



It's Only Television, Right?

High-speed chases with cars tumbling through the air and crashing, Jason, Freddy, Michael, aliens, body-snatchers, brainwashers, blood-suckers, zombies, gangsters, guns, knives, bombs, drugs, nudity and sex. It has all been done on-screen numerous times, so limits are pushed to increase the shock value. But are people becoming desensitized as a result? And is there a limit on how much is too much on television?

There have been studies conducted to see if TV has an adverse effect on children and adults. Some studies suggest that behavior can mimic what is watched on television, depending on the person, environment, personal background and amount watched.

Christopher Eggleston, M.D., J.D., an expert on the subject of media violence and video games and an instructor at the University of California, Davis, College of Medicine, has given lectures on the subject, including one called "Media Violence and Children for Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist." The focus of his presentation was the violent effects of the media.

"The conclusion of the public health community, based on over 30 years of research, is that viewing entertainment violence can lead to increases in aggressive attitudes, values and behavior, particularly among children," he says. "Its effects are measurable and long-lasting. Now more than ever children are being confronted by frightening media images, ranging from child-marketed movies and television shows to news reports of domestic terror attacks and images of war."

According to Eggleston, certain environmental stimuli, which are often characterized in popular media, are inherently stressful to a young child. Young children rely on their caregivers for self-regulation, including comfort and making the world a predictable as well as a coherent environment.

He says children need repeated opportunities through experience with the environment and their caregivers to develop the ability to integrate sensory inputs with thoughts and behaviors. When it comes to behavior, Eggleston says individual factors can include age, gender, trait

aggression, intelligence, psychosocial factors, cultural environment and family values/parental regulation of media diet.

According to Dr. Angelo Nazareno, a pediatrician in Sacramento for the last 15 years, there is a reason a movie or television show is rated a certain way. "A child's television and computer consumption should be monitored and regulated by parents," Nazareno says. "The time they spend on it should be monitored, as well as the types of games and movies and websites there are seeing."

Movies are rated by viewer content, but the ratings can be useless if not properly enforced by parents, he adds.

Nazareno also tells parents to be more involved in their children's lives. He advises them to encourage their children to pursue other activities for their mental and physical well-being.

"Obesity is one big problem facing a lot of children because they are less active," Nazareno says. "Children and teens who are sitting in front of a monitor, TV

or computer are spending all their time that could be spent socializing or participating in physical activities and sports."

Eggleston says children ages 8 to 13 years spend more time with media than any other youth age group. He says one good outcome of this is that adolescents who are typically resistant to working with adults can discuss topics ordinarily intolerable. They can do this by describing how characters or icons would address such a topic. In this light, the media may provide a projective device for youths to discuss issues.

On the other hand, there are many negative effects of the media including it possibly contributing to increased aggression and hostility, loss of sympathy for victims and using violence as an acceptable means of conflict resolution.

Eggleston says cognitive beliefs about violence no longer characterize these behaviors as wrong. The emotions are no longer a visceral or affective response to violent behavior; often times the perpetrator is attractive and violence is seen as funny.

The average American youth spends...

• 21 to 28 hours per week watching television • Up to 90% of video games have violent content • 53% of first- to third-grade children rated their favorite game as violent • 99% of boys and 84% of girls in middle school rated their favorite games as violent

The American Academy of Psychiatry states that children's cartoons portray more violence than primetime programming: Primetime has an average of three to five acts per hour, while Saturday morning cartoons average 20 to 25 violent acts per hour.

"A major study looked at all [74] English language G-rated feature films released in theaters between 1937 and 1999, which were available on videocassette in the U.S. before September 1999," Eggleston says. "All 74 showed at least one act of violence, with 81 percent showing a character attempting to kill or severely injure another person."

A majority of the violence involved clashes between "good" and "bad" characters, as a means of resolving conflict. About half of movies showed a character celebrating an act of violence and less than one-third of the movies portrayed a character advocating nonviolence.

There was a statistically significant increase in duration of violence over time.

"Our content analysis reveals a striking behavioral message implied by G-rated films that the good guys triumph over the bad guys through the use of force," Eggleston says. "The implication is that victims are likely to be bad and have gotten what they deserve."

Association of Media and Actual Violence in Kids states that children as young as 18 months act out what they see on television. Children under eight years are often unable to distinguish fantasy from reality. Children who watch violent TV shows, even cartoons, are more likely to hit playmates, argue, disobey class rules, leave tasks unfinished and are less willing to wait for things than peers who watched nonviolent programs. Media violence has been demonstrated to produce "immediate violent behavior" in some viewers.

Okeema Polite, the director of Mental Health at Another Choice Another Chance, says the violence on television could possibly contribute to bad behavior; however, the root of the problem for many kids she sees is their home life. Another

Choice Another Chance mainly serves abused children who have experienced neglect or sexual abuse.

Eggleston advises parents to ask themselves:

- *Who created the message and why are they sending it?*
- *Who owns and profits from it?*
- *What techniques are used to attract and hold attention?*
- *What values and points of view are represented by this message?*
- *What is omitted from this message and why is it left out?*
- *How might different people interpret this message?*

The National Association of Broadcasters issued this statement in 1952: "Television and all who participate in it are jointly accountable to the American public for respect of the special needs of children, for community responsibility, for the advancement of education and culture, for the acceptability of the program material chosen, for decorum and decency in production, and for propriety in advertising."