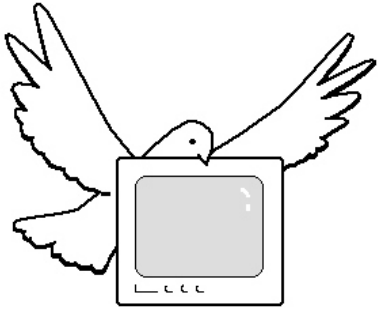


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**UNITED NATIONS SECRETARY-GENERAL'S
STUDY ON VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN**

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Violence in the Media

Chapter XI. Situational Overview, pp. 33-39.

Children across North America are exposed to significant amounts of violence through the media. In defense of the pervasiveness of violence in the media in North America, the entertainment industry often has asserted that the amount of violence in the media merely mirrors the reality of violence in society (e.g., West, 1993). A comparative analysis of media violence and real-world violence by film critic Michael Medved (1995) demonstrates well how untenable such an assertion is. As Medved noted, if the murder rate presented during an average evening of television was real, "in just 50 days everyone in the United States would be killed and the last left could turn off the TV." (pp.156-157).

According to the National Television Violence Survey (Wilson et al, 1997; 1998), 61% of television programs (excluding the news) contain violence. In them, aggression is used as an entertainment device. Violence is glamorized and trivialized; it often involves humor, and rarely is it accompanied by negative consequences. Violence is even more pervasive and insidious in video games. Eighty-nine percent of 70 top-selling games contain violence with almost half being serious violence against other game characters. Moreover, in 41% of the games violence is necessary for the protagonists to reach their goals, and in 17%, violence is the major focus of the game (Children Now, 2001). In fact, success in many video games is dependent on the choice and use of violent strategies (Funk et al, 2004). It is important also to note that technological advances have increased graphic capabilities. Since the mid 1990s, violence in video games has become increasingly realistic (Gentile et al, 2004). Children have a daily diet of such violence. Statistics from the U.S. indicate that virtually all families with children have at least one television set, and that most subscribe to cable or satellite TV. The majority of children have a television set in their bedroom. Most families also have at least one VCR or DVD player, a video game system, and a computer (Anderson et al, 2003). A survey of Canadian children shows a similar pattern of media accessibility with almost half the children reporting a personal TV set and 35% their own VCR (Canadian Teachers' Federation, 2003). In North America, children from infancy to age 6 years spend more time consuming entertainment media than they spend reading, being read to, and playing outside combined (Rideout et al, 2003). School-aged children spend more time consuming entertainment media than in any other activity other than school and sleeping (Roberts et al, 1999; Stanger & Gridina, 1999). Estimates range from an average of four hours each day (Woodard, 2000) to 6 or 7 hours a day (Gentile & Walsh, 2002; Roberts & Foehr, 2003), most of which is spent watching television (Roberts & Foehr, 2003).

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The extensive presence of violence in the entertainment media, together with the high rates of child exposure to it, has stimulated much discussion and much research about its impact. After decades of debate there is now a general consensus that media violence is a risk factor that,

like other risk factors, interacts with characteristics of the child, the family, and the community, in contributing to the development of aggressive behaviors, fears, and sleep disturbances. And like other risk factors, the greater the level of exposure to violent media, the greater the likelihood the child will be affected by it. It is by now well documented that exposure to television and movie violence can perpetuate violence by desensitizing the viewer to violence and by increasing the likelihood of aggression. These effects are summarized in a report from an expert panel of media violence researchers that was established by the U.S. Surgeon General in 2000 (Anderson et al, 2003). Desensitization, in essence, implies that the viewer has reduced sympathy for victims, and reduced capacity for emotional arousal in response to violence. Increases in physically and verbally aggressive thoughts, emotions and behaviors are the short-term effects of exposure to media violence. Longitudinal studies indicate that frequent exposure to violent media in childhood is linked with adult aggression including physical assault and spousal abuse. Watching violent television in childhood has been identified as one of the most salient predictors of youth violence (Bushman & Huesmann, 2001), and of adult violent criminal behaviors (Johnson et al, 2002). Less frequently researched, but clearly very important to healthy child development are findings showing that exposure to violent television induces fears, anxieties, nightmares and other sleep disorders (Cantor, 2002; Owens, et al, 1999; Singer et al, 1998). The need for and the importance of research in this area is underscored by the increasing amount of violence in televised news and the paucity of information on its impact on children (Walma van der Molen, 2004). The limited evidence available shows that although only few children watch TV news, those that do report increased worries and fears for personal safety (Canadian Teachers Federation, 2003). Compared with the decades of research into the effects of television violence, the research on the impact of playing violent video games is in its infancy. At this time there are no long-term studies of the impact of playing violent video games. However, the research that has been undertaken suggests that the effects are comparable with or more intense than are those of televised violence. Playing violent video games decreases empathy and helping behaviors; it increases aggressive thoughts and feelings, and it promotes attitudes accepting or supportive of interpersonal violence (Anderson & Bushman, 2001; Funk et al, 2004). In particular, effects have been found in schools. Adolescents who play violent video games show a greater than average frequency of arguing with teachers and of becoming involved in physical fights (Gentile et al, 2004). Not surprisingly, they also show poor academic performance. As the body of research in this area grows, and as graphics continue to become increasingly realistic, we might expect the impact of playing violent video games to be more profound than that of the more passive activity of observing violence in television and movies. The video game player is both actively and intensely involved in creating, directing and controlling the levels and type of violence perpetrated on the character, and is reinforced for successful acts of violence (Anderson & Dill, 2000; Funk et al, 2004; Sherry, 2001).

« Sometimes it (TV) scares me. »
9 year-old boy (Canadian Teachers' Federation, 2003, p.36)

We have even less knowledge at this time of the impact of violence in song lyrics, in music videos, or on the Internet (Funk et al, 2004). Preliminary investigations of violent music videos suggest they may increase antisocial behaviors and acceptance of violence among older adolescents and young adults. And there is some evidence that listening to music with violent lyrics can increase feelings of hostility (Anderson, Carnagy & Eubanks, 2003). A number of concerns have been expressed about children's and adolescents' access to the Internet. Although most young people appear to use the Internet for social purposes, email and chat rooms (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2001), the Internet is an unregulated and readily available source for all types of information including how to obtain a gun or build a bomb. Overall, however, at this time the data in these newer forms of media are neither clear nor consistent enough to draw conclusions. What we can identify are factors that moderate between exposure to violent media and its effects.

Especially Vulnerable Children

We first note that there are no apparent sex differences in the likelihood that children will be affected by media violence. In contrast to studies from the 1970s, recent research indicates

that both males and females may be affected by media violence, although some sex differences do emerge. Girls generally prefer fantasy violence and boys generally prefer human violence; both are attracted to comedic violence (Cantor, 1998; Funk & Buchman, 1996). For vulnerable girls, exposure to media violence in childhood predicts the use of indirect aggression in young adulthood – e.g., lying and stealing with the intent to harm others. For vulnerable boys, exposure to media violence in childhood predicts the use of more direct physical aggression (Huesmann, et al 2003). Although children generally appear to enjoy violent entertainment media (Anderson et al, 2003), some children are especially likely to be affected by it. For those who are vulnerable, media violence may be (1) a short-term precipitating factor for the imitation of the violence observed, or (2) a long-term predisposing factor for aggressive behaviours that are learned through desensitization and observational learning (i.e. learning that the world is a hostile place and that aggression is an acceptable and effective means to social problem solving) (Huesmann et al, 2003), or (3) an agent of intensification of fears and anxieties (Cantor, 2002; Owens, et al, 1999; Singer et al, 1998).

Exposure to violent media has its greatest effect on children who are already at risk for emotional and behavioral difficulties. The research has identified the following mediators between violent media and aggressive behaviors: existing aggressiveness or antisocial tendencies (Anderson et al, 2003; Funk et al, 2002; Gentile et al, 2004), high levels of sensation-seeking (Slater, 2003), low levels of empathy (Funk et al, 2002; 2003), a history of physical abuse (Coie & Dodge, 1998) and poor selfconcept (Funk et al, 2002a). Children with emotional difficulties (Funk et al, 2002) are more likely to experience increased fears and anxieties from violent media. In addition, low levels of parental supervision are associated with a variety of problematic outcomes for children who consume violent media (Gentile et al, 2004). As a group, these findings suggest that children with externalizing or internalizing behaviour difficulties are those most vulnerable to exposure to media violence. In turn, those most at risk for behavior difficulties are those with poor socialization histories. There is some evidence of biological predisposing factors, but the preponderance of evidence shows family variables to be the dominant force in the development of behavior difficulties. In essence, children who experience parental neglect, abuse, inappropriate punishment, harsh physical punishment, marital discord, parental depression, or parental substance abuse, are at risk for the development of behavioral and emotional difficulties (Kearney, 2003). The more media violence to which such children are exposed, the greater the likelihood they will be affected by it. That said, it is important to note that most aggressive children do not become violent adults (Anderson et al, 2003). Nonetheless, a significant portion do (Tremblay, 2000; Tremblay et al, 2004). Lessening the risk factor of media violence clearly is important.

When children design video games...

Sometimes video games that involve fighting are good, especially when the fighting is against cancer. Nine-year-old former leukemia patient, Ben Duskin of California, has a very special unrequited wish which the Make-A-Wish Foundation made a reality. With the help of Eric Johnston, software engineer for LucasArts, Ben's Game was developed. The game's central character – Ben – zooms around the screen on a skateboard zapping mutated cells and collecting seven shields to protect against the common side effects of chemotherapy. Ben's Game is now a staple in children's chemotherapy wards.

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Promising Practices

In both Canada and the U.S., efforts to reduce children's exposure to violence in the media have centered on facilitating parental monitoring through the provision of ratings systems and the V-chip technology, increased programming regulations, and parent and child media education. None alone has proven successful. A multi-faceted approach likely is necessary.

Ratings systems in the U.S. have been evaluated and been shown to be difficult for parents to use or to understand. Ratings for video games appear to be particularly in need of reform. In Canada they are varied since, like films, their classification and ratings are under

provincial/territorial jurisdiction. In the U.S., the system for rating video games has resulted in most being labeled as suitable for everyone, despite the pervasiveness of violence within them (Funk et al, 2003). Parental use of video game ratings is rare. Walsh (cited in Gentile & Walsh, 2002), for example, reports that 90% of teens say that their parents never check the ratings before allowing them to rent or purchase video games. Ratings for television programming appear to be under-used also. In the Kaiser Family Foundation survey of 1998, only 32% of 10 – 17 year-olds said that their parents used the television ratings systems, only 14% of parents could define 9 of 11 television rating symbols, and only 22% of those with children under the age of 10 years were able to name the ratings of children's shows. In Canada, it has been argued that the rating system is userfriendly (Canadian Cable Television, 2004). However, systematic research has not addressed parental understanding or use of ratings provided. We do know, however, that very few Canadian parents monitor what children watch (Canadian Teachers' Federation, 2003).

A more fundamental flaw in the television rating system has been identified (Kunkel et al., 2000). First, it is noteworthy that in neither country are news or sports programming, both full of violence, subject to ratings. For general audiences, ratings categories in the U.S. are defined by particular content characteristics, for example, 'contains moderate violence.' In Canada, ratings are similar – the potential viewer is informed as to the nature, type and extent of violence. Categorization of children's programming is different. In both Canada and the U.S. children's programming is categorized primarily on the basis of the program-maker's intentions and the anticipated impact of the material on a child. The U.S. 'TV-Y' category, for example, is rated as suitable for all children and not expected to frighten young children. There is no information about the presence or type of violence. In Canada, the rating of 'C' is given for programming intended for children under the age of 8 years, attention has been paid to themes that may threaten children's sense of security, and depictions of aggressive behavior or violence are limited to those that are imaginary or unrealistic. It is, of course, the case that many younger children have difficulty differentiating the imaginary from the real, and that 60% of all children's programs contain some violence. The importance of clear and useful ratings systems is that the success of the V-chip technology is dependent upon them.

The V-chip is a parental control technology. Whether in the television set (as required in the U.S.) or offered through cable decoder boxes (as in Canada), the intent is to allow parents to block the child's access to inappropriate programming, most often on the basis of ratings. However, when ratings are ineffective or misunderstood, the technology is of little value. In fact, much of the evidence shows that parents are unaware of the V-chip technology (Cantor, 2002). Moreover, in Canada its use is even less likely since parents must pay an additional fee for the V-chip from their cable providers. Because of such difficulties, the V-chip has been described as an unsuccessful social experiment (Huesmann et al, 2003). The ratings are there to make sure that kids don't play games that have too much violence, but it doesn't stop us.

« My parents know I play the games and they don't care. »
11 year-old boy (Children's Rights Centre, 2005)

The use of ratings and V-chips represents efforts to balance free-speech concerns with the need to protect children from exposure to violence. An alternative approach is seen in the U.S. with the Children's Television Act (CTA) of 1996. Rather than attempting to ban programming expected to have a negative effect on children (bans tend to be resisted under free speech concerns), the CTA requires broadcasters to provide particular amounts of informational and educational television for children. License renewals are linked with compliance. The impact of the Act is described well by Calvert and Kotler (2003). In its initial form, the CTA's guidelines were weak, and there was excessive flexibility in their application. Broadcasters themselves were able to decide which of their programs met the criteria for educational or informational television. Researchers soon identified distorted and inaccurate classifications. For example, GI-Joe, a violent action adventure cartoon, was described by one broadcaster as an educational and informational television program.⁸ Subsequent strengthening of the CTA

guidelines improved the Act such that its overall evaluation now is positive. It appears to be one useful tool in reducing the amount of television violence exposure.

Increased legislation also has been recommended for reducing the marketing of violent entertainment to children. A U.S. Federal Trade Commission survey shows that the entertainment industry routinely markets products to children that their own ratings deem inappropriate for children. In addition, children under the age of 17 years frequently are able to purchase tickets for movies, music recordings and video games that are labeled as suitable only for adults (FTC, 2000). Overall, these data show that the Canadian approach of encouraging industry selfregulation is likely insufficient. Legislative changes may be needed to ensure that there is more compliance with guidelines in the production and marketing of violent entertainment. The data also highlight the need to complement regulations with parent and child education. Families are of critical importance in reducing the harmful effects of media violence. Research conducted in Toronto, Canada shows that the majority of children up to age 12 believe they should be protected from television programs, Websites, and video games that are disturbing or frightening (Media Awareness Network, 2004). Parents can ensure they understand rating systems, understand and adopt the V-chip technology, avoid purchasing toys that promote imitative play of violent programming, monitor their children's video game habits, and co-view and comment on televised violence. But these interventions require knowledge and motivation. As noted above, few parents understand or use ratings and V-chips. In fact, typically, parents exert little control over their children's consumption of media, violent or otherwise (Canadian Teachers' Federation, 2003; Gentile & Walsh, 2002). Knowledge of the harmful effects of media violence is lacking among most parents (Cantor, 2002). Parents also seem unaware of the amount of exposure to violence their children experience through television watching, the Internet and through video games (Funk, et al, 2004; Gentile & Walsh, 2002). Education in each of these areas is needed.

8 WDIV-TV, Detroit, Michigan described GI Joe as follows. " The Joes fight against an evil that has the capabilities of mass destruction of society. Issues of social consciousness and responsibility are show themes." (cited in Calvert & Kotler, 2003, p. 278).

The research consistently demonstrates that if parents co-view television with their children and comment appropriately on the violence, the effect of the violence is significantly reduced (Anderson et al, 2003; Funk et al, 2002). Likewise, parental monitoring of video games is a protective factor against consequent aggressive behaviors (Gentile et al, 2004). What is missing in the research at this time is information identifying whether parental co-viewing of television and monitoring of children's media consumption is common only among parents who display more involved parenting styles in general. It may be useful to provide general parenting skills education to promote more involved and democratic styles of parenting. Such parenting would increase the likelihood of co-viewing and discussion, and would reduce the child's exposure to risk factors such as neglect and harsh punishment that promote imitation of the violence observed. Research also is needed to identify facilitating factors in parental use of ratings and technological filtering devices such as the V-chip. Media literacy programs in schools have been suggested for children. Among the wide variety that has been tried, the most successful seem to be those in which the child is actively and creatively engaged in production. An early intervention of this type was undertaken by Huesmann and his colleagues in 1983. Its goal was to reduce the imitation of televised aggression observed by 7 and 8 year-old children. The children produced a videotape to explain to other children why it was bad to imitate TV violence and how television is not like real life. They were told that some children had been harmed or fooled by television violence, and that the videotape would help them. The goal of this prevention program was realized. More recently, video production as a path to media literacy has been successfully used in a number of projects in New York City. For example, as part of a three-year project funded by the U.S. Department of Education, students in one school are analyzing and re-making a video about a young

woman who is in an abusive relationship. Educators agree that the more children engage in the creative process, the more fully they understand the media and the less likely they are to be manipulated by it (Armstrong, Chen & Furger, 2002).