

**SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA ACADEMIC CENTER OF EXCELLENCE ON YOUTH  
VIOLENCE PREVENTION, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, RIVERSIDE**

**Fact Sheet**

**MEDIA VIOLENCE**

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**Introduction**

Children and adolescents have access to and consume a variety of different media forms, including television, the Internet, music and music videos, film and video games, many of which contain high levels of violent content. The concern (and the controversy) lies in whether violent content in media affects a young person's beliefs and behaviors, and more specifically, if frequent exposure contributes to increased aggression and even violence in young people.

Much of the research on the relationship between media exposure and aggression supports such a connection. Although critics have challenged the validity of these findings, suggesting that the studies focused only on short-term effects and were conducted in controlled laboratory settings, one study suggests that exposure to violent media in home environments has long-term implications.<sup>1</sup>

Promising strategies for reducing exposure to media violence are available and include limit setting by parents/guardians, technological innovations such as the v-chip (which blocks inappropriate shows or content from being viewed by children), and media literacy training.

**Scope of the Problem**

Most American homes (99%) have a television set, and "over half of all children have a television set in their bedrooms." After sleeping, watching television is the most frequent activity of children. The average child spends 28 hours a week watching television. By the time the average child is 18 years old, he or she will have witnessed 200,000 acts of violence, including 16,000 murders. Up to 20 acts of violence per hour occur in children's programming.<sup>2</sup>

Movies, music videos, video games, and the Internet also contain high levels of violent content correlated with youth violence. Internet websites showing violence (killing, shooting, fighting, etc.) correlate with a 50% increase in reports of seriously violent behavior. Violence on the internet is also possibly the most damaging and in need of more research.<sup>3</sup> In 2003, about 12.5% of roughly 22 million adolescents (10-14 years old) saw 40 of the most violent movies.<sup>4</sup> One recent study showed a physiological connection with desensitization to violent video games.<sup>5</sup> There is little research on the

effects of music videos and behavior, but there is limited information on rap videos and their effect on aggressive attitudes.<sup>6</sup>

### **Media as a Risk Factor**

The relationship between exposure to violent media and aggression has been researched extensively over the past 30 years. Different types of studies have confirmed a correlation.<sup>2</sup> A review of almost 600 studies shows three main results of media violence: aggression, desensitization, and fear.<sup>7</sup> Exposure to media violence also has been correlated with changes in youth attitudes about the use of violence in interpersonal relationships.<sup>8</sup> While the evidence may be compelling, translation of these findings to the “real” world has been problematic.<sup>6</sup> Findings are criticized on the grounds that most studies were conducted under controlled laboratory conditions and focused on short-term changes in behavior. It is unclear whether violent media has similar effects when viewed in home or community settings and whether such exposure has long-term consequences.<sup>8</sup>

Research involving the *Children in the Community Study* addressed these limitations and demonstrated a relationship between consistent consumption of media (3 hours a day) in the home/community and an increased likelihood of aggression toward others. Researchers followed 707 families for a 17-year period and examined the relationship between consumption of media and aggression, using youth self-report, parental report, and criminal arrest data. Forty-two percent of males who viewed television more than 3 hours per day at age 14 were reported to have been involved in aggressive acts that resulted in injury when they were 16 or 22 years old, this compared to 9% of males who viewed less than 1 hour of television per day. This relationship persisted even after controlling for other factors such as prior history of aggressive behavior, child neglect, neighborhood violence, family income, psychiatric disorders, and gender.<sup>1</sup>

Social learning theory provides an explanation for how violent media may influence childhood aggression. Social learning theory posits that a child learns how to act and forms his or her attitudes from observing important role models in his or her life. Characters portrayed in the media may become models that influence the child's attitudes, beliefs, and behavior. He or she may learn to see violence as a part of everyday life and an acceptable way to solve interpersonal problems. Because violence in the media is so frequently presented without negative consequences, youth may fail to accurately assess or even understand the real-life consequences of violent actions against others.<sup>8</sup> Children 7 years and younger do not understand the difference between reality and fantasy, according to research.<sup>9</sup> Developmentally, they are less able to discern reality from fantasy and are more likely to be emotionally and cognitively affected by the violence they observe.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, the effects of violent media appear to be race-, class-, and gender-blind. Violent media influences both males and females (although some data suggest that males may be slightly more affected), and while some studies suggest a connection between socioeconomic and community factors and vulnerability to the effects of media violence,

most research shows that all groups can experience the effects of media violence on attitudes and behaviors.<sup>8</sup>

### **Promising Strategies**

At present, little research exists on the effectiveness of different interventions for reducing the effects of violent media on children. Some common sense approaches such as limiting children's access to violent media and teaching them to be informed media consumers have gained support from professional and legislative groups. Despite the lack of research, available interventions have both intuitive and theoretical appeal.

#### Limiting Access To and Consumption of Violent Media

Researchers have found that limiting media consumption, including television viewing and video game playing, can reduce short-term aggressiveness in children.<sup>10</sup> Since the majority of children's media exposure occurs in the home, parents/caretakers play a pivotal role in limiting consumption both by monitoring their child's viewing habits and by regulating what and how much media they consume. Parents/guardians should engage their children in discussion of this issue but realize that they may not share their children's opinions or interpretations of violent programming and content.<sup>8</sup>

In 1996 Congress passed the Telecommunications Act, which was intended to assist parents and caregivers in reducing children's exposure to violent media.<sup>11</sup> The legislation calls for the inclusion of V-Chips in all new televisions and for the development of a rating system to enable parents/caretakers to assess the violence content of specific shows.<sup>11,12</sup> The ratings system, however, is voluntary and networks are allowed to rate their own shows.<sup>9</sup> To some extent, the industry is responding with devices such as Weemote and TVGuardian, which can filter out certain television channels and even offensive language, thereby providing some level of parental control over children's viewing preferences.<sup>12</sup>

#### Developing Media Literacy in Parents and Youth

Another strategy to reduce the effects of violent media is media literacy training. Parents/caregivers and children are taught to critically appraise the media they consume and develop strategies for reducing exposure to violence. They are taught to distinguish between real and fantasy violence, identify the real-life consequences of violent acts that occur in the media, critically assess the motivations of the producers in making the media product, and describe nonviolent alternatives to the violent actions contained in the programming. Despite this training, "more than half of Americans do not know their television is equipped with a V-Chip and two-thirds have never used it."<sup>9</sup>

Media literacy training resources include the Just Think Foundation, which focuses on children by providing educational programs that can be utilized during or after school and on-line<sup>13</sup>; the Center for Media Literacy, which offers media literacy training for

teachers, parents, and community, civic, and youth leaders through exercises and activities in small group settings<sup>14</sup>; and the American Academy of Pediatrics *Media Matters* program, which provides training for health care professionals in media literacy and educational materials for use in the health care setting.<sup>15</sup>

## References

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11. See <http://www.fcc.gov/telecom.html>
12. See <http://www.familysafemedia.com/v-chip.html>
13. See <http://www.justthink.org>
14. See <http://www.medialit.org>
15. See <http://www.aap.org/advocacy/mediamatters.htm>

### **Related Publications on Media Violence**

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### **Internet Resources**

American Academy of Pediatrics *Media Matters:*  
<http://www.aap.org/advocacy/mediamatters.htm>

The Center for Media Literacy: <http://www.medialit.org>

Center for the Prevention of School Violence: <http://www.ncdjdp.org/cpsv>

Children Now: <http://www.childrennow.org/>

The Just Think Foundation: <http://www.justthink.org>

New Mexico Media Literacy Project: <http://www.nmmlp.org>

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