

Television Violence and Its Effects on Young Children

Betty Jo Simmons,^{1,2} Kelly Stalworth,¹ and Heather Wentzel¹

This article examines research on television violence and links violence to specific programs commonly watched by young children. Although there are some who try to disprove any connection between television and aggressive behavior, there is evidence to suggest that such linkages do exist.

KEY WORDS: television; violence; programs for young children.

INTRODUCTION

After the introduction of television in 1939, E. B. White said it was “going to be the test of the modern world. We shall stand or fall by the television— of that I am quite sure.” (Asamen & Berry, 1993, p. 10) These prophetic words are proving to be more accurate on a daily basis. With its ability to inform, entertain, teach, and persuade, television unquestionably has tremendous effects upon its viewers. Indeed, television has become the central activity in most homes today. Currently, in the United States, 98% of all households have at least one set. Even more astounding is the fact that it is watched an average of 7.5 hours per day (Asamen & Berry, 1993). Beckman (1997) concurs, saying that children watch more than 28 hours of television each week and in the process the average child, before the age of 12, has viewed over 8,000 murders.

RESEARCH ON TELEVISION VIOLENCE

In order to clean up the airways for young audiences, the Federal Communications Commissions (FCC) enacted The Children’s Television Act in 1990. Many television stations show strictly positive programs, but the negative ones are also still being aired. This point is

important because preschool children are curious and easily influenced. They tend to mimic and repeat what they hear and see on television without knowledge of right and wrong.

One of the main concerns with television programming is the violence viewed by children. Berk (1993) says that because young folks cannot fully understand what they see on television, they are very much under its influence. Davidson (1996) agrees that children are extremely vulnerable to television between the ages of 2 to 8 years because of their maturational inability to separate what they view from reality. Attention to violence on television became a matter of serious consideration in the 1950s, with the first congressional hearing taking place in 1952. From 1952 to 1967, many analyses were done of the content of television programs. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the scrutiny shifted from content alone to specifically discerning the effects of violence on viewers. The resulting findings supported the idea that a casual relationship existed between television violence and aggressive behavior (National Institutes of Mental Health, 1983).

IMITATING VIOLENCE

Levin and Carlsson-Paige (1996) lament the 1984 deregulation of broadcasting, noting that subsequently teachers began to observe an escalation of violence in their classrooms. They state that “Today, U.S. crime rates are increasing most rapidly among youth who were in their formative early years when children’s TV was deregulated and violent programs and toys successfully

¹Longwood College, Farmville, Virginia.

²Correspondence should be directed to Betty Jo Simmons, Professor of Education, Longwood College, 201 High Street, Farmville, Virginia 23909; e-mail: bjsimmon@longwood.lwc.edu

deluged childhood culture” (p. 17). Governmental investigation led to several studies about the effects of violence. Two of the most well known were done by Bandura and Berkowitz. Bandura (1973), a social learning theorist, purported that children learn primarily through social modeling. From his studies, he concluded that children went through three stages—exposure, acquisition, and acceptance (Moody, 1980). He maintained that increased exposure to aggressive models led to reduced inhibitions toward violence. For example, when a television character acts violently and the consequences are positive, then the viewer is more likely to assume this behavior. Today, unfortunately even the “good” guys feel obligated to blow away their opponents (Munson, 1996).

Berkowitz (1962) examined the effects of television on aggressive drives. He concluded that exposure to televised violence does arouse aggressive behaviors, especially if viewers believe that aggression is justified. Noble (1975) maintains that aggressive behavior is harder to inhibit if viewers have a target which is associated with a television victim. Similarly, a study involving five different countries in which children were subjected to violence through television found evidence that even brief exposures caused them to be more accepting of other aggressive behavior. This research also concluded that the more children watched television, the more accepting they became of aggressive actions (Huesmann & Eron, 1986). Davidson (1996) reports that research done by Leonard Eron of the University of Michigan shows that violence children watched as eight-year-olds became a better predictor of adult aggression than socioeconomic and childrearing factors.

Cullingford (1984) reports on a study done by Shaw and Newell in which they interviewed families about their concerns over television. One of the major findings was that violence went almost unnoticed. Even when people were shown killings and then heavily prompted, most did not think of it as violent. The frightening truth was that “objectionable content” had become so acceptable that it was invisible. Later investigations by Drabman and Thomas (Geen, 1981) used observation to determine the effects of violent films on the way children resolved conflict. They, like Geen, who used blood pressure as the indicator concluded that violence leads to desensitization (Molitor, 1994; Voojjs & Voort, 1993). Thus, it is not hard to understand what Minnow, former chair of the Federal Communications Commission, meant when he said that in the 1960s, he worried that his children would not greatly benefit from television, but in the 1990s, he worries that his grandchildren may be harmed by it (Minnow, 1995).

VIOLENCE AND FEAR

In addition to theories that television can cause children to be more aggressive and less sensitive to the results of violence, there is also the theory that televised violence causes viewers to be afraid. According to this theory, the misconstrued world presented on television is seen as a mirror of reality and viewers become convinced they will fall victim to violence. It is reasoned that viewers absorb information without analyzing it and subsequently develop false beliefs about law enforcement and crime. Chen (1994), who found that crime during prime time is depicted 10 times greater than in reality, gives credence to the notion that television is distorted in its portrayal and resolution of crime and violence.

Levine (1996) says 3-to 5-year-old children live in a magical world that often leaves them terrified of things which completely surprise adults. On the other hand, there are those who disagree that television makes them afraid. According to Hamilton (1993), today’s children are much more preoccupied with violence. Therefore, according to Dr. Daniel Koenigsberg, chief of child psychiatry at Saint Raphael Hospital, it is not so much that children are scared by it, as it is that they accept it and are intrigued by it. Thus, it is easy to see that not everyone agrees about the effects that violence has; however, it is generally agreed that it does play a significant role in the children’s construction of social reality (Voojjs & Voort, 1993).

CHILDREN’S PROGRAMS FEATURING VIOLENCE

According to Kaplan (1998), the National Coalition on Television Violence has classified the *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* as the most violent program “ever studied, averaging more than 200 violent acts per hour” (p. 16). Furthermore, in an experimental study involving 5-to 11-year-olds (26 boys and 26 girls with ethnically diverse backgrounds), Kaplan (1998) reports that children who watched *Power Rangers* committed 7 times more aggressive acts than those who did not. Recognizing that children imitate what they see, several day care centers, nursery schools, and elementary schools have outlawed *Power Rangers* in play.

According to Evra and Kline (1990), “One of the dangers for preschoolers or early school-age children is their lack of ability to relate actions, motives, and consequences, and they may simply imitate the action they see” (p. 83). Levin and Carlsson-Paige (1996) purport that children cannot assimilate the *Power Rangers* into their own naturally limited experiences. Thus, unable to devise meaningful play from what they have seen, they

act out “what they are unable to understand, primarily the kicking, fighting, and shooting” (p. 18). Teachers, according to Levin and Carlsson-Paige (1996), have observed that children become so fascinated by the Power Rangers that they excuse their own aggressiveness by saying they must do as the Power Rangers do.

Another show, similar in content, is the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. Violence is also the main attraction in this program. The four heroes are pumped-up turtles named after four famous artists: Michaelangelo, Donatello, Leonardo, and Raphael. Their mentor is a skilled ninja rat. Each has a distinctive personality and each fights best with specific weapons. The main “bad guy,” Shredder, is so named because he has blades protruding from his clothes, which he does not hesitate to use when fighting. In one episode on the Cartoon Network, Shredder tried to use a robot to take over the world and the Turtles stopped him by fighting. At the end of the show, the characters discuss what is supposed to have been learned by the viewers. However, young children watching these shows would not necessarily learn from these messages because they can take in only so much information at a time. According to Evra and Kline (1990), the lack of understanding and well-developed behavioral control causes the main attraction to be primarily the action.

In what may be called the “Dynamic Duos” are found Bugs Bunny and Elmer Fudd, Tweetie and Sylvester, the Roadrunner and Wyle E. Coyote, and Tom and Jerry. Each pair takes turns trying to outsmart and pummel one another. The goofy and colorful characters attract children and the only message that might be sent to children is how to solve problems through fighting.

Similarly, a new wave of cartoons, such as Beavis and Butthead, The Simpsons, King of the Hill, and Daria, are aimed at an adult audience; yet many children are intrigued by these animated cartoons. Most of the themes in these shows focus on adult life, things that young children would not understand. For example, those that focus on teenage life, such as Beavis and Butthead and Daria, show lazy characters concerned only with materialistic and selfish things. These programs also use adult language that is not appropriate for small children to hear. However, since children do watch these shows, they tend to repeat certain things that they see and hear.

For example, at the beginning to Beavis and Butthead, words come across the screen saying that the cartoon is not realistic and the acts in the show should not be repeated. However, such disclaimers do not register in the minds of children who are more intrigued by action than consequences. For example, in the early 1960s, Schramm, Lyle, and Parker (1961) were pointing out the

inherent danger involved in televised violence. They noted that a 6-year-old told his father he wanted real bullets because toy ones did not kill like Hopalong Cassidy’s bullets. It appears that when children watch shows, they often do not remember the plot, but they do remember the actions of their favorite characters. Evra and Kline (1990) found that even 14-month-old children have a tendency toward some type of imitation of television.

PUBLIC REACTION

Even though there are shows on television that are designed for preschoolers, many American adults feel that there are still not enough programs for young children. In a press release on October 5, 1995, the Center for Media Education (CME) published the results of a national poll which showed strong public support of more educational programs. To quote from the poll:

More than four in five American adults (82%) believe there is not enough educational children’s programming on commercial broadcast television. Three in five adults surveyed (60%) support specific requirements that broadcasters air an hour of educational programming—or more—for children each day. More than a third of all parents (35%) would require two hours daily. 80% of Americans believe there are good reasons to regulate children’s TV more strictly than programming intended for general or adult audiences. The two most frequently cited reasons for the lack of quality in children’s broadcast programming are violent (43%) and insufficient educational programming (25%). (Poll on Children’s Television, 1995, Center for Media Education)

These complaints are slowly being attended to with new educational programs and the revival of old ones, such as Schoolhouse Rock and Sesame Street. A rating system has recently been enacted. At the beginning of each show, letters and numbers, ranging from “G” to “Adult” appear at the top left-hand corner of the television screen, stating the appropriateness of the television show.

In 1997, in response to the public’s demand for improvement in the quality of children’s television, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) issued stronger rules to regulate the Children’s Television Act of 1990. According to the new expectations, broadcasters must produce 3 hours weekly of educational programming. These programs must make education the major focus with clearly articulated objectives, and a designated target age group. Fortunately, more stations are appearing and many of them do show programs that are, for the most part, appropriate for all audiences. Channels such as PBS, Animal Planet, The Family Channel, and the Disney channel are examples. However, there is still

the question of violence on television. Especially so, since the Children's Television Act is not definitive about the meaning of educational programming. The act simply says that programs must contribute to the well-being of children "in any respect." The "in any respect" seems to be a loophole that dilutes the original intent (*U.S. News and World Report*, 1997).

Even when educational programs are produced, problems remain. One of them lies with the competition. With the availability of cable, violence continues to be prevalent. Children can and do quickly switch the channel to the Cartoon Network (*New York Times*, 1997). Furthermore, since educational programs are not big moneymakers, producers tend to schedule many of them early in the morning or in spots which are not the most normal viewing times. Another major consideration is what Zoglin contended in 1993, namely, that children are not much attracted to educational shows. He says, "The very notion of educational TV often seems to reflect narrow, school-marish notions" (p. 64). Five years later, Mifflin (1997) pointed out that broadcasters agree because they have a hard time finding educational programs that children will watch (*New York Times*, 1997).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Naturally, children are easily confused when they watch the superhero beat up other characters. Therefore, recognizing and taking a proactive position against televised violence becomes a prime responsibility for all those involved in the care and nurturance of young children. With this premise in mind, the following recommendations are offered:

1. Parents, teachers, and communities must work together to combat the violence that is permeating society. They must work to build community programs to prevent violence and diffuse aggressive behavior. They must work on an individual level to teach acceptable and unacceptable standards.

2. Children must have their television viewing supervised and regulated which means that adults have to show responsible behavior themselves by refusing to watch programs that are violent in nature. If they are unwilling to abolish violent programs in their homes, they must take the time to ask questions of their children, explain the seriousness of violence to them, and help them to evaluate what they witness.

3. Parents must not let television become the dominant part of their family's life. It is imperative that drastic steps be taken to curtail the kind of socially unacceptable behavior, which is routinely and daily invited into the average home.

4. Parents and teachers must help young children develop appropriate behavior for social interactions. Children need guidance in learning to settle disagreements with verbal rather than physical skill.

5. Schools need to take television violence seriously, especially so, since it transfers to inappropriate behavior in the classroom. Thus, school personnel should take immediate steps to involve parents and the community in open dialog through newspaper articles, PTA meetings, and public forums.

6. The curriculum must be based upon the developmental needs of young children. Consideration must be given to fantasy, animism, and the inability of children to separate real from the pretend. Young children should be taught how to make decisions and how to work through problems by finding acceptable alternatives to violent acts.

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