**CALIFORNIA ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS
RESOURCE PAPER**

ARE THE MEDIA RAISING VIOLENT KIDS?

A 14-year-old boy who shot down eight of his classmates in Paducah, Ky., in December 1997, he 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.[1] 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.[2]

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.[3]

IT TAKES MORE THAN TV

"Television and the movies have never, in my experience, turned a responsible youngsters 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."[4]

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?"[5]

In a great many households, work, divorce or both have removed parents for much of the day. When the grownups are absent, or even when one is at home but not mindful, children are left to a culture shaped by the media. 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."[6]

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."

VIOLENT HEROES

For example, Wilson and her colleagues found that 40 percent of violent incidents on TV are initiated by characters portrayed as attractive role models for children, such as heroes. Cartoons, especially those on cable channels, are particularly loaded with violence. Although characters are animated, young children don't distinguish well between reality and fantasy, the researchers said. [7]

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.[8]

Studies at the University of Pennsylvania have shown that children's television shows contain about 20 violent acts each hour. Furthermore, children who watch a lot of television are more likely to think that the world is a mean and dangerous place and often behave differently after they've been watching violent programs on television. In one study, about 100 preschool children were observed both before and after watching television. Some watched cartoons that had many aggressive and violent acts; others watched shows that didn't have any kind of

violence. The researchers noticed real differences between the kids who watched the violent shows and those who watched the nonviolent ones.[9] Children who watched the violent shows were more likely to strike out at playmates, argue, disobey authority and were less willing to wait for things than those children who watched the nonviolent programs.

LONG-LASTING EFFECTS

Dr. Eron and his associates at the University of Illinois found that children who watched many hours of television when they were in elementary school tended to also show a higher level of aggressive behavior when they became teenagers. By observing these youngsters until they were 30 years old, Dr. Eron found that the ones who had watched a lot of television when they were 8 years old were more likely to be arrested and prosecuted for criminal acts as adults.[10]

Experts pinpoint the entertainment media as contributing to the violence problem through its glamorization of gangs and heroes who wield superior force. "Popular culture pushes the image that the way to gain respect is by using force," said Norm Policar, a vice principal at Will C. Wood Middle School in Sacramento. "They see it in the movies, on TV, in every video game they play, that the way to deal with conflict is to fight back. What would surprise you is how many parents tell their kids 'don't take (guff) from anybody.'" [11]

"Many boys have impulse-control problems," said Gil Noam, a professor of education and medicine at Harvard. "They don't think, 'What are going to be the consequences for the rest of my life?'" Things that merely amuse a grownup can injure a child whose brain undergoes a powerful surge in development before age 14. "Parents don't understand that taking a 4-year-old to "True Lies" -- a fun movie for adults but excessively violent -- is poison to their brain," says Michael Gurian, author of *The Wonder of Boys*.[12]

It's not only young males who are affected by media violence. In the early 1970s, such shows as "The Bionic Woman," "Charlie's Angels," and "Wonder Woman," portrayed females as in control, aggressive and not dependent on males for support. While conventional wisdom may point to the positive aspects on young viewers, a recent study suggests otherwise. L. Rowell Huesmann, Ph.D., a psychologist at the Aggression Research Group at the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research, found that young girls who often watched shows featuring aggressive heroines in the 1970s have grown up to be more aggressive adults involved in more confrontations, shoving matches, chokings and knife fights than women who had watched few or none of these shows.[13] Huesmann found that 59 percent of those who watched an above-average amount of violence on television as children were involved in more than the average number of such aggressive incidents later in life.[14]

EASY GUN ACCESS

Researchers believe young boys have always nurtured bizarre revenge fantasies but lacked the means to carry them out. "Without access to guns, these kids might break a couple of windows," says Geoffrey Canada, president of the Rheelen Centers for Children and Families in Harlem. "It would be a pain, but it wouldn't be mass murder."

"The violence in the media and the easy availability of guns are what's driving the slaughter of innocents," says Barry Krisberg, president of the National Council on Crime and Delinquency in San Francisco.[15]

Unfortunately, kids do have access to guns. Americans own nearly 200 million of them, according to the National Institute of Justice. More than half of these guns are stored unlocked; 16 percent are both unlocked and loaded.[16]

A TV program ratings system has been put in place in an attempt to tell viewers whether a show contains content not appropriate for children. But defusing the violence -- or reducing the chances of a child imitating media violence -- begins in the home. "There must be a balance between what the children are watching and hearing and what is happening in the home,"

California Association of School Psychologists' Elliott said. "Children must be taught what is real and what is not real. They must know that solving a problem with violence -- how they do it in a movie -- is not the best way."[17]

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.[18]

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."

Elliott suggests taking the following steps in everyday situations to ease media influence:

- If a child tells of a friend who took the wrong actions to solve a problem, discuss other methods that could have been used to diffuse a bad situation.
- Don't be afraid to set down some rules and then hold to them. If a child should be grounded for doing something wrong, parents should do it. But at the same time, parents should not overreact by imposing too severe a punishment. "As funny as it sounds, it provides a sense of security for kids to know where the boundaries are -- and that they are consistent boundaries."
- Turn off the TV. And start turning it off when they are young. Rules regarding homework and spending time with the family are important, but it is difficult to start enforcing these rules when the child is 15.

- Set aside one program or so a week for family TV viewing. Discuss the program and how the problem posed was solved -- whether it was correct or incorrect and how to better solve the problem.
- Model positive ways of problem solving and handling anger -- children learn by watching their parents.
- Call your school psychologist if you need suggestions on how to teach your child to cope with the ever-increasing influence of the media. For information on how to reach a school psychologist, call your school district office, county office of education or the California Association of School Psychologists at 916/444-1595.

California Association of School Psychologists, 1998.

ENDNOTES

1. The National Institute on Media and the Family web site includes several studies and articles regarding media influence on children. The site can be accessed at www.mediaandthefamily.com.

2. Geoffrey Cowley, et al., "Why Children Turn Violent," *Newsweek*, April 6, 1998, Page 24.

3. Ibid., Page 24.

4. Richard Lacayo, "Toward the Root of the Evil: Schoolboy massacres may be an aberration. But the question remains: Why do kids kill?" *Time*, April 6, 1998.

5. Telephone interview with Irene Elliott, school psychologist for the Rescue Union School District, El Dorado County, California, May 26, 1998.

6. "Why Children Turn Violent," *Newsweek*.

7. Nathan Seppa, "Children's TV remains steeped in violence: Warning labels aren't keeping children away from violent programs," *APA Monitor*, American Psychological Association, June 1998.

8. American Psychological Association Public Policy Office, "Is Youth Violence Just Another Fact of Life?" Position Paper, 1996.

9. "Children and television violence," NewsView Archives, American Psychological Association, June 1998.

10. Ibid.

11. Deborah Anderluh, "Amid rising violence, schools work to defuse tensions," *The Sacramento Bee*, March 2, 1997, Page 1.

12. "Toward the Root of the Evil," *Time*.

13. "Children and Television Violence," American Psychological Association.

14. Ibid.

15. "Toward the Root of the Evil," *Time*.

16. "Why Children Turn Violent," *Newsweek*.

17. May 26, 1998 telephone interview.

18. "Children and Television Violence," American Psychological Association.