

TELEVISION AND VIOLENCE OVERVIEW

Television is the most powerful storyteller in American culture, one that continually repeats the myths and ideologies, the "facts" and patterns of relationships that define and "legitimize the social order." [Brown, J. & Steele, J.R. (1986, April/May). Sexuality and the mass media: An overview. *SEICUS Report*, (p. 7).]

Each day 75 million Americans tune into this description of "social order" on prime-time television programs. On Thursdays, that number jumps to 94 million. Each week, students spend in excess of 28 hours watching television. In the average American home, the television is on seven or more hours a day. In most homes, that is more time than students and their families spend sleeping and resting for the next day. [Glassman, B. (ed.). (1996). *The macmillan visual almanac*. (p. 121, 144). New York: Macmillan.]

In a society where 74% of American families have two or more televisions and over 25% have two or more VCRs, it is not surprising that by the time most students graduate from high school, they will have watched approximately 22,000 hours of television—twice as many hours as they will have spent in school. [Glassman, B. (ed.). (1996). *The macmillan visual almanac*. (p. 163). New York: Macmillan.]

In 1950, only 8.3% Americans owned and watched television. In just five years, that number skyrocketed to 68%; by 1965, the figure had risen to 95%. Presently, 98.2% of all Americans own and actively use at least one television set. Instead of reading a book or riding a bike, American children, adolescents, and adults passively watch television. [Glassman, B. (ed.). *The macmillan visual almanac*. (p. 164). New York: Macmillan.]

Many television critics are concerned that there are few adult discretionaries available to supervise child and adolescent TV viewing. The "civilian labor force," which includes non-institutionalized civilians aged 16 and older, has grown from 119 million in 1993 to 124 million in only 2 years. According to Linda Ellerbee [Lawrences, N. (1993/1994, December/January). What's happening to our children. *Midwest Today*.]:

'We have this monster that speaks with many voices and with many images, and on the other side we have a seven year old with a remote who doesn't distinguish between cable and network, what's appropriate and what's not...'

Years ago, students returned home from school, talked with a parent about the school day, and began homework. In the United States, 5th graders spend an

average of 46 minutes a day doing homework; in Japan, 5th graders spend 57 minutes on homework, while in China, 5th graders spend 114 minutes. Chinese students appear to spend significantly more than double the amount of time American 5th graders spend on their homework. As TV viewing has risen, national test scores have declined. When a student can become emotionally and physically stimulated by television, homework seems unbearably boring. [Glasserman, B. (ed.). (1996). *The macmillan visual almanac* (p. 580). New York: Macmillan.]

Today, a strong majority of children come home to an empty house. Although after school programs are more popular, there remains a significant amount of unsupervised time. Fathers, on average, spend less than ten minutes a day of uninterrupted quality time with his children. For mothers, the average is not significantly higher. The issue is not only TV, but also the lack of parental involvement in kids' lives. Young people are more often looking to television characters and situations, in lieu of their parents, for role models and value systems.

It is estimated that by the time most children complete elementary school, they will have witnessed 8,000 murders and 100,000 other acts of violence on television (this figure excludes films and movies). In 1980, only 20% of American households subscribed to cable. In 1990, that percentage nearly tripled to 58%. [Glassman, B. (ed.). (1996). *The macmillan visual almanac*. (pp. 160, 164). New York: Macmillan.]

A far greater number of young people have at their immediate disposal a network which provides a stunning range of shows, from "Little House on the Prairie" to "Silence of the Lambs" and everything in between. Even more startling is that 45% of homes in 1993 subscribed to cable, allowing them access to 49 or more channels. An additional 26% subscribed to 37-48 channels. The advent of cable TV has increased the intake of violence by an average of 50% for families subscribing to a pay cable movie channel. [Abbott, W. (1994, June). To reduce TV violence. *Christian Social Action* (p. 5).]

Never in history has so much stimulating information been so freely offered to children, who are, as mentioned earlier, largely unsupervised. According to psychiatrists, whose clientele increasingly include extremely high numbers of children, the danger is desensitization. The constant repetition of violence and violent imagery desensitizes viewers in the same way a therapist desensitizes a phobia patient: by repeated exposure to what is frightening. Many will remember that several years ago, many people—adults and children—listened to and watched a woman be brutally beaten and raped in Central Park, New York City. One may wonder if these bystanders were desensitized by scenes previously seen on TV.

Perhaps the most disturbing research is the correlation between screen violence and violence directed toward women. In 20 years, the number of forcible rapes skyrocketed from 37,990 to 109,060. Although these numbers are already staggering, rape is one of the most underreported of all crimes. Adolescents across America watch apathetically while women are chained up, beaten, degraded, and violated on America's highly watched music television channel, MTV.

According to social learning theorists, people, particularly those who are vulnerable and impressionable, will imitate behaviors of others, especially when those models are rewarded or not punished for their behavior. This is especially true when the models are perceived as attractive and similar to the imitator and the modeled behavior is simple, prevalent, possible, and has functional value. In other words, if a particular behavior will help a young person obtain popularity, acceptance, and/or power (all very important pursuits in a young person's development), then that behavior will become a very natural means to the end.

Brian Siano attempts to answer this question of the violent effect of television in light of evidence:

'From the earliest years of TV broadcasting, parents and educators have expressed concerns that television is harmful, particularly to a vulnerable population such as children. Perhaps no single issue has received more attention than whether or not violence in TV programming is implicated in the creation of a more violent society.'

Children who spend excessive amounts of unsupervised time watching television tend to be children who demonstrate more aggressive and violent tendencies. Even movie writer Ben Stein has stated that "...it's been proven beyond any doubt that screen violence affects children.'" Screenwriter and journalist Jeff Silverman supports Stein's declaration by stating that "there's a reason that L.A.—the capital of the movie industry—is the capital of kids getting caught with guns in school." [Alexander, A. & Hanson, J. (eds.). (1995). *Taking Sides: Clashing views on controversial issues in mass media and society* (3rd ed.). (pp. 18, 26, 27). Guilford: The Dushkin Publishing Group, Inc.]

Further back, in 1982, Dr. Thomas Radecki, Psychiatrist at the Southern Illinois School of Medicine and Chairperson of the National Coalition on TV Violence (NCTV), announced that over 700 scientific studies and reports on the subject of television and film violence had been located, and he said "the research clearly proves, beyond a reasonable doubt, that TV and film violence is a major cause of real-life violence in our society.'" Radecki continued, "adults are as strongly affected as children.'" Although his statement is dated, it is still emphatically

supported by today's statistics. [National Coalition on Television Violence. (1982, March). Evaluating television violence. *Enzage/Social Action*, 10, 30.]

A recent news story reported that a ten-year old boy became angry with a girl and shot her in the head. She died. He cried, as he did not realize the gun would actually kill her.

What moves a ten-year old boy to shoot and kill another child? And where did he find the gun?

Developmentally, ten-year-old kids are still learning to distinguish between reality and fantasy. More poignantly, they have yet to understand that there are certain consequences for their actions. With little parental guidance, kids observe on television that Wil E. Coyote bounces back after being flattened by the Road Runner's antics and the kick of a Power Ranger only hurts the bad guys, who don't really die anyway. More startling is the lack of public disapproval of such random and unharmed acts of violence. In fact, most do not consider them violent: they are just cartoons. Yet, they are not "just cartoons" to youngsters who cannot make the distinction.

Furthermore, children who come to understand their world via an abundance of violent "fantasy" acts on television become young people who have little desire or ability to see the world, and its consequences, as it really exists.

Youth leaders have a daunting task—to expose the darkness with light. Since television is such a pervasive and undeniable part of our society, might it be harnessed in order to equip and empower young people to make good decisions and to do what is right? Teaching students to be critical viewers and active respondents is an important and practical aspect of youth work.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. How does violence manifest itself in television programs today?
2. To what extent do you think young people are aware of the impact television violence has on them?
3. Consider the most popular television programs this year. What is attractive to kids about these shows? How can you, as a youth worker, respond to those needs?
4. How do students learn to distinguish between fantasy and real life?
5. What are the positive effects of television, and how can they be utilized?
6. How might this article be used with young people?

IMPLICATIONS

1. Young people need an appropriate, safe, and nurturing place to develop their own sense of identity, apart from what is offered to them on TV.
2. Parents are playing a significantly smaller role in the socialization and moral teaching of their children.
3. Youth workers play a pivotal role in educating themselves, the young people they serve, and their parents about the persuasiveness of television in our society.
4. Youth leaders have a responsibility to equip and empower students in being critical about what and how they watch television.

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