

**WARNING: TV SEX AND VIOLENCE MAY BE
HAZARDOUS TO YOUR CHILD'S HEALTH**

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President John F. Kennedy once said, "We have the power to make this the best generation in the history of mankind, or the last." Others have noted that our civilization is just one generation or 25 years away from savagery. And whether this occurs or not depends on how we socialize our children and the general quality of our family life.

At the present time this doesn't look too promising. We are currently witnessing a virtual explosion of interpersonal violence in our society. The U.S. is now the most violent of all the major advanced literate nations in the world today. Our rate of homicide is four times greater than that of Scotland or Australia and ten times greater than the Scandinavian countries. There are more murders on the island of Manhattan per year than in the entire United Kingdom.

If we search for the causes of violence in our society, we know that any single act has multiple determinants, and most studies suggest that these determinants are usually found in the family experience and environment as well as peer culture of the perpetrator.

One hypothesis which keeps re-emerging focuses on the nature of our television programming (including movies and videos).

If one analyzes the content of TV in England we find their rate of televised violence has been only 1/2 that of ours. The Scandinavian countries have a much lower rate even than that. Thus one of the major social-cultural differences between the U.S. with its high rate of homicides and violence and those other countries with low violence rates is the sheer amount of violence screened on public television. Television is probably the second most powerful socializing agent in our society exceeded only by the family. And where the family is immobilized, dysfunctional, in the process of breaking up (which over half do in the U.S.) TV may be the most potent force as a teacher of values and educator of mayhem.

Psychologist researchers representing the American Psychological Association gave testimony on this issue to members of the U.S. Congress several months ago. One of them, Dr. Leonard Eron, did a meta-analysis of 200 studies on TV violence and found that aggressive behavior of all kinds, including criminal violence, is highly related to TV-violence exposure. He and his associate found that TV and film violence can affect youngsters of all ages, of both genders, at all socioeconomic levels and all levels of intelligence. They also found that the younger children are, the more susceptible they are to "being taught to behave more violently by films and television." In addition, the team found that aggressive habits learned in early childhood "are very persistent and resistant to change."

Dr. Eron stated, "Children who were not predisposed toward aggression but watched many hours of violent television grew up to be more violent than those with aggressive tendencies who didn't watch a lot of TV." All of this suggests that TV is a school for violence. It also desensitizes the child viewer so that conscience is diminished and compassion for the victim erased.

In the last 40 years there have been many thousands of studies on this subject (including my own at the University of Utah demonstrating the desensitization of children to televised violence). The overwhelming majority of these repetitiously and monotonously keep leading to the same conclusion: a diet of TV/film/video violence is especially toxic to child audiences.

The evidence keeps piling up year after year. These evidences and research are extremely varied: field studies, tightly controlled laboratory studies, clinical case history data, longitudinal research spanning several generations, etc. And while critics (mostly researchers and others doing work for the TV industry) may carp about the short-comings of a particular study of two there is no way they can refute the general thrust and outcome of overall findings in the long term.

One critic is Michael Moriarty, an actor who plays an assistant D.A. on TV's "Law and Order," who has denounced Attorney General Janet Reno's taking the TV industry to task for its excessive depiction and exploitation of violence. He claims that the TV industry is being condemned without benefit of trial. "It's the politics of fear. And to claim that passing legislation to reduce the amount of this violence is for the sake of the children suggests that we can't protect our own kids, that we're unfit parents. That's an outrage to me."

The truth is--in all of this--that TV has been on trial for about 30 years. The evidence was in long ago. National commission after national commission has repeatedly come to the same verdict. Children are hurt by watching certain kinds of TV. But nothing happens. Nothing changes. And in the meantime Rome is burning.

It's interesting to note that some tobacco institute scientists are still denying absolute cause-effect proof of harm from smoking cigarettes despite thousands of deaths yearly suggesting the contrary and hundreds of studies linking smoking behavior to a long list of pathologies.

One of the few studies that gave the TV industry an apparent "clean bill of health" was funded by NBC and conducted by Dr. Milavsky. He and his colleagues studied 7- to 12-year-old boys plus teen-age males over a period of years to see if TV violence viewing caused any negative effects. Out of hundreds of variables studied they found only a few showing significant negative effects.

They dismissed these as being of no importance concluding they must have been due to chance. However, when their data was re-analyzed by Dr. Thomas Cook, an expert in evaluation research, he came to an opposite conclusion. He found that there

indeed was significant evidence showing cumulative negative effects from TV violence viewing. So it turned out that even with one of the most important and extensive studies funded by the TV industry—when carefully analyzed and evaluated—he reached the same conclusions as most of the other research.

Long time psychologist researcher in this area, Dr. Daniel Linz, a professor at UC Santa Barbara, states, "The consensus among social scientists is that very definitely there's a causal connection between exposure to violence in the media and violent behavior." When Syracuse University researcher George Constock reviewed the 190 most important studies in the area of TV violence effects, he found "a very solid relationship between viewing antisocial portrayals or violent episodes and behaving antisocially. It hold up regardless of sex."

In 1985, the American Psychological Association (representing most psychologists in America) reaffirmed their conclusion: "Television violence has a causal effect on aggressive behavior for children and adolescents." In 1982, the National Institute of Mental Health "Report on Television and Behavior" summarized the findings of 2500 studies and concluded that there is overwhelming scientific evidence that a "causal relationship exists between viewing televised violence and later aggressive behavior." This merely again endorsed and reiterated the conclusions of the earlier "President's Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence" (1969) and the "Surgeon General's Report on Media Violence" (1972).

One of the most significant of the effects studies was conducted by Doctors Leonard Eron and Rowell Huesmann who followed 8-year-olds for 22 years and found that extensive watching of violent TV programs at age eight was a good predictor of criminal behavior at age 30--regardless of socioeconomic status, IQ, age, or gender. All children can be harmed. In follow up research on fifth grade children in the U.S., Finland, Poland, Australia, and Israel they found the same linkage between violence viewing and being more violent-aggressive in real life.

Another way to look at it, fairly, is to say that the data now available on the cause-effect link between violent TV watching and violent behavior is so strong and has been verified and replicated so many times that parents should take active measures to protect their children. This might consist of using lock boxes on home TV sets to better monitor and set limits on what their children look at on TV/films/video. Say "No" to their seeing certain programs. Take the TV out of the children's bedrooms. Eliminate cable TV (other than basic). Buy a device that will black out certain channels. Set a maximum limit of 60 minutes daily viewing time. This is what some parents have done. And you would do this because you are concerned about their mental and physical health as well as personal safety.

In my profession as a clinical psychologist I have the opportunity of interviewing large numbers of troubled children and their concerned parents. What I too often find is that in the one-parent home or where both parents work long hours they often simply do

not have the time nor energy to sufficiently monitor what their children look at on TV or even the kind of videos they are renting. In fact TV and videos are often used as cheap baby sitters. And many exhausted stressed-out parents have little inclination to get into a hassle with their children--especially teen agers--about what is appropriate or not appropriate for them to look at (especially if its at someone else's house). So in too many homes "no one is minding the store."

We have a new generation of latchkey children who spend many hours at home or in someone else's home with no adults present. In that vacuum I find many children becoming "addicted" (getting a high, a buzz, or kicks) from watching people and objects being blown away, tortured, and slaughtered. Often this in an attempt to fill the void or numb the pain of deficient relationships with caring nurturing parent figures who are missing during most of their waking hours.

While the reader of this article may be a responsible parent who establishes boundaries and limits on their child's viewing behavior or habits--another parent down the street may be quite indifferent about the issue. And your child, totally innocent, could be maimed or injured or worse by their teenager and still wind up, indirectly, a victim or casualty of TV violence. So just turning the set off to certain kinds of programs in your home doesn't entirely protect your family from harm.

The television industry has a major responsibility not to pollute the air waves. Even though they are well aware of what the research says, they are dismally failing to exercise restraint. The same applies to the sale of some of the super violent interactive video games. Many of these allow the child to repeatedly rehearse committing acts of extreme violence.

It is indeed ironic that there are many in our society who go to extreme lengths to protect the spotted owl in remote forests. But are indifferent or little interested in protecting the minds and physical safety of our own children--who some, maybe naively, would regard as our most important national resource.

Some time ago I received a letter from a teenage girl. She wrote: "Dear Dr. Cline: Today my mother and I were listening to a recording of a talk you gave (at a local university) concerning television violence. Almost a month ago my little 10-year-old brother was playing around in his bedroom. His room is in the basement and it was not finished off as far as the ceiling and walls are concerned. He was playing around and hung himself. My 12-year-old brother and a friend found him. My little brother had no reason to kill himself. He could not even comprehend death. We searched our minds for reasons why Jimmy would be playing around with hanging himself. Then my father remembered Jimmy had told him of a TV show on Nightmare Theater where a man had hung himself, cut the rope, and walked off without a mark. We believe that Jimmy was trying this. He has wrapped a belt around his neck through the buckle and then tied it to a pipe. He was standing on some old junk furniture and fell off.

Everything was there, the same as on the TV show--only Jimmy didn't make it. It was fast and quick for Jimmy and he was a good boy. We're sure he's in the right place now, but it still doesn't change the fact that if it hadn't been put into his mind, he wouldn't have done it. I thank you for your talk. It brought a comfort to my mom--for she is still taking it hard, for she didn't know if it was purposeful or an accident. Your talk has helped her to know why Jimmy would do it. Sincerely-----.

Children are great imitators. And when we allow them to, in fact, be exposed to explicit detailed depictions of violent behavior they are attending a school for violence. This increases the chances that when they are frustrated or angry or even curious in the future that they might just try out some of the anti-social acts they have been tutored in.

In saying all of this I don't mean to suggest that we don't want our children to defend themselves if aggressed against. But in most cases there are peaceful solutions to problems. And children can be taught to negotiate, reason fairly, and even retreat when necessary rather than engage in behaviors that might escalate a conflict to where serious injuries or even death could occur.

With regards to depictions of sexuality in current TV, videos, and movies there would appear to be a major erosion of values and standards. Some might view this with approval but others would have cause for concern as they see the escalating teen pregnancy rates, problems with AIDS and other diseases transmitted primarily by promiscuous life styles.

In research published by Joyce Sprafkin and Theresa Silverman analyzing prime time television it was found that sex outside of marriage was shown in a ratio of 7:1 compared to intercourse within marriage. I found the same result in research I conducted several years ago doing content analysis of every movie being shown in the Salt Lake Valley. The strong implication was that the only sex worthwhile was with someone else's wife or that was in some way illicit or illegal or with someone under-age.

Since the content of most cable TV special channels are recent vintage unedited movies and these are the same films available at the corner video stores available without restriction to children of any age, we should examine what our children are looking at. There are large numbers of slasher films, porno-violence movies, endless rapes, and many other films presenting promiscuity in an attractive or humorous light.

Frederick Wertham, a New York psychiatrist specializing in treating disturbed children, once said, "Whatever you put into a child's mind you get back 10 years later--with interest." However, in my experience, you usually don't have to wait 10 years. Sometimes the payoff may be the next day or week. I have seen many children--even college students--have nightmares for weeks following exposure to a particularly offensive movie.

If we look into the future I see little hope that the TV industry will be more responsible in their programming. It certainly hasn't happened in the past despite all the knowledge that modern behavioral science has provided. What this means is that the buck will stop the laps of concerned parents. They will have to say "no" even to their teenagers. If they don't, they could reap a grim harvest later. And this doesn't mean we turn off all adventure films, detective who-done-its, or the like. But there are some films/shows/videos which are toxic and unhealthy. So we discriminate wisely and without guilt. We choose to protect ourselves and children from harm.