EDUCATION WEEK

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Researchers Target Impact of Television Violence

Helping Children Divide TV Fantasy From Reality Becomes a Top Priority

By Marianne D. Hurst

To help children distinguish between real and imaginary violence, the National PTA has for years promoted a school-based workshop called "Taking Charge of Your TV." Among other goals, the program aims to help parents and educators talk with children about what they see on television.

Focus On: RESEARCH

In the wake of several violent incidents at schools in the late 1990s, interest in the program began to take off. Then, last year, when singer Justin Timberlake ripped off part of Janet Jackson's top in a simulated assault during a Super Bowl halftime show, the initiative attracted even more interest.

"If parents and children are sitting and watching a television program together [with some violent content], and the parent says nothing, it's an implicit endorsement—whereas if a parent says something, it makes their values clear to the child," said Frank Gallagher, the assistant director of education for Cable in the Classroom, the cable television industry's education foundation and a co-sponsor of the program. "Kids today live in a media world. If you open up a channel of communication, they're often happy to talk about it."

No Laughing Matter

Researchers, in particular, say it is paramount that parents get involved in what their children are watching on television, because decades of research, including several recent studies, indicate that heavy exposure to television violence can lead children to think it is appropriate to act in the ways that violent TV characters do.

"One problem with cartoon violence is that it has the same effect [on the brain] as realistic violence," said John P. Murray, a professor of developmental psychology in the school of family studies at Kansas State University, in Manhattan, Kan. He is a co-author of a book to be released in February that documents 50 years of research on the effect of television on children.

"But there are no consequences to [cartoon] violence," Mr. Murray said. "Characters get shot with double-barreled shotguns and they get back up. It sets it in a humorous context with a laugh track, and communicates to preschoolers that violence is funny and it's OK to do."

"We can safely say that viewing violence does lead to more aggressive behavior," he added, noting some estimates that nearly 10 percent of all violence can be explained by the viewing of televised violence.

Douglas Gentile, an assistant professor of psychology at Iowa State

FROM THE ARCHIVES

For background, previous stories, and Web read **Violence and Safety**.

RESOURCES ON THE WEB

Find out more about the national PTA progra **"Taking Charge of Your TV, "** including a downloadable **parents' guide**. (📄)

Browse an **overview** of the issue of violenc television and its impact on children, from tl **American Psychological Association**.

Read **"Looking through Time: A Longitu Study of Children's Media Violence Consumption at Home and Aggressive Behaviors at School,"** a scientific paper fr **ERIC** database.

Talking With Kids offers advice on how to **discuss violence** with children.

university and the director of research for the National Institute on Media and the Family, based in Minneapolis, says that while hundreds of risk factors contribute to aggression, television violence is certainly a major one.

"People are violent without media violence, and most who watch it are not violent, but that doesn't negate the fact that it does have a causal role," he said.

Most researchers, Mr. Gentile said, are more cautious about establishing a full causal relationship, because not all children exposed to media violence will act aggressively. That is due, in large part, to parental and societal interventions, he said, but he pointed out that children who lack those critical interventions are likely to act more aggressively.

A study Mr. Gentile conducted in Minnesota between 2000 and 2003 of 430 children in grades 3-5 illustrates an apparent connection. The study surveyed not only the students, but also their peers and teachers. It found that children who watched heavy amounts of television with some violent content—what some researchers define as roughly four hours a day—were more violent by the end of the school year than they were at the beginning, and that they had a greater likelihood than children who viewed less TV of spreading rumors and of performing worse academically.

But many in the television industry dispute such research findings. They say there is a dearth of studies that examine the long-term effects of television violence. The industry also says that parents need to take the primary role in determining what their children watch.

Several media organizations contacted for this story were unavailable for comment.

'Ray of Hope'

Despite the industry's arguments, many experts contend that more needs to be done to curb violent content on TV.

A report released in 1998 by the Santa Barbara, Calif.-based Center for Communication and Social Policy—titled the "National Television Violence Study"—reviewed the body of research available and concluded that while the industry has made some attempts to manage televised violence, it still contributes to aggressive behavior in children, desensitizes them to violence, and increases their fear of being victimized.

The study also found that most violence on television is trivialized, that few programs emphasize anti-violence themes, and that many programs fail to show the real consequences of violent acts.

Some popular television programs, such as "Rug Rats," were cited by researchers as encouraging children to behave aggressively. Cartoons such as "The Simpsons" and "Pokemon" and the show

A more recent study—released last year by the Parents Television Council, a Los Angeles-based advocacy group for improved programming on TV—came to similar conclusions. The study reviewed 400 hours of prime-time programming on all major broadcast networks from 1998 to 2002. It found that overall violence seen during the 8 p.m. family hour increased 41 percent during those years, and that the per-hour rate of deaths depicted doubled, with many

"Power Rangers" were also cited, as were evening news broadcasts, which tend to emphasize violent incidents.

violent scenes becoming more graphic and detailed.

—Rug Rats image: cooltoons.com

Melissa Caldwell, the PTC's director of research and publications, says the research linking television violence and childhood aggression is unquestionably strong. "This is something the medical community has been researching for 50 years now, and there are over 1,000 studies documenting the causal relationship between media violence and aggression," she said.

But Jennings Bryant, the director of the Institute for Communication Research at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, cautioned that "TV is not the sole factor" in the development of aggression. Not all children who view televised violence will act out in a violent way, he pointed out, especially those whose parents intervene when they see their children watching violent programming.

Moreover, most experts agree that the problem cannot be solved by the television industry alone. In fact, most of the researchers interviewed for this article emphasized that parents can be one of the most effective deterrents of violence and aggression by simply watching programs with their children and commenting on what they see.

"It's like an inoculation when parents and teachers tell kids that cartoon and media violence is not real, and it's not the way one is supposed to act," said Mr. Murray of Kansas State University. "The ray of hope is that parents do matter. What they do sticks with kids, particularly the younger you start."

Impressionable Minds

Studies estimate that the average child watches 23 to 28 hours of television a week, and that by the age of 18, a child will have witnessed 200,000 acts of TV violence, including 40,000 murders.

Researchers specifically cite some popular programs as contributing to the problem, such as the cartoon shows "Rug Rats," "The Simpsons," "Pokemon," and other youth shows such as "Power Rangers." They said emphasis on coverage of violent incidents by nightly news shows is also a problem.

Concerns about the effects of television violence on children have also attracted the attention of character education organizations, such as The Polite Child Inc., a Seattle-based company that aims to improve social skills among K-12 students.

Started in 2001, the program is taught in 16 schools in Seattle and five schools in Palm Springs, Calif. It wraps a social-skills curriculum into existing school curricula to help teachers show students how to be more compassionate, loyal, honest, and respectful.

"The sad thing about most television [programs] is what you are teaching these young, impressionable kids is that it's OK to be disrespectful, to tease, to taunt, and hurt other people—and it just gets worse from there," said **Corinne Gregory**, the founder and president of the group. "Kids will learn and repeat what they are exposed to, and it strongly affects their behavior."

Interesting Ideas?
Send suggestions for possible Research section stories to Debra Viadero at Education Week, *6935 Arlington Road, Bethesda, MD 20814; email:* **dviadero@epe.org**.