

Media Violence: The children are watching

A guide for parents and teachers

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Children, Media and Violence:

The Facts

Children are exposed to images, sounds and stories from outside the home and community at a rate that is unprecedented in human history. Home entertainment media in the form of television, video, cable, satellite, video games, and the Internet command more of children's time and attention than just about any other activity besides sleeping. Too often, the messages children get from these media are violent ones.

Violence plays a major role in everything from cartoons, sports, news and other television programming, to comic books, rock videos and computer and video games.

Consider these facts:

- By the time most Canadian children reach the age of 12, they have seen more than 8,000 murders and 100,000 other acts of violence on television alone. This figure does not include videos or video games.
- A study at Laval University showed that children's TV programs contained 68 per cent more violent scenes than appeared in programs for adults. Other studies counted an average of 26.4 violent acts per hour on children's programs, compared to 9.5 violent acts per hour on prime time television.
- By the time the average student completes high school, he or she will have spent 11,000 hours in school-compared to 15,000 hours in front of the television set.
- Canadian parents spend more time watching television with their children each week than the combined time they spend reading with them, helping them with homework and teaching them spiritual beliefs.
- Many popular action/adventure video games are based solely on violence and players are rewarded for killing.

Media and Violence: The Effects

We tend to think of television viewing as a passive experience, but children soak up media images like sponges. Even toddlers, who may look like they're ignoring the TV set, take in more than we realize and imitate what they see and hear on TV. Television's influence over children seems to be greatest around Grade 3. But even teens are affected by the violence they see in video games and on TV, especially if it involves sexual or racial violence.

Of course, media can't be blamed for all the violence in society, and not all children react to media violence in the same way. Many factors determine whether a child will be aggressive, for example, individual temperament and witnessing real-life violence in the home. But there's enough research evidence to show that media violence has a major influence on society and on children in particular.

Some of the possible side-effects of media violence

Aggressive behavior

- Studies consistently show aggressiveness increases in both pre-school children and adolescents after they watch violence on TV.
- Two separate studies were conducted on remote communities in Canada where television was introduced. In one community the number of physical attacks increased by 160 per cent within two years. In the other, researchers found a significant increase in the rate of fighting four years later. They also found children imitating violent gang behavior they saw on TV.
- A long-term study that looked at males at ages 8, 18 and 30, found that those who viewed more television violence at age 8, showed more criminal behavior at age 30.

More tolerance for violence

Studies have shown that children who view violence repeatedly on TV become more tolerant of violence in real life. In fact, they are less likely to come to the aid of a victim. They also get the idea that violence is an acceptable way to resolve disputes.

Gender stereotyping

The more television children watch, the more likely they are to have sexist notions about male and female roles. This is likely because

- women in entertainment media are often portrayed as sex objects or doers of household chores;
- women and girls are often shown as victims in violent scenes; and
- most TV and movie media heroes are male.

In a recent Canadian study, 75 children aged 10 to 12 were asked to name their media heroes and only three children—all girls—named women.

Feelings of anxiety and powerlessness

Effects on health

A constant barrage of violent images—war, murder, disaster—sends children a message that the world is a dangerous place and that they are powerless to do anything about it. When children are consumed by worry they are less likely to play freely and explore their world. Free play and exploration are necessary if children are to learn, grow and gain self-confidence.

- Children who are disturbed by violent images may experience nightmares and sleeping disorders.

Some research has shown that children who play violent video games may experience blood pressure changes similar to those of adults under stress.

- When children spend a lot of time watching TV or playing video games, they may not be getting enough fresh air and exercise. Obesity may become a problem.

Help children become critical users

Parents and teachers should talk to children about what they see and hear in the media. Try asking some of the following thought-provoking questions.

- What do they think about what happened in the program?
- What was real and what was pretend? Discuss how TV shows and movies are produced and how props and stunt people are used to make violent action scenes look realistic.
- How do they feel about what they watched? If they felt uneasy, what was it that made them feel that way? Why? Let them know how you feel.
- When a violent incident occurs, point out that violence is not the way adults usually solve problems. What other ways could the character have acted? Was there a non-violent solution?
- Were there consequences to what the character did? Were people hurt? Was the character punished? What would the consequences be if the character did that in real life?
- What role could witnesses have played to aid the victim? Why did or didn't they?
- Are there really people like the ones we see in magazine advertisements, in commercials or in TV shows? How realistic is the portrayal of these people?
- Challenge the claims made in commercials. Conduct research with the real experts to find answers.
- Are news clips a good way to gauge what's going on in the "real" world? Explain that, while the violence in the news is real, it represents only a small portion of what goes on in the world. Discuss how "news" is selected for entertainment value and point out that often the good things that happen never make it into the news. Assure them that the world is not as violent or scary as the news would suggest.
- Discuss why people buy the tabloids even though they know the stories are exaggerated.

- Discuss ownership of the media. Find out how many newspapers, radio stations or television networks are owned by the same company. Investigate world views or biases of these companies. Are they more likely to report on conflict or compromise?
- What is the role of advertising in the media? Identify and discuss the various methods of persuasion used by advertisers.

What parents can do in the home

Plan your family TV viewing together

Consult a television listing and let your children make choices from among programs you know are non-violent, informative or entertaining.

Limit television's influence in your home

Limit children's TV time to one or two hours a day. Plan to watch only one show at a sitting and keep the set turned off at other times. Use a VCR to tape good programs and replay them at convenient times for your family.

Know what your children are viewing

Accompany your children when renting videos. Preview comic books, video and computer games before purchasing. Identify appropriate choices and let your children pick from among them. Clearly communicate what kinds are off limits and why.

Offer your children entertainment alternatives

Use good children's videos as alternatives to network or cable TV. Have a choice of other activities available such as board games, sports, crafts, and books that involve children physically, intellectually or creatively. Encourage imaginative play. Encourage reading. Research shows that children who read more do better in school.

Don't use television as a babysitter

Yes, you're busy and it's sometimes convenient to sit kids in front of the TV when you need to get things done. Try to keep that time to a minimum and keep an eye on what they're watching.

Be a good role model

Children tend to pick up the television viewing habits of their parents. How much TV do you watch? How much do you read in front of your children? Children learn more about behavior by modeling what parents do than by doing what parents say.

Call or write television stations and sponsors

Let television stations and sponsors know which programs you disapprove of. Also let them know when you like a program and encourage them to show more programs like it.

Call or write your legislative representatives

If you believe there should be more regulations to promote non-violent television programming and restrict advertising on children's television, contact your Member of Parliament and the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) and let them know what you think.

What teachers can do in the classroom

Many schools have acknowledged the effects of media on children by incorporating media education into their curricula. Here are a number of ideas you can use in the classroom:*

For elementary students

- Ask students to talk about violent or aggressive acts such as hitting and name-calling. Ask them how they feel when others hit them or call them names.
- Ask children what shows they like to watch and what shows they saw last night.
- Ask them to talk about any violence they saw in any shows they watched recently. How did it make them feel? Angry? Sad? Scared? What do they do when they feel this way?
- Show examples of violent and non-violent cartoons. Ask children to think of different or peaceful ways the cartoon characters could have acted to resolve their problems.
- Ask students what happens to cartoon characters who are hit or hurt? Is this realistic?

For junior and senior high school students

- Discuss various forms of violence: physical, verbal and (for older students) sexual.
- Ask students to list and record five programs they like to watch. List the five or 10 most popular programs.
- Ask the students to keep track of the number of violent acts that appear in a single episode of one of these programs. Ask them to keep track of both the number of helpful acts and anti-social acts they see in the program.

- Ask them if in watching these shows they have become desensitized to normal human reactions to violence. For example, do they feel horror, revulsion or empathy with the victim?
 - Ask students to identify stories in the media where conflict was resolved without the use of violence.
 - Attend a news conference. Then analyse the slant in the news.
- * Some of these ideas were adapted from ASAP: A School-based Anti-violence Program, London Family Court Clinic, London, Ontario.

For more information

A wealth of materials on media violence have appeared in recent years. This is only a partial list of resources available to parents and teachers.

PrimeTime Parent, a multi-media kit for facilitating workshops for parents

The Alliance for Children and Television
344 Dupont St., Suite 205
Toronto, ON M5R 1V9
Phone: (416) 515-0466

Scientific Knowledge about Television Violence
CRTC

Ottawa, ON K1A 0N2
Phone: (819) 997-0313
or (604) 666-2111 or (604) 666-8322
The CRTC accepts collect calls and provides voice mail with a call back option.
Fax: (819) 994-0218
Internet: <http://www.CRTC.gc.ca>

Media Awareness Network
179 Rideau Street, Ottawa, ON K1A 0M9
Phone: 1-800-896-3342
Internet: <http://www.screen.com/mnet>

MediaWatch
(kits for parents, teachers, administrators)
517 Wellington Street West, Suite 204
Toronto, ON M5V 1G1
Phone: (416) 408-2065

National Clearinghouse on Family Violence
(Canadian reports on media violence and children)
Family Violence Prevention Division
Health and Welfare Canada
Tunneys' Pasture
Ottawa, ON K1A 1B5
Phone: 1-800-267-1291

Media Literacy Resource Guide, and Mass Media and Popular Culture are available from Alberta's Learning Resources Centre (LRC) in Edmonton.

To order call (403) 427-2767.

The Effects of Television on Children, produced by Health Canada, is available from the National Clearing House on Family Violence.

To order call 1-800-267-1291.

Suggested Reading

A is for ox: the collapse of literacy and the rise of violence in an electronic age. Sanders, Barry. New York: Vintage Books, 1995; 1994.

Big world, small screen: the role of television in American society. Huston, Aletha. Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 1992; 195 pages.

Don't be a TV television victim. [videorecording]. Santa Cruz, California: Media Watch, 1992.

How to talk with children about media imagery and pornography: a media literacy workshop for parents and professionals. Calgary, Alberta: Education on Media and Pornography, 1994.

La violence dans les médias: ses effets sur les enfants. Ottawa: Santé et Bien-être social Canada, 1993; 19 pages.

L'enfant devant la télévision des années 90. Mireille, Shalvon, Paris, France: Casterman, 1991; 178 pages.

Positive action: gender and violence in children's entertainment. Campbell, Sandra. Toronto, ON: Media Watch, [1995]. 3 documents: Teacher kit, Administrator kit, Parent kit—each 38 pages.

Prime time parent. [videorecording]. Ottawa: Health Canada, 1995.

Respecting children: a Canadian approach to helping families deal with television violence. Ottawa: Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission, 1996; French version on reverse.

Television violence: a review of the effects on children of different ages. Josephson, W. Ottawa: Health Canada, 1995.

The effects of media violence on children. Ledingham, Jane E. Ottawa: Health and Welfare Canada, 1993; 17 pages.

The smart parents' guide to kids TV. Chen, Milton. San Francisco, California: KQED Books, 1994.

Video kids: making sense of Nintendo. Provenzo, Eugene F. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991; 184 pages.

Viewing violence: how media violence affects your child's and adolescent's development. Levine, Madeline. New York: Doubleday, 1996.

The resources listed above were compiled by the ATA library; however, they have not been reviewed by the ATA's Safe and Caring School Steering Committee

To register your opinion of media programming contact the following organizations:

CRTC: Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission
Broadcast Coordination
Ottawa, ON K1A 0N2
Phone: (819) 997-0313

Canadian Broadcast Standards Council
P.O. Box 3265, Stn. D
Ottawa, ON K1P 6H8
Phone: (613) 233-4607

To voice your opinion about television violence contact the Coalition for Responsible Television (CRTV).
Phone: 1-900-451-3664 (\$3 per call)

More Information

More information about the Society for Safe and Caring Schools and Communities is available at www.sacsc.ca.

