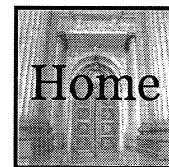


Inquiry into the Effects of Television and Multimedia on Children and Families in Victoria



Chapter 7 Aggressive/violent behaviour

The effects of television violence
Aggressive behaviour
Violent behaviour
Sexually aggressive behaviour
Links with crime and offending

(a) The effects of television violence

7.1 Three major areas of concern regarding the effects of television violence on children are identified and discussed by the research literature:

- The 'direct effect';
- 'desensitisation'; and
- fear of the world around them, or the 'mean world syndrome'.

7.2 The 'direct effect' process suggests that children and adults who watch a lot of violence on television may become more aggressive and/or develop unhealthy attitudes and values about the use of aggression to resolve conflicts.[1]. 'Desensitisation' suggests that children who watch a lot of violence on television may become less sensitive to violence in the real world around them, less sensitive to the pain and suffering of others and more willing to tolerate ever-increasing levels of violence in our society.[2]. The 'mean world syndrome', suggests that children or adults who watch a lot of violence on television may begin to *believe* that the world is as mean and dangerous in real life as it appears on television. Hence, they may begin to perceive the world as a much more threatening place.[3].

7.3 Many of the studies on television violence have concluded that there are some negative effects related to watching violent or aggressive behaviour on television. They do not necessarily indicate a direct 'cause and effect' relationship. Rather, they suggest that exposure to media depictions of violence enhance the risk that the viewer will engage in subsequent aggressive behaviour. Exposure to media violence is one of many contributing factors that produce aggressive behaviour.[4]

(b) Aggressive behaviour

7.4 Some researchers estimate that between 5-15% of aggressive behaviour is attributable to high levels of media violence.[5] Recent Australian research, based on interviews with parents and teachers, found that some children mimic violent television dramas in the playground. This research has established that children, particularly those aged two to five years, are profoundly affected by news events.[6] The question of the extent of causality in a possible relationship between multimedia violence and aggressive behaviour remains unanswered.

As a matter of definition, the Committee is interested in what constitutes a high level of television violence and, as corollary, what constitutes a high level of exposure. Because cause and effect is difficult to establish, the Committee invites comment from parents, educators and researchers as to whether those children exposed to high levels of television/multimedia violence are more likely to use aggressive means to solve a conflict situation. Tied to this are concerns about whether those children exposed to high levels of television/multimedia become more anxious about the 'mean and scary' world in which they appear to live. Additional issues concern: the extent to which prolonged exposure to portrayals of aggressive/violent behaviour desensitises young people; the relationship between exposure to television/multimedia violence and aggressive inter-family relationships; the relationship between exposure to a high level of television/multimedia violence and anti-social behaviour among peer groups; reinforcement (or extension) of existing aggressive behaviour by exposure to television/multimedia violence. By means of comparison, the Committee is interested in establishing whether those people who are exposed to high levels of television/multimedia violence are more aggressive in the manner in which they bring up their children.

(c) Violent behaviour

7.5 Early research suggested that viewing violent television was a causative link to violent behaviour.[7] More recent research suggests that television and videos cannot create aggressive or violent people but they will make aggressive people commit violent acts more frequently.[8] More recently, a correlation between violent videos and violent behaviour has been established. For example, English researchers have found that violent offenders are more readily influenced by violent videos than are other young people.[9]

7.6 While there may be disagreement among researchers as to the exact contribution of multimedia violence to actual violence, there is no disagreement that it makes a significant contribution to some people's short-term behaviour. The effects do not have to be great, however, for the damages to be significant.[10]

7.7 It is also possible that exposure to media violence may result in undesirable effects other than aggressive behaviour. A significant view is that distorted multimedia perceptions about violent behaviour, poor empathy for others, inadequate emotional arousal and low moral development all enhance the possible adoption of violent behaviour and violent film preferences.[11]

As a result, the Committee wishes to determine whether children exposed to high levels of television/multimedia are more likely to be violent in their play or 'acting out'. Furthermore, are people, particularly the young, who are exposed to regular or high levels of television/multimedia violence likely to be desensitised about this sort of material?

(b) Sexually aggressive behaviour

7.8 There is much public concern over the availability, particularly to minors, of sexually explicit media material. A study conducted by the South Australian Council for Children's Films and Television Inc. found that many young people under the age of 18 years are gaining access to explicit material in the form of 'R'- and 'X'-rated videos.[12]

7.9 One substantial experiment conducted in the early 1980s on the viewing of pornography found that those exposed to the pornography came to believe, much more than did non-viewers, that unusual sexual behaviour was widespread. Viewers exposed to the pornography also became more callous toward sexual exploitation and more tolerant of rape than the non-viewers were.[13]

The Committee understands that there is a significant risk of children being exposed to pornographic or sexually explicit material through the use of multimedia and the Internet in

particular. Consequently, the Committee welcomes suggestions that deal with the manner in which parents can deal with access issues. The Committee seeks information and evidence as to whether excessive exposure to pornographic or sexually explicit material leads to sexually aggressive behaviour or sexual crimes. There are also concerns that exposure to sexually aggressive or explicit material perpetuates stereotypes of both men and women among young people. Furthermore, there are many suggestions that it is important to distinguish between erotica, soft pornography, hard-core pornography and hard-core pornography incorporating violence. In addition, can videos containing sexually explicit scenes serve as a cathartic or therapeutic experience, particularly for those who are pre-disposed to sexual aggression?

(c) Links with crime and offending

7.10 The debate over the extent of influence the media has over offending behaviour continues. However, research finds it difficult to prove whether multimedia violence causes crime and no firm predictions can be made without conducting extensive longitudinal studies that examine future offending behaviour.[14]

7.11 Although concerns about imitative violence most often focus on pre-schoolers (with their lack of life experience and their belief in television's reality),[15] it is actually 'copycat' crimes or other acts of violence committed by adolescents that most come to public attention.[16] Those programs which adolescents are likely to copy are those that demonstrate in detail the method of committing a crime. There is the view that adolescents, with their superior abstract reasoning ability, are capable of imagining and planning a real-life re-enactment, including detecting and correcting the gaps or flaws that may have caused the television crime to fail.[17] One measure to prevent copycat crimes would be to tighten censorship rules for those deemed to be most easily swayed by violent videos.

The Committee invites submissions that address the question of linkages between high exposure to television/multimedia violence and criminal activity in children. It also wishes to better understand if exposure to television/multimedia violence in childhood leads to criminal activity as an adult. Furthermore, does the portrayal of criminal acts on multimedia represent the reality of crime in society? How does the portrayal of punishment/retribution for criminal behaviour in multimedia impact on the reality of the situation?

Endnotes

[1] J.C. Murray, *The Impact of Televised Violence*,

[2] J.C. Murray, *The Impact of Televised Violence*,

[3] J.C. Murray, *The Impact of Televised Violence*,

[4] M. Brown, 'The portrayal of violence in the media: Impacts and implications for policy', *Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice*, Australian Institute of Criminology, 55, 1996.

[5] G. Comstock, 'Television and film violence', in S.J. Apter and A.P. Goldstein, eds., *Youth Violence: Programs and Prospects*, Pergamon Press, New York, 1986; M. Levine, *Viewing Violence*, Doubleday, New York, 1996.

[6] G. Lally, 'Playing at drama', *Herald Sun*, Wednesday, 11 March 1998, p. 21.

[7] P.M. Greenfield, *Mind and Media: The Effects of Television, Video Games and Computers*, Harvard University Press, London, 1984; Australian Broadcasting Tribunal, *TV Violence in*

Australia, Report to the Minister for Transport and Communications, vol. 2, Australian Broadcasting Tribunal, Sydney, 1990; C. Luke, *TV and Your Child*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1990.

[8] K. Ahmed, 'Film violence linked to crime', *Guardian Weekly*, Sunday, 18 January 1998, p. 3.

[9] K. Browne and A. Pennell, *The Effect of Video Violence on Young Offenders*, Home Office, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 1997.

[10] M. Levine, *Viewing Violence*, Doubleday, New York, 1996.

[11] L.R. Huesmann and N.M. Malamuth, 'Media violence and anti-social behaviour: An overview', *Journal of Social Issues*, 42(3), 1986, pp. 1-6; D. Linz, S. Penrod and E. Donnerstein, 'Issues bearing on the legal regulation of violent and sexually violent media', *Journal of Social Issues*, 42(3), 1986, pp. 171-193; S. Nugent, P.R. Wilson, T. Brooks and D. Fox, *Sex, Violence and Family Entertainment: An Analysis of Popular Videos*, Australian Institute of Criminology and Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department, Canberra, 1987.

[12] South Australian Council for Children's Films and Television Inc., *Kids and the Scary World of Video Viewing Among 1498 Primary School Children in South Australia*, 1985.

[13] D. Zillmann and J. Bryant, 'Pornography, sexual callousness and the trivialisation of rape', *Journal of Communication*, 32, Autumn 1982.

[14] A. Hagell and T. Newburn, *Young Offenders and the Media: Viewing Habits and Preferences*, Policy Studies Institute, London, 1994.

[15] G. Lally, 'Playing at drama', *Herald Sun*, Wednesday, 11 March 1998, p. 21.

[16] N. Hellen and N. Rufford, 'Official: Violent videos cause crime', *The Sunday Times*, Sunday, 17 August 1997, p. 3.

[17] W. Josephson, *Television Violence: A Review of the Effects on Children of Different Ages*, Doubleday, Canada, 1995.

Continue to next page ...