



Media Violence, Aggression, and Fear

The common sense notion that exposure to violence in the media can impact children's aggressive behavior is supported by research in the fields of child development, medicine, and education. In *The Future of Children* volume "Children and Electronic Media," experts discuss the effect that exposure to violence in the media can have on aggressive behavior, and also on children's fearfulness. Although there is no evidence supporting the idea that violent media actually increases violent crime, still research has indicated that when children view media violence, some act out aggressively, experience fear, develop unrealistic perceptions concerning the violence that exists in the real world, or develop less advanced moral reasoning strategies.

As noted in *The Future of Children*, scholars have conducted hundreds of studies concerning the impact of media violence on children's aggressive behavior. Although there is no evidence supporting the idea that media violence increases violent crime, exposure to violent media appears to have both short- and long-term effects on children's aggressive behavior. For example:

- In one study investigating the short-term effects of media violence, elementary school children exposed to one episode of *MightyMorphin Power Rangers* demonstrated significantly more (seven times) intentional acts of aggression, such as hitting, kicking, and shoving than did a group that did not watch the program.
- In another experimental study, five- to six-year-old children who had just watched a violent movie and were then observed playing together in a room were rated much higher on physical assault and other types of aggression than were children who had watched a nonviolent movie.
- A longitudinal study examining the long-term effects of exposure to violence found that heavy exposure to television violence predicted increased physical aggression in adulthood, even after researchers controlled for the child's initial level of aggressiveness, the child's IQ, the parents' education, the parents' TV habits, the parents' aggression, and the socioeconomic status of the family.

These findings are even more startling in light of the fact children are exposed to a lot of violent media.

- A three-year assessment of more than 3,000 programs a year found that a steady 60 percent of programs across twenty-six channels contain some physical aggression; on average, a typical hour of programming features six different violent incidents.

- Public television is much more tame; only 18 percent of shows contain violent content.

Television violence, however, is not the only cause for concern. The most popular video games played by youth contain violence, and these violent games have been linked to a host of aggression-related cognitive, emotional, and behavioral outcomes. These outcomes include more positive attitudes toward violence, increased use of aggressive words or solutions to hypothetical problems, quicker recognition of facial anger, increased self-perception as being aggressive, increased feelings of anger and revenge motives, decreased sensitivity to scenes and images of real violence, and changes in brain function associated with lower executive control and heightened emotion.

In addition, children's aggressive behavior is not the only outcome affected by violent media content. Children's fears and anxieties can be influenced by media exposure as well. According to developmental research, the nature of media-related fear varies by age. Preschoolers and younger elementary school children tend to be frightened by characters and events that look or sound scary, whereas older elementary school children can be frightened by scenes involving injury, violence, and personal harm. These older children are also more responsive than younger children to events in the media that seem realistic or could happen in real life. Several studies, for example, have found that older children are more frightened by television news than are younger children.

Children's perceptions of reality can also be affected by media violence. Although most of the evidence is correlational, a few experiments using control groups have shown that repeated exposure to television violence increases people's fear of victimization. In one study, elementary school children who frequently watched the news believed that there were more murders in a nearby city than did infrequent viewers, even when researchers controlled for grade level, gender, exposure to fictional media violence, and overall TV viewing.

Similarly, children's exposure to television violence may also impact their moral development. In one survey study, researchers found that children aged six to twelve, who were heavy viewers of fantasy violence programs such as *Power Rangers*, were more likely than children who seldom watched such programming to judge hypothetical examples of aggression as morally correct if these examples were for reasons of protection. In this same study, children who watched more violent programming (realistic and fantasy) displayed less advanced moral reasoning strategies, focusing more on rules and the presence or absence of punishment in their reasoning about moral dilemmas than on more advanced strategies, such as perspective taking. Similarly, in an experimental study involving children aged five to fourteen, researchers found that children who had watched a violent program were more likely than those in the control group to judge violence as morally acceptable. The children who had watched the violent program also exhibited less advanced moral reasoning in their responses, often relying on authority or punishment as rationales (for example, "You shouldn't hit because you'll get in trouble"). Based on these findings, the researchers concluded that children's exposure to a single program containing fantasy violence can alter children's short-term evaluations of aggression and can even adversely affect the strategies they use to make sense of those evaluations.

In considering children's exposure to media, therefore, it is important to consider the complex ways in which violent content may impact children's overall development, aggressive behavior, increased fear, unrealistic perceptions of the world, and tendencies to develop less advanced moral reasoning strategies.

Prepared by Ann Cami based on information contained in *The Future of Children: Children and Electronic Media*, Jeanne Brooks-Gunn and Elisabeth Donahue, eds., Volume 18, Number 1, Spring 2008 www.futureofchildren.org.

Specific Chapters Referenced Include:

Barbara J. Wilson, "Media and Children's Aggression, Fear, and Altruism," pp. 87-118.

Soledad Liliana Escobar-Chaves and Craig A. Anderson, "Media and Risky Behaviors," pp. 147-180.

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