

background

Report # 57

Violent Television's Lingering Effects

July 2004

Watching Violence On Television

Lingering Harm

Effects Of Media Violence Last Into Adulthood

For decades, behavioral scientists reported that watching a lot of violence on television leaves children prone to developing aggressive, even violent behaviors. Now they report more troubling news: Those aggressive tendencies seen as a child appear to carry over into adulthood.

Children who frequently watch violent television shows are more likely to behave aggressively as adults, hold aggressive attitudes, and be convicted of a crime, according to a 15-year study of adults whose television viewing habits as children were recorded in the 1970s.

Those interviewed included 329 young adults in their 20s who had been part of a group of children in a 1977 study of the effects of television violence.

The television shows they watched as children that were considered especially violent at the time – including roadrunner cartoons, “Starsky and Hutch,” and “The Six Million Dollar Man” – pale in comparison to many of the violent television programs available to children today.

The study, supported in part by the National Institute of Mental Health, was reported in *Developmental Psychology*, a journal of the American Psychological Association. It was conducted by two veteran investigators of television violence, L. Rowell Huesmann, Ph.D., and Leonard D. Eron, Ph.D., and their colleagues at the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research.

Early Findings Of Harm

Evidence of the possible harm of watching too much violence on television dates to the mid-1960s.

Dr. Huesmann and Dr. Eron, for example, were among the first researchers to report that grade school children exposed to a steady dose of violent television programs tended to be the children who teachers and friends identified as the more aggressive in class.

Other characteristics among children, including their levels of patience and their willingness to follow rules, were also found to be influenced by the amount of television violence they were exposed to.

Among adults, a steady dose of violent television has been found to contribute to a diminished capacity to feel sympathy for victims.

And adults who are fed a strong dose of violence are more likely to de-

Men who watched the most violence on television as boys were three times more likely to have been convicted of crimes as adults.

velop an exaggerated sense of danger in the world around them.

Lasting Impact

As studies matured, Drs. Huesmann, Eron, and others began reporting evidence that hinted at a link between high levels of violence watched by children and the aggressive, violent, even criminal behavior they exhibited later as adults.

Their latest findings are based on surveys of adults who had been part of a 1977 study as young children, police and court records, and interviews with spouses and significant others.

Outcomes were measure by how many times they committed aggressive acts such as spousal abuse and physical aggression, and on records of criminal activities.

In every category, children who had viewed the most television violence were more aggressive as adults compared to

(Continued on back)

(Continued from front)

adults who were low- and medium-viewers of violence as children.

- Men who viewed the most TV violence as children were much more likely to have pushed, grabbed, or shoved their spouses as adults.
- Men who viewed the most TV violence as children were much more likely to have responded to an insult by shoving a person.
- Men who viewed the most TV violence as boys were three times more likely to have been convicted of crimes as adults.
- Women who were exposed to the most TV violence as children were more likely to have thrown something at their spouse.
- Women who viewed the most TV violence as children were four times more likely than other women to have reported having punched, beaten or choked another adult.

Violent behavior as an adult is also associated with children strongly identifying with same-sex aggressive characters on television and strongly believing that violent TV shows depict reality.

Any child is vulnerable to the effects of watching violence on TV, in films, games, and other media, Dr. Huesmann said. "Both girls and boys with a high exposure to TV violence in first to fourth grades were more aggressive as adults, even when we statistically controlled for their childhood aggressiveness, social class, intelligence and many other factors."

An Ounce Of Prevention

The potential harm of being exposed to violent programming has been an issue of public concern for decades. Some measures to protect children have

Among the women, those who watched the most TV violence as children were four times more likely to have punched or choked another adult.

been proposed, agreed to by the entertainment industry, and put into practice. These include a age-based rating system for adult content and violence.

The much talked about V-chip technology might help, the study states, but only if "a content-based rating system is used that would actually allow parents to make judgments on the basis of violent content instead of the age guideline rating system used for many programs."

But the study suggests the responsibility of protecting children from violent TV rests primarily with parents.

Perhaps the most effective approach for parents is to forbid young children from watching violent programming. With older children, parents should watch with them and comment on what is on the screen.

Studies suggest this helps to limit a child's identification with the char-

acter doing the violent act, reduce the child's perception that the violence is real, and lessen the likelihood that a child will act out the violent act in fantasy or play immediately after seeing it on TV.

Parents also need to understand the effects of watching violent programming.

For example, the study points out that the violent scenes children are most likely to model their behavior after are ones in which they identify with the perpetrator of the violence and the perpetrator is rewarded for the violence, and those in which children believe the scene as telling about life as it really is. "Thus, a violent act by someone like Dirty Harry that results in a criminal being eliminated and brings glory to Harry is of more concern than a bloodier murder by a despicable criminal who is brought to justice," the study reports.

b

references

This report was based on the following sources:

- Huesmann, L.R., Moise-Titus, J., Podolski, C., & Eron, L.D. (2003). Longitudinal relations between children's exposure to TV violence and their aggressive and violent behavior in young adulthood: 1977 – 1992. *Developmental Psychology*, **39** (2), 201-221. The American Psychological Association.

Children, Youth & Family background is published by the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development (OCD), a program of the University of Pittsburgh School of Education. These reports are based on available research and are provided as overviews of topics related to children and families.

OCD Co-Directors: Christina J. Groark, PhD.; Robert B. McCall, PhD.

background Editor: Jeffery Fraser, e-mail: jd.fraser@att.net

University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development, 400 N. Lexington Avenue Pittsburgh, PA 15208; (412) 244-5447; fax: (412) 244-5440

This report and others can be found on the Internet by visiting: <http://www.education.pitt.edu/ocd/family/backgrounders.asp>