

# **Television Violence And Its Impact On Children**

By John P. Murray, Ph.D.

## **THE PROBLEM**

Few homes in the United States are without at least one television set, giving almost all American children access to this influential medium. Unfortunately, much of the programming for children contains violence.

Violence in children's television is so prevalent that Saturday morning children's shows contain as much as five times the number of violent acts per hour than do the shows aired for adults during weekday, prime-time hours.

Research suggests that violence viewed on television affects the behavior of children as well as adults. Those who watch a great deal of violence on television are more likely to behave aggressively. Children who view a steady diet of violence are more likely to be less sensitive to the pain and suffering of others. Even perceptions of the real world are altered, with those who watch a lot of violence tending to view the world as a mean and dangerous place.

Mounting evidence of the harmful effects of television violence has spurred public concern, giving the problem prominence as an important public policy issue. Further, years of study have led to suggestions for efforts that might be made at home, in school, and within the industry to lessen the amount of violence America's children watch.

## **BACKGROUND**

From its earliest years, television in the U.S. has been used primarily as a vehicle for marketing

goods and services, not as a medium for education or broadening the horizons of its viewers.

In most countries, television began as a public, government-owned system. In the U.S., the first license, issued by the Federal Communications Commission in 1941, was for a commercial television station. It wasn't until almost 20 years later that public broadcasting began as educational television in the U.S.

## **Concerns**

The first congressional hearings into the influence of television were held in 1952. The hearings, like several of those that followed, were hampered by the complexity of the issue, legal pitfalls, the lack of research, and disagreement among social scientists.

But as research accelerated, evidence began to suggest there are compelling reasons to be concerned about violence on television, as was noted by the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence in 1969.

By 1992, the American Psychological Association Task Force on Television and Society concluded that 30 years of research confirmed the harmful effects of violence shown on television.

## **EFFECTS OF VIOLENCE**

Research suggests that there are three major ways in which television violence may influence children and adults.

- **Direct Effect.** Children and adults who watch a lot of violence on television might become more aggressive. They might also come to embrace attitudes and values that view aggression as a favorable means of resolving conflict.
- **Desensitization.** Children who view a good deal of violence on television may be less sensitive to violence in the real world. They might also become insensitive to the pain and suffering of

others, as well as more tolerant of increasing levels of violence in society.

- Mean World Syndrome. Children and adults who are repeatedly exposed to violence on television may be more likely to view the world with apprehension, believing that the real world is as mean and dangerous as it appears so often to be on television.

## **RESEARCH**

A number of studies support all three types of effects of television violence on children and adults. A few classic studies described below illustrate the evidence.

### **Aggressive Behavior**

A study of about 100 pre-school-aged children who were enrolled at a Pennsylvania State University nursery school suggests that the kinds of television programs children see influence their levels of aggression and sensitivity. The study, reported in 1972, was conducted by Alethea Huston-Stein and her colleagues.

Three groups of children were each given a short-term diet of different television programs. One group watched either “Batman” or “Superman” cartoons. A second group was shown “Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood,” and a third viewed neutral programs with neither violence or pro-social messages. They watched their respective programs for one-half hour a day, three days a week, over a four-week period.

Children who watched “Batman” and “Superman” cartoons were found to be more physically active. They were more likely to get into fights with one another, play roughly, break toys, and snatch toys from others.

The children who watched “Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood,” however, were more likely to play in a cooperative manner. They were more likely to spontaneously offer to help the teacher and engage in “positive peer counseling”-- showing kindness, sensitivity, and concern for others.

Those children who watched neutral programming were neither more aggressive nor more helpful.

This study not only presents evidence that TV violence increases the likelihood of aggression among some children, it suggests that positive programming influences pro-social behaviors, such as cooperation and sensitivity.

### **Long-Term Study**

Children in a small, upstate New York town participated in a long-term study of the influence of violence on television. Begun in 1963 by Leonard Eron and conducted over a 22-year period, the study found evidence supporting a link between aggressive behavior and a diet of television violence.

Eron and his colleagues assessed the television viewing habits of 8-year-olds and charted their behavior. A relationship between aggression and the children’s viewing habits was noted early on.

Children who watched more violent programs were more likely to be identified by teachers and peers as the more aggressive students in school. A follow-up study, done when the students were 18 years old, reaffirmed the relationship between viewing television violence and aggressive behavior.

A third follow up, conducted when the students were 30 years old, found a relationship between early television viewing and arrest and conviction for violent crimes, including spousal abuse, child abuse, murder, and aggravated assault.

### **Mean World Syndrome**

For more than 25 years, a research group at the University of Pennsylvania, led by George Gerbner, studied prime-time programming targeted at adults and Saturday morning children's programming. Their work documents characteristics of television programs, and offers evidence that suggests how television influences the way viewers perceive the world around them.

By monitoring television programming, they found, in general, that children's programming contains a far greater number of violent acts per hour than programs shown during prime time. Saturday morning children's shows, on the average, depicted 20-25 violent acts per hour. By comparison, prime-time shows had 5 violent acts per hour.

Gerbner and his colleagues also studied television viewing habits in relationship to viewers' perceptions of risk in the real world, asking heavy and light television viewers questions that explored a range of attitudes.

Researchers reported that how much television a person watches generally predicts his or her level of fearfulness. Heavy television viewers were found to be more fearful of the world. They were much more likely to overestimate their levels of risk. They were also more likely to overestimate the number of persons employed in law enforcement.

These particular studies do not conclusively prove that watching violent television

directly produces aggressive behavior. Children and adults who are aggressive for other reasons may choose to watch more violent television. Nevertheless, hundreds of studies over more than three decades converge on the conclusion that viewing violent TV does contribute to aggressive behavior in children and adults.

## **POLICY**

History suggests that how the FCC views television's influence has an effect on the amount of violence that is broadcast.

In 1961, for example, FCC Chairman Newton Minow, in a well-publicized speech, referred to television as a "vast wasteland," after he had monitored television programming over a one-week period. His observation was followed by an agreement among broadcasters to assign a significant share of the UHF spectrum to public broadcasting.

Twenty years later, FCC Chairman Mark Fowler publicly proclaimed that he, too, had monitored the television programming of his time. But unlike Minow, he found in 1981 a vast richness of programming and opportunity and little need to regulate television, which he described as just another appliance, a "toaster with pictures."

Fowler's observations were followed by a deregulation of children's television, which led to an increased amount of advertising and the highest violence index rating for Saturday morning children's shows in 20 years of monitoring -- 32 acts of violence per hour.

Reed Hundt, the current FCC chairman, has called for a "New Social Compact" to change children's television. He stated, "Social science has documented that television can

be an effective educational tool, especially for young children, and our public policies must ensure that this positive potential does not escape us.”

## **WHAT CAN BE DONE?**

The nature of the problem of television violence suggests action to reduce its impact on children can be taken in the home, schools, and in the television industry.

### **Home**

In the home, parents could become more aware of how violence on television influences their children. An understanding of ways parents can help their children use television effectively might also help.

One basic intervention suggested for parents is for them to watch and discuss television programs with their children. Parents might, for example:

- Explain that the violence the child sees on television is not real.
- Explain how violent acts are staged for the screen.
- Discuss the consequences of such violence, if it were real.

### **School**

The use of media literacy courses is an example of an intervention that might be tried at the school level. These “critical viewing” programs are designed to help children understand how television works and how it affects them.

Raising public awareness by addressing television violence as a public health issue might also help. Several organizations produce community-oriented programs on the issue,

including the National Telemedia Council, National Alliance for Nonviolent Programming, Center for Media Education, Center for Media Literacy, and Mediascope.

The videotape, “The Kids Are Watching,” produced by Mediascope, is an example of a program designed to stimulate discussion about television violence and its impact.

## **Television**

Several regulatory and voluntary changes in the television industry have been suggested to lessen levels of violence on television.

On the regulatory side, toughening of the Children’s Television Act of 1990 is being considered by the FCC. The act limits advertising time during children’s programs, and required stations to demonstrate how they serve children’s educational needs. Among the issues being considered is placing quotas on stations to ensure that a certain amount of children’s educational television is broadcast.

Working with the television industry to make positive changes in children’s programming is one way to encourage voluntary steps to reduce violence on the screen.

One major change that might encourage more responsible programming is to shift support for children’s shows from advertising to underwriting. The intent would be to lessen the pressure to accommodate advertisers’ needs for a mass audience of 2-to-12-year-old children. That pressure has been associated with a preponderance of fast-action, fast-paced, often animated programming that tends to be violent.

The argument for shifting sponsorship from advertising to underwriting, with an

emphasis on building the sponsor's image, rather than selling specific products, is that such a change might lead to more specialized, age-specific shows for children.

Further development of the parental advisory notices that television networks began using in 1987 is another voluntary step the industry could be encouraged to take. The use of "viewer discretion" warnings resulted in a 14% drop in average audience rating for children ages 2 to 11 years, according to a six-year study done by J. T. Hamilton of Duke University and reported in his 1994 publication, "Marketing Violence: The Impact of Labeling Violent Television Content."

### **IN CONCLUSION**

Social critic E. B. White, writing in Harper's Magazine in 1938 of a new invention called television, observed:

"I believe television is going to be the test of the modern world, and that in this new opportunity to see beyond the range of our vision, we shall discover either a new and unbearable disturbance of the general peace or a saving radiance in the sky. We shall stand or fall by television -- of that I am quite sure."

In the years since White made that observation, social scientists have confirmed the medium's influence on the behavior and perspectives of those who watch it.

Unfortunately, much of the programming targeted at children contains high levels of violence, which has been associated with heightened aggression, insensitivity to others, and exaggerated fear of the real world.

The good news is that in the home, in schools, and within the industry, steps can be taken to reduce the violence children watch, and, perhaps, prevent television from becoming

the “unbearable disturbance” that White had warned of more than one-half century ago.

## REFERENCES

Murray, J. P. (1995, Spring). Children and television violence, The Kansas Journal of Law & Public Policy, 7-15.

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