

A LINE ON LIFE

11/5/95

Media and Violence *

David A. Gershaw, Ph.D.

It seems that most of us are preoccupied with violence – especially with television, video games and sporting events. Even though we may desire to see violent media events, we are also becoming more afraid of violence in our personal lives. We fear becoming victims of random violence, drive-by shootings or muggings. Whether you are aware of it or not, both of these phenomena are connected.



Essentially, the more violence that is depicted in popular fiction – as in television programming – the more it will be seen as a social norm. With its almost constant presence, it has ceased to be viewed as fiction – as belonging to other places and other times. We start to see it as part of ordinary, everyday life.

Although the media is not the only way or main cause for our increased social violence, it does contribute to the problem. The effects are greatest with those who watch TV most frequently. With the use of the "electronic baby-sitter," this particularly relates to children.

From ages 2 to 11, children average 28 hours a week watching television. By sixth grade, the average child has seen 8,000 TV murders and 100,000 acts of violence. By high school graduation, the number has more than doubled – 40,000 murders and 200,000 acts of violence.

Frequently viewed fictional violence leads us to regard violence as normal in real life.

Frequently viewing TV violence – with both children and adults – is directly related to increased aggression. Frequently viewed violence makes aggression seem like a **social norm**. In other words, it leads viewers to see aggression as an acceptable way – sometimes the *only* way – to solve conflicts. After viewing violent programs, children play more roughly – fighting more frequently, breaking toys, or snatching toys away from others. Likewise, TV can be a positive influence too. Prosocial behavior increases after watching more positive programs, like *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*.

If there is a steady diet of televised violence, it has long-term effects. One study examined a group of children, first at age 8, then at 18 and 30 years of age. If the children watched more violent behavior on TV, they were not only more aggressive at 8 years – but they were still more aggressive at 18. By the age of 30, they were more likely to have been convicted of violent crimes against people – aggravated assault, spouse or child abuse, or murder.

This is not caused just by television. Some children are predisposed to impulsive violence, or they may live in violence-prone or stressful environments. They are more predisposed to watch violent TV programs. Both the environmental exposure and the media influence encourage violent behavior.

Even if the children don't become violent, the repeated exposure to violence in the media leads to **desensitization**. They pay less attention to – or are less distressed by – violence in real life. They empathize less with the pain and suffering of others. Over time, they become more willing to tolerate greater levels of violence in their society.

In addition, a "**mean world**" **syndrome** develops. People who see a great deal of violence on TV begin to believe that the world is dangerous. They overestimate their risk of being victimized, becoming more suspicious and apprehensive of others. They are more likely to perceive threats where none exist. They may become aggressive in "*self-defense*."

What can be done? First, the problem is deeply rooted in our culture, so there is no single cause. Therefore, there can be no single solution. However, progress can be made at several levels.

- **At home** – Parents can become more involved in viewing programs with their children and supervise their viewing decisions.
- **At school** – Children can be taught how to watch television more intelligently.
- **In business and industry** – After recognizing that supporting violent programming produces more violence, advertisers can promote more effective programming in children's television.
- **By the government** – Rather than reducing funds for educational television, the government can support educational programming for all ages. This programming can stress methods to deal with conflict other than violence.

These actions are a beginning. However, first we must come to grips with our ambivalence toward violence, which is partially indicated by our tolerance of violent programming. If we cannot even take that step, the epidemic of individual violence will continue.

* Adapted from Roy W. Menninger's "Reducing TV violence may curb antisocial behavior," *The Menninger Letter*, October, 1995, pages 4-5.