

Media Violence in the United States and the Affects on Children

by

Jane Doe

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Professor Randall Norris

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## Outline

Thesis: Recent surveys and studies have shown that violence in the media can have different effects on viewers, especially on children ages nine through adolescence. While some people believe that violence in the media adversely affects children, other individuals believe that violence has little or no effect on today's children. The research on violence in the media and its effects on children demonstrate that it does adversely effect most children.

- I. Television violence refers to all violence appearing on TV screens and involves the act of injuring or killing someone or the threat of injuring or killing someone.
- II. For over two decades, mass media violence has consumed the majority of adolescents' waking hours.
  - A. Carl T. Rowan has expresses his outrage towards individuals who believe violence in the media affects children.
  - B. David S. Barry has come to the conclusion that studies show a link between screen violence and violent criminal behavior in children
- III. Although studies on media violence, connected to child behavior demonstrate its advantages and disadvantages, these individuals provide their knowledgeable opinions.
  - A. James Steyer whom is out to save America's children.
    1. Steyer is the founder of advocacy group Children Now.
    2. **He has also published the book titled, The Other Parent.**
  - B. **Mike Males says that the complaints are misdirected.**
    1. **He believes that evidence from media violence studies have no effect on real-life aggression.**
    2. Mike suggests that America's violence stems from its societal problems, such as youth, poverty, child abuse, neglect, and xcessively harsh juvenile justice policies.
  - C. Media violence critic L. R. Huesman believes that depriving children of violent shows may increase their violent tendencies.
- IV. Many individuals feel that violence in the media has no direct affect on children today.
  - A. It is surprising to know that only 5 to 10 percent of children are effected by media violence
    1. Children tend to not do those things in which they will get punished, and they know that the good guys only respond to violence with violence.

2. Some people say that we were a violent culture before the invention of television.
  3. Since violence and aggression are portrayed throughout the media, most use that as an excuse.
  4. These individuals blame other problems for childhood aggression.
- B. Some individuals believe that other problems in society are to blame.
1. They think the cause of America's violence stems from societal problems.
  2. Some of today's societal problems include youth, violence, child abuse and neglect, as well as excessively harsh justice policies.
  3. **An excessive number of rape victims in America has also become a problem.**
- V. **Opponents of these views argue that violence in the media does affect children.**
- A. The other half of Americans argue that media violence causes children to act out aggressively.
1. When children see their role models or favorite actors/actresses demonstrating aggressive behavior children believe that aggressive behavior is acceptable.
  2. Some younger children do not realize that television shows are usually make-believe, so when they commit crimes they don't understand why they receive punishment
- B. Children spend more time learning about life through television than anywhere else.
1. Today 99 % of all homes have a television, making access to television easier.
  2. Most children learn about sexuality and sexual intercourse from television, and the majority of the information does not provide precautions which would allow teens to avoid pregnancy and STD's.
  3. Children also believe that smoking is a part of "adult" life, and this misperception has resulted in increased tobacco usage.
- VI. There are many different views on media violence and the effects it can have on children.
- A. An American child views over 200,000 acts of violence on television before the age of eighteen.
- B. If children are supervised in their television viewing, then their chance of engaging in aggressive behavior is lessened.
- C. Unfortunately, parental supervision is often limited.
- VII. The research demonstrates most American children of affected by what they view on

television.

- A. If there were more parental supervision for children, then criminal behavior could be lessened.
- B. Today's producers of media content need to create more delightful and inspiring products.
- C. Better programming would enhance the lives of children and provide a safer atmosphere for others.

## Media Violence in the United States and Its Effects on Children

"Television violence refers to all violence appearing on TV screens and involves the act of injuring or killing someone or the threat of injuring or killing someone. Television violence can also relate to any physical force exerted for the purpose of violating, damaging, or abusing" (Alter 1). "Today in the U.S. the average American child will witness over 200,000 acts of violence on television, including 16,000 murders before age 18" (Baby Bag Online 1). When families turn on their television set "any time of any day a carnival of murder, mayhem, and bloodshed come right into their own living room" (Wekesser 25). If children are the viewers "it is difficult for them to interpret what they view and they can't distinguish fact from fantasy" (26). With that in mind it's unbelievable that we as a society, "where kids spend 40 hours a week on average with media, don't see media literacy as an absolutely essential part of the national curriculum" (Silver 41). However, two important individuals that have studied media violence in relation to its effects on children are Carl T. Rowan and David S. Barry (Barbour 123,134). Although these studies demonstrate the pros and cons of media violence and its affects on children, other individuals have their own opinions (Silver 41 and Barbour 129). After many different studies many individuals believe that violence in the media has no direct effect on children today and blame aggression on societal problems (Dudley 37). On the other hand, many other individuals argue that violence in the media causes children to act out aggressively (19). As a result, "recent studies and surveys have shown that violence in the media can have different affects on viewers, especially on children from nine until adolescence" (Wekesser 26). While some people believe that violence adversely affects most children, others believe that violence has little or no effects on today's children (Barbour 124,130). The research on violence in the media and its affects on children demonstrate that it does adversely affect most children.

"Television violence refers to all violence appearing on TV screens and involves that act of injuring or killing someone or the threat of injuring or killing someone" (Baby Bag Online 2). Media violence also refers to any physical force exerted for the purpose of violating, damaging, or abusing. This can also refer to the "act or instance of violent action or behavior portrayed through satellite, news broadcasts, and television shows" (1). "A common understanding or definition of what constitutes television violence could be useful in helping to examine and regulate the problem" (Alter 1). However arriving at such an understanding is no simple matter (1). One approach to avoid is just simply defining the word violence because there are many

different ideas toward the meaning of violence (1).

First and foremost, the following individual has studied media violence and its affects on children in the U.S. and has determined that people are escaping from the truth of what makes children aggressive (Barbour 134). "Among progressives, columnist Carl T. Rowan has expressed his outrage over misplaced energies of those who have embraced the media crusade and the escapism from the truth" (134). Rowan states that media violence does not cause aggressive behavior in children (134). However, Rowan feels that children are becoming violent from other sources (134). In one quote by Rowan he states, "I'm appalled that liberal Democrats... are spreading the nonsensical notion that Americans will, to some meaningful degree, stop beating, raping and murdering each other if we just censor what is on the tube or big screen.... The politicians won't, or can't, deal with the real life social problems that promote violence in America.... so they try to make TV programs and movies the scapegoats! How pathetic!" (134).

Secondly, one other important individual who has also studied media violence in relation to affects on children is David S. Barry (Barbour 123). Barry argues that the "increase of violent images on television viewed by young people has contributed to a dramatic rise in U.S. crime rates" (Barbour 123). David S. Barry a journalist and screenwriter states that there is a "proven direct casual link between media violence and aggressive behavior" (123). One interesting fact that Barry shares is that "by the end of elementary school children will have witnessed 100,000 acts of media violence" (123).

Although studies on media violence, connected to child behavior demonstrate the pros and cons, these individuals provide their own knowledgeable opinions (Silver 41 and Barbour 129). One individual for instance has been a "speaker at the white House Summit on children and the media" (Nicholson 1). James Steyer, the author of The Other Parent, blames the FCC regulations for bringing television to its present level for viewers, especially children (1). Steyer reports that over "two-thirds of TV shows, including 84 percent of sitcoms, now contain sexual content, which is up from 56 percent in 1998. All the sexual content adds up to an average exposure of more than 14,000 sexual references each year, on TV alone" (2). He feels that this is a "condition, not a theory, and something needs to be done" (2).

On the other hand, according to freelance writer Mike Males media violence has no affect on real life aggression (Barbour 129). Males argues that" research into the effects of media

violence is unreliable and proves only a minimal relationship between media violence and real life aggression" (129). He believes that children learn aggression from other sources and violence on television is definitely not the source (129). Among some of the many problems that he believes cause child aggression are "societal problems, such as youth poverty, child abuse and neglect, and harsh juvenile justice policies" (129). Males also believes that "critics attack the media because it allows them to ignore society's real problems" (129). Mike goes on to say that the biggest question media-violence critics can't answer is the most fundamental and that is: "is media violence the cause, or simply one of the symptoms of this unquestionably brutal age?" (130).

Finally, one other individual believes that "depriving children of violent shows may only increase their violence" (Barbour 133). L. R. Huesman feels that if children are not allowed to view violence this will make them more curious and then cause them to act out aggressively (133). Studies by Huesman and his colleagues have followed children in a variety of different countries (Tulloch 2). They argue that the results of their research demonstrate that "TV viewing in young children is a source of later aggression" (2). They also suggest that aggressive children choose to watch more violent programs which cause them to be more violent (2). However, another group of researchers gathered data from different countries that state that "the relationship between TV violence and aggression can be found where screen violence is much lower than the United States" (2).

However, many individuals feel that violence in the media has no direct affect on children today (Wekesser 31). "It is surprising to know that only five to ten percent of children are affected by media violence" (Dudley 51). Children tend to learn not to do those things in which they expect to get punished (53). The other factor that children learn is that "good guys only respond with violence against violence" (53). "It is also said that we were a violent culture before TV, from Wounded Knee, to the lynching bee, and we'll be one after all our children have disappeared by video game into the pixels of cyberspace" (Wekesser 36). So what in the end might children learn? Well they will learn not to start violence, because they will be punished (Dudley 53). Also, if violence occurs they can rely on the good guys to do something about it, as the children should not result to violence (53).

On the other hand, these individuals who believe that media violence does not affect children feel that other problems influence aggression (Wekesser 37). These individuals believe

that "violence in children results from societal and family problems" (Wekesser 37 and Dudley 41). America's societal problems include youth violence, child abuse and neglect, and excessively harsh justice policies (Barbour 129). "It is shocking to know that four million children have been added to poverty rolls" (130). Also studies done by the "Minnesota State Prison, the Massachusetts Correctional Institute, and the Massachusetts Treatment Center for Sexually Dangerous Persons found history of neglect in 60 to 90 percent of violent inmates studied, including those on death row" (130-131). "Today 2 million kids are violently injured, sexually abused or neglected, according to Denver based American Humane Association" (131). In the issue of parents influencing aggressiveness, "Leonard Eron conducted a study that tested instigation (parental rejection or lack of nurturance), reinforcement (punishment or reward), identification (acquiring parents' behavior and values), and sociocultural norms" (Dudley 41). He tested 870 children and interviewed 75 to 80 percent of their parents (41). "From the study he found that children with less nurturing parents were more aggressive, than those who were closer to their parents" (41). Also, children with low parental identification and were punished more often were even more aggressive (41).

Although most individuals do not feel media violence affects children, the other half of America argues that media violence causes children to act out aggressively (Dudley 29). When children see their role models or favorite actors or actresses demonstrating aggressive behavior "they believe that the behavior is acceptable" (33). For instance, in the case of celebrity suicide. When Kurt Cobain, lead singer of Nirvana committed suicide many male adolescents took part in copycat suicides (34). "It seems that that suicide rates increase if a celebrity commits suicide and if there was extensive media coverage on the death" (34).

Another situation occurred when nine year old Olivia Niemi was sexually assaulted with a discarded beer bottle on a deserted beach in San Francisco. The four girls who took part in the attack said they were imitating a scene from Born Innocent, an NBC television movie they watched three days before committing the crime" (31). It is clear that younger children do not realize that television shows are usually make-believe, so when they commit crimes they don't understand why they receive punishment (Wekesser 26). Children cannot distinguish fact from fantasy (Wekesser26). "They feel that the depictions on television transmit a sense of acceptance or normativeness about violence" (Wekesser 26,47). When violence is presented without punishment viewers are more likely to learn that violence is successful (Dudley 19). "Children

see that type of incident where the perpetrator is let go without punishment in 73 percent of all violent scenes" (19).

"As a result of 99 percent of homes owning a television set, where do most children spend the majority of their time learning about life?" (19). Well it's obvious obvious that "50 percent of children spend more time in front of the television than they do in front of a teacher" (Dudley 32). With the lack of established sexuality programs in school and limited parent child communications "the media has become one of the nation's leading sexuality educators" (Media Effects 1). "By the time they graduate from high school American teenagers will have spent 15,000 hours watching TV, compared to the 12,000 hours spent in the classroom " (1). "Many government officials, watchdog groups, and parents feel that violence and sex on television affects children, especially when two out of three shows include sexual content" (Media Effects 1 and Greenspan 4).

Although this is the main source of sex education that children receive it is definitely not the best. Ten percent of all television programs contain sexual scenes, but do not make any reference to possible risks or responsibilities associated with sex, including pregnancy or STD's (Media Effects 1). "Also 76 percent of teens said that the one reason they have sex is because TV makes it seem normal for teens" (2). One other issue that children partake in is smoking. >From the TV commercials with their role models taking drags off cigarettes to programs with their favorite actor lighting up, "children feel that smoking is a part of life and that everyone is doing it" (3). Teens everywhere have picked up on this bad habit which is portrayed as sexy and cool (1). Well of course teens want to fit in and be liked by their peers, but in order to do so they have to light up a cigarette and appear to enjoy it (1). With so much pressure put on them by the media, "the use of tobacco has increased" (1).

There are many different views on media violence, ranging from individuals who believe that media violence does not affect children as opposed to other individuals who argue that violence in the media causes aggressive behavior in children (Barbour 123, 129). "How are children expected to react when they view over 200,000 acts of violence on television before age 18?" (Baby Bag Online 1). "Do we want the type of nation a generation from now, whose citizens have been brought up on *both* fictional and actual violence and for whom neither elicits much horror?" (Barbour 125). It has been said that if an "individual were to look at the killings through the eyes of a child and consider what role it's played for America's generation, they

would definitely see what a menace TV violence really is" (Wekesser 25). Also, in 1988 Aletha Houston, chairwoman of the American Psychological Associations Task Force on Television and Society, told Congress "that all independent scholars agree that there is evidence that TV can cause aggressive behavior" (19).

Another interesting fact shows that homicide arrest rate has increased in 1985 and 1991 for 15 and 16 year olds (26). Some individuals want to know if media is to blame then it "should affect all viewers, no matter what age, race, gender, region, or economic status, but this is far from the case" (Barbour 131). In the case of race, it has been reported that whites tend to order more violent channels than blacks, "yet murder arrests among black youth are 12 times higher than that of the whites" (132). Yet, it is horrifying to know that today's children "by age 18 have seen 40,000 people die right in their own living rooms" (Barbour 125).

In conclusion, "most American children are adversely affected by what they view on television" (Dudley 29). If there were more parental supervision for these children then their chances of reacting in a criminal manner could possibly be lessened (Baby Bag Online 1). "Children do not realize that most TV shows are made up", as children have very impressionable minds (Wekesser 26). So as it seems children can't distinguish fact from fantasy (Wekesser 26). For them "television is a reflection of the world, and it's not a friendly place" (26). Yet, juvenile viewership rates are high (26). As a result, today's producers of media content need to create more delightful and inspiring products in order to enhance the lives of children and provide a safer atmosphere for others.

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