

Children and the media:
Let's talk

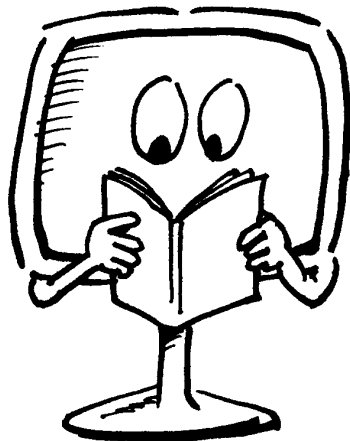


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Young Media Australia (YMA) exists to promote a quality media environment for Australian children and to raise community awareness of the needs of children and young people in relation to print, electronic and screen based media.

Young Media Australia is the trading name of the Australian Council on Children and the Media.
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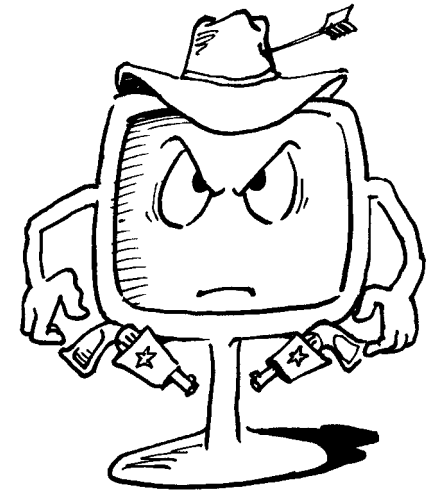
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Violence on television

Probing the impact
of violence



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Today we see television programming changing constantly, and violence becoming more prominent. There is cause for concern about the effects on this generation of young television viewers.

Overview

Australian children have very easy access to televised violence, in a variety of forms. Their early morning cartoon shows are reliably violent; the early evening news services place a heavy emphasis on vision of violent events; movies and police shows screening at 8:30 pm frequently feature violent action.

The impact of violent images on children can be examined in three ways. Firstly, using child development theory, about the way children learn and develop. Secondly, using the results of many years of specific research studies on the effects of TV violence on children. Thirdly, responding to community concerns about children's overexposure to violence.

Violence & children's development

From child development theory it's evident that different children will be affected differently at different ages and stages of their development, and by different types of content.

The under eight year olds will focus on violent events, on the success of violent acts, and particularly on the apparently approved use of violence by heroes. The under eight year old will get from cartoon programmes the message that "violence works and violence wins". This message is received despite the fact that child viewers laugh at the cartoons, or can tell that it's fantasy.

The older child is more likely to be influenced by reality based material, such as action movies and series, but will absorb the same messages from violent heroes about the success of using violence. Older children may also be made anxious by news programmes and by dramas or documentaries that they perceive to be real, and which could occur in their own neighbourhood. The older child has the ability to imagine that the events could happen to him or her.

Violent television heroes, particularly superheroes, have a strong impact on young children. To simply ban children's superhero play neglects to meet their needs. Replacement by finding, teaching and encouraging activities which meet the same needs as superhero play and that children find attractive, is the best way to avoid superhero play.

Research findings

Over 20 years of specific research, studies have attempted to refine our knowledge about the impact of TV violence on children. The results of these specific studies are disputed by some. However, the overall trend of the research evidence is clear. In essence, repeated exposure to TV violence has three areas of impact:

- children are more likely to use aggressive means to solve a conflict situation;
- children are made anxious about the "mean and scary" world in which they appear to live; and
- children become less sensitive to the use of violence in real life.

Overall, it is the heavy viewers (over three hours daily), the younger children, boys, children from violent homes, and the insecure who will be most affected by exposure to TV violence.

Community concerns

There is consensus in the community that it is better for children's development into balanced, healthy adults, if they don't continually witness the use of violence to solve conflict, that it's harmful for them to perceive their world as a threatening place in which to live, and to be left with scary images in their minds. The community is interested in reducing children's exposure (particularly of those under 8) to both reality and fantasy based violence. This requires combined action by caregivers, by regulators, and by the TV industry.

Action

Well-informed children, parents, and children's professionals are better able to make wise choices about media consumed by children, particularly TV. Australians can help reduce the impact of media violence by:

- advocating for the right of all children to be protected from exposure to harmful media;
- lobbying legislators, regulators and the industry on ways to reduce exposure of children to TV violence;
- encouraging schools to develop and adopt curricula which include media studies and critical viewing skills;
- lodging complaints about any industry practices which put children at risk of harm; and
- supporting organisations such as Young Media Australia in the quest for a quality children's media environment.

Tips for parents

Some tips on how parents can protect their child from TV violence and real-life violence include:

- Don't put a TV set in a child's room, where you won't know what he or she is watching;
- Limit your child to two hours of TV a day;
- Help him or her to choose programmes that are not violent;
- Watch TV together, and talk about what you're watching. Ask your child:
 - Is it real or pretend?
 - Is this the way we do things at home?
 - What do you think would happen if you did that?
- Tell your child what you think about violence. Tell him or her that it makes you sad and angry;
- Set an example. Don't watch violent programmes when children are in the room; and
- Refuse to give young children toys related to violent TV.

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