WHAT IS VIRTUAL VIOLENCE?

Virtual violence refers to violence that is not physically experienced, but that can carry a lasting psycho-social effect on an individual. Virtual violence in entertainment includes television, music, film, video, computer games and the Internet.

TELEVISION VIOLENCE AND CHILDREN

By watching aggression on television, children learn how to be aggressive in new ways. They also draw conclusions about whether being aggressive to others will bring them rewards. Those children who see TV characters getting what they want by hitting are more likely to imitate what they have seen on TV.

By the age of three, children will willingly watch a show designed for them 95 percent of the time and will imitate someone on television as readily as they would imitate a live person. Children may view some TV characters as having a so-called good reason for acting violently, but this does not make the child less likely to imitate the aggressive act than when there is no good reason for the violence.

Additional effects of TV violence include children's willingness to accept more aggressive behavior in others. Children may also become more fearful as they come to believe that violence is as common in the real world as it is on television.

Television is not always a negative influence. Children's shows that teach academic and social skills can help children learn effectively. Educational children's programs can outweigh the negative effects of exposure to TV violence.

MUSIC AND ROCK VIDEO INFLUENCE

Music activates emotions, sometimes raising the problem of real-life situations being dealt with in symbolic form. Songs and music have played an important role in learning as well as in the
communication of culture. As children get older, parents become less concerned about what their children see and hear. The video age has made it difficult for even the most conscientious full-time parent to act as an intermediary between children and the outside world. Parents have functioned as protectors for their children against the full weight of the adult world, and they have filtered their children's knowledge of that world. This kind of protection becomes very difficult, given the accessibility to music and rock video influence.⁶ There are troubling themes in music and videos that are cause for concern. The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP)⁷ notes the following themes can be cause for concern:

- Advocating and glamorizing the abuse of drugs and alcohol
- Pictures and explicit lyrics presenting suicide as an alternative or solution
- Graphic violence
- Preoccupation with the occult-songs about sadism and human sacrifice, and the apparent enactment of the rituals in concerts
- Sex which focuses on controlling sadism, masochism, incest, devaluing women and violence toward women

Typically, music is not a danger for a teenager whose life is happy and healthy. Teens that are persistently preoccupied with music or videos and display changes in behavior such as isolation, depression, alcohol or drug abuse are cause for concern.

THE INTERNET

This is the first generation to interact with and alter the content on the screen and the conversation on the radio. Young people are spending more time than ever on electronic media, at the expense of nonelectronic media and socialization (although new forms of socialization are evolving around TV watching and video game playing). "Screenagers" understand electronic media in ways that adults don't. They see this media as a replication of cultural reality instead of a mere communicator of events. Other problems include:⁸

- Children accessing areas that are inappropriate or overwhelming
- On-line information that promotes hate, violence and pornography
- Children being misled and bombarded with intense advertising
- Children being lured into providing personal household information to unknown sources

Communicating on-line does not prepare children for real interpersonal relationships. Participating with a child in the on-line experience gives parents an opportunity to monitor and supervise their children's activity.

SUGGESTIONS FOR PARENTS

Virtual violence is not the single factor that explains youth violence. Social, cultural, familial and cognitive factors and how these factors are interrelated can explain more about youth violence. Parents can provide guidance for children's virtual viewing entertainment by doing the following:
• Learn how virtual violence entertainment can affect children.
• Set positive examples for children with your own virtual entertainment habits.
• Be prepared to change your viewing of adult programs when children are present.
• Make use of parental control devices for cable and on-line access.
• Use video technology as an ally. When there are unacceptable TV programs on, let children watch a favorite nonviolent video instead.
• Limit the time children spend with virtual entertainment.
• Get children interested in exercise, a hobby, crafts, sports activities, etc.
• Engage in virtual entertainment with your children.
• Keep your children rooted in reality; explain that not all of what is viewed
is true to life.
• Pay very close attention to what children are watching and listening to as they approach adolescence.
• Do not use the TV as a baby sitter.
• Disapprove of violent programs, music or games in front of your children.
• To offset peer pressure among friends and classmates, contact other parents and agree to enforce similar rules about length of time and type of programs that children may watch.
• Be a positive role model for children and adolescents when choosing virtual entertainment.

While there is much support to show the long range effects of virtual violence and the connection to children's level of aggressive behaviors when they become teenagers, researchers point out that parents have tremendous power to moderate that influence. There is a great deal of violence in both adult's and children's virtual entertainment. Limiting the number of hours children are exposed to violence will reduce the amount of aggression they see.

References


