

The Effects of Violent Media on Children

This fact sheet is extracted from an Australian Psychological Society Position Paper entitled *Media Representations and Responsibilities*, which can be found on the website: www.psychology.org.au.

Introduction

- Research consistently reports very high levels of exposure to violence through electronic media;
- persistent viewing of violence on television is linked to an increased likelihood of behaving aggressively in the long-term; and
- television is only one of a number of factors which contribute to the tendency to violence and aggression, each of which makes a small but significant contribution.

What does the research tell us about its effects upon children?

- Exposure to violent television can and does influence children's feelings, attitudes and behaviour;
- it is generally agreed that prolonged exposure to television violence is one of a number of factors which lead to children being more likely to display aggressive behaviour in both the short-term and the long-term;
- some children enjoy, and develop an appetite for, viewing violent material;
- viewing violence on television leads to immediate distress and fear in many children;
- many children retain longer-term recurrent disturbing memories from viewed violence;
- exposure to media violence can contribute to beliefs that aggression is an acceptable and effective behaviour, can induce fear and anxiety and the belief that the world is "a mean and scary place";
- continual exposure to media violence increases the likelihood that children will be desensitised to real violence;
- age and gender are important influences on the nature of the effects, with younger children likely to be more susceptible to learning from TV; and
- the social context of viewing is important in determining the effects of exposure to violent television; e.g. if an adult helps the child interpret and critique the viewed material, the negative effects are lessened.

What does the community want?

- There is widespread community concern, particularly amongst parents and teachers, about the level of violence in television programs and videogames;
- consumers, including children, tend to dislike the amount of violence on TV; and
- most children's preferences are for exciting and humorous programs, and violence is generally unwelcome except when it is associated with high levels of action.

What can parents do?

- Parents can know what their children are watching;
- set and enforce clear rules about the amount and type of programs watched;
- watch with their children whenever possible, and help their children interpret and critique the viewed material by means of family discussions; and
- encourage their children to engage in more active and creative pursuits, including activities with parents and other family members.

What can educators do?

- Media education curricula should be developed and widely disseminated in schools. A key element should be the provision of skills in monitoring and analysing media content;
- professional development seminars should be made widely available for teachers to enable them to increase their own media literacy skills;
- teachers can use their influence by drawing the attention of children and parents to exciting, non-violent media, and expressing their own enthusiasm over them; and
- media education should be made widely available for parents as well as for children.

What can journalists and journalism educators do?

- Recognise the complexity of the issues and avoid simplistic global assertions;
- include best-practice examples in journalism education; and
- make professional development courses available for currently practising journalists.

What can psychologists do?

- Be alert to recognising the influence of media in the ideation and emotionality of clients, particularly children and adolescents; and
- stay abreast of current research and conduct research in neglected areas.

In conclusion

It is recommended that media producers respond to the community's concern about TV violence, hear the preferences expressed by children, and use their resources to produce exciting media material that does not rely on violence. In turn, media policy makers and regulators need to ensure that classification systems are based on the research evidence and are effectively applied, monitored and enforced.

Consumers can undertake a range of activities to influence the type and quality of media viewed by children:

- complain to appropriate bodies about material or policies of which they disapprove;
- praise programs they admire to organisations such as those listed below;
- boycott certain programs or media outlets; and
- join and support lobby groups.

Organisations for further information

Australian Broadcasting Authority, Level 15 Darling Park, 201 Sussex Street, Sydney NSW 2000. Ph: (02) 9334 7700; Fax: (02) 9334 7799; email: info@aba.gov.au

Federation of Australian Commercial Television Stations (FACTS), 44 Avenue Road, Mosman, NSW 2088. Ph: (02) 9960 2622; email: facts@facts.org.au

Young Media Australia, 69 Hindmarsh Square, Adelaide SA 5000. Ph: (08) 8232 1577; Fax: (08) 8232 1571; email: info@youngmedia.org.au

For further information contact: The Australian Psychological Society, Level 11, 257 Collins Street, Melbourne, Victoria 3053. Ph: (03) 8662 3300; Fax: (03) 9663 6177; email: contactus@psychology.org.au