



INFORMATION FROM...

The National Clearinghouse on Family Violence

The Effects of Media Violence on Children



Does TV teach children to be violent? And if it does, what can parents do to counteract its influence?

Since television service was introduced to Canada in 1952, it has become so much a part of our existence that many people cannot imagine a life without it. Virtually every Canadian household has a TV set; many have two or three.

We love TV and we watch a lot of it, and yet our pleasure is tainted by a profound unease. What is television doing to us, anyway? Everyone knows people who can't seem to turn off the TV, but there is no agreement on how much TV is "too much." Nor is there any agreement on what is "good TV" and what is "bad" or "dangerous."

People who grew up with TV are usually the most ambivalent about it. They feel guilty about enjoying vulgar, exploitative, violent shows when they could be watching something more edifying like *Masterpiece Theatre*. They recognize the seductive power of the medium.

And yet, many parents who feel uneasy about TV also admit they use TV as a babysitter. What kind of upbringing are children getting from their electronic nannies?

How Children Understand Television

Children begin to notice and react to television very early. By the age of three, children will willingly watch a show designed for them 95% of the time and will imitate someone on television as readily as they will imitate a live person (Parke and Kavanaugh, 1977). The average time children spend watching television rises from about 2 1/2 hours per day

at the age of five to about four hours a day at age twelve. During adolescence, average viewing time drops off to 2 to 3 hours a day (Liebert and Sprafkin, 1988).

Young children do not process information in the same way as adults. Nor do they have the experience or the judgment to evaluate what they see. For example, children between the ages of 6 and 10 may believe that most of what they see on TV is true to life. Since they watch a lot of TV, this makes them particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of television.



How Violence Affects Children

The results of studies on the effects of televised violence are consistent. By watching aggression, children learn how to be aggressive in new ways and they also draw conclusions about whether being aggressive to others will bring them rewards (Huesmann and Eron, 1986). Those children who see TV characters getting what they want by hitting are more likely to strike out themselves in imitation.

Even if the TV character has a so-called good reason for acting violently (as when a police officer is shown shooting down a criminal to protect others), this does not make young children less likely to imitate the aggressive act than when there is no good reason for the violence (Liss, Reinhardt and Fredriksen, 1983).

In an important study carried out in Canada, children were found to have become significantly more aggressive two years after television was introduced to their town for the first time (Kimball and Zabrack, 1986). Children who prefer violent television shows when they are young have been found to be more aggressive later on, and this may be associated with trouble with the law in adulthood (Huesmann, 1986). Strong identification with a violent TV character and

believing that the TV situation is realistic are both associated with greater aggressiveness (Huesmann and Eron, 1986). In general, boys are more affected by violent shows than girls are (Lefkowitz, Eron, Walder and Huesmann, 1977).

Besides making children more likely to act aggressively, violence on television may have other harmful effects. First, it may lead children to accept more aggressive behaviour in others (Drabman and Thomas, 1974). Second, it may make children more fearful as they come to believe that violence is as common in the real world as it is on television (Bryant, Careth and Brown, 1981).

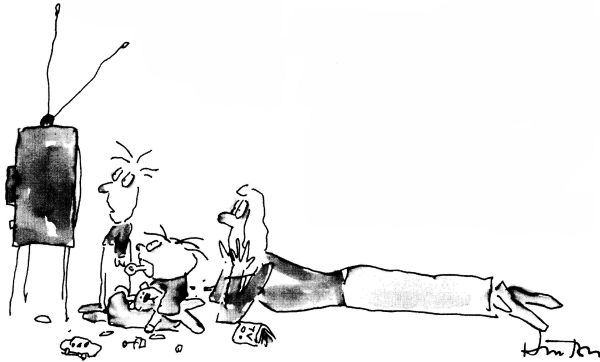
But television is not always a negative influence. There is strong evidence that children's shows that, were developed to teach academic and social skills can help children learn effectively. In fact, research suggests that the positive effects of educational children's shows probably outweigh the negative effects of exposure to TV violence (Hearold, 1986).

If violence on television helps to make children more aggressive, it is still only a small part of the overall problem. Other factors in a child's life may be far more influential than TV. For example, pre-schoolers who were given guns and other "violent" toys to play with were found to commit more aggressive

acts than preschoolers who had merely watched a television program with violent content (Potts, Huston and Wright, 1986).

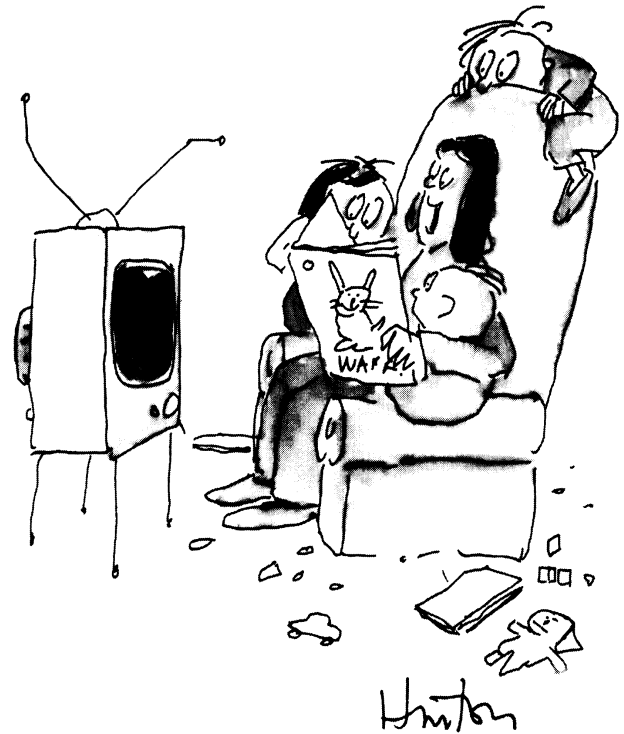
Another major factor that determines how aggressive a child will be is how his or her parents behave. If parents ignore or approve of their child's aggressive behaviour, or if they lose control too easily themselves, a TV control plan will not help. Similarly, if parents themselves exhibit violent behaviour, they serve as role models for their children.

On the other hand, parents who show their children how to solve problems nonviolently and who consistently notice and praise their children for finding peaceful solutions to conflicts will have children who are less aggressive (Singer and Singer, 1986).



The Role of Parents

When there is an adult present who comments on the action of a TV show, children remember more and are more likely to imitate what they have seen (Gruse, 1973; Watkins, Calvert, Huston-Stein and Wright, 1980). Thus, watching TV with an adult may actually intensify the effect of television on children, whether this effect is positive or negative.



Parents can serve as models of how to watch television, as gatekeepers allowing or denying access to the television, and as interpreters of the content of television. However, research has shown that most parents seldom intervene in their children's choices of TV shows, though it is true that when children and parents watch together, it is more likely to be a program the adults prefer (Peters et al., 1991). This can mean that children are exposed to violence in crime shows and news programs that the adults have chosen to watch.

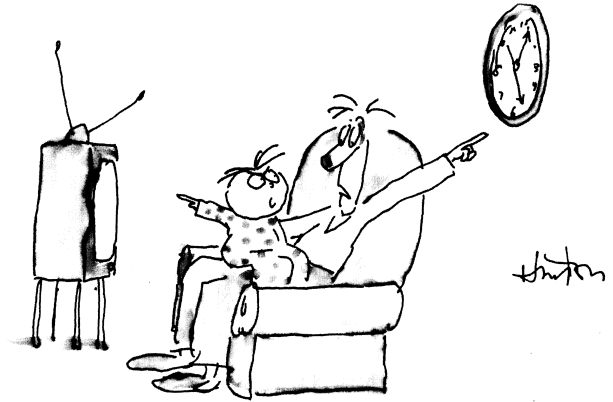
What Parents Can Do

1. Don't panic. Remember that watching one television show with some violence content is not going to irreversibly damage your child. What matters most for young children is the cumulative effect of what he or she watches and the general viewing habits that he or she develops. And of course, you can't always be there

to control what your child is watching. By all means, tell other parents and babysitters how you feel about your child watching violent programs, but recognize that you will probably not be able to keep your child completely innocent. Your child is going to see examples of aggression, even in the playground. Teaching your child what to think about violence on TV goes hand in hand with teaching him or her what to think about violence in the real world.

2. Make rules and stick to them, but allow for some flexibility. You as a parent have the right and the responsibility to make decisions for your children. In general, parents who set rules but who leave some room for compromise have happier, more competent children than parents who let their children make their own rules or parents who are rigid and dictatorial.
3. If possible, start early in influencing your children's exposure to television. It is easier to enforce rules with younger children than with older ones, and younger children are the ones who appear to be most sensitive to the negative effects of video violence. Moreover, when good TV habits are established early, they are easier to maintain.
4. If you want to reduce the amount of violent content, they are exposed to, make rules about what your children can watch rather than about how much they can watch. Even so, you may also want to consider limiting the number of hours your children watch TV so that they have time for other activities. You can make them earn their television time by finishing their homework or chores or by playing outside for a while. You are the expert on what is reasonable for your children and you know

what will fit best into your family routine.



Make sure you can live with the rules you set and that you are ready to enforce them. The important thing about any TV viewing agreement is how consistently you implement it. Keep it as simple as possible. A few rules are easier to remember and obey than an elaborate system that everyone ignores. Remember that children will usually balk at making changes in their viewing habits. You have to be prepared to stick it out to convince them you are serious.

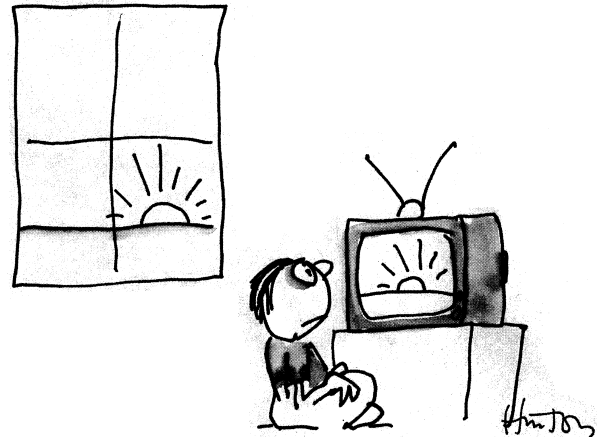
6. Make video technology your ally. You cannot watch every program with your children or preview all the shows they might want to watch. However, young children are often happy to watch their favourite videotapes over and over again; you can let them watch a tape you have already seen instead of worrying about what is on television at that specific time.

7. Make lists of programs you consider acceptable. But rather than trying to vet all possible programs to decide whether your children should be watching them, consult Jack Livesley and Frank Trotz's book *The Penguin Guide to Children's TV and Video* for useful reviews of many children's shows and suggestions for appropriate selections for different age groups.

8. Consider investing in an electronic device that can limit television watching, if your children have their own TV set. Otherwise, you will find it hard to control what they watch. There are many devices that will limit TV watching when you are not there. Addie Jurs, in *Becoming Unglued*, describes several such gadgets of different levels of sophistication and cost. They include "The Switch," which controls electricity to the TV set through a unit with a key (available for about US \$25 from P.O. Box 344, Western Springs, Illinois, U.S.A. 60558), and Super Vision, which will turn the television on and off in two specific time periods for each of four children (about US \$100 from Tectrics Labs, 5256 South Mission Road, Suite 110, Bonsall, California, U.S.A. 92003).

9. Give your children attractive alternatives to TV. Enrolling them in regularly scheduled community programs or making a routine of outdoor excursions or indoor crafts will reduce the number of arguments about television and teach children how to enjoy a broader range of activities. A Canadian study examined the changes in how families living in a small town spent their days before and after television was introduced. It found that people spent less time talking, socializing outside the home, doing household tasks, engaging in leisure activities such as reading, knitting, and

writing, and being involved in community activities and sports after television became available. They even slept less (Williams and Handford, 1986). It is clear that television's impact on children arises not only from the kinds of behaviour it promotes, but also from the other activities it replaces.



10. Adapt your approach to the age of your child. With the under-fives you can set the rules without too much discussion, but with older children you will want to listen to their feelings and explain the reasons for the rules. This also gives you a chance to talk to them about your beliefs. Teaching the right values is probably just, as important as controlling what your children watch in making sure that they do not grow up to be aggressive. Besides, children will go along with rules more often when they have been involved in the process of making them. As your children enter adolescence, you must allow them to make more of their own decisions in this area as in others.

11. Talk to your children about television, and get them to tell you how they see it. One of the most powerful ways of keeping children from being affected by TV violence is to get them to tell you how

children can be fooled or hurt by what they see on television (Huesmann, Eron, Klein, Brice and Fischer, 1993). Some books about television's effects that you can read with your child to start the discussion are listed in Suggested Reading on the next page.

12. Be prepared for the possibility that, for your children's sake, you may have to change your own TV viewing habits. Decide how you feel about violent content. Be aware of what you watch when your children are around and decide whether you can and should reconsider your choices. If you don't want to give up your favourite shows, you can always tape them and watch them after your children are in bed.

Suggested Reading

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