

## *Stop Teaching Our Kids To Kill*

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(introduction)

"The fact is that media violence primes children to see killing as acceptable. Over the years I have heard firsthand many horror stories that show the link between media violence and aggression. Teachers report first graders stabbing kittens to death and mutilating pets after seeing violent acts on TV or in a movie. Parents observe preschoolers attempting to drown siblings because a cartoon hero drowned an enemy on TV. Law officers tell of the hundreds of preteens who plot murder and revenge and luckily are stopped before the tragedy occurs. Adolescents who copy crimes they see on television do so with cold-blooded calculations and with no remorse."

"They even detect and correct the flaws that may have caused the television crime to fail."

"It's important to note that media violence can also be a powerful influence for good. Scientific evidence has established that screen portrayals of violence need not lead to reinforcement of aggressive attitudes and behaviors."

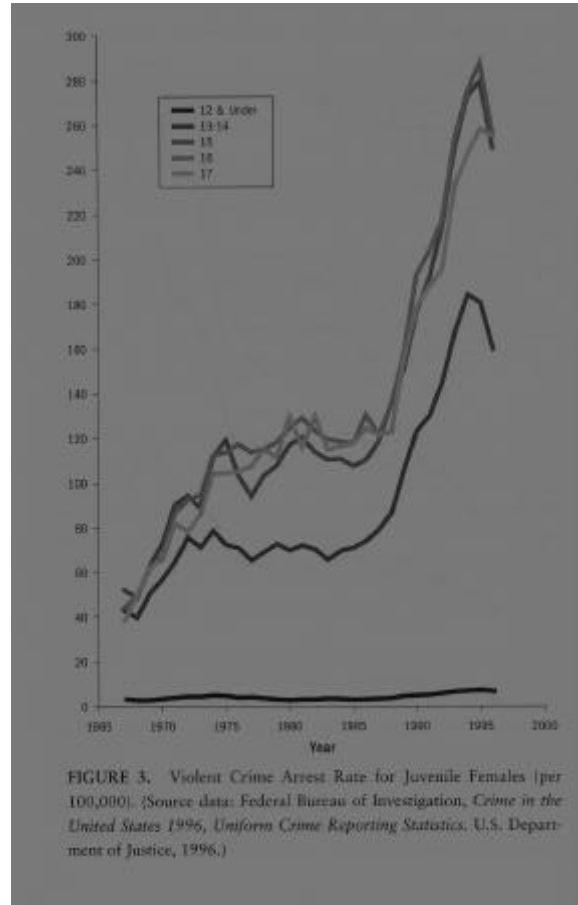
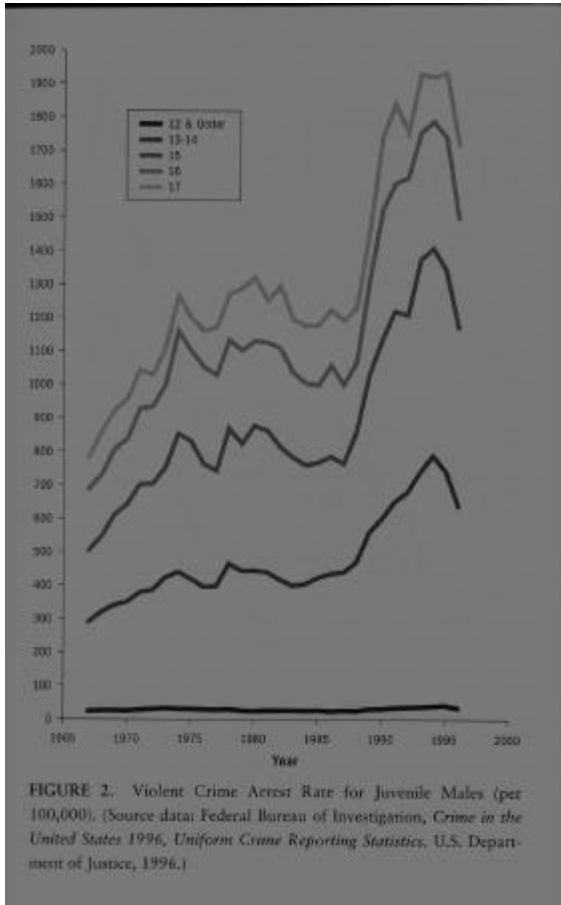
"If the consequences of violence are demonstrated, if violence is shown to be regretted or punished, if the perpetrators are not glamorized, if the act of violence is not seen as justifiable, if, in general, violence is shown in a negative light as causing human suffering and pain, then the portrayal of violence is less likely to create imitation effect. But if the violence is glamorized, sanitized, and made to seem routine or even fun to do, then the message is that it is acceptable, and our children imitate it. Permitting sensational visual images showing hurting as powerful and domination of others are dangerous."

### **"IT'S A VIOLENT WORLD AFTER ALL"**

Many have reduced this issue to a chicken and egg question: does violence on screen make people violent, or is that violence merely mirroring what is actually taking place every day on our streets and around the world? We think the former, and we have the evidence to prove it.

The prime years for violent crime are roughly the years from ages sixteen to twenty-four.

Yet, throughout this era of an aging population, the violent crime rate still went up.



## “NOT JUST A TOASTER WITH PICTURES”

Since 1950 there has been a total of more than 3,500 research studies conducted in America on the effects of media violence on the population. One random analysis of almost 1,000 studies found to demonstrate there is a tangible correlation between violent entertainment and violent behavior.

In the realm of media violence research scientists over five decades have been able to repeatedly demonstrate both short term and long term increases of violent behavior as the result of short term and long term exposure of manufactured horror.

If adults with their thinking functions developed, with their abilities to analyze and evaluate intact, and with their language skills proficient enough to express the feelings brought up by horrific images, can still be quite disturbed by the violence on screen. Imagine how children and teens are effected and infected. Ours is a media culture careening out of control, with violence everywhere we turn. Understanding the links between real life and screen violence is paramount to taking effective long lasting action.

Over the last four decades experts have found 3 basic negative effects from exposure to screen violence. They are: one; increased aggression; two, fear and insensitivity to real life; three, screen violence. Some studies highlight one or more of these effects, and others more inclusive long-term experiments touch on all three.

- INCREASING AGRESSION – in 1969 Senator John Pastor held a hearing to which he invited the usual group of parents, teachers, social scientists, and network executives. He also invited the Surgeon General of the United States. The Surgeon General had just concluded the first report on smoking and health which caused quite a stir because it indicated the link between smoking and lung cancer. When the Surgeon General subsequently commented on TV violence, he put the issue in the same context as the smoking controversy: A public health issue.

In 1982 the National Institute of Mental Health issued a pivotal report, in its review of over 2,500 studies of the effects of TV violence, it concluded, “ in magnitude, television violence is as strongly correlated with aggressive behavior as any other behavioral variable that has been measured.”

Taking into account their baseline aggressiveness intelligence and social economic conditions, it was found that, for boys and girls, the amount of television they were watching at age 8, predicted the seriousness of criminal acts for which they were convicted at age 30. This was a big and frightening leap to make. It pushed the evidence one step forward.

Perhaps the scariest of all is the fact that Enron and Huesmann further observed second generation effects. Girls and boys watching more television at age 8 were later as mothers and fathers, punishing their own children more severely than those parents who had watched less television as children were. Remarkably how much television violence a 30 year old parent had been watching at age 8 predicted their children’s degree of physical aggressiveness even better than it predicted their own at age 30. It is something to consider that the second and now third generation effects are accumulating and rippling down through the generations during today’s era of unprecedented youth violence.

In conducting a study designed to observe youth that young children’s behavior changed more significantly than any of the older children or adults, 45 first and second graders in three towns were observed during free play for rates of objectively measuring noxious physical aggression such as, hitting, shoving and biting before television was introduced in the town with no television. The same 45 children were then observed again during free play two years later. To prevent biased data research, assistants collecting the data were actually kept uninformed to why they were observing children in these three towns for rates of hitting, shoving and similar behavior. Furthermore, an entirely new set of research assistants was employed the second time around, so that a data-gatherer would not be influenced by some recollection of the child’s behavior two years earlier.

As to be expected, rates of noxious physical aggression did not change in the two controlled communities. Since they had already been exposed to television to begin with. In contrast, two years after the introduction of television rates of physical aggression of the third town, young children violence had increased by 160%. The increase was observed in both boys and girls and in those who were aggressive to begin with and those who were not.

Over seven years of research, first at the Centers for Disease Control and later at the University of Washington, Doctor Central gathered statistical data that indicated the following: "if television's technology had never been developed, there would be 10,000 fewer murders each year in the United States, 70,000 fewer rapes and 700,000 fewer injurious assaults.

- **DESENSITIZING US**

Violence does not occur solely via an attacker's aggressiveness. Violence is also caused by the unwillingness of others to intercede.

Perhaps our cultural de-sensitization about age appropriate affairs can be best understood in comparison to other countries. It was common for American preschoolers to see the Batman movies, or especially the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle movies, during the 1990's. However, it is interesting to note, that British children under the age of 12, were not allowed to see Batman, and Swedish children under the age of 15 could not get in to see the first two turtles movies.

The increase in the level of violence on screen and the accompanying increase in de-sensitization that it inflicts on children especially means that the entertainment industry must up the ante to hold and certainly increase viewership. The more often our children are exposed to violent programming, the more it is seen as normal and natural, and the less attention grabbing it becomes. If the screen violence seems like an addictive drug, you're on the right track. The fact that all forms of media violence that whether on TV or on film and video games have become more and more graphically brutal and sensational attests to the effectiveness of de-sensitization.

- **INCREASING FEAR**

Research has demonstrated that TV distorts a person's concept of reality, changing his or her attitudes and values. Thus, TV creates a perceived need for guns, which in turn, creates violence, which reinforces the need for guns and so on, in an endless tragic spiral.

As our children were becoming more aggressive de-sensitized and fearful, TV violence continued to escalate. A 1994 study by the Center for Media and Public Affairs identified 1846 violent scenes on network and cable programs between 6 am and midnight on one day. The most violent periods were between 6 and 9 am, with 497 violent scenes or 165.7 per hour. And between 2 and 5 pm, 609 violent scenes, or 203 per hour. These are the times a day that children and young people are most likely to be watching. The study also concluded that from 1992 to 1994 depictions of serious violence increased 67%. Violence in promos and trailers almost doubled. And violence in network and local news programs increased 244%.

Marc Fowler, chair of the F.C.C., said that television was just another appliance "a toaster with pictures" and that we need not be concerned. Yet in the 1980 and '81 season the F.C.C. was discussing deregulation of children's programming, violence on children's television shows reached its highest level in 20 years.

As the result of the 1980's congressional hearings, the Congress designed a television violence act known as T.V.A., in 1990. The senate and house passed the children's television act, but President

Bush refused to sign it, saying that it bordered on infringement of the First Amendment. Children's Television Act was enacted and made two provisions: One, commercials during children's programs could not exceed 10.5 minutes per hour on weekends and 12 minutes per hour on the weekdays. Two, television broadcast licenses could not be renewed unless the station complied with the first provision and that had served the "educational and information needs of children" by providing at least 3 hours a week of educational programming.

The years to follow proved to be ineffective. The networks identified such programs as G.I. Joe, Leave it to Beaver, The Jetsons, and James Bond as examples of shows that served the educational and informational needs of children.

The National Cable Television Association was awarded a three year contract to administer the largest study of television content ever undertaken. In February 1996, the first year analysis was released. It determined that television violence poses the greatest risk if there are repeated acts using a conventional weapon, if violence is put into a humorous context, or if it is morally justified in some way. The conclusion of the first year of study was that "physiologically harmful" violence is pervasive on broadcast and cable TV programs.

In 1997 the second year a summary was released with similar results. And in April of 1998, 3<sup>rd</sup> year results told the same story and made a mockery of the networks' "principles, and the so called cooperation on the topic of reducing TV violence." It summarized:

- Nearly 40% of the violent incidents on television are initiated by characters who possess qualities that make them attractive role models
- 1/3 of violent programs feature "bad" characters who are never punished
- more than half of the violent incidents feature physical aggression that would be lethal or incapacitating if it were to occur in real life
- at least 40% of the violent scenes on television include humor
- 60% of television programs contain violence and more than 60% of the violent incidents involves repeated behavioral acts of aggression
- youngsters who watch two hours cartoons each day are exposed to five hundred high risk portrayals of violence per year that teach aggressive behaviors
- TV ratings tend to attract many children to very violent inappropriate programs by alluding kids to their existence

As a result of all this undeniable research many experts and organizations with moral and social responsibility for children's welfare have issued strong statements over the years. With organizations representing all of America's doctors, all psychiatrists and millions of parents call upon an industry to change--reduce violence on public TV. And that the industry does exactly the opposite--increases the violence. This can be viewed as nothing short of complete and total contempt for the people of the United States.

## ENVIRONMENT TEACHES

Conditioning our children and teens to want and need to act violently starts with environmental saturation of visual violence. John Dewey, the great educational innovator, says, "the environment teaches."

Consider the following:

- A preschooler who watches about two hours of cartoons a day, is exposed to nearly 10,000 violent episodes each year. At least 500 of them feature a potent set of contextual features making them a high risk for teaching aggressive attitudes and behaviors
- Nearly all characters that possess qualities that make them attractive role models initiate 40% of the violent incidents on television. More than half of the violent incidents feature physical aggression that would be lethal or incapacitating if it were to occur in real life.
- By age 18, the typical American child will have seen at least 200,000 dramatized acts of violence and 40,000 screen murders

Jerome Bruner writing in *Psychology Today* in 1975 wrote, "children's play is the vehicle of improvisation and combination. The first carrier of rule systems through which a rule of cultural restraint replaces the operation of childish impulse." In 1975, the children were imitating social rules and norms in their creative play more often than they were imitating deviant visual images. So as they acted out their play scenarios socially accepted behaviors were being reinforced as youngsters learned to communicate with each other, express feelings, negotiate differences and resolve conflicts. What social rules are being reinforced as children act out TV programs that model and reward physical aggressiveness? How can youngsters possibly learn social restraint if their creative play consistently models the impulsive violent behavior they see on the screen?

First imitation, then identification

A seven year old boy described a deliberate attempt to reduce his own fear by identifying with a character in "A Nightmare on Elm Street" by saying, "it was easy. I pretended that I was Freddy Krueger, and then I wasn't scared. Now, that's what I always do, and I'm never scared." Since identifying with an aggressive hero can increase real life aggression this tactic for reducing fear is chilling indeed.

Children with a propensity for violence usually have both learning and behavior problems and are labeled "difficult" by teachers and parents. From the onset of their former schooling years, they come to identify themselves as bullies and school yard thugs. They not only use violence as a mainstay of amusement and imitate it at every opportunity, but also identify themselves as violent people. Early childhood is a formative time of ego development. We all know an adult who doesn't believe in us, no matter how much we tell them that they are pretty, smart, and capable--they see themselves as ugly, stupid, and inept. They see themselves that way largely due the messages they received about themselves as children. Recurring childhood messages impress young minds. Once believed they are very difficult to change in later life.

An estimated 4 million American children are victimized each year by physical abuse, sexual abuse, domestic violence, community violence, and other traumatic events. When television is added to this equation, more stress is added to the child's life. Research has found that abused children watch more television than other children, prefer violent programs and admire violent heroes. Children who are both abused and watchers of a great deal of television are most likely to commit violent crimes in later life.

### Upsetting Young Brains

As discussed, TV violence makes you desensitized. Take for example, Michael Carneal, a 14 year old boy, who killed three classmates in Paducah Kentucky, or Andrew Golden 11 year old killer, in Jonesborough Arkansas were brought to court to face their crimes. Their eyes looked dead, they portrayed nothing physically or emotionally that would suggest that they had just gunned down children in cold blood. We want to see some remorse. Instead we see nothing that would indicate that these young boys understood their actions.

Dr. William Belson interviewed 1,565 British boys between 13 and 17 years of age. It reported that "I forced a girl to have sexual intercourse; I bashed a boys head against a wall; I threatened to kill my father; and I burned a boy on the chest with a cigarette while my mates held him down." Research found that the boys who had watched above average amounts of television violence were currently engaged in rates of serious violence 49% higher than that of the boys who had watched below average quantities of violence.

Point being, the brain solidifies the link between pleasure and violence. It is difficult to convince it that it isn't normal to do so. Endorphins remember.

### **IT'S IMPORTANT TO FEEL SOMETHING WHEN YOU KILL**

On average, American children who have home video game systems, play with them about 90 minutes a day.

More than 60% of children report that they played video games longer then they intended to play. The interactive quality, the intensity of the violence, the psychological reactions all serve to connect the players feelings of exhilaration and accomplishment directly to the violent images. And "good" feelings keep the player wanting to play.

Jane Healey in her book Endangered Minds lists four elements that make video games addictive.

1. The player experiences feelings of mastery and control. The less sense of power the child or teen feels in his or her life, the more this element may become important as an addictive factor.
2. The level of play is exactly calibrated to the player's ability level. Rather than coping to the challenging problems in the real world, young people are easily drawn into following the more made-to-order sequence in video games.

3. The player receives immediate and continual reinforcement, which makes the games particularly addictive.
4. The player can escape life and be immersed in a constructed reality that seems to be in totally in his or her control.

Doctor Donald Shifrin wrote in American Academy of Pediatrics, "when youngsters get into video games, the object is excitement. The child then builds a tolerance for that level of excitement. Now the child mimics drug-seeking behavior. Initially there is experimentation. Behavior to seek the drug FOR INCREASING LEVELS OF EXCITEMENT and then there is habituation when more and more of the drug is actually necessary for these feelings of excitement."

There are three things necessary in order to shoot and kill effectively and efficiently. From a soldier in Vietnam to an eleven-year-old in Jonesborough, anyone who does not have all three will essentially fail in any endeavor to kill. First you need a gun. Next you need the skill to hit a target with that gun. Three you need the will to use the gun.

Operant conditioning is a very powerful procedure of stimulus response training, which gives a person the skill to act under stressful conditions. An example of operant conditioning is used in flight simulators to train pilots. An airline pilot in training sits in front of a flight simulator for endless, mind-numbing hours. He is taught to react in a certain way when a particular stimulus warning light goes on. When another light goes on, a different reaction is necessary. One day the pilot is actually flying a jumbo jet. The plane is going down, three hundred people are screaming behind him, he is scared out of his wits, but he does the right thing. Why? Because he is conditioned to respond in a particular way to this crisis situation, he acts from a conditioned response rather than making a cerebral decision. Thinking too much in these types of situations may mean that you will be dead, before you do something effective.

Michael Carneal, a 14-year-old boy who walked into a Paducah school and opened fire on a prayer group meeting that was breaking up, never moved his feet during his rampage. He never fired far to the right or left, never far up or down. He simply fired once at everything that popped up on his "screen." (It is not natural to fire once at each target.) The normal response is to fire at a target until it drops, and then move on to the next target. This is a defensive reaction that will save our lives. It's human instinctual reaction. Eliminate the threat quickly. Not to shoot once and then go on to another target before the first threat has been eliminated. But most video games teach you to fire at each target only once. Hitting as many targets as you can, as fast as you can, in order to rack up a high score. And many video games give bonus effects. For example, head shots. It's awful to note that Michael Carneal's eight shots he had eight hits. All head, and upper torso. Three dead and one paralyzed. And this is from a kid, who prior to stealing that gun, had never shot a real handgun in his life.

Many of the new games with new technology permits you to scan pictures of your fellow students and teachers from your high school yearbook and "morph" them onto the faces of the people you kill.

Many of the modern games provide joysticks or grips that are consistent and lifelike to the real weapons that are used on the streets.

## DON'T JUST STAND THERE, DO SOMETHING

The big question is so how do we protect our kids? At the same time empower them to know what's going on. Here are a few guidelines:

First, dealing effectively with media violence is a process. If your kids have seen more than you would have liked them to, if you think they may be lost causes, take action anyway. Know that the steps you take now to remedy the situation will pay huge dividends in the long run. It is important to remind ourselves that we, as parents, are in it for the long haul. It's the cumulative effects of our consistent attitudes, actions and values that will educate our children. Not a few isolated incidents.

Second, We want to stress the notion of perception "how do your kids perceive your stance on media violence? Children, as we have demonstrated, imitate what they see, and are very affected by their surroundings. As we share our perceptions with our kids they become more perceptive. It's that simple."

Our third point has to do with power. Authentic power has nothing to do with physical force, domination, coercion, or inflicting suffering. Children and teens both need to be continually reminded that those who are feeling small, afraid, weak, and helpless are often the first to resort to violence.

Finally, keep perspective on the situation.

Establish a few rules and strive for consistency. **"The blueprint"**

The average American child watches four hours of television each day through the most formative years until age 18. By decreasing the amount of time your child spends in front of the television, we will also decrease the chances of kids running into inappropriate content in the first place. We realize that by reducing the amount of viewing time is perhaps the toughest part of this equation. But you'll get results.

Here are some tips to making this goal a reality:

- Ensure that kids finish their homework before they watch television.
- Use a timer to indicate when video game or computer play must end.
- Create a "budget" of ten hours of screen time weekly and enforce it.

It is especially important to note that if a child is experiencing difficulties such as A.D.H.D. over-use of TV and video games usually exacerbate the problem--taxing parental patience and adding to the child's stress. In cases such as these, the less screen time the better.

Consider the physical placement in the home of the television and/or computer. Keep them out of bedrooms.

➤ BUILD CHILDREN'S LANGUAGE AND READING SKILLS

A well-developed language system gives the brain a well-developed mental function.

When a child is able to verbalize and think on higher levels the easier it will be to teach children about consequences of violence. A rich vocabulary enables a higher level of articulation of feelings, opinions, and ideas about media violence that a less literate child cannot.

➤ DISCUSS THE PRODUCTION TECHNIQUES USED TO MAKE VIOLENCE SEEM "COOL."

Media is intentionally constructed for specific audience reaction. Techniques and production include how background music makes the action seem thrilling. Slow motion and close-ups add to the effects of violence and suspense. Educate the kids by explaining and discussing how these techniques accomplish the desired effects from media technology. As a parent don't be afraid to discuss how portrayal or characters, settings and situations are manifested in making the dramatic effect that technology has capitalized on. Emphasize to your children the difference between fantasy and reality.

➤ EXAMINE SENSATIONAL VERSUS SENSITIVE PORTRAYALS OF SCREEN VIOLENCE

If the child is younger than eight, they should never see sensational gratuitous violence ever. As children age and mature, emphasize the necessity of verbally discussing and analyzing the information they view.

➤ DEAL DIRECTLY WITH TV NEWS PROGRAMS

Much of TV news has a great deal of violence in its coverage. Do not overlook the fact that over exposure to violence in news can lead to a child seeking it as entertainment. Most news focuses on a negative aspect of human behavior.

Preschoolers are not ready to watch TV news. Children under age eight, parents should consider watching news later in the evening while the child is asleep. After the age of eight, parents should consider discussing the news with their children and encourage them to watch news type programs that is more appropriate for adolescent age children. High school age students often times can learn a great deal from the TV news and they know how to analyze it.

➤ CHOOSE SLOWER PACED QUALITY SCREEN ENTERTAINMENT FOR YOUR CHILDREN

Select TV programs, videos, and video games that have a slower pace and require some thinking. Count the seconds between image changes. If each image changes every two or three seconds the pace is too quick. The TV industry has labeled appropriate broadcasts with the label e/i.

➤ REFUSE TO BUY OR CONDONE VIOLENT VIDEOGAMES

Video game systems are not developed appropriately for children.

Children don't need video games. The earlier they are introduced in a child's life, the more likely it is that the child will crave violent games within a short time. Compromise may be reached if youngsters are using sporting type games such as basketball, baseball, car racing, or golf as a preferred substitute to violent combative type games.

➤ LISTEN TO YOUR CHILD

Listen to what your children are saying about violence. How are they interpreting it?

Warning signs are quite evident. Kids are not great at masking their emotions. So if your child is saying things about violence that give you pause, pick up on it and act accordingly.

➤ CONFRONT PEER PRESSURE

Peer pressure is perhaps our biggest stumbling block to getting kids on the right track. And this is true with almost everything bad for them. Kids want to fit in. and they see conformity as a major step in accomplishing this feat.

The entertainment industry, in some respects, has taken initiative to ban violent video games and violent media without legislation. Even though the entertainment industry would like to convince us that violent video programming and games are really just good clean fun. We know from some of the school shootings in Littleton, Paducah, Jonesborough, and Springfield that this is not the case.

We must start by educating parents on a national level. Campaigns such as "buckle up" was a campaign to assist motorists in the prudence of automobile safety, and M.A.D.D. have been successful in curbing drunk driving. Likewise, there must be an educational campaign on the TV, in ads, in print media, everywhere to inform parents of the potential harm associated with exposing kids to media violence.