, Dr. Leonard Eron, then a professor of psychology at the University of Illinois at Chicago, monitored the television viewing of the entire third-grade population of Columbia County, New York. Factors such as socio-economic background, parental attitudes and IQ figured into the study but had no significance as indicators of future tendencies toward violence. The best predictive factor was the amount of TV violence viewed by the 8-year-olds. Children who watched more television violence at age 8 were more aggressive at age 19 than their cohorts. Further, the more aggressive teen-agers were also more likely to have committed violent crimes — murder, assault, and/or child and spousal abuse — by age 30.

In testimony before the United States Senate Committee on Government Affairs in 1992, Eron summed up the last 40 years of mass media/aggression research: "There can be no longer any doubt that heavy exposure to televised violence is one of the causes of aggressive behavior, crime and violence in society. The evidence comes from both the laboratory and real-life studies."¹

Violence-saturated television can also change a person's perception of reality. According to professor George Gerbner at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, "What television seems to cultivate is what we call 'the mean world syndrome.' If you're growing up in a heavy viewing home, for all practical purposes, you live in a meaner world ... than your next door neighbor who ... watches less television. The major, most pervasive message

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of violence is that of insecurity and vulnerability and fear.”²

How are screen violence and actual behavior linked? Six different effects upon the viewer have been noted:

- *Reward factor*. An act of violence that is either rewarded or unpunished supports and encourages aggressive attitudes.
- *Reality factor*. Older children are more likely to imitate realistically portrayed violence.
- *Role models*. Children who identify with a violent character are more likely to be aggressive.
- *Justification factor*. An act of violence that is portrayed as justified is more likely to be copied.
- *Sympathetic connection*. Viewers, especially children, who identify with an actor’s situation and feelings are more likely to imitate that violence.
- *Psychological blunting*. Excessive amounts of media violence block typical emotional responses, making persons less sensitive to human suffering and less responsive to real-life aggression.³

Entertainment such as television, movies, recordings, video games and MTV are often blamed for children’s attraction to violence. Such criticism may be legitimate, but families and caregivers must also acknowledge their share of responsibility. It is the parent/caregiver who must change the channel, rewind the unacceptable movie, and refuse to purchase the video game that allows a “winner” to tear out the loser’s heart. It is the adult’s responsibility to monitor what the child sees, and to borrow a phrase, sometimes that involves “just saying ‘No.’”

Psychologist and television violence researcher Albert Bandura puts it like this: “If parents could buy packaged psychological influences to administer in regular doses to their children, I doubt that many would deliberately select Western gunslingers, hopped-up psychopaths, deranged sadists, slapstick buffoons and the like, unless they entertained rather peculiar ambitions for their offspring.”⁴

Turning off the “bad stuff” is only a partial solution. (See “Turn off the violence” on page 6.) Something must fill the void; adults in the family must actively seek good programming or other positive alternatives to violent entertainment.

Many parents assume that governmental regulation of the airwaves will “cure” the media violence problem. However, Peggy Charren, founder of Action for Children’s Television, a nonprofit organization working towards the elimination of commercial abuses in children’s programming, places that assumption into perspective. “Government censorship is not the way to protect children from television’s violent content. ... The right to express what some consider offensive speech is the price we pay for freedom of political speech, and we can’t afford to risk losing that very important right.”⁵

Enforcement of the Children’s Television Act of 1990 is one tactic Charren recommends. Networks are required to produce a certain amount of programming that educates and informs children. Parents and concerned citizens can collectively insist that networks comply with those requirements.

Media literacy courses are especially helpful in this regard. Such curricula can either stand alone as a separate teaching unit or be included in regular social studies or English course work. Even very young schoolchildren can learn to apply analysis techniques to depictions of media violence, but care must be taken in the teacher’s choice of programming to analyze. Such assignments are best done with guidance and in conjunction with the parent/caregiver.

Students can learn to develop their own definitions of violence, including the discernment that violence is not always physical. They can learn to judge motive, intent and consequences. Using grids they have created, students can count specific acts of violence that fall within their own definitions. Mature students can also note information about perpetrators and victims. Those roles are often characterized by stereotyping along racial, gender and socio-economic lines.

The American Psychological Association suggests four steps that parents can take to mitigate the effects of televised violence on young viewers.

- Watch at least one episode of each program the child watches to learn how violent the programs are.
- When viewing together, parents should discuss the violence with the child, i.e., why the violence happened and how painful it was. Ask the child how the conflict could have been resolved without violence.
- Explain to the child how violence in entertainment is “faked” and not real.
- Encourage children to watch programs with characters that cooperate, help and care about each other. These programs have been shown to influence children in a positive way.⁶

While it is true that responsible children’s television programming is a solution to societal violence, it is only one solution. Complex problems cannot be solved with simple, one-dimensional solutions. Network officials can in all honesty claim that violence existed long before the invention of television. However, as the co-authors of the 1992 American Psychological Association’s report on television and society state: “Forty years of research have removed the excuse for inaction by programmers and policymakers by removing the fiction that TV’s harmful effects are merely conjecture.”⁷

The viewing public can make its opinions heard on several fronts. First is the choice of programming allowed into the home. Consistent choice of acceptable shows and consistent rejection of unacceptable ones sets an example for

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younger household members. Additionally, networking with school personnel and other parents within the community multiplies what some feel is the negligible effect of one household's rejection of violent programming.

Write to the network. (A phone call is easy to ignore.) Explain why certain programs are not allowed in your home. Be specific. Telling an executive that "I hate violence and you show too many violent programs" is not helpful. Instead, list the program by name, giving concrete examples for each objection: "I don't like the Three Stooges because Larry's first reaction to frustration is to bash a friend over the head."

The reduction of societal violence requires long-term, multifaceted approaches. Televised violence is not the cause of all society's ills, but depictions of violence do create an aura of acceptability around the philosophy that "might makes right." Violent programming promotes a mind-set that accepts societal violence as normative. Television is not the sole influence upon young children, but it is a significant one if only by virtue of the time young children spend watching TV. It is not merely "entertainment"; it is also a

shaper of values. Creating and advocating responsible, nonviolent children's television programming are two solutions to reducing societal violence.

Prepared by Sue Ann Meador, associate editor of School Safety Update.

Endnotes

1. *Congressional Record*, 18 June 1992.
2. "Does TV Kill?" *Frontline*, PBS, 10 January 1995.
3. B. Wilson, D. Linz and B. Randall. "Applying Social Science Research to Film Ratings: A Shift from Offensiveness to Harmful Effects." summarized in *Media & Values*, Summer 1993: 11.
4. "A Look at TV Violence." *Violent Injury Prevention Program Newsletter*, July 1993: 1.
5. Peggy Charren. "Improve children's TV choices without censorship." *The Brown University Child and Adolescent Behavior Letter*, March 1994: 8.
6. "Violence on Television." *TV Guide* and the Center for Communication symposium publication, 2 June 1992: 2.
7. J. Murray, R. Menninger and T. Grimes. "Glued to the TV set: Rethinking a national obsession." *The Brown University Child and Adolescent Behavior Letter*, August 1993: 8.

Each family must ultimately decide what is acceptable viewing

The National Association of Elementary School Principals offers this list of suggestions in its *Report to Parents: How Parents Can Turn Off TV Violence*:

1. *Set an example.* Don't leave TV on all the time, even when eating or engaged in other activities. Select specific programs for information or entertainment. Don't watch "adult" programs when children are present.
2. *Do not use TV as a baby sitter.* Keep interesting items handy as alternatives, i.e., jigsaw puzzles, board games, crayons, pencils, paper, books and magazines.
3. *Reject all other violent "media."* Make it a family rule that violent entertainment has no place in your home, whether videotapes, video games, radio programs, music lyrics or reading materials.
4. *Schedule daily activities.* Teach your child to plan a daily after-school schedule in which TV fills only a small block of time — or perhaps none!
5. *Plan a weekly TV schedule.* Sit down each week with your child and choose suitable children's and family programs from the weekly listings.
6. *Use TV to teach.* Children interpret what they see differently than adults. They may not be able to distinguish fiction from fact, and something an adult thinks is funny may terrify a child. Watch programs with your child and explain the difference between news and entertainment, reality and make-believe, education and exploitation. Discuss programs with your child and compare your family values with those shown on TV.
7. *Keep an eye on the tube.* Place the TV in a central location where you can monitor who is watching what. Young children should not have TV sets in their bedrooms, although radios may be permitted and books are encouraged. Watch and evaluate new programs — even cartoons — before you let your child tune in.
8. *Encourage other activities.* The average American child watches TV for almost as much time as is spent in school! Reduce TV time by promoting at-home activities like exercise, hobbies, crafts, reading, playing games, tending pets, helping with household tasks, doing homework, keeping a journal and writing letters.
9. *Look for good TV.* There are many fine programs to watch with your children including concerts, plays, sports events, nature and wildlife shows, animated films, documentaries and movies suitable for children.
10. *Join forces to oppose TV violence.* Cooperate with teachers and other parents in efforts to reduce TV violence. Write or call local and network television officials, government regulatory agencies, and Congressional leaders. Let them know that you are concerned about TV violence and advocate the development of quality programs for children.

Laws combat influence of media violence on kids

Since the 1950s, when television became a regular presence in American households, the debate over media violence has raged. There are those who believe that a causal link exists between media violence and the increase of violence in today's society. However, the protections of the First Amendment limit Congress' and state legislatures' power to enact legislation to regulate media violence.

In the 1950s, the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) developed industry standards for television programming. Broadcasters were required to limit incidents of violence and sex to the necessities of plot development.

In 1974, the major networks and the NAB adopted voluntary guidelines, the Family Viewing Policy Act. The act advocated family programming for the first hour of prime time and advisory warnings for programs that might be unsuitable for children. However, this act was ruled unconstitutional.

In 1977, the Subcommittee on Communications of the House Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce issued a report on the impact of television violence. This report acknowledged Congress' limited power to regulate television programming due to the First Amendment and to the Communications Act of 1934, which prohibited the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) from censoring broadcast media.

Congressional legislation

In 1990, Congress enacted both the Children's Television Act and the Television Programming Improvement Act. The latter act was designed to encourage the development of programming standards to reduce violence on television. This act exempted the networks from certain antitrust restrictions for three years. (Previously, the Sherman Anti-Trust Act had prohibited networks from engaging in joint discussions.) Although guidelines were adopted to reduce violence and sex in television programming, they proved to be unenforceable and of questionable effectiveness.

The Children's Television Act of 1990 took a more forceful approach. Under this legislation, broadcasters are required to air programs designed to meet the educational and informa-

tional needs of child audiences. The FCC is empowered to enforce this act by denying license renewal applications for stations that do not satisfy the act's programming requirements. Traditionally, the FCC has not monitored programming; instead it reacts only when complaints are received. However, in 1993, the FCC imposed stricter requirements for educational and informational shows. As a result, seven stations were denied license renewal.

Legislators are now taking more creative approaches to limit children's exposure to violent television; there are currently several bills before Congress that attempt to skirt constitutional restraints. The Children's Media Protection Act (S 332) proposes a ban on the broadcast of "gratuitous violence" for all network and cable channels between the hours of 6:00 a.m. and 10:00 p.m. each day. It further advocates violence rating systems and television control boxes.

The Television Violence Reduction Through Parental Empowerment Act of 1995 (S 306) would require all new television sets to come equipped with "V-chips" designed to block out television shows that parents deem unsuitable for their children.

The Television Violence Report Card Act of 1995 advocates the establishment of a governmental or private organization to evaluate television programming. Parents would be provided with "report cards" to encourage monitoring of the programs that their children view.

State legislative action

The Washington legislature pronounced that media violence is conducive to violent behavior. As of January 1, 1995, all televisions sold there are required to be equipped with a channel blocking device. If televisions do not have these devices, manufacturers are required to provide them at no charge. Further, public libraries are required to establish policies for minors' access to violent videos and video games.

Colorado, Missouri and Tennessee also have adopted statutes to limit minors' access to violent materials by regulating the sale or rental of violent videos, video games or other related materials. Colorado and Tennessee classify violations as misdemeanors; Missouri punishes violations as either class A misdemeanors or class D felonies.

Clarification:

Regarding the school discipline issues of corporal punishment and reasonable force described in the February 1995 *School Safety Update*, the state of New York does *not* authorize corporal punishment in schools. However, a teacher "... may use physical force, but not deadly physical force, ... to the extent [the teacher] reasonably believes that force is necessary to maintain discipline..." (NY PENAL § 35.10)

“Driver training” for the information superhighway

Today, many decades after the hazards of smoking were first made public, tobacco continues to contribute to 350,000 deaths each year in the United States. Yet as every teacher knows, you can tell students about the dangers of smoking (or other self-destructive behaviors) until “you’re blue in the face,” and these cautionary words still will not counteract the media message that smoking is cool.

The following story describes how one school system faced this challenge and in doing so provided its students with skills that they will use in the classroom and beyond.

On the morning of June 7, 1994, a billboard went up in Billerica, a town 30 miles northwest of Boston. Was it just a basic advertisement on the side of the road? As evidenced by the sizeable crowd of young schoolchildren, teachers, proud parents and concerned citizens who gathered to watch, this was no ordinary billboard.

What made this event extraordinary is that the billboard contained an anti-smoking message created by America’s youngest creative advertising team: six-year-old slogan writer Jackie Love and 12-year-old graphic artist Jonathan Renoni.

Both of these Billerica students created the winning entries in a contest run by a unique school-sponsored Media Literacy Ad Lab. According to program co-director Renee Hobbs, this first-of-its-kind Ad Lab provides students with the opportunity “to plan, design, create and disseminate persuasive public service messages relevant to the citizens of Billerica.”

The 48-foot hand-painted billboard features Renoni’s graphic design and Love’s original slogan: “Save Someone Special ... Stop Smoking!” The billboard was donated and installed as a public service by Ackerly Communications, a local company with a plant near Billerica.

John S. Katsoulis, assistant superintendent of schools in Billerica, explained that the Ad Lab is a simulation of an authentic advertising agency, with teachers and students serving as the staff of creative media and research departments. According to Katsoulis, the Ad Lab was designed as part of

a systemwide media literacy initiative. Among other things, the Ad Lab has helped students “unmask the claims and myths of tobacco and alcohol advertising.”

“Media literacy teaches students to think critically, to communicate creatively and to act constructively,” said Hobbs, who teaches at Babson College and also serves as director of the Institute on Media Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. “Students,” she continued, “need to understand the messages that are also found between the lines of ad copy, beyond the engaging sounds on the radio, and behind the fast-paced visuals on TV.”

The mission of the Media Ad lab was to create a model program that could become a regular part of the community’s school program, where students in kindergarten through 12th grade would have an opportunity to engage in hands-on learning in an authentic communication environment.

The program uses the media curriculum *AdSmarts*, produced jointly by the Center for Media Literacy and the Scott Newman Center. The five-module teaching resource for middle school students includes video presentations, teacher handouts and comprehensive lesson plans for five weeks of training.

Many students already know that advertisers try to persuade them to purchase or consume, but they do not understand how the process works. *AdSmarts* gives students a glimpse of how imagemakers create media ad strategies.

Since the 1988 introduction of the “Ol’ Joe” advertising campaign for Camel cigarettes, sales to persons under age 18 are estimated to have increased from \$6 million to \$476 million annually. The goal of *AdSmarts* is to develop action skills in young people that will help them expose, alter and counteract such media messages — particularly the dangerous messages in alcohol and tobacco advertising.

These action skills produce concrete results. Katsoulis reported that more than 20,000 student-designed stickers have been distributed to students throughout the Billerica School District and more than 250 T-shirts bearing student-created anti-smoking slogans have also been given away.

“When students become message makers instead of just message receivers, their motivation and interest in school skyrocket,” said Hobbs. “And by experiencing the process of making persuasive messages, students can be better prepared to analyze critically the multitude of ads they are exposed to each day.”

This article originally appeared in the Summer 1994 issue of Connect, the quarterly publication of the Los Angeles-based Center for Media Literacy, and has been adapted with permission. Information about the AdSmarts media literacy curriculum is available by contacting the Center for Media Literacy at 1-800/226-9494.

Minnesota program leads in turning off the violence

Turn Off the Violence is a public awareness campaign that encourages all people to “turn off” violent entertainment — television, movies, music, videos and video games. This grassroots effort has grown in just a few years from a two-person, Twin Cities beginning to a national coalition of hundreds of individuals and organizations that is now directed by the Minnesota Citizens Council on Crime and Justice.

A series of violent crimes within the state in the summer of 1991 had heightened Minnesotans’ awareness of violence as a threat to personal, familial and societal safety. As two police crime prevention specialists discussed the events over lunch one day, one said to the other, “If we could just turn off the violence ... ! If we just had a knob ... ” The campaign was born during those lunchtime musings over the preponderance of violence in popular American entertainment.

Seven principles guide the Turn Off the Violence coalition and define its mission:

Simplicity. The campaign promotes two goals for individual violence reduction: to learn and use nonviolent ways to deal with conflict and anger and to choose alternatives to violent media entertainment.

Noncensorship. This campaign does not advocate government censorship, nor does it promote boycotts. There are no lists of “unacceptable” movies, television shows or music videos. Membership philosophy encourages individuals to consider the issue of violent entertainment carefully. As these individuals decide what is good entertainment and what is unacceptable, they will express a preference for nonviolent entertainment. When enough members of the public choose to turn off violence, the market for violent entertainment begins to shrink.

Grassroots. All members are encouraged to share actively

at the local level in planning and implementing Turn Off the Violence programs. The materials are affordable, enabling any interested person to participate without economic hardship.

Comprehensiveness. The campaign initially raises public awareness about violence through helping people realize that violent entertainment affects personal attitudes about the acceptability of violence. Turn off the Violence further asks the public to be aware of the many other forms of societal violence — physical or sexual violence, verbal abuse, gang activities, hate crimes, even playground violence.

Inclusivity. Violence is no stranger to any segment of society. Diversity is essential to achieving the coalition’s goal of a more peaceful society.

First step. The personal choice to turn off violent entertainment represents the first step in reducing societal violence. Many other influences affect a person’s attitude towards violence, but that first step is the one that empowers individuals.

Coalition building. Turn Off the Violence encompasses organizations and individual members who share knowledge and resources to promote the program’s purpose.

Turn Off the Violence began with the simple concept that every person has the power to turn off violence, beginning in his/her own home. If personal choice can make a difference in

one home, that same choice can ultimately have an effect on thousands of homes in hundreds of communities throughout the country.

This year the focus date for Turn Off the Violence Day is October 12, 1995. On that day the coalition asks that people take specific action. The idea is not just to avoid all forms of violent entertainment, but to plan fun-filled, nonviolent activities that underscore the need to reject violence.

Schools can join in the campaign through sponsoring and promoting events having themes of nonviolence: an art show; special musical or dramatic productions; a gala family movie night at a local theater; a stay-at-home family board game night; or a culinary cook-off, for example. To help toward its goals, the coalition offers a low-cost educational guide for the classroom or a community action guide as well as reproducible brochures for the community, local organizations or schools. For more information about this campaign, contact Turn Off the Violence, Citizens Council, 822 South 3rd Street, Suite 100, Minneapolis, MN 55415, 612/593-8041.

1995 School Safety Leadership Training

Complete this three-day training program and become a member of NSSC's national cadre of trained professionals. Participants will receive NSSC's curriculum guide and a certificate of completion. The fee for the training materials and program, which includes two meals, is \$495. Each class is limited to 30 participants. A \$60 nonrefundable deposit will reserve space in the session you wish to attend. Program dates and locations are as follows:

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NSSC REPORT

Agencies stand ready to help reduce consequences of media violence

Many people are eager to make media violence the scapegoat for society's ills. Media depictions of violence are not to blame for "the state of the nation" — multiple environmental, social and individual factors contribute to societal violence. However, the media factor cannot be ignored.

Popular culture gives rise to numerous superheroes whose response to problems is the use of force. While there is nothing wrong with a rattling good adventure story, there is something wrong with the consistent media image of force as a preferred problem-solving method. Such a model conveys the impression, whether intentional or not, that violence is the No. 1 solution for conflict.

Conflict is a natural part of life and an essential plot component, but conflict need not inevitably lead to interpersonal violence. Children learn to deal with conflict as part of their socialization process; violent media images in response to conflict are negative socialization ingredients.

The following agencies provide resources for persons interested in more information about the media's role in society and media violence.

The **Center for Media Literacy** is a not-for-profit membership organization dedicated to the development of a media literate citizenry. Its work includes seminars in media literacy, including the production of media literacy workshop kits; dissemination of information; and publications. Contact the Center for Media Literacy at 1962 Shenandoah Street, Los Angeles, CA 90034, 310/559-2944, FAX 310/559-9396.

Mediascope is a nonprofit organization that promotes constructive depiction of social issues in the media. Its activities include informational forums for the creative community and violence prevention practitioners; publications; story and script consultations; research; and an information clearinghouse. Contact Mediascope at 12711 Ventura Boulevard, Suite 250, Studio City, CA 91604, 818/508-2080.

Two major projects that monitor TV content are under way at this time. The networks have commissioned the Center for Communications Policy at UCLA to do a 3-year study of violence in television programming, and the National Cable Television Association has commissioned Mediascope to study the impact of violent programming content on viewers, especially children. The studies will result in nonbinding reports to the authorizing agencies; both studies focus upon the context in which violence is used.

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