

Children, violence and the media

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There can be no doubt that South Africa is a very violent society. The murder rate of approximately 67 per 100 000 is one of the highest in the world, more than 8 times the world's average.^{1,2} Discussions around the dinner table at home and at work often include the latest crime statistics. There are websites providing daily updates on crime in neighbourhoods.

While it may be difficult for adults to live in an environment with very high levels of violent crime, it is really children who are most affected. South Africa is home to 48 million people, approximately 20 million of whom are under the age of 20 and frequently psychological and physical victims of violence. During the period 1 April 2004 to 31 March 2005, 1 128 children were murdered, 24 189 were victims of assault with the intent to commit grievous bodily harm, 31 607 were victims of common assault and 22 486 were raped, as reported to the South African Police Force.³

Children learn from what they see and hear, as early as the first year of life, when infants imitate waving and clapping. There recently have been media reports of children injuring themselves and others while pretending to be their favourite superhero during play. The effects of the media on violent behaviour are well reported and have both short and long-term consequences.^{4,5} In the short term, aggressive behaviour increases immediately after watching media violence, and in the long term exposure to violent media limits the individual's ability to generate alternative solutions to a conflict. In July 2000, a joint statement of the Public Health Community in the USA consisting of many groups, including paediatricians, psychiatrists and psychologists, issued a joint statement that concluded that over 1 000 studies indicated there was a causal association between media (TV, films, video games) violence and aggressive behaviour in some children.

The main points the report made were that children exposed to violence:

- Are more likely to view it as an effective means of conflict resolution and to assume that it is acceptable behaviour
- Can be emotionally desensitised towards violence in real life, which can decrease the likelihood to act on behalf of the victims
- Can perceive the world as violent, which increases fear of becoming a victim self-protective behaviour and developmental disorders, and
- May be led to real-life violence. Young children exposed to violent programming have a higher tendency for violent and aggressive behaviour later in life than children who are not so exposed.

In spite of all this knowledge, overwhelming violence continues in the media. In the USA it has been calculated that by the age of 16 the average child would have been exposed to approximately 200 000 acts of violence on TV and approximately 20 000 murders, and there is no reason to assume that the situation is any better in South Africa. The

perpetrators of the violent acts are usually portrayed in a very positive manner, while the victim is not portrayed at all and no attention is paid to the long-term effects of the injury.

In a typical hour of TV programming, children's shows featured more than twice as many violent incidents (14%) than other types of programmes (6%).⁵ Many researchers believe that children aged 7 and younger are particularly vulnerable to the effects of viewing violence, because they tend to perceive fantasy and cartoon violence as realistic. Two long-term studies indicate that TV habits of children are a significant predictor of adult aggression and criminal behaviour, regardless of children's initial aggressiveness, IQ or social status, or of parenting style.⁶ In a 20-year study boys who preferred and viewed more violent programmes at the age of 8 were more likely to be aggressive as teenagers and to have arrests and convictions for interpersonal violent crimes as adults.⁷ A 17-year longitudinal study concluded that teens who watch more than one hour of TV a day were almost four times as likely as other teens to commit aggressive acts in adulthood (22% v. 6%). Unsupervised television viewing is likely to be more common in poorer communities because of the pressure on parents to work.

Many people in our society live with the assumption that injuries and violence are an intrinsic part of the human condition. This is not so; violence can be prevented and violent cultures can be turned around. It is the duty of governments, communities and individuals to make this difference.⁸

Crime and violence will not disappear without a multidisciplinary approach. Numerous conferences and workshops have come to this conclusion. What will it take for the media to take action and stop this senseless celebration of violence?

References

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