



It's A Mean World, Stay Tuned

Scientifically speaking, there is little doubt — mass media violence, especially on TV, is harmful to children

It's been a lingering topic of public debate. Does mass media violence, particularly that shown on television, really influence the behavior and attitudes of children who watch it?

Based on the scientific evidence at hand, the answer is yes. The weight of 35 years of research concludes that mass media violence contributes to aggressive behavior, insensitivity, and fearfulness.

Whether viewers are fully aware of what is known about the harmful effects of mass media violence is another matter. An "education gap" is argued to exist, depriving viewers of much of what science has learned — a gap blamed, in part, on the failure of researchers to articulate their findings and on the reluctance of the television industry to acknowledge evidence of the potential of violent programming to do harm.¹

Nevertheless, the body of research is convincing enough that such groups as The American Medical Association, the American Psychological Association and the American Academy of Pediatrics have become outspoken advocates of reducing violence in the mass media.

Aggressive Behavior

Beginning in the mid-1960s, psychologist Leonard Eron and colleagues

followed a group of children, then eight years old, observing their television viewing habits and their behavior. The study, one of the most extensive ever done, would span three decades and uncover some of the strongest evidence that too much TV can harm children.

Not only was there a relationship between watching violent television and aggressive behavior, but Eron found early TV viewing habits to be a stubborn influence, one that carried weight well into adulthood.²

At age 8, the children who preferred or watched violent television programs were more likely to be the ones identified by teachers and friends as the aggressive kids in school. When revisited at age 18, researchers again found aggressive behavior related to the early television viewing habits of the children. Finally, as 30-year-old adults, the link between aggressive behavior and TV viewing habits was again observed. In fact, researchers reported evidence that tied television viewing habits developed early in life to arrests for violent crimes.

Just as violence seen on TV contributes to aggression, the flip-side is also true: Non-violent programs containing messages of tolerance and cooperation can inspire pro-social behavior.

Both sides of the coin are demonstrated in the work of Alethea Huston-Stein and colleagues, who studied the influence of television programming by observing 100 children in a Pennsylvania State University nursery. The children were separated into three groups. One was shown *Batman* and *Superman* cartoons; another, *Mister*

Rogers' Neighborhood. The third group was shown neutral programs with neither violent or pro-social messages.

Once again, a relationship between violent TV and aggressive behavior was apparent. Children exposed to the *Batman* and *Superman* cartoons were more physically active and were more likely to get into fights, play roughly, and break toys.

On the other hand, children fed a diet of *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* tended toward positive behaviors. Unlike classmates who watched the superhero cartoons, they were more likely to show sensitivity, offer help to teachers, play cooperatively, and express concern about other children's feelings.

Television, it turns out, can nurture the positive within children, characteristics as important as sensitivity.

But at the same time, mass media violence threatens to undermine feelings of concern, empathy, and sympathy among those exposed to it.

Desensitization

In psychology, there is a method for treating pathological fears called "exposure therapy." With some patients, simply exposing them to a situation they find frightening tends to diminish the anxieties that situation once evoked.

With mass media violence, similar principles appear to be at work.

The tendency for violent film and television to dull a viewer's sensitivity is documented in a number of studies. One, involving college-age men,

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illustrated how even a short period of exposure might shape attitudes toward violence and its victims. In this case, the victims were women.

Over a five-day period, the men were shown films depicting violence, often sexual violence. With repeated exposure, they enjoyed the films more and came to view the material as much less violent and degrading to women as they had on the first day. By the end, they considered the rape victims as less severely injured than a control group men who hadn't had prolonged exposure to the films.³

Mean World

From cop shows to cartoons, television liberally sprinkled with violence conjures a world of peril and conflict, predators and victims. For those who watch enough of it, the real world can assume the same snarling face.

A "mean world" syndrome was first observed by University of Pennsylvania researchers lead by George Gerbner, who for longer than 25 years has monitored prime time and Saturday morning TV. Evidence of a paranoid reaction to television violence came from viewer's responses to questions about real world risks, such as: What are your chances of becoming a crime victim? How far would you walk from home at night? What percentage of the workforce is involved in law enforcement?

For heavy television viewers, there clearly was a mean and dangerous world lying in wait outside their living rooms. They were, for example, much more likely to exaggerate the risks to themselves that stepping outside homes presented. And their estimates of the number of people employed as police were high compared to the more reasonable estimates made by those whose television viewing schedules were light.

Mass media violence, with all of its

implications, is a pervasive risk that American children exposed to daily.

Violence Per Hour

Kid's shows are typically more violent than prime-time shows largely produced for adults. On the average, Saturday morning children's shows contain 20 or more acts of violence per hour, while prime-time shows average five. Observing programs broadcast in the Washington, DC area, researchers found the periods when the most violence is shown are those between 6 a. m. and 9 a.m. and between 2 p.m. and 5 p.m. — times when children are most likely to be watching television.⁴

Public Policy

History suggests public policy and the views expressed by the Federal Communications Commission are related to how much violence is broadcast on television. Not long after FCC Chairman Newton Minow described television in 1961 as a "vast wasteland" cluttered with violence and murder among other things, an agreement among broadcasters assigned a large piece of the UHF spectrum to public broadcasting.

In 1981, FCC Chairman Mark Fowler gave television programming high marks, said he saw no reason to regulate the industry, and described the television as just another appliance, a "toaster with pictures." An increase in the amount of advertising on Saturday morning television followed, along with a hike in the violence rating of Saturday morning programming to 32 violent acts per hour — a 20-year high.

However, policies adopted by the television industry to inform viewers of program content show some promise in shielding young children from violence.

Television movies carrying "viewer discretion" warnings, which were adopted by the industry in 1987, tend to lose audience share among children 2 to 11 years old. Those movies experienced a 14 % drop in the average audience rating for that age group between 1987 and 1993. In 1997, television expanded the viewer discretion warnings to include a program rating system similar to the one devised by the Motion Picture Association of America to rate films. Once again, this action followed widely-publicized political debate over the content on television and films.

references

This article was largely drawn from the following report:

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⁴ Lichter, R.S., & Amundson, D. (1992). A day of television violence. Washington, DC: Center for Media and Public Affairs.

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