

Essay on Young Children, TV And Media Violence: Causes and Ways to Control

Psychologists, educators, and other researchers have studied how TV affects young children. Here are some of the main points they emphasize:

Young children watch more television than any other age group: Between the ages of 2 and 3, most children begin to acquire the habit of watching television. American children between the ages of 2 and 5 spend more time watching TV than any other age group! Among other things, heavy TV viewing can also mean heavy exposure to violence. Children's programming has consistently been found to have higher levels of violence than any other category of programming. And young children also frequently watch violent programs intended for adults.

Young children can't tell the difference between fantasy and reality: A preschooler's rich imagination is a big part of his normal development, but that means it is usually hard for him to tell the difference between what's real and what's imaginary. Preschoolers cannot always understand that what they see on television is made up, especially when it looks so much like real life. So, it's especially difficult for them to distinguish between television violence and real-life violence.

Young children are particularly susceptible to media violence: Because they lack the life experience to evaluate what they are watching, preschoolers are not critical viewers of the violence they see in television programs, movies, and videotapes. They simply accept the violent behavior they see as real and normal.

Young children learn by imitating what they see, so television can be a powerful teacher: Television can teach children violence and aggressive behavior. For instance, because most 3 to 6-year-olds want

to feel that they are strong and in control of their world, they often identify themselves with TV characters that are powerful and effective. But what they see most often are superheroes and other characters that solve problems with violence, usually as a first resort, and they are rewarded for doing so. When young children watch TV or videos that present violence as successful, exciting, funny, pleasurable, and commonplace, it can be easy for them to accept the “TV way” as real and desirable.

Preschoolers need a variety of real experiences and real playtime in order to grow and develop: Growing children need a wide range of activities and experiences. They need a mix of physical activity, lots of “hands-on” experience with the world, a chance to be with other children and caring adults. And they need lots of time to play! Imaginative play is the single most important way 3 to 6-year olds learn, grow, and work out their feelings, fears, and fantasies. The more a child watches TV, the less he develops his own ability to entertain himself, and the less time he spends on all the other important experiences he needs to grow and learn.

The relationship between screen violence and street violence has been studied ever since the early days of television – some say over 3,000 studies in the past four decades. While it is too simplistic (and impossible) to “prove” that media portrayals “cause” violence in real life, there are more nuanced studies that explore how media violence is perceived by viewers or internalized in attitudes and/or behaviors.

In one interesting study, social science researchers Daniel Linz, Barbara J. Wilson and Barbara Randall first identified six different and distinct characteristics of “violence” in film and then explored how viewers of different ages and stages of maturity, responded.

The following summary provides an entry point for further discussion about what constitutes “violence” in media and ways that parents and caregivers might select or monitor their children’s media.

1. Reward for Violence

If a violent act is rewarded or left unpunished, it is more likely to foster attitudes supportive of aggression. The lack of punishment actually functions as a sanction or a reward for violent behavior.

2. The reality of Violence

The more a violent act is realistically portrayed, the more likely it is to be imitated. Older children are more emotionally responsive to programs that depict realistic events and are influenced more by violent movies that feature events that are humanly possible.

3. Violent Role Models

Children are more likely to imitate and look up to characters whose use of violence is portrayed as necessary or attractive. Moreover, children who strongly identify themselves with a violent media character are more likely to be aggressive themselves.

4. Justified Violence

The more an act of violence is presented as justified, the more likely it is to be copied. Young children are more apt to hurt than to help a peer after watching a cartoon with scenes of justified violence.

5. Violent Connections

Viewers who find similarity between themselves and their actions and feelings and a violent act, theme or character in a film are more likely to imitate or emulate that violence in real life. This is particularly true of children.

6. Amount of Violence

Excessive exposure to media violence may produce a psychological blunting of normal emotional responses to violent events. It may also lead to a lack of responsiveness to real-life aggression.

Ways to Control Your Child's Exposure to Media Violence

1. Set guidelines about what is appropriate for viewing in your family. Apply guidelines to all media: TV, cartoons, videos, movies, video games, magazines, and comic books.
2. Help children select programs within your family's guidelines. Seek to add positive programs while limiting negative ones.
3. Be aware of what children are watching outside your home. Communicate your standards to neighbors, grandparents, babysitters, and others who may care for your child or children. Ask for their cooperation in limiting violent viewing.
4. Be a good role model when making your own viewing selections.
5. Periodically watch TV with children to share their experience of TV and to learn more about what they do and don't understand what they see and hear.
6. Use a VCR to tape appropriate entertainment for children to watch alone.

7. Encourage children to become involved in a variety of leisure activities other than TV, videos and video games.

8. Talk about TV management with other parents; share tips and provide support for one another; challenge those who are still apathetic.