Television Violence Essay, Research Paper

Television Violence

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

As indicated, there are both advocates of the view that the watching of violence on television by children causes them to commit violent behavior, and there are people who disagree with this view and feel that other factors besides violent television viewing can be attributed for the cause of violent behavior in children. This paper will start by first discussing the views of those who disagree with the statement that the viewing of violence on television by children is the cause of violent behavior by children.

One reason given for the cause of violence that is commited by children is given by The National Institute of Mental Health ( N.I.M.H. ). According to the N.I.M.H. when kids beat up their siblings or abuse animals they may have a chemical problem. Children prone to violence may have low levels of the important neurotransmitter serotonin that helps regulate emotions. Researchers have found deficiencies of the neurotransmitter serotonin in adults who commit violent crimes and try to take their own lives. If one ultimately discover that kids with low serotonin go on to repeat the adult pattern the results are chilling and we must consider what must be done to help them now according to Dr. Markus Kruesi, a N.I.M.H. psychiatrist ( Talen,1992 ).

Another cause given for violence in children is explained in a study conducted by the Erikson Institute in Chicago. In this study the Erikson Institute discovered how children from dangerous urban environments experience loss and threat, and how therapeutic play can be a positive vehicle for effective intervention. They list two hypotheses relevant to domestic concerns, most particularly in the “War Zones” of urban public housing projects. They were: (1) Children will continue to cope with difficult environments as long as their parents and other caretakers are not pushed beyond their capacity to adapt to stress and make sense of their children’s experience, and (2) As an adverse unintended consequence of adapting to dangerous environments, children will develop patterns of behavior and emotional expression that hinder successful functioning in the normal load of school, work, and the community ( Brown University Child Behavior and Development Letter,1 ). The researchers in this study were attempting to identify the relationship between children and violent behavior. They identify three critical elements, which included parent-child attachment, parental self-esteem, and the stability of routine care taking arrangements.

Thus far, the literature does identify factors other than television, which may be a cause of violent behavior among children. Nevertheless, the evidence given is not definitive in terms of its identification of a cause or a correlation between viewing violent television and violent behavior among children. Now this review of the literature will look at the views of those who support the theory that the viewing of violent television by children causes violent behavior among these children.

Much research has been done in an attempt to show why children are so influenced by what they see on television. The people who conduct this research feel that the research proves time and time again that violence and violent television viewing do go hand in hand. Author Michael Howe stated “The truth about television violence and children has been shown. The studies that have been conducted and all their results seem to point to one conclusion : Television violence causes children to be violent and the effects can be life-long ” ( Howe, 1977 ).

Howe went on to say “The information cannot be ignored, violent television viewing does affect children”. The effects have been seen in a number of cases. In New York, a sixteen-year-old boy broke into a cellar. When the police caught him and asked him why he was wearing gloves he replied that he had learned to do so to not leave fingerprints and that he discovered this on television. In Alabama, a nine-year-old boy received a bad report card from his teacher. He suggested sending the teacher poison candy as revenge as he had seen on television the night before. In California, a seven-year-old boy sprinkled ground-up glass into the lamb stew the family was to eat for dinner. When asked why he did it he replied that he wanted to see if the results would be the same in real life as they were on television ( Howe,1977 ). These are just a few examples of how television can affect the child. It must be pointed out that all of these situations were directly caused by children watching violent television.

Researcher/Author, Douglass Carter, writes, “Not only does television violence affect the child’s youth but it can also affect his or her adulthood”. Some Psychologists and psychiatrists feel that continued exposure to such violence might unnaturally speed up the impact of the adult world on the child. This can force the child into kind of a premature maturity. As the child matures into an adult, he can become bewildered, have a greater distrust towards others, a superficial approach to adult problems, and even an unwillingness to become an adult ( Carter,1977 ).

Author John Langone, writes, “For some, television at its worst, is an assault on a child’s mind, an insidious influence that upsets moral balance and makes a child prone to aggressive behavior as it warps his or her perception of the real world”. Some see television as an unhealthy intrusion into a child’s learning process, substituting easy pictures for the disciplines of reading and concetrating and thus, transforming the young viewer into a hypnotized nonthinker ( Langone,1984 ). As one can see, television could disrupt a child’s learning and thinking ability which could cause life long problems, because if a child cannot do well in school, his or her whole future is at stake.

Author, Palmer Door explains why children like the violence that they see on television. Door, writes, “Since television violence is much more vicious than that which children experience, real-life aggression appears bland by comparison” (Door,127-128) . The violence on television is able to be much more exciting than the violence that is normally seen in real life. Instead of seeing a police officer handing a ticket to a speeding violator, he can beat the offender bloody on television. However, children do not always realize that the ways in which these characters portray themselves is not the way things are handled in real life. They come to expect these fictional norms, and when they do not see them, the world becomes boring and in need of violence. The children then might create the violence that their minds crave. The television violence can cause actual violence in a number of ways. As already explained, after viewing television violence the world becomes boring in comparison to what is shown on television. The child needs to create violence to keep him or her self satisfied ( Door,1980). Also, author John Langone writes “The children find the violent characters on television fun to imitate. They do so because the ideas that are shown to them on television are more attractive to the viewer than those the viewer can think up himself” ( Langone,98 ).

Another reason given as to why television violence causes violence in children is apparent in the big cities. Rowell Huesmann, writes, “Aggressive behavior was more acceptable in the city, where a child’s popularity rating with classmates was not hampered by his or her aggression. In the bigger cities crime and violence is expected, and, therefore, is left unchecked and out of line” (Husemann,1985 ).

As one can see there are many valid arguments by advocates on each side of the issue as to whether or not the viewing of television that contains violent content by children is responsible for violent behavior in those children. Therefore, in order to attempt to come to a more informed conclusion concerning this issue , the final part of this review of the literature will discuss the outcomes of several studies and research that research professionals have conducted in the past and see what conclusions they came to.

Much research into the topic of children and television violence has been conducted . Door, says that “All of the results seem to point in the same direction. There are undeniable correlations between violent television and aggression “. He says that this result was obtained in a survey of London school children in 1975. It was found in this study that there was a significant relationship between violence viewing and aggression ( Door,160 ).

In other research done in Israel, 74 children from farms were tested as well as 112 schoolchildren from the city of Tel Aviv. The researchers found that schoolchildren from the city of Tel Aviv , watched far more television than the children who lived in the farming areas. However, both groups of children were just as likely to choose a violent television program to watch when watching television. The city children had a greater tendency to regard violent television programs as accurate reflections of real life than the farm children did . Likewise, the city children identified more with characters from violent programs than did those living on the farm ( Huesmann,1985 ).

The government also did research in this area. They conducted an experiment where children were left alone in a room with a monitor playing videotape of other children at play. Soon things got out of control. Children who had just seen commercial violence accepted higher levels of aggression than the other children who were not exposed to commercial violence. The results were published in a report. The report found some strong indications of a casual relationship between violent television viewing and violent behavior in children ( Langone,1984 ).

In other research among U.S. children it was discovered that aggression, academic problems, unpopularity with peers and violence feed off each other. These relationships among social problems promotes violent behavior in the children ( Husemann,1985 ). The child watches violence which causes aggression. The combination of aggression and continued television viewing lead to poor academic standings as well as unpopularity. These can cause more aggression and a vicious cycle begins to spin ( Huesmann,1985 ).

In yet another piece of research children who watched a lot of violent television were compared to children who do not watch a lot of violent television. The results were that the children who watched more violent television were more likely to agree that it was okay to hit someone if you are mad at them. The other group learned that problems could be solved passively, through discussion and authority ( Cheyney,1983 ).

Another study, concerning the effects of television violence worth looking at is the one that Rowell Huesmann conducted in the mid seventies. For most of television’s early years, it was difficult to find role models that would inspire young girls in the viewing audience. In the mid-1970s, a new era of programs such as “Charlie’s Angels”, “Wonder Woman”, and “The Bionic Woman” entered the scene. Now, there were females on television who were in control, aggressive, and were not dependent upon males for their success ( Huesmann,1985 ).

One might think that this phenomena would have a positive impact on younger female viewers. But the above mentioned phenomena having a positive impact on younger female viewers was not the case according to Huesmann’s research. His research stated that young girls who often watched shows featuring aggressive female heroes in the 1970s have grown up to be more aggressive adults involved in more confrontations, shoving matches, chokings, and knife fights than women who had watched few or none of these shows. One example cited by Huesmann is that 59 percent of those who watched an above-average amount of violence on television as children were involved in more than the average number of such aggressive incidents later in life ( Huesmann,1985).

According to Huesmann’s study ages six to eight are very delicate and critical years in the development of children. During this time children were learning scripts for social behavior that would last them throughout their lives. Huesmann found that those scripts did not always have happy endings. Thus, saying these negative characters portraying negative figures caused violence in these girls behavior that eventually followed them into their adult life ( Huesmann,1985 ).

In one final study done, that is worth noting researchers in the study concluded that, the context in which most violence is presented on television poses risks for viewers . But, more important is the contextual pattern in which most violence is shown. According to the research the risks of viewing the most common depictions of televised violence include learning to behave violently, becoming more desensitized to the consequences and harm that comes out of violence, and becoming more fearful of being attacked (National Television Violence Study, 1994-1995).

The following contextual patterns of violence are found consistently across most channels, program types, and times of the day. Perpetrators of violent crimes on television go unpunished 73% of the time. The portrayal of rewards and punishments is probably the most important of all contextual factors for viewers as viewers interpret the meaning of what they see on television. When violence is seen without punishment , viewers are more likely to learn the lesson that violence is successful. The Negative consequences of violence are not often portrayed in violent programming. Most violent portrayals do not show the victim experiencing any serious physical harm or pain at the time violence occurs. For example, 47% of all violent interactions show no harm to victims, and 58% show no pain. Even less frequent is the depiction of any long-term consequences of violence. In fact, only 16% of all the programs studied portray any long-term negative consequences of violence, such as psychological, financial, or emotional harm (National Television Violence Study 1994-1995).