



Effects of media violence on children

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What is media violence

When researchers are looking at issues such as how much violence there is on TV or in computer games, they use a definition along these lines:

Violence is “a credible threat of physical force, or the application of physical force, intended to cause physical harm to an animate being or group of beings.”

The important things to note are that there needs to be intent to hurt, and that the hurt is inflicted on living things, rather than objects.

Where does media violence occur?

Violence in the media is easily accessible to children. It occurs in cartoons, in news updates in family programs, in the news, in “cop shows”, and in “blockbuster” movies screened at 8.30pm on TV. There are often high levels of violence in M, MA15+ and R18+ classified cinema films and videos. Many computer games feature violent themes.

Trailers for forthcoming programs on TV often contain a collection of the most violent scenes. Parents often feel ambushed by these as they cannot be anticipated.

How much violence is there?

There have been few content analyses done on Australian TV or media for levels of violence.

Overseas content analyses, which have some relevance as much of our programming, particularly on commercial TV is from the US, show that children's cartoons carry the most acts of violence.

Problem aspects for children

Violence in the media is all pervasive, and difficult to avoid. Frequently the violence is glamorised, and violent solutions offer the way to be powerful.

Mostly the heroes are male, and the victims are female, showing who does the violence and to whom it's done.

Violent media and products are actively marketed to children and young people. The products themselves are frequently in a classification not recommended for children. (e.g. M or MA15+).

There is much cross promotion of violent products, e.g. by fast food chains and cinema links; toys and TV series; toys and cinema films.

Opinions/insights from reliable sources

The Australian Psychological Society has this to say about media violence in a July 2000 Position Paper:

“For at least 20 years there has been a consensus amongst most of the psychological research community actively involved in media research that violence on television contributes to aggressive behaviour, to anxiety about becoming a victim and to callousness with respect to the impact of violence on others (Pearl, Bourhilet & Lazar, 1982). Studies have predominantly, but not exclusively, focused on children. The evidence for these links is as strong as that for the contribution of any other studied contributor to community violence.”

Four major US medical groups (the American Academy of Pediatrics, American Psychological

Association, American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and American Medical) issued a joint statement in 2000 entitled *Joint Statement on the Impact of Entertainment Violence on Children: Congressional Public Health Summit*. They summarised their position as follows:

- Children who see a lot of violence are more likely to view violence as an effective way of settling conflicts. Children exposed to violence are more likely to assume that acts of violence are acceptable behaviour
- Viewing violence can lead to emotional desensitization towards violence in real life. It can decrease the likelihood that one will take action on behalf of a victim when violence occurs.
- Entertainment violence feeds a perception that the world is a violent and mean place. Viewing violence increases fear of becoming a victim of violence, with a resultant increase in self-protective behaviours and a mistrust of others.
- Viewing violence may lead to real life violence. Children exposed to violent programming at a young age have a higher tendency for violent and aggressive behaviour later in life than children who are not so exposed.

What does research have to say

We can learn much about the way in which media violence will impact on the young from the solid base of child development research and theory developed over 50 years. Findings from social science research on specific topics can be used to supplement this knowledge.

Some researchers dispute that media violence has a detrimental impact on the young, but there are now over 200 original research studies and many more research reviews which combine to give a reliable picture of the likely impact of violent media on children.

US researcher Craig Anderson, who has conducted original research on media violence (especially computer games) and carried out meta-analyses of the mass of research studies, sums up the situation in regard to the research evidence in this way:

“The effect of media violence on aggression in general is bigger than the effect of smoking on lung cancer; it's bigger than the effect of calcium intake on bone mass; it's bigger than the effect of homework on academic achievement, or the effect of asbestos exposure on lung cancer. These are all effects that people generally understand to be true, real effects that are large enough to be important and large enough to worry about”. (ABC Background briefing July 22 2001).

In summary, the research shows us that a diet of media violence can increase the risks that children will:

- be more likely to choose to use violence to solve conflict
- be desensitised to use of violence by others (more callous)
- develop a mean and scary view of the world.

The risks are increased when children's real life experiences are close to those on the media.

Further, the impact of violent media is likely to be increased when the child viewer spends time fantasising about the program afterwards. (i.e. by playing with toys linked to the violent program).

The research also gives us good indicators as to the types of media violence that will increase the three risks outlined above.

The risk of choosing violence to solve conflict is increased by exposure to programs in which the violence is performed by an attractive hero, who does violence in a good cause, who is rewarded and applauded for doing it, whose violence has few real life consequences, and is set in a comic context. (Example 9 yr old Kevin in the Home Alone movies or most toy related cartoon series).

The risk of being desensitised to the use of violence by others is increased by exposure to movies in which graphic violence is shown constantly and humorously.

The risk of developing a mean and scary view of the world is increased when children see programs, such as the news, in which violence happens to real people, to children and animals, and they fear that such things will happen to them.

Who is most vulnerable

The research tells us that the most vulnerable to media violence are:

- children under the age of seven or eight. Children of this age find it difficult to distinguish between fantasy and reality. To the young child, even a cartoon hero can be seen as real, especially when the characters resemble real people (as opposed to Daffy Duck or Bugs Bunny). Young children tend to watch a lot of cartoon series in which the major theme is that of resolution or winning by using violence.
- boys (because most violence in the media is done by males)
- those who live in violent homes
- those who spend a lot of time with media.

Older children (over eight) are more likely to be upset by the news because they know it is about real life and can identify with some of the settings and happenings.

Gender issues

Boys seem to be more vulnerable to violent media portrayals than girls. This is seen to be because there are many male role models in the media, and most of these succeed by best at doing the violence. Boys are interested in seeing how to be powerful.

What are the risks or potential outcomes?

Frequent exposure to violent products will increase the risks that children will develop a mental script for the way to deal with conflict, and this may not emerge until later in life. Children's media environment contains much of the harmful forms of glamorised violence. This poses a serious mental health risk for society. Media violence is but one contributor to the use of violence in society, but it is one that we can do something about.

What parents can do

- Minimise exposure to programs and products which feature glamorised violence.
- Use the classification system to avoid programs/products classified M or MA15+, AV or R. These are all only recommended for persons over the age of 15 years.
- Minimise exposure to news programs for children under 11 or 12. These children are unlikely to understand that “it isn't likely to happen to you” as they don't understand probability
- Look for programs classified C or P on commercial TV, or sample the many non violent programs on the ABC.
- Be a media educator: express your views, and discuss program content, eg talk to children about what would happen if they did those violent things at home
- Buy or borrow videos with themes other than violence

Related topics

Watching the TV News

Dealing with harms that have already occurred

Top Ten Tips for parents

References

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