

*Growing Up Fast and Furious:
Reviewing the impacts of violent and sexualised media on children*

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Concluding Comments

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Today's event has brought a wealth of evidence and ideas from some of the leading national and international researchers in the field and I thank the organisers for the opportunity to participate in this landmark event. In these brief concluding comments I will attempt, albeit briefly, to capture some of the key themes that emerged across the day.

We were reminded at the outset that today's topic addresses "not a pleasant message". Violence, abuse, neglect and sexual assault are key concerns. In this country, in 2007–08 there were 317,526 notifications of children and young people to child protection authorities. Of these, 55,120 were substantiated and most disturbingly, 60% of those substantiated instances of abuse, neglect or sexual assault applied to the same children, who were the subject of multiple events in the one 12-month period. Violence and emotional abuse profoundly affect the lives of too many children.

The topics discussed today go to the place of children in society. The rhetoric of a child friendly society stands in stark contrast to the reality that robs too many of their childhood. It is a contradiction that the concern about the impacts of violence on children coexists with the ever-increasing availability of violent material. Today's presentations squarely focus attention on the cognitive, emotional and social residues of exposure to violent or sexualised material. They also explore the predisposing factors in individuals as well as the processes that flow from exposure to harmful experiences and have enduring impacts on the development of children and young people.

The Canadian, Richard Tremblay, has used data from a longitudinal study in Montreal to highlight the fact that humans are at their most violent as toddlers. We are socialised out of violence, rather than socialised into violence. The exploitation, desensitisation, objectification, sexualisation and adultification that flow from exposure to violent and sexualised material could be seen as processes that override socialisation out of violence, and reinforce reversion to the behaviours of an earlier stage of development.

¹ The views expressed are those of the author and may not reflect the views of the Australian Institute of Family Studies or the Australian Government

There is also what might be called the violence paradox, whereby victims are more likely to become victimisers. Cultural stories, mores and values set the context for this process. In the sweep of history one thing is clear, however, cultures can correct. We are not bound by inexorable destiny: rather, we can reverse processes of decline and dysfunction.

That said, the frequency of contact, ease of access and pervasiveness of new media are unparalleled in history. We live in an age where abundance of choice and ready availability of products and information have created their own problems, including what has been called “affluenza”.

We also have an unparalleled capacity to repeat experiences. If one compares this with previous centuries the contrast is stark. We now can have much of the world’s literature, music and art available to us whenever and wherever we choose. Contrast this with those living in 17th and 18th Century Europe where most would never hear the works of Handel and Bach, and if they were the very fortunate few who did, might never hear them more than once, and where books remained the luxury of the literate few.

As discussed today, the widespread accessibility and repeatability of exposure to media based violent and/or sexually explicit material could be seen as the democratisation of dysfunction, in a culture that engenders confusion and desensitisation and where the previously private has now become the pervasively public.

Truly child-friendly societies should seek to reduce risk, respect vulnerability and ameliorate the scope for harm. They would also recognise the individual differences in susceptibility to desensitisation, objectification, adultification and sexualisation. There remains much to learn about the mechanisms that differentially drive risk and vulnerability.

So what can we do? The juvenile offending literature points to the prime importance of adult and parental monitoring, as does the literature on child protection. We also have much to learn about how we can educate the community to exercise greater discernment in the choice of material that children and young people access. Passive acceptance and learned helplessness need to be countered by vigilance and agency. There is also a need to promote substitution of positive, pro-social alternatives. Finally, more research is needed on the psychological mechanisms that underpin neurological priming, desensitisation and susceptibility to the triggering mechanisms for violent behaviour and automatised response. As such, we need more research focused on vulnerability and resilience and how these change with time and experience. Experimental and longitudinal methods will further our understanding of the causal pathways and evaluation of interventions will extend the evidence base to inform public policy and professional practice.

In a broad sense, while there is still much to learn, sufficient evidence of the toxic effects of a diet rich in violence and pornography is available, as the presentations today have convincingly demonstrated. The jury is not out. What is clear, however, is that the

perennial problem in public policy of the gap between knowledge and action applies to this area, as it does in many others.

Taking the lead from initiatives in road safety, anti-smoking and HIV Aids campaigns, the way forward is likely to require:

- **Advocacy;**
- **Regulation;**
- **Information;**
- **Sanctions; and**
- **Education.**

Sustained behaviour change probably requires all of the above. While continued commitment and persistence will be needed, in this, as in other areas, change will happen.

Thank you.