

# HOT SHEET

## Are the Media Raising Violent Kids?

August 1998

Volume 2, Number 3

California

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School

Psychologists

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A 14-YEAR-OLD BOY WHO SHOT DOWN EIGHT of his classmates in Paducah, Ky., in December 1997, had recently watched actor Leonardo DiCaprio enact the same fantasy in the hit movie "The Basketball Diaries."

A Cameron Park, Calif., man is convinced that the death-obsessed lyrics of punk rock songs played a role in the 1997 suicide of his 13-year-old son.

When it comes to media violence, the debate is fast approaching the same point that discussions about the health impact of tobacco reached years ago — it's over. Eighty-five major studies have explored the link between television violence and children's aggressiveness. Of that number, only one funded by a major television network found no connection — in stark contrast with the other studies. Few researchers bother any longer to dispute that bloodshed on TV, in movies, popular music and video games has an effect on the kids who witness it. According to the National Institute on Media and the Family, the average American child will see more than 200,000 acts of violence on TV before he or she turns 18. And many experts believe that these violent acts, when mixed with other negative influences, have and will continue to have devastating effects on America's youth.

Recent headlines are alarming. Over the past two years, boys as young as 11 have mowed down classmates or teachers in communities far from the violence of the inner-city. Not all the news is bad; a new report from the U.S. Department of Education suggests that violence is still rare in the nation's schools, and the number of killings by kids 17 or younger has declined by nearly one third since the early 1990s.

Nonetheless, juvenile homicide is still twice as common today as it was in the mid-1980s. Most of the shooting is done by males who seem driven by feelings of powerlessness. When adults suffer a setback or humiliation, says Harvard psychiatrist James Gulligan, they can draw on past successes to salvage self-esteem. Adolescents don't have that luxury, and can feel the need to fall back on behaviors learned at home, from peers or through the media.

### IT TAKES MORE THAN TV

"Television and the movies have never, in my experience, turned a responsible youngster into a criminal," says Stanton Samenow, author of *Before It's Too Late: Why Some Kids Get into Trouble and What Parents Can Do About It*. "But a youngster who is already inclined toward antisocial behavior hears of a particular crime, and it feeds an already fertile mind." Most children resist the worst temptations, he said. The trick is to recognize the ones who do not. "If you have a child who increasingly is lying instead of putting some value on the truth, a child who is becoming more ruthless and unprincipled — you need to take some of these signs seriously."

Irene Elliott, a school psychologist for the Rescue Union School District in Northern California, agrees. "There has to be something else there," said the California Association of School Psychologists board member. "Parents and teachers should look at how violence shows up in other parts of their children's lives. Do they seem obsessed by it? Is it always in their drawings; is it in their relationships?"



Is that the only kind of books, movies and shows they like? Do they talk about nothing else? Is it a pervasive part of their lives? In play acting is the solution to a problem to just kill everybody?"

The National Institute on Media and the Family reports that the average kid spends 1,680 minutes a week in front of a TV, absorbing the ways fictional characters handle problems. Armed with video-game joysticks and TV remotes, kids can go from one violent scene to another, from "South Park" to "The Jerry Springer Show" to the video game "Mortal Kombat." Ordinary kids may be a bit desensitized to violence, while more susceptible kids can be pushed over the edge. Experts agree that a constant diet of mass entertainment can warp children's sense of the world. When violent action is all they see, says University of Illinois psychologist Leonard Eron, "the lesson they learn is that everybody does it and this is the way to behave."

Even cartoons — considered children's fare on television — contain a profound amount of violence, often committed by the "good guys." In the National Television Violence Study, released in March 1998 by the American Psychological Association, researchers at the University of California at Santa Barbara, the University of Wisconsin, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and the University of Texas at Austin studied the programming of 23 channels, seven days a week, from 6 a.m. to 11 p.m.

What they found is that TV violence hasn't diminished since a ratings system went into effect in 1997 when parental, child advocacy and other groups called on the networks to tone down the violent content of their shows. "Neither the overall prevalence (of violence) nor the way in which violence is treated on television has changed appreciably," said Barbara Wilson, Ph.D., associate professor of communications at UC Santa Barbara. "Violence is still glamorized."

This recent study went on to find that the most aggressive children watched TV the most. That result echoed much earlier studies that the American Psychological Association recently cited when taking a strongly negative view on violence in the media.

After reviewing hundreds of research findings, three major national studies conducted during the past 25 years have concluded that heavy exposure to televised violence is one of the significant causes of violence in society. The Surgeon General's Commission Report (1972), the National Institute of Mental Health 10-Year Follow-up (1982) and the report of the American Psychological Association's Task Force on Television in Society (1992) all found that violence on the screen has the following negative effects:

- It increases the viewer's fear of becoming a victim of violence, with a resultant increase in self-protective behaviors and increased mistrust of others.
- It desensitizes the viewer to violence, resulting in a calloused attitude toward violence directed at others and a decreased likelihood of taking action to help a victim of violence.
- It increases the viewer's appetite for becoming involved with violence.
- It often demonstrates how desirable commodities can be obtained through the use of aggression and violence.
- Sexual violence in X- and R-rated videotapes widely available to teenagers has also been shown to cause an increase male aggression against females.

According to the American Psychological Association, the following steps can help parents maintain some control in shaping their children's viewing habits:

- Limit television viewing time to 1-to-2 hours a day.
- Watch at least one episode of the program your child views so you can better understand the content and discuss it with them.
- Explain questionable incidents, such as random violence, that occur and discuss alternatives to violent actions as ways to solve problems. Help children understand how painful it would be in real life and the serious consequences for violent behaviors.
- Ban programs — including TV shows, movies and video games — that are too violent or offensive.
- Restrict television viewing to educational programming and shows or programs which demonstrate helping, caring and cooperation.
- Encourage children to participate in more interactive activities such as sports, hobbies or playing with friends.

## PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT CRUCIAL

Elliott emphasizes that parents must be involved in their children's lives, especially what is going on outside the classroom. "Parents need to open the lines of communication with their children," she said. "Most parents are not comfortable talking to their kids about certain subjects. But they need to be honest and to let them know that while they don't have all the answers, they'll be there to help them."