

# MEDIA INFLUENCES ON CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS: VIOLENCE AND SEX

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The portrayal of violence, sex, and drugs/alcohol in the media has been known to adversely affect the behavior of children and adolescents. There is a strong association between perceptions of media messages and observed behavior, especially with children. Lately, there has been more of a focus in the public health/medical field on media influences of youth and the role of the pediatrician and/or healthcare worker in addressing this area of growing concern. There is a need to explicitly explore the influences of media violence, sex, and drugs/alcohol on youth within the context of the Social Learning Theory. Implications of these influences are discussed, and recommendations for pediatricians and/or health care workers who interact with children and adolescents are described.

Pediatricians and health care workers should incorporate media exposure probes into the developmental history of their patients and become knowledgeable about the effects of medial influences on youth. (*J Natl Med Assoc.* 2002;94:797-801.)

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## VIOLENCE

Violence is prevalent in the United States of America. While the incidence rate of violent crime has decreased in recent years, it still remains high at 5.7 per 100,000 population.<sup>1</sup> For 1994, the rate of victimization (per 1000) for violent crimes in youth aged 12 to 17 was 116 and the rate of victimization (per 1000) for violent crimes in adults was 43.<sup>2</sup> Although most of this violence is obvious and unacceptable, a great deal of it is subtle and even condoned. Indirectly, children are exposed to violence daily on television, radio, and in the newspapers. Modern technology brings on-the-scene

coverage of gun battles, sniper attacks, riots, and other physical violence directly into homes where children may be watching.

This violence may include scenes from elsewhere in the world, but also may depict national (e.g. terrorism scenes from Sept. 11, 2001) and local violent acts. Movies and television entertain with realistic and bloody dramatizations of murders, beatings and tortures. Warlike video games have become a popular part of culture, and children routinely watch cartoons that depict violent events.<sup>3</sup>

Data support the association between media violence and subsequent aggression or aggressive tendencies in children.<sup>4-5</sup> As early as 1963, Bandura demonstrated that preschoolers learn aggressive behavior by watching television<sup>6</sup>. Three groups of children were shown a film in which a male actor walked up to an adult-sized doll and commanded it to move out of the way.

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When the doll did not move, the actor hit the doll with his fists, a mallet, and then rubber balls. Group 1 saw the man rewarded. Group 2 saw the incident end without reward or punishment. Group 3 saw the actor receive a verbal reprimand. The children in groups 1 and 2 were noted to behave more aggressively following the film than those in group 3. Bandura's studies have been repeated by countless experiments with similar conclusions.<sup>7-13</sup> However, children may react differently to media violence for a variety of reasons including personality differences, gender, family functioning, and other community support.

Television continues to be one of the most powerful and important influences on the health and behavior of children throughout America. More families own a television than a telephone.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, the amount of viewing and content of the programs is likely to have an impact on the behavior of children.

Media violence on American television is uniquely accessible and pervasive. Violence on television is frequent, usually inconsequential, and often rewarded.<sup>15</sup> The American Academy of Pediatrics estimates that by 18 years of age, the average child will have witnessed nearly 100,000 acts of violence on television.<sup>16</sup> If only 10% of these acts were to be considered highly violent, the average child would be exposed to 555 highly violent acts per year or about 1.5 per day. Violence occurs in prime-time television at a rate of 8-12 acts per episode with children's cartoons being some of the most violent. Such constant exposure to portrayals of physical violence, some of which viewers do not even recognize as violent, may dull a child's aversion to this behavior.

Media violence typically does not demonstrate the art of patience, compromise, or negotiation seen with many instances of conflict resolution in adult life. Media violence rarely illustrates the negative psychological or physical ramifications experienced by the victims and their families, and if presented, only brief vignettes of acute grief often are shown.

Sege and Dietz demonstrating the viewing

practices of children and subsequent violence, described several mechanisms by which children are affected by violence.<sup>17</sup> First, media violence is portrayed as a quick fix for conflicts void of negative consequences. This depiction of violence increases the probability that violence will be among the first strategies chosen by a child. Second, violence is frequently carried out by the hero in the program who often receives a reward and therefore endorses the use of violence as a means of conflict resolution. Lastly, the frequency of viewing and the absence of consequences may desensitize children to violence. Some susceptible children may accept violence as a natural and acceptable fact of life.

Although there are additional causes of violent behavior other than television, television viewing adds to factors that may already be present. Television serves as a supplement to further ingrain the use of violence as an acceptable form of conflict resolution.

## STEREOTYPES

The troublesome violent content of television viewed by youth is compounded by the stereotypes of men and women portrayed throughout the media.<sup>18</sup> Women are commonly viewed as attractive, young, and married, and are frequently depicted in the context of home, family, and romance. Men are portrayed as older, powerful, and employed outside of the home. Professional men, as well as white men, are predominant characters in 70-90% of television programs. Female adolescents are portrayed as being obsessed with their appearance. Intellectuals are frequently viewed as social misfits. As it relates specifically to young children, cartoons often use non-white characters as villains, further solidifying the stereotype of minorities as dangerous human beings.<sup>19</sup>

## SEX

The effect of sex in the media on children's behavior is an emerging field of study. While there are numerous studies that demonstrate the link between media violence and aggres-

siveness in children, there are only five studies that demonstrate a connection between media with high sexual content and changes in teenagers' sexual behavior and attitudes.<sup>20-24</sup> In a study of 75 adolescent girls, in which half were pregnant, the pregnant girls reported watching more soap operas than their non-pregnant counterparts and were less likely to believe that their favorite soap opera stars used any form of birth control.<sup>25</sup> Data from the National Survey of Children illustrated that males who watched more television had the highest prevalence of sexual intercourse.<sup>26</sup>

The data linking sex in the media with the attitudes and behavior of youth is not as extensive as that linking media violence with behavior. Because these few studies examine statistical correlations, causality cannot be necessarily inferred. However, it seems reasonable to suppose that if children can learn aggressive behavior by watching television, some of them should be expected to learn heightened sexual behavior, as well.<sup>27</sup>

The United States has the highest teenage pregnancy rate in the Western world, despite the fact that teenagers are not having sex in greater numbers than their Western peers.<sup>28</sup> Undoubtedly, the relatively high US pregnancy rate is multifactorial. Inappropriate or inadequate sexual messages pertaining to abstinence, birth control, and sexually transmitted diseases; the lack of easy access to birth control; cultural attitudes; and the lack of education pertaining to birth control in sex education classes all may contribute to the relatively high pregnancy rate in the US.<sup>29</sup> However, the few studies that have been conducted appear to show that television may be a significant contributor to the sexual practices and attitudes of young people.

## **MEDIA EFFECTS ON OTHER**

### **Attitudes and Behaviors**

Like violence and sex in the media, there seems to be an association between drugs and alcohol as portrayed in the media and the be-

havior of young viewers. Recent studies document that children and adolescents who are exposed to greater amounts of tobacco or alcohol advertisements are more likely to use or intend to use such products.<sup>30 31 32 33</sup> Alcohol and tobacco advertisements are especially effective in reaching young adults. For example, recent publicity about tobacco companies and targeting of youth indicates that starting smoking at an earlier age greatly increases the probability that the habit will continue to an older age.<sup>34,35</sup>

## **IMPLICATIONS**

The way in which children learn, makes the portrayal of violence, sex, drugs, and alcohol within the media an important contributor to the behavior of children. Social Learning Theory suggests that children learn by watching, imitating and assimilating.<sup>36</sup> Television may teach positive or negative messages to children about conflict resolution, gender roles, courtship patterns, and sexual gratification.<sup>37</sup> The large quantity of television viewed by youth and the quality of the programming are instrumental in shaping children's attitudes pertaining to methods of conflict resolution, sexual behavior, drugs and alcohol, and stereotypes of men and women. In a recent review of the literature on media influences, Villani concluded that the primary effects of media exposure are increased violent and aggressive behavior, increased high risk behaviors, including alcohol and tobacco use, and accelerated onset of sexual activity.<sup>38</sup>

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Due to the potential immense influence of television on the behavior of youth, health care providers must ask about the media exposure of their young patients and make it an integral component of their developmental history. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) has made several recommendations in an effort to decrease the negative ramifications of television violence, sex, drugs, and alcohol usage among youth.<sup>39,40</sup> Physicians should encourage

caretakers to become familiar with the parental advisories and rating systems used throughout the entertainment industry.

Parents should be urged to closely monitor their children's consumption of all media and to limit viewing to one to two hours of television a day as recommended by the AAP. As noted by Robinson, interventions used to reduce television, videotape, and video game use have demonstrated a decrease in aggressive behavior in elementary school children, therefore supporting the potential benefits of reducing children's media use.<sup>41</sup> Television content should be used as a tool to discuss acceptable versus inappropriate forms of behavior.

In addition to the above, alternate forms of entertainment such as outdoor play, reading, arts, and crafts should be encouraged. Such activities are frequently instrumental in fostering family interaction and communication. However, due to the pervasive nature of television, its impact cannot be ignored. By comprehending and supporting education about media-viewing practices, physicians can play an important role in reducing the risks of exposure to mass media among children and adolescents. Therefore, every attempt to encourage positive programming which focuses on acceptable family values, appropriate methods of conflict resolution, and educational programming should be emphasized.

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