

Michael Carneal, a 14-year-old from Kentucky, stole a gun and fired 8 shots at a high school prayer group. He hit 5 of the children in the head and 3 in the torso. Carneal had not previously fired a gun, except for a few practice shots immediately before the shooting incident. How did he know what to do so accurately and completely?

Violence: the Effects of Exposure on Children

Recently, a local news station in Charleston, SC, covered a story about the discovery of a decomposing body in a neighborhood wooded area. The discovery was made by several young boys scouting out a place to build a fort. As the reporters interviewed the boys, they confirmed that they weren't the least bit afraid. They didn't appear afraid or even shocked. The reporter asked the boys to describe the dead body, and they did in fairly vivid detail, noting damage to specific body parts. Only one boy actually expressed any type of emotion, saying that he felt sad for the dead woman. However, his expression was anything but sad. In fact, he appeared quite excited, probably due to the media attention, and the idea of actually being on television.

Do these boys lack some major character qualities? Compassion? Empathy? Could it be that they weren't shocked at seeing the dead woman because it wasn't the first time that they had the experience? It may have been their first experience in real life, but how many dead bodies had they seen in action movies and on television? How many people had they, themselves, killed in video games?

Another interesting anecdote involves young people who are brought into the emergency room with gunshot wounds. ER doctors tell repeated stories of how surprised kids are at how much such wounds actually hurt. When the main character, whether evil or good, gets shot on television or in a movie, he barely slows down.

According to the American Psychological Association, it's not even an issue anymore as to whether media violence affects young behavior. For the most part, they're just looking for explanations of the effect and ways to counteract such sad outcomes as school shootings and unrealistic expectations about violence in real life. In this issue, we'll look at the statistics of excessive exposure to violence, discuss the effects and note how you can help your children avoid becoming a statistic.

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What do the Statistics Reveal?

As early as 1972, the Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee reported that America's young people model violence and aggression from television and movie viewing. In the '80s, another study by the National Institute of Mental Health confirmed the Surgeon General's committee findings. In 1993, the American Psychological Association researched what were termed as the four long-term effects of viewing violence:

1. **More aggressive and anti-social behavior**
2. **A greater fear of becoming victimized by violence**
3. **Desensitization to violence and**

victims of violent acts

4. **Stronger desire for violence in entertainment and real life.**

Many organizations have backed the APA in support of the dangers of exposure to violence including the American Medical Association, the Academy of Pediatrics, and the national PTA.

With all these statistics and professional support, why are children viewing more violence than ever? Why are more violent movies showing every year and breaking sales records? Is it possible that adults have become desensitized and their lack of concern is reflected in their children?

Think about it!

- ◆ *80% of American school districts have cited an increase in violence in the last five years.*
- ◆ *Daily, 160,000 students miss school due to fear of physical harm.*

Do We Celebrate Criminal Behavior?

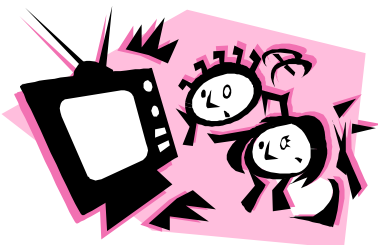
It has been stated that "as a culture we celebrate and glorify criminals and violence". Even television shows that attempt to reveal criminals and their behavior, such as America's Most Wanted and Unsolved Mysteries, can do more to promote such behavior than curb it. Sadly, these and other reality police shows may be turning tragedy into entertainment.

There is also a growing interest in mass murderers and serial killers, particularly in the youth segment of our culture. Entire websites are dedicated to real life killers. Movies and television programs created about their lives and horrendous crimes often promote interest in these unhealthy individuals. More attention is given, in our society, to the criminals than to the victims that

they violently destroy.

It is much more common for young people to state that their favorite movie characters are the antiheroes or "bad guys" because they find them more fascinating than the hero or heroine.

After the movie *Natural Born Killers* was released, several incidences of youth violence in Oklahoma, Utah, Georgia, Massachusetts and Texas were connected to the influence of the movie. Would these young people eventually have committed crimes had they not seen this movie or did the movie bring thoughts and images to them that promoted violence? Is the celebration of criminal behavior a commonality in our society or is it just that certain young people are more susceptible to being influenced by violent criminals?



Like a Military Boot Camp

The desensitization that children develop from overexposure to violence has been compared the experience of a military boot camp. “The training methods militaries use are brutality, classical conditioning, operant conditioning and role modeling” notes author, David Grossman. He insists that “...these same factors are contributing to the phenomenal increase of violence in our culture.” The idea is that through exposure to violence on television and movies, children are being trained to be violent themselves. An abbreviated version of Grossman’s military comparison includes:

- ◆ **Brutality** - in the military, brutalization is designed to break the person down in order to rebuild him. A new set of values is put into place and soldiers are taught to view violence and death as a way of life. When children are overexposed to media violence, they adopt the same set of values, viewing violence as a necessary evil of survival.
- ◆ **Classical Conditioning** - children associate violence with entertainment.
- ◆ **Operant Conditioning** - in the same way that children are trained to respond to a fire drill or soldiers are designed to respond to orders, immersion in violence promotes children to respond in a violent manner to various situations.



Is media violence training your child to become a fighting machine without the maturity of boundaries?

- ◆ **Role Models** - Any person, evil or good, put on television may be viewed by a child as a role model. So many adults in our culture idolize movie and television personalities, why shouldn’t children? Unfortunately, most children don’t distinguish between the serial killer and the life saving doctor.

Prior to the age of 7, children are not able to discern the difference between reality and fantasy. When they view violence, whether in the movies or on the news, young children assume what they are watching is real. A child may even say “okay” when you explain the difference, but there is little evidence that they actually do comprehend what you’re telling them. A first-grader, upon seeing the airplanes hit the Twin Towers, asked his mom why the Power Rangers™ couldn’t stop the bad guys. This is not an unusual response for children to make in times of crisis.

The Journal of the American Medical Association, in an article dated as early as 1992, says that “if, hypothetically, television technology had never

been developed, there would today be 10,000 fewer homicides each year in the United States, 70,000 fewer rapes, and 700,000 fewer injurious assaults.”

If you are concerned that your child has been exposed to excessive violence on television or in movies, contact your Employee Assistance Program for an immediate assessment.

Why Aren't All Children More Violent?

While all of the research appears to lead in one direction, there is one more factor to consider...personality. Two children may be exposed to the same violent material on television, in movies and through video games, yet respond in opposite manners. One child may become more aggressive while the other is actually more fearful and apprehensive. Some children may appear to not be affected at all until many years later. Since it is almost impossible to predict how your child will respond to such stimulation, it is wisest to protect him or her than risk the result.

What Should We Do?

There are many actions we can take against media violence. The most obvious begins at home, where parents can easily monitor what their children are watching or playing. Parental control devices may be put on televisions, computers and video games. Unfortunately, it is often easier to let a child view what he likes rather than fight the battle. Explaining to your child what violence can do is an excellent place to start in the battle. Standing firm is the second and most challenging step.

It may also be necessary to monitor what your child's friends are being exposed to, especially if your child spends significant time in their homes. Communicating with other parents about the serious negative effects of violence with children will help protect your child.

Not supporting movie makers and television stations that promote violence, particularly during the peak "prime time" watching hours is also an option. Letters, emails and just plain not participating during those viewing periods can make a difference.

Most importantly, modeling for your children by not watching violent material will have a significant impact. Even when children do not appear to be paying attention, they are! Try pointing out the people who are making a positive impact on society rather than the latest criminal or action star.

*Contact your
Employee
Assistance
Program at
1-800-899-
3926 if your
child is
showing any
symptoms of
violent
behavior
and/or
thoughts.*

Publishing Information

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