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ABSTRACT

The overall pattern of research findings indicates a positive association between television violence and aggressive behavior. The first congressional hearing on television took place in 1952, when the House Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce investigated television entertainment to ascertain if it was excessively violent and sexually provocative and whether it had pernicious effects. Investigations of television have continued since then. Research also supports the conclusion of a causal relationship between television violence and aggressive behavior. Networks could police their programming, but this rarely happens, since they do not seem to recognize the relationship between violence and aggression. Since parents bear a major responsibility for the training, education, and socialization of their children, their role in examining what children are watching and in intervening, if necessary, is very important. Teachers can also help by teaching critical viewing skills to show students that: plots are made up, characters are actors, programs are broadcast to make money, and programs are subsidized by advertisers selling products. Parents and teachers can work together to teach children to view television critically and literately. (Contains 28 references.) (TB)

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Media Literacy: Fighting the Effect

Television has on Children

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Abstract

Television violence and the impact it has on children is a growing concern in the world today. Although research indicates that violence on television triggers negative behaviors in children, this effect can be diminished through interventions that mitigate this effect. Interventions through the networks include violence report cards and electronic technology to block violent programs. Interventions through parents include planning, discussing, and watching appropriate television programs together. Interventions through teachers include teaching cognitive skills and critical viewing skills. If parents, teachers, and the networks work together, the age old battle of television violence can be won.

Media Literacy: Fighting the Effect

Television has on Children

The overall pattern of research findings indicates a positive association between television violence and aggressive behavior. Television violence is one of the things that may lead to aggressive, antisocial, or criminal behavior (Smith, 1993). Centerwall (1993) argues that television violence increases violent and aggressive tendencies in young people and contributes to the growth of violent crime in the United States.

The public is enormously interested in the effects of television on children (Neuman, 1984; Phillips, 1986; Rosenthal, 1986). The majority of Americans feels that entertainment television is too violent, that this is harmful to society, and that we as a society have become desensitized to violence. By the time children graduate from high school, they have spent more time viewing television than any other activity with the exception of sleep (Christo, 1988). Therefore, there is a need to educate children concerning the impact of television and develop media literacy programs in order to combat the effects of television.

History of Research

The first congressional hearing on television programming took place in 1952, when the House Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce investigated television entertainment to ascertain if it was excessively violent and sexually provocative and if it had pernicious effects (National Institute of Mental Health [NIMH], 1982). Violence in the media has increased since 1952 and continues to increase (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1984).

During the period from 1952 to 1967, analyses of programs found a great deal of violence on them. One analysis in 1954 reported an average of eleven threats or acts of violence per hour (Pearl, 1984). Later analysis confirmed that violence on television was increasing and that it was increasing more rapidly on programs with large numbers of children viewers (NIMH, 1982).

The initial research efforts of numerous investigators led to the Surgeon General's research program on television and social behavior in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The Surgeon General's conclusion that television violence does have an

adverse effect on certain members of our society stimulated a torrent of research, congressional hearings, and expressions of public concern (Huesmann & Malamuth, 1986).

The late 1970s and early 1980s also saw the emergence of cable television and the video cassette as major media forces. Many teenagers and even preadolescents became frequent viewers of scenes that graphically couple sex and violence (Huesmann & Malamuth, 1986). A new research focus developed on the effects of such media stimuli.

In 1982, the National Institute of Mental Health commissioned a comprehensive review of the recent scientific literature on television and social behavior as a 10-year follow-up to the surgeon general's report. This study indicted television violence in even stronger terms than did the earlier report. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) 1990 reported that air time for war cartoons increased from 1.5 hours per week in 1982 to 43 hours per week in 1986. In 1980, children's programs featured 18.6 violent acts per hour, that number rose to about 26.4 violent acts each hour by

1990 (NAEYC, 1990).

Smith (1993) concluded that by the time children leave elementary school, they will have witnessed at least 8,000 murders and more than 100,000 other assorted acts of violence. It seems fair to say that the majority of researchers in the area are now convinced that excessive violence in the media does exist.

Effects of Television Violence

While the history of research proves that television violence exists, the convergence of findings also supports the conclusion of a causal relationship between televised violence and aggressive behavior (Atkin, 1983; Berkowitz, 1986; Comstock, Chaffee, Katzman, McCombs, & Roberts, 1978; Huesmann & Malamuth, 1986; Turner, Hesse, & Peterson-Lewis, 1986). Research has left little doubt that viewing violent media material can instigate or intensify subsequent aggression in viewers of all ages, although children seem to be the age group effected the most.

The degree to which television violence effects children is dependent upon the characteristics of those children. Factors such as age, intellectual level,

identification with television personalities, the total amount of television watched, and the belief that television is realistic effects the influences of television violence on behavior. A combination of these characteristics along with heavy television viewing can lead to serious antisocial behavior (Peterson & Peters, 1983).

Smith (1993) claims that children who are frequent viewers of media violence learn that aggression is a successful and acceptable way to achieve goals and solve problems. They are less likely to benefit from creative, imaginative play as the natural means to express feelings, overcome anger, and gain self-control. They observe characters behaving aggressively in order to solve interpersonal problems and identify with the aggressive characters and imitate their behaviors.

The observational learning theory states that children learn to behave aggressively from the violence they see on television in the same way they learn cognitive and social skills from watching their parents (Pearl, 1984). Children imitate aggressive behavior immediately after they have seen it on film or

television. They encode what they see and hear and then store it in their memories. If they see a great deal of aggressive behavior on television, they will store and retrieve that behavior for future action.

Despite the vast amount of research linking the observation of violence on television to the aggressive behavior of the viewer there has been little research concerning interventions in order to reduce the effect. This study will deal with intervention techniques aimed toward networks, parents, and teachers. Instilling media literacy through the efforts of these individuals may reduce the negative effect of television violence on the aggressive behavior of viewers, especially children.

Interventions

Network

The most obvious place to intervene in order to diminish the effect of television violence would be at the programming level. However, the television networks have never conceded that there is a relation between violence displayed on the screen and the viewer's subsequent aggressive behavior (Chaffee, et al., 1984; Wurtzel & Lometti, 1984a; Wurtzel & Lometti,

1984b).

Because of the network's lack of initiative in the direction of providing quality programming for children, the House, Senate, and FCC all appear to be getting into the act. Senator Dorgan wants to legislate a television violence "report card" for stations (McAvoy, 1994). Under Dorgan's amendment, the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) would give out grants to private nonprofit organizations to conduct surveys and produce quarterly report cards on the amount of violent programming aired by cable and broadcast networks. The report cards would be distributed to the public.

Ernest Hollings, Chairman of the Senate Commerce Committee, has indicated that he would also like to move a television violence bill (McAvoy, 1994). Under his proposal, stations would be banned from airing violent programs during hours when children are in the viewing audience. Transgressors would risk license revocation.

In the House, Telecommunications Subcommittee Chairman Ed Markey is hopeful the Electronic Industries Association will agree to move forward with a voluntary

effort of their own (McAvoy, 1994). A new device called the V-chip can be placed in television sets and will allow the viewer to identify violent programs and block them electronically. This device would allow the issue to be settled voluntary rather than mandated by law. By using this V-chip, the individual consumer will make the choice, not the networks nor the government, with the issue of First Amendment rights left untouched.

The majority of evidence seems to reflect the importance of self-regulation over government restrictions. The television industry needs to make its efforts more visible. The television industry points out that Congress should realize that television already has other regulators: advertisers and viewers (Tyrer, 1994). They claim that viewers can help curb violence on television by not watching. If something is offensive, it gets changed due to the reaction of the viewers, not Congress or producers.

The best of all answers is for the federal government not to be involved. The responsibility of broadcasters should be redefined, restated, and renewed. In the social compact of the television

industry, the key word is responsibility.

Responsibility means that the television industry must recognize the full implications of its huge role in our society. Responsibility means admitting the real impact of television violence. Television violence can be controlled without the violation of our First Amendment rights. But the First Amendment does not guarantee responsible acts. Individuals are the only guarantors of their actions.

The networks should not carry the entire weight of intervention concerning television violence on their shoulders alone. Parents and teachers should also take a stand and work together to combat the negative effect television violence has on children.

Parent

Since parents in our society bear the major responsibility for the training, education, and socialization of their children, their role in the intervention process is a very important one. Eron (1986) concludes that if parents could be informed as to the negative effect that the viewing of violence on television can have on their children, and at the same time be taught how to control and shape their

children's television habits, that would be a major contribution.

Shaughnessy, Stanley, and Siegel (1994) offer several suggestions for parents in order to help their children become more television literate. Parents can monitor their children's television viewing habits in order to determine what and how much their children are watching. They can act as role models and only watch educationally redeeming and relevant shows. They can discuss what they have watched with their children. Parents can purchase electronic aides to help control the out of control viewing habits of their children. Families can hold meetings to decide what will be watched during the week nights and on weekends.

Parents should aide in their children's comprehension of the television programs they watch. According to Rule and Ferguson (1986), what children comprehend from a violent television program is likely to be related to their attitudes toward aggression and will also be related to the their tendency to identify with aggressive television characters.

While watching television with their children, parents can verbalize disapproval of violence in a

given situation. Any aggressive inclinations evoked by a television program might well be restrained if parents verbally disapprove of the violence, but could be allowed free rein if they appear to approve (Berkowitz, 1986).

Parents are also responsible for helping their children to become literate in decoding the novel sign system of television. Phillips (1986) claims that television literacy can aide parents in helping children be in command of television's impact, rather than the reverse. Television literacy involves learning to break a continuous stream of sights and sounds into meaningful units. It involves learning to recognize formal features, such as sad music or a speeding train as signifying some meaning within the story, and learning to focus on important facts and to ignore others. Parents need to teach children to draw inferences to fill in important meanings and to apply knowledge of the real world to television and vice versa (Pingree, 1984). Television literacy involves understanding the persuasiveness of advertising.

Research indicates that not just sitting with one's children during television viewing, but

discussion and directives about specific acts and events seen on television has a beneficial effect on children (Phillips, 1986). Parents should help children discriminate between fantasy and reality. Potter (1988) found that the more often mothers made statements that television is "make believe" the less their children believed in the reality of television characters and the less likely they were to act out the character's aggressive behaviors.

Parents who develop a mediating style involving discussion are inherently more helpful to children in differentiating and organizing their environment, and would also be useful in helping children to retain new information, to form new schemas, and possibly to adopt a somewhat more critical or discriminating approach when watching television (Singer & Singer, 1986).

Teacher

Television entertains, informs, and, in all cases, instructs--whether instruction is intended or not. Educators know this and should strive to teach children the impact of television viewing on their learning, attitudes, and behavior. Teachers have a vast amount of instructional materials available in order to teach

television literacy. Programs include teacher-taught lessons that produce changes in awareness of television production, special effects, the nature of commercials, the excesses of violence, and the difference between reality and fantasy.

Teachers can also teach critical viewing as well as critical thinking skills. According to Door, Graves, & Phelps (1980), some critical viewing skills are to inform students that: plots are made up, characters are actors, incidents are often fabricated, settings are often constructed, programs are broadcast to make money, money for programs comes from advertisers purchasing air time, ads are to sell products to the viewers, and audience size determines broadcaster income.

Teaching about television is considered by many television researchers to be one of the most significant practical developments, one that needs to be continued, expanded, and evaluated in the future (NIMH, 1982). The quest of educators should be for more and better ways to capitalize on the useful aspects of the child's viewing experience. Teachers should work cooperatively with parents, not to

eliminate television watching, but to examine what children are watching, and how much time they spend watching programs that have no learning value.

Summary

As consumers of television, we all have a responsibility to bring pressure on the networks to improve the quality of television for our children. This process is a slow one and, while we must ensure it takes effect, it might be more fruitful to look at ourselves as parents and educators who work and live with children and our role in the impact the media has upon them.

By utilizing the impact of television in order to encourage cognitive development, and active and critical participation, rather than passive absorption, networks, parents, and teachers can turn the negative effects of television into positive ones. By teaching children critical viewing skills we can set the foundation for them to become more educated, visually literate consumers of television. Unless children are taught to view television critically and literately, they will simply be reactive recipients of its message and the controversy concerning television violence will

continue.

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