Introduction

Children and adolescents have access to and consume a variety of different media forms, including television, the Internet, music and music videos, film and video games, many of which contain high levels of violent content. The concern (and the controversy) lies in whether violent content in media affects a young person’s beliefs and behaviors, and more specifically, if frequent exposure contributes to increased aggression and even violence in young people.

Much of the research that has been conducted on the relationship between media exposure and aggression supports such a connection. Although critics have challenged the validity of these findings, suggesting that they focused only on short-term effects and were conducted in controlled laboratory settings, a recent study suggests that exposure to violent media in home environments has long-term implications.1

Promising strategies for reducing exposure to media violence are available and include limit setting by parents/guardians, technological innovations such as the v-chip (which blocks inappropriate shows or content from being viewed by children), and media literacy training.

Scope of the Problem

Most American homes have a television set, which is in use for at least 7 hours each day.2 After sleeping, watching television is the most frequent activity of children. The average child spends 25 hours a week watching television. By the time the average child is 18 years old, he or she will have witnessed 200,000 acts of violence, including 40,000 murders.3 In 2,693 television programs reviewed, 73% of perpetrators were not held accountable for their violent acts and 47% of victims showed no evidence of harm; 67% of programming targeted at children not only contained violence, but consistently juxtaposed violence with humor.4 Researchers found that the negative consequences of this violence were rarely portrayed.

Movies, music videos, video games, and the Internet also contain high levels of violent content. For example, 60-90 percent of the most popular video games have violent themes.5 Furthermore, fifty-nine percent of fourth grade girls and seventy-three percent of fourth grade boys stated that their favorite video games are violent. Additionally, an
analysis of music videos on MTV found the approximately one-fourth of all videos portray overt violence. It was also found that in eighty percent of the violent videos the aggressor was depicted as an attractive role model, which is disturbing given the fact that MTV is the most recognized network among those aged 12 to 34. Lastly, three-fourths of the videos on MTV involve sexual imagery, with half of those involving violence and eighty percent combining the two, which suggests violent behavior against women.

**Media as a Risk Factor**

The relationship between exposure to violent media and aggression has been researched extensively over the past 20 years. A review of 217 studies found that exposure to violent media was consistently correlated with increases in aggressive behavior in youth. Exposure to media violence also has been correlated with changes in youth attitudes about the use of violence in interpersonal relationships. While the evidence may be compelling, translation of these findings to the "real" world has been problematic. Findings are criticized on the grounds that most studies were conducted under controlled laboratory conditions and focused on short-term changes in behavior. It is unclear whether violent media has similar effects when viewed in home or community settings and whether such exposure has long-term consequences.

Recently, the *Children in the Community Study* addressed these limitations and demonstrated a relationship between consistent consumption of media (3 hours a day) in the home/community and an increased likelihood of aggression toward others. Researchers followed 707 families for a 17-year period and examined the relationship between consumption of media and aggression, using youth self-report, parental report, and criminal arrest data. Forty-two percent of males who viewed television more than 3 hours per day at age 14 were reported to have been involved in aggressive acts that resulted in injury when they were 16 or 22 years old, this compared to 9% of males who viewed less than 1 hour of television per day. This relationship persisted even after controlling for other factors such as prior history of aggressive behavior, child neglect, neighborhood violence, family income, psychiatric disorders, and gender.

Social learning theory provides an explanation for how violent media may influence childhood aggression. Social learning theory posits that a child learns how to act and forms his or her attitudes from observing important role models in his or her life. Characters portrayed in the media may become models who influence the child’s attitudes, beliefs, and behavior. He or she may learn to see violence as a part of everyday life and an acceptable way to solve interpersonal problems. Because violence in the media is so frequently presented without negative consequences, youth may fail to accurately assess or even understand the real-life consequences of violent actions against others.

While children of all ages can be affected by violent media content, young children are particularly vulnerable. Developmentally, they are less able to discern reality from
fantasy and are more likely to be emotionally and cognitively affected by the violence they observe.\(^8\)

Finally, the effects of violent media appear to be race, class, and gender-blind. Violent media influences both males and females (although some data suggest that males may be slightly more affected), and while some studies suggest a connection between socioeconomic and community factors and vulnerability to the effects of media violence, most research shows that all groups can experience the effects of media violence on attitudes and behaviors.\(^8,10\)

**Promising Strategies**

At present, little research exists on the effectiveness of different interventions for reducing the effects of violent media on children. Some common sense approaches such as limiting children's access to violent media and teaching them to be informed media consumers have gained support from professional and legislative groups. Despite the lack of research, available interventions have both intuitive and theoretical appeal.

**Limiting Access To and Consumption of Violent Media**

Researchers have found that limiting media consumption, including television viewing and video game playing, can reduce short-term aggressiveness in children.\(^6\) Since the majority of children's media exposure occurs in the home, parents/caretakers play a pivotal role in limiting consumption both by monitoring their child's viewing habits and by regulating what and how much media they consume. Parents/guardians should engage their children in discussion of this issue but realize that they may not share their children's opinions or interpretations of violent programming and content.\(^8\)

In 1996 Congress passed the Telecommunications Act, which was intended to assist parents and caregivers in reducing children's exposure to violent media. The legislation calls for the inclusion of v-chips in all new televisions and for the development of a rating system to enable parents/caretakers to assess the violence content of specific shows.\(^11\) Unfortunately, implementation has been slow to nonexistent. Organizations such as the American Civil Liberties Union are contesting the legislation on censorship grounds.\(^12\) The networks have been slow in developing effective rating systems for their programming.\(^13\) To some extent, industry is responding with devices such as Weemote and TVGuardian, which can filter out certain television channels and even offensive language, thereby providing some level of parental control over children's viewing preferences.\(^13,14\)

**Developing Media Literacy in Parents and Youth**

Another strategy to reduce the effects of violent media is media literacy training. Parents/caregivers and children are taught to critically appraise the media they consume and develop strategies for reducing exposure to violence. They are taught to
distinguish between real and fantasy violence, identify the real-life consequences of violent acts that occur in the media, critically assess the motivations of the producers in making the media product, and describe nonviolent alternatives to the violent actions contained in the programming.

Media literacy training resources include The Just Think Foundation, which focuses on children by providing educational programs that can be utilized during or after school and on-line; the Center for Media Literacy, which offers media literacy training for teachers, parents, and community, civic, and youth leaders through exercises and activities in small group settings; and the American Academy of Pediatrics Media Matters program, which provides training for health care professionals in media literacy and educational materials for use in the health care setting.

References


3. See http://www.ncdjjdp.org/cpsv


5. See http://www.justthink.org


for Mental Health Services and National Institutes of Health, National Institute of Mental Health; 2001.


see also http://www.fcc.gov/telecom.html


13. See http://www.tvguardian-online.com

14. See http://www.tvguardian-online.com/weemote

15. See http://www.justthink.org

16. See http://www.medialit.org

17. See http://www.aap.org/advocacy/mediamatters.htm

**Related Publications on Media Violence**


**Internet Resources**


The Center for Media Literacy: http://www.medialit.org

Children Now: http://www.childrennow.org/media

The Just Think Foundation: http://www.justthink.org

Mediascope: http://www.mediascope.org/
Appreciation is expressed to Dr. L. Rowell Huesmann for his insight and suggestions for this fact sheet.