

Psychiatric Effects of Media Violence **http://www.psych.org/public_info/media_violence.cfm**

The debate is over. Over the last three decades, the one overriding finding in research on the mass media is that exposure to media portrayals of violence increases aggressive behavior in children. The National Institute of Mental Health has reported that "In magnitude, exposure to television violence is as strongly correlated with aggressive behavior as any other behavioral variable that has been measured." In addition to increased aggression, countless studies have demonstrated that exposure to depictions of violence causes desensitization and creates a climate of fear.

An oft quoted statistic still bears repeating: the typical American child watches 28 hours of television a week, and by the age of 18 will have seen 16,000 simulated murders and 200,000 acts of violence. As the evidence linking increased aggression to excessive exposure to violent entertainment has grown, psychiatrists, pediatricians, and other physicians and mental healthcare providers have joined the call for limits on the amount of violent depictions to which children are exposed.

APA Position Statement on Violence

The American Psychiatric Association joins with other professional organizations in advocating for a significant decrease in violent programming on network and cable television. Television violence has been shown to be a risk factor to the health and well-being of the developing child, adolescent, and to the stability of their families. The APA has encouraged voluntary restraint on the part of the TV industry to decrease TV violence. Since voluntary restraint has been ineffective in protecting our young people from the escalating harm and intrusive assault of TV violence, reasoned regulatory action should be pursued, consistent with constitutional guarantees. (APA Board of Trustees approved 12/93)

The Pervasiveness of the Problem

In 1996, the National Television Violence Study examined the most extensive body of television programming ever collected for the purpose of content analysis. The study found that the majority of all entertainment programming contains violence. Especially disturbing was that the perpetrators of violence went unsanctioned in 73% of these violent scenes, since the most effective way of reducing the likelihood of young viewers imitating violent behavior is to show such behavior being punished.

Ignoring consequences of violence (including the pain of victims, the victims' families, and the families of perpetrators) or depicting the consequences unreasonably sets in motion a destructive encoding process. Viewers become desensitized and fearful and begin to identify with aggressors and the aggressors' solutions to various problems. The violent behaviors and attitudes thus encoded, aggression is now all the more likely in personal situations.

A Distortion of Reality

Individuals with greater exposure to media violence see the world as a dark and sinister place. Television programs present a narrow view of the world, and the world they present is violent. Thus, people who watch a lot of television are more likely than those who watch less to see the world as being violent and overestimate their chance of being involved in violence.

Nowhere is the media's distortion of reality greater than in the portrayal of individuals with mental illness. A 1997 content analysis of programming found that television characters with mental illnesses were highly likely to be shown committing acts of violence. In fact, mentally ill characters were 10 times more violent than the general population of television

characters, despite mountains of evidence that show that individuals with mental illnesses are no more likely to be violent than mentally healthy individuals.

Protecting Our Youth

Children and adolescents are exposed to more media depictions of violence than ever before. Such depictions pervade not only television, but film, music, online media, videogames, and printed material. Commercial television for children is 50-60 times more violent than prime-time programs for adults, as some cartoons average more than 80 violent acts per hour. With the advent of videocassette sales and rentals, pay-per-view TV, cable TV, videogames, and online interactive media, many more children and adolescents have greater access to media with violent content than had ever been available in previous decades. Again, these depictions desensitize children to the effects of violence, increase aggression, and help foster a climate of fear.

The critical period for lasting harm from exposure to depictions of violence is pre-adolescent childhood. Children as young as 14 months model behaviors. Viewers of violent programming can come to perceive the world as more violent than it really is, and a callous attitude toward violence can emerge. Fifty percent of murder victims are between 15 and 34 years old, and 55% of those arrested for murder are under 25 years old. One third of all the violent crimes in the U.S. are committed by individuals under 21 years old. Violence and the threat of violence simply come to feel like part of the natural background of everyday life.

Adolescents and young people are among the fastest-growing demographic groups in America. Without strong action against the ever increasing levels of violent entertainment to which they are exposed, the levels of violence already linked to this age group -- in terms of both victims and offenders -- can only be expected to increase.

What Can Be Done?

Corporations that produce and distribute media depictions of violence cannot be allowed to state that they are simply "giving the public what it wants." In a survey commissioned by the American Medical Association, two-thirds of all adults and 75% of adults with children have walked out of a movie or turned off the television because the content was too violent. Clearly, the public doesn't want what the media thinks it wants. While fiercely protective of free speech, Americans still want to be informed about the levels of violent or sexual content in television programs, computer games, music, and movies to which their children could be exposed.

In testimony before Congress, the APA and many other children's advocacy groups have agreed on the necessity of rating systems that not only are explicit as to the specific nature of the content (e.g., violence, sexual situations, adult language), but also must specify the age-appropriateness of the content. Rating systems inevitably involve subjective judgment as well as objective measures but can be an important tool to help ensure positive and developmentally appropriate models of behavior for our impressionable children.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that children be exposed to no more than 1 or 2 hours of television a day. Particularly where young people are concerned, limiting exposure to violence in the media, limiting overexposure to the media in general, and teaching and encouraging critical viewing, listening, videogame-playing, and reading habits can help set the pattern for more positive values, and, ultimately, a less violent, more humane society. Media literacy skills are vital. Rather than allow the media to promote unchallenged the quick fix of violent solutions, conflict resolution skills involving patience and negotiation should be taught.

But no rating system or skills training can substitute for parental involvement. In 1996, the American Medical Association published the Physician Guide to Media Violence. Included therein were a series of steps that parents can take to limit the media's influence on their children:

Know the shows your children see.

Don't use television, videos, or video games as a babysitter.

Limit television use to 1 or 2 quality hours per day.

Set situation limits (e.g., no television or video games before school or before homework is done.

Keep television and video player machines out of children's bedrooms.

Turn the television off during mealtimes.

Turn television on only when there is something specific you have decided is worth watching, not "to see if there's something on."

Don't place the television in the most prominent location in your home.

Watch what your children are watching.

Be an active viewer: talk and make connections with your children while the program is on.

Be especially careful of viewing just before bedtime, as emotion-invoking images may linger and intrude into sleep.

Learn about movies that are playing and the videos available for rental or purchase. Be explicit with children about your guidelines for appropriate movie viewing and review proposed movie choices in advance.

Set a good example and limit your own television viewing.

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