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AUTHOR Middleton, Yvette; Vanterpool, Sandra M.
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ABSTRACT

Noting the research finding that children watch an average of 20 to 25 violent acts per hour on Saturday morning cartoons, this paper discusses cartoon violence and presents the findings of a survey examining children's ability to differentiate between real and fantasy violence in television cartoons and the impact of such violence. Participating were 23 third graders and their parents. Findings indicated that 20 of the students watch cartoons before and after school and while doing homework, with 78 percent indicating that they watch cartoons with a sibling or a friend, and 4 percent watching with their parents. "Rugrats" was selected as the favorite cartoon, followed by "Pokemon" and "Dragon Ball Z." Over 40 percent reported that they enjoyed watching characters fight, 26 percent that they liked to see shootings, and 30 percent that they enjoyed viewing characters being blown up, bloodied, or stabbed; no students indicated that they did not like cartoon violence. Fifty-six percent of the students indicated that they thought the cartoons were real. Thirty-four percent of the parents indicated that they watched cartoons with their children. Seventy-three percent of parents reported that they thought cartoons were not too violent for young children. After completing the survey, most parents admitted that they did not have much time to monitor their children's viewing, and that viewing was controlled mostly by older siblings. (Author/KB)

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TV Cartoons: Do Children Think They Are Real?

**By Yvette Middleton and
Sandra M. Vanterpool**

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By Yvette Middleton and Sandra M. Vanterpool

Abstract

The purpose of our article is to look at the impact of cartoon violence on our children and their ability to differentiate between what is real and what is fantasy in cartoons. We conducted two surveys: one given to third grade students in the Fordham section of the Bronx and another given to their parents. These surveys focused on the amount of cartoons being viewed in their homes. From our surveys, we found that our findings were identical to many other studies on the same subject: our children are very influenced by cartoon violence on television today. Parents were also very surprised at the real impact these violent cartoons have on their children. Many parents felt that if these cartoons were too violent, they wouldn't be shown on television. Our article also gave parents some suggestions to help reduce the amount of cartoon violence their children see, such as setting limits on the amount of time spent watching television, discussing the shows their children watch, etc. In conclusion, we found that we can give all these suggestions to parents, but their children will still be attracted to these cartoons as long as the media glorifies these violent cartoons.

Introduction

The Road Runner drops an anvil on the Coyote's head. Batman punches the Joker. Itchy burns Scratchy with acid. Children giggle and laugh at the events mentioned above every time they tune into these cartoons. Studies have shown that children watch an average of twenty to twenty-five violent acts occurring each hour on Saturday morning "children" programs. Violence on cartoons? It seems hard to believe that the cartoons that we all know and love contain such violence, but it is true. Our children witness these violent acts and sadly, find them amusing.

Why are children so drawn to these types of programs? Young children are unable to decipher between real and fantasy violence and often emulate the violence they see on their favorite cartoons. As teachers, we often find that our students' conversations are not centered on sports, time spent with their families, etc., but on whether Goku will destroy the evil Raditz. In our article, we are going to look at the impact of cartoon violence on our children and their ability to differentiate between what is real and what is fantasy in cartoons. We will be also looking at two surveys that we conducted: one given to third grade students in the Fordham section of the Bronx on their amount of cartoon viewing and another survey given to parents about their children's cartoon viewing habits.

As New York City schoolteachers, we observe very aggressive behavior in our students (boys especially) on a daily basis. We overhear their discussions on what cartoons they saw the day before or over the weekend. Nine times out of ten, it is a cartoon which contains a large amount of violence. Instead of being bothered by this violence, our students are "cheering" the

hero in their favorite cartoon. They are watching cartoons where they witness such acts of violence as fighting, blood, gore and even death, enjoying every bit of the action! They get enthralled by all of this and don't blink an eye!

In studies done on television, viewers rate shootings and fistfights in cartoons as significantly less violent, more humorous and more suitable for children than the same types of acts in other forms of programming, but to counteract their assumption, some studies have also found the rate of violence on cartoons is much higher than in other types of programs(Potter & Warren, 1998. p. 40 & 41). With so many studies out there today, it is very hard for parents to choose which study is right or wrong.

Kids have always been captivated by larger than life figures. The pervasiveness of today's mass-marketed heroes, like Batman and Superman, makes them far more influential than they used to be. As the popularity of these fictitious characters mounts, so do the concerns of parents & teachers about the hold these characters seem to have on young minds(Woodman, 1991. p.40). Just watching young children in dramatic play would give you an idea of what cartoon program is their favorite one to watch. We have watched students wield blocks and pencils, claiming "it is a sword!" and even seen students pretend to kick and punch like Batman does.

The concern that many parents, teachers and critics also have is that so many of these cartoon characters don't die. They walk through a hail of bullets and carry on, unharmed. As a result, experts say that children get a warped perspective of what's really dangerous and what isn't. Until around age six, a child's ability to discriminate between fantasy and reality complicates their involvement with superheroes(Woodman, 1991. p.49). When our young children watch cartoons with these types of violence, they start to visualize themselves as their favorite cartoon character and decide that if they are that character, they won't be harmed if they get shot or run over by the

bad guy.

When children start to imitate negative or violent behavior in the name of a character, then it may be time for parents to intervene(Woodman, 1991.p.82). If a parent sees a child “karate kick” a sibling and they explain that “the Black Power Ranger does it all the time”, it is time for the parent to sit down with the child and explain why it is wrong to kick someone just because they saw a cartoon character do it. Parents cannot wait until their child seriously harm themselves or others before they decide to discuss the cartoons their children watch. The first step to doing this is to just sit and watch the cartoon with them.

Cartoon Violence

If you turn on the television on any Sunday morning, you are likely to see a cartoon with scenes that contain a violent act. Violence in a cartoon? That can't be true since cartoons are made for young children. Sadly, children witness an average of 25-30 acts of violence in a hour of children's programming and 66% of all children's programming is violent in content. Within that 66%, there are many different flavors and genre of violence(Gulin,1998. p.1). Different flavors of violence? Has society become so immune to violence that it is categorized like ice cream? Once again, it is a sad fact in our society that violence is so acceptable. Many popular shows among young children are geared towards cartoons where good(the hero with the “special powers” triumphs over evil(the villain).

Cartoons are often divided into two types of violence, **happy and realistic**. **Happy violence** is the type of violence seen in such cartoons as the *Itchy and Scratchy* show on **The Simpsons** and the **Road Runner** cartoons. In these types of cartoons, a character has violent

acts inflicted on them that would normally seriously injure or even kill a real person and the audience is suppose to “laugh”. For example, the cat in *Itchy and Scratchy* is always being chopped up or have his tongue “pulled out”, causing Bart and Lisa to laugh hysterically at such violence. If this example of a “violent cartoon-within-a-cartoon” doesn’t show how dangerous cartoons can be to a young child’s mind, we are not really seeing what we should be seeing in our children’s cartoons. With **realistic violence**, the audience is not supposed to laugh at the violent acts and the context of the story is usually very serious(Barcus, Gitlin, Milavsky,1999. p.2). Cartoons like Batman, Spiderman, Transformers, BeastWars all fall into the category of **realistic violence** because the characters(the heroes) often engage in physical violence to rid their world of “evil”(the villains). A new cartoon that is quickly gaining popularity is **DragonBall Z** , a perfect(yet sad) example of the new trend of **realistic violence** . It includes physical violence since the main character(Goku) is involved in battle with various enemies. No weapons are involved since Goku is a martial arts master. Plenty of verbal violence occurs in the form of threats. The rendering of battle scenes are almost as graphic as some live-action fights one might see on prime time television, complete with sound effects and some splattering of blood. In one scene, Goku holds evil Raditz in a lock so Piccolo can fire an energy beam to kill the Saiyan invader. In the process, Goku sacrifices himself. The audience views the energy beam piercing through both of the characters and Goku is seen flying through the air with a big hole in his chest (Barcus & et.al, 1999.p.2). Now put yourself in the place of a young child watching this episode of **Dragon Ball Z**. Do you think they will know that it is just a cartoon and Goku will appear in next week’s episode? No. A young child will look at this episode with wonder at Goku’s actions and believe that if he is ever shot by an “energy beam”, they will survive to “fight again”! Why is

violence such a crucial element in cartoons, especially cartoons geared for boys? Sadly, the media has created an image that males have to be aggressive and ready to stand up for his beliefs and principles. Men are not allowed to be emotional, be compassionate or be afraid for fear that they will be negatively portrayed as being weak and unmanly. In order to stick to these stereotypes, the male in many situations has to use violence to protect himself or to exercise his power. Cartoons have become an extension of the reality in our society. By showing violence, these cartoons constantly teach this stereotype to children who watch them, thus continuing this vicious cycle of violence. As with other cartoons like **Dragon Ball Z**, violence is justified because it is used by the superhero in defense of the Good against the conniving principles of Evil(Barcus & et.al, 1999. p.2).

Violence is also used to “liven up” the program in order to keep our children interested in them. Research has shown that kids have a short attention span and cartoons have the “flash” needed to grab their attention, but this unnecessary violence is doing more harm than good to our little children. Let’s take a long look at the actual repercussions of cartoon violence. Children begin to watch television for the most part around preschool age. At this time in their lives, children take an “exploration” approach to television. They try to establish meaning with cartoons and are attracted to vivid production features(rather than the violence itself). Intense sounds and sights, as well as quick cuts and movements make cartoons very appealing to them. Most cartoons are constructed with vivid production features, which greatly increases children’s predisposal to cartoon violence(Gulin, 1998. p.2). Young children do not say, “Hmmm, that is not real!” Instead, they can’t wait until they can try these stunts out themselves, often with life-threatening results. How many times have we seen on the news that a child has been killed acting

out their favorite cartoon? Cartoons have been enjoyed by children(even adults) for years, but we have to teach our children that everything on television is not real.

Our Surveys

To find out how cartoons affect our children, we surveyed twenty-three third graders from the Fordham section of the Bronx. We asked them fourteen questions based on the amount of time they spent watching cartoons, the types of cartoons they watch and their opinions on whether cartoons are real or not. Twenty out of twenty-three students surveyed watch cartoons before school, after school as well as when they are doing their homework. When students were asked with whom do they watch cartoons, **78%** of the students said they watch cartoons with a sibling or friend, **17%** of the students said that they watch cartoons by themselves, but only **4%** said that they watch cartoons with a parent. **86%** of students also watch cartoons before bed , which shows that our students spend a great deal of their time watching cartoons on a daily basis.

When asked about their favorite cartoon, **Rugrats** was chosen as the top favorite with **Pokemon** second and **Dragon Ball Z** third. Most of the students chose **Dragon Ball Z** as their favorite action cartoon and it was also chosen as the top cartoon choice to watch if they were limited to one cartoon a day. When surveyed on the type of cartoon violence that they like to see, **43%** said that they enjoy watching the characters fight, **26%** said that they like to see characters shoot other characters and **30%** also enjoyed seeing characters being blown up, bloodied or stabbed.

When we surveyed the students' opinion over whether cartoons were real or not, **56%** said that they were real and **43%** felt they were not real. When we asked what happens when a

cartoon character dies, **86%** agreed that they come back to life to start the action all over again, whereas **13%** felt a character remains dead and is never seen again.

To test whether this type of logic can be applied to real life situations, we also asked the students their opinion of what happens when real people die. **47%** said “the person goes to Heaven” and **47%** said “the person goes to Hell”. **4%** said “the person goes under the ground and comes back as a flower.”

From our survey, we found that our findings were identical to many other studies: our children are very influenced by cartoon violence on television. When asked about their favorite type of cartoon violence, not one student said that they did not like cartoon violence at all, which shows us how potentially desensitized our children are becoming to cartoon violence.

In addition to our survey of the twenty-three students, we also surveyed their parents to also find out their opinion on cartoon violence. They all agreed to speak to us on the condition that we didn't mention their names. When we asked if they watch cartoons with their children, **34%** of the parents said they watch with their children, **60%** of the parents said they do not watch with their children , and **4%** of the parents watch with their child occasionally. When asked about some of the cartoons that their children watch with them or alone, the parents named the following cartoons: **Pokemon, Powder Puff Girls, Sailor Moon , Batman , Rugrats, Spiderman, Superman and The Simpsons.** When we asked parents the amount of time their child spent watching cartoons, **4%** said an hour, **21%** said two hours, **8%** said three hours and **65%** said their children watch four or more hours of cartoons.

Our final question posed to the parents was their thoughts about cartoons being too violent

for young children. 25% agreed that cartoons were too violent for young children, but 73% said they were not too violent.

After completing our survey, most parents admitted that they do not have much time to monitor their children's cartoon viewing because they work, have to run errands, etc. The viewing of television programs are controlled mostly by brothers or sisters not much older than the child watching these shows. Parents also believed that their children were "smart" enough not to try anything violent that they saw on television. One mother was shocked when we asked her child what happened when a character dies in a cartoon. The child responded by saying, "He cannot die. He lives forever!" We also asked what would happen if he were in the cartoon and he fell over a cliff. The child started to laugh and said, "I cannot die. I'll just get up and walk again like Bart Simpson when he fell down the cliff on **The Simpsons**".

These comments are typical of today's society view of cartoons. With so many parents working and trying to juggle so many things in their lives, they really don't have time to sit down and actually look at what their children are watching. Parents should sit and look at least one of the cartoons that their child watches so they will be familiar with the content of the cartoon. This will give parents an opportunity to discuss the program with their child. Parents can also protect children from excessive cartoon violence by doing the following:

- 1) Set limits on the amount of time they spend watching television programs, including cartoons.
- 2) If the children has a television set in their bedroom, consider removing it.
- 3) Point out that although the character has not actually been hurt or killed, such violence in real life results in pain or death. (AACAP, 1997. p.2)

Parents should also look for the following symptoms of long-term exposure to cartoon violence: children become less sensitive to the pain and suffering of others, become more fearful

of the world around them and may be more likely to behave in aggressive ways towards others.

The number one thing a parent must do is to set clear limits on the amount of cartoons being watched. Parents must also stop using the television as a “babysitter” and instead, offer other enjoyable activities for their children to do. Just taking these first steps will get parents to become more aware of the amount of violence their children are really seeing in just one cartoon!

Conclusion

There are no easy solutions to the amount of violence found in cartoons. We can lecture and lecture about the harmful messages children get from these cartoons, but children will still be drawn to these cartoons and imitate the actions that they see. Some children are able to decipher between reality and fantasy quite well due to parental involvement in their cartoon viewing, but sadly, this is just a small portion of our youth today. The psychological road between real life and make believe doesn't run only one way (Garro, 1994. p.2). Until the media really stops “cranking out” the same violent themes in the cartoons our children watch, we will continue to have our children grow more aggressive in each passing year of their lives. As teachers, we see this aggression grow and wonder to ourselves, “when will it stop?” The sad thing is that it might never end.

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