

Early Childhood Today (Scholastic) v19 n5 p16-17 mar05

Between Teacher & Parent: The Effect of Television Violence
on Children

“But that’s how they Fight on TV”

Helping a child who is negatively influenced by television programming
By Adele M. Brodtkin

THE TEACHER'S STORY

Luke entered the classroom "shadow dueling" again this morning. And I thought, "Oh boy, it's gonna be another one of those days." For the past month or so, the 6-year-old has come to school "wired." It was puzzling at first, since Luke had been such a calm little guy. The change in him began to make sense when a stack of Yu-gi-oh cards slipped out of his jacket pocket. As the cards scattered, I asked the embarrassed child if he also watches the Yu-gi-oh cartoon on TV. "I see it at breakfast sometimes," he admitted, looking apologetic, since he knows action figures are not welcome in our kindergarten. At least the mystery was solved. I now understood how a formerly easygoing child had been transformed into a perpetual swordsman. I reminded Luke that not only Yu-gi-oh but all action figure toys and Game Boys were to be left at home. Of course, though, the absence of the cards wouldn't change him back into our old easygoing Luke as long as he continued watching the cartoon.

I have always thought it isn't really a teacher's place to tell parents what kind of activities, including TV watching, are acceptable in their homes. However, I'm considering having a chat with Luke's parents to see if they have observed a similar change in his behavior.

THE PARENT'S STORY

Luke is a delightful child-active, curious, eager to learn. He was never particularly aggressive or hyper until he and his neighborhood friends started watching the Yu-gi-oh cartoon and collecting the cards. I've watched the show with him, and frankly, I don't understand the fascination. To me, both the program and the card game are complicated and boring. I looked into it and found out this cartoon isn't considered especially harmful to kids, since it's not really violent. But I do notice a change in Luke's behavior after he watches the show. He gets all revved up and eager to duel with anyone, including our dog. Yu-gi-oh is such a popular program among his friends that there's no keeping him from it. I'm hoping he'll lose interest in the show on his own.

Dr. Brodtkin's Assessment

For more than a quarter of a century, researchers have been studying the effects of TV viewing on both children and adults. Although controversies still exist, the data presents a clear picture of increased aggression in all age groups following the viewing of "violent" TV. The effect on children varies from child to child, depending on differences in temperament, social environment, and age. For children as young as Luke, the line between fantasy and reality is easily blurred, especially among those with rich imaginations. So a program need not be truly violent to rev up a boy Luke's age.

What the Teacher Can Do

The teacher would be wise to discuss this matter with Luke's parents. Together parents and teacher could come up with an arrangement that would allow Luke to enjoy the cartoon-just not before school or during quiet activities. It might be fine to watch a tape of the show before playing in the backyard at home under adult supervision.

In school, the teacher might use the Yu-gi-oh phenomenon for a lesson in communication. She could arrange a group meeting in which fans describe and explain the show and card game. It isn't easy for children even a few years older than Luke to translate the world of Yu-gi-oh into everyday language. The teacher will probably discover that most of even the biggest fans don't really understand the game or the meaning of terms used in the show. What they do understand and respond to are the emotions behind such mottos as "I have no chance to win. That's why I want to play!" It's about achieving the impossible, being small yet powerful, a common wish in childhood. Wonderful discussions about power, competing, winning against impossible odds, being strong, unafraid, and proud might emerge. All the while, of course, the Yu-gi-oh fans' opinions should be treated with respect. Their affinity for Yu-gi-oh should be understood as an expression of wanting to feel good about them selves. The teacher can then guide children toward less stimulating, more constructive activities that create the same good feeling that comes with mastery.

What the Parent Can Do

The task of parents in this era of technology that often exploits children's urges to be powerful is not easy. Parents become mediators between the culture surrounding this programming and their child's need for calm surroundings. As Luke's parent discovered, Yu-gi-oh is relatively harmless compared with much of the programming available to very young children. But parents still have to decide what effect any particular program may have on their child. Children who have witnessed real aggression or more violent programs may remain completely unaffected by the Yu-gi-oh cartoon. Others may become even more troubled by the show. Happily for Luke, his real world is apparently not overstimulating or chaotic. He is not jaded about aggression to the point that Yu-gi-oh seems ho-hum. His viewing of the program should be limited and arranged so that it does not interfere with quiet activities at school and at home. It is especially important that one or both parents watch the show with Luke and follow up with impromptu discussion. Parents can ask questions like: What happened and why? Whose side were you on? How would you have played if you were in that program? Some of these questions might arise during imaginative play. This discussion can lead quite naturally to talk about how we treat others and the importance of being helpful, not hurtful.

In short, it is unrealistic to expect parents to keep Yu-gi-oh and other popular cultural icons away from their children. However, it certainly is possible for parents to join children in watching the show and balance their Yu-gi-oh experience with family values.

When to wonder

- * If the child's eagerness to engage in fighting dominates his interactions for extended periods of time, whether or not he watches stimulating programs
- * If his sleep is regularly disturbed by nightmares evoked by the cartoon
- * If restlessness dominates his personality and interferes with interactions at home and in school for weeks or months

RESOURCES

- * Martha B. Bronson, *Self-Regulation in Early Childhood*, Guilford, 2000
- * Jane M. Healy, Ph.D. *Your Child's Crowing Mind*, Doubleday, 1994
- * Linda C. Mayes, M.D. & Donald J. Cohen, eds *The Yale Child Study Guide to Understanding your Child*, ch. 23 "Children and Violence," Little Brown, 2002
- * Jack Sanger, et al, *Young Children, Videos and Computer Games: Issues for Teachers and Parents*, Palmer Press, 1997

Adele M. Bmdkin, Ph.D., is a psychologist, consultant, and author.