

## **Taking Lessons From Littleton**

### **How We Can Prevent Youth Violence With Teens**

Russell Mokhiber and Robert Weissman co-authored "On the Rampage: Corporate Predators and the Destruction of Democracy". (1) They looked at the funding sources of the major public health groups and found out that big corporations dump big money into these groups, and pretty soon, the groups start taking the line of the big corporations. Americans now understand why they are losing the wars on cancer, heart disease and diabetes.

#### **Big Media Fear Medialiteracy**

Canadians and Americans face the same problem with medialiteracy organizations. Some of these organizations get funding from big media to promote the kind of medialiteracy that will take blame away from the media for intoxicating kids and teens. Most media education material in Canada and in the U.S. (sometimes schools receive free kits) get funding from big media. The funding "naturally" helps put the blame on parents, just like the food industry funding helps put the blame for diabetes and obesity on the lack of exercise. And, may we need to say, the big media corporations are much more powerful than the sweet food industry. They know how to protect their image.

ACME Coalition was founded in 2003 to build medialiteracy that can grow free from the big media. Dr. Sut Jhally, from the Media Education Foundation, was one of the founding members of ACME. He declared: "Media literacy is so dangerous to media corporations that they have moved to hijack the movement as it builds momentum. ACME's formation and launch therefore is an important political moment." Jacques Brodeur was also a founding member of ACME and works as a consultant for schools in Quebec and Ontario. He does violence prevention using medialiteracy to increase kids and teens awareness against the influence of violent entertainment. On the 6th Anniversary of the Columbine High School shooting, in Littleton, Colorado, he released his own interpretation of the event. (2) He points at the culture of violence that feeds kids and teens' fantasies in North America.

#### **Columbine High School, 6 years after**

The 20th of April 2005 marked the 6th anniversary of the Columbine High School massacre in Littleton, Colorado. The big media have not missed the opportunity to repeat the names of the young killers, as if they needed to become famous. But, what factors have made this nightmare event possible. Many different reactions have been expressed. Youth crime has been a target. School safety raised many worries among parents. Why did such a horrible event happen in a high school ? Why did these boys commit such a horrible crime ? Who did they really target ? What did they mean, exactly?

Michael Moore, the movie producer, analysed the drama in his own way. His movie, Bowling For Columbine, won the attention of huge crowds all over the world. For him, violent entertainment feeding U.S. youth through television, cinema and video games is not to blame. He blames the availability of guns and the militarization of his country's economy. In his movie, Moore attacks Wal-Mart and Charlton Heston, accusing them of predatory behaviour in glamorizing the constitutional right to own and carry firearms. He also blames the media news reports that have been feeding the fear of black men since slavery. To exclude the entertainment industry from any blame, Moore compares his own country to Canada; young people in both countries, he says, watch the same programs, (South Park) attend the same movies, applaud the same singers, (Marilyn Manson) and play the same video games. Since young people in the U.S. commit far more murders, he concludes that broadcasters and producers carry no responsibility and deserve no blame.

#### **Violent Crime Rate**

Moore does not mention that the violent crime rate in Canada has been going up for the last 20 years and that young Canadians now commit twice as much violent crime as adults. (3) Moore does not mention that our violent crime rate is still rising, while crime against property has been going down consistently for more that a decade. Moore does not mention that the rise of violent crime is much more rapid in the 15-25 year old age group than any other age group. Many sorts of non criminal aggressions, physical and verbal, are increasing, also, mostly among young Canadians, including elementary school kids. These aggressions create profound and various

damages: distress, isolation, depression, suicides. Bullying by girls is also on the rise, faster than boys some say. That's what Canadian teachers and parents witness in many schools and families.

The questions that Canadians and American must ask now become :

Why are young people more and more violent, both in Canada and U.S.A.?

Why is the increase of youth violence also a major issue in Europe ?

Why has it become a major public health issue over there ?

Why is the number of kids with troubled behaviour in our elementary schools also on the rise ? In each Canadian province, education departments have recorded the phenomenon and researchers in Quebec have evaluated the increase at 300% between 1985 and 2000. Why is the percentage of these troubled kids higher in kindergarten and 1st grade ? The blame must not be carried by schools, but that is where we witness the phenomenon. Each year, our Canadian schools, just like schools in the U.S., succeed in socializing some of these kids. Not all, unfortunately. So, inevitably, some kids reach secondary school keeping their social skills underdeveloped. They then become labelled "at risk teens". If their peers are not trained to respect and enjoy differences, if sarcasm and humiliation are common in their environment, frustration heats up and the media culture of revenge comes to the "rescue" and pushes these teens to act out.

### **The Will, the Skill and the Thrill to Kill**

These kids' culture comes mostly from Hollywood and is spreading all over the world. In 1997, a UNESCO survey concluded that the hero of kids in 82 out of 83 countries was the Terminator. This culture of violence teaches our kids to kill, like Lt. Col. Dave Grossman said. Grossman is a retired psychology professor from the U.S. army, director of the Killology Research Group, and co-authored with Gloria DeGaetano « Stop Teaching Our Kids To Kill ». He declared: "Videogames give kids and teens the will, the skill and the thrill to kill". During the shooting, in the cafeteria, some witnesses say that the boys seemed to enjoy the shooting. They were experiencing the "thrill to kill". Revenge, combined with the satisfaction of hitting the target, brought pleasure to these boys. Grossman explains that the shooting precision of the young killers (80% of the shots hit the head and upper torso) was better than most FBI officers. The boys got their training from DOOM, a murder simulator used by the U.S. army to train 19 years old recruits and condition them to kill without thinking. The two boys also listened to Marilyn Manson, known to ask his fans to repeat after him in his shows: « We love hate, We hate love ». That's the cocktail mix that pushed the two boys to act out in Littleton. Thousands of teens have similar media consumption and similar reasons to act out. Violence in movies, TV programs and video games has nothing to do with creativity. It is a marketing ingredient used by producers to lure, catch and addict the most vulnerable of our fellow citizens, the less experienced among them, children and teenagers. The will and the thrill to kill, unfortunately, are only the tip of the iceberg.

Desensitization to real life violence that surrounds young viewers and video game players is a much more pernicious damage. Desensitization is what make teens become passive bystanders when witnessing one of their peers being physically and verbally bullied. In the video recorded the night before the crime, that is what the killers say has hurt them the most, the passive complicity of their peers when they suffered bullying by the "sport" guys.

### **Kids Force-Fed With TV**

Violence committed and suffered by kids and teens has helped create many violence prevention programs all across North America. Some programs include emergency plans for each individual school if a killer shows up. Others consider metal detectors, surveillance cameras or the hiring of security officers as prevention practices. Few of these programs, unfortunately, have targeted the influence of TV violence as a major factor in the increase of physical and verbal violence. The influence of TV on kids behavior is very well known and documented. In an article in the prestigious international weekly newspaper, Le Monde Diplomatique, analysing problems witnessed in today's education, the author describes and blames the « lamination of children by television ». These children start school force-fed with TV, they have been exposed to the small screen since their birth, almost 5 hours a day, even before learning to speak. « The flood of their family space from this tap constantly open, from which an uninterrupted flow of images runs, has considerable effects on this young person's formation ». (4)

## **Unanimity in the Health Community**

In April 2003, major U.S. professional organizations in the field of health (American Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, American Psychological Association, American Medical Association) signed a joint statement. "At this time, well over 1000 studies - including reports from the Surgeon General's office, the National Institute of Mental Health, and numerous studies conducted by leading figures within our medical and public health organizations point overwhelmingly to a causal connection between media violence and aggressive behavior in some children. The conclusion of the public health community, based on over 30 years of research, is that viewing entertainment violence can lead to increases in aggressive attitudes, values and behaviour, particularly in children." (5)

All parents of teens know that an increasing number of programs, movies and video games feed their imagination. Unfortunately, most parents do not know the extent of the impact of violent entertainment on their child's mental health. The damage is real and deep. Heroes fascinate children and 95% of them solve conflicts with violence. Productions carrying these role models glorify revenge and cruelty. Meanwhile, the broadcasting of violence is on the rise. In 1994, Canadian broadcasters committed to self regulation to prevent any government intervention. Since then, private broadcasters increased doses of violence by 432% during the 8 following years. TV and video games have also damaged our children by keeping them away from physical activity while promoting unhealthy food, creating the increase of obesity. The influence of TV is gigantic, deep, well known, scientifically proven and well documented. For scientifically aware people, ignoring the contribution of TV to youth violence is now impossible.

## **Reversible Trend ?**

Conscious of hundreds of studies about the toxic influence of TV and curious to verify if that influence is reversible, Tom Robinson, professor of medicine at Stanford University, directed an audacious research project with children in San Jose, California. He produced teaching tools for teachers who agreed to prepare 3rd and 4th graders to turn off television and quit video games for 10 days.(6) That was in 1999. He measured verbal and physical violence before, right after and also 20 weeks later. He discovered that the reduction of exposure to TV and video games would make verbal (-50%) and physical (-40%) violence go down. (7) He also noticed that the most aggressive kids made the most progress. He also measured a significant reduction of obesity. (8) The Journal of the American Medical Association published his results.

## **The "10 Day Challenge" was created in 2003**

Informed of Robinson's study, in 2003 and 2004, teachers and parents in 20 elementary schools in Quebec and Ontario became curious to see if a similar project could produce the same results with their students. Would turning off TV make a difference ? How would families respond to a call for action from the school ? The results were far from benign. The 10Day Challenge has been evaluated by kids, teachers and parents.(9) In April 2005, three more elementary schools participated in the Challenge and a total of 1,159 kids were offered to participate. The 2005 Challenge will be evaluated as well.

## **Can Teens Survive a 10Day Strike Without TV and Videogames ?**

Only one high school has participated in the Challenge so far. The evaluation comes from teens themselves, parents and teachers.(10) More than 500 teens from 12 to 16 participated in the strike. That represents more than 50% of the student population of the school. Teens opened the strike walking through the streets of their city at lunch time, just like workers did when the labour movement started organizing a hundred years ago. Parents participating in the evaluation said what impressed them the most. Teachers did the same.

## **Highlights**

522 students participated in the evaluation, 168 parents and 32 teachers.  
78% of students say they participated in the Challenge. 6% of students shut TV and videogames down completely for the whole 10 days; 23% say that they reduced consumption by 75%, 36% by half and 35% by a quarter.  
Evaluation showed that teens succeeded an average of 4.8 days of strike.  
Four out of 5 said that the Challenge was very or quite useful.

Preparation reached all students and media literacy sessions helped them obtain some benefits, as the answers show.

Two thirds of parents found the Challenge very or quite useful.

All teachers (100%) found the Challenge very or quite useful. 86.2% of staff considered the profit very or quite important.

### **Benefits that Teens Witnessed**

TV and videogames deprive teens of time that they could use to develop social skills. Turning off such entertainment during a 10 day period has an impact on their quality of life. The Challenge has favored the increase of physical activities for half of them, time spent with friends for 45% of them, time spent with parents and help for tasks at home for one quarter of them. The Challenge allowed improvement of teens' social relationships. Family links also seem to have been improved.

Evaluation allowed measuring other benefits.

- Violence in school. 32% of teens say that physical violence went down, 27% say the same for verbal violence.
- Violence at home. The Challenge generated a decrease of verbal violence for 39% of answering students, 38% say the same for physical violence. That is more than one third.
- The Challenge made critical sense better for 65% of teens, mostly girls. This is the most improved element. Six parents out of 10 (59%) say that they witnessed the improvement of their child's viewing skills; 9 teachers out of 10 say the same,.
- The influence of TV. 76% of parents say that they are conscious of it.
- New dynamics in the school. 63% of teens say that the Challenge improved it. Majority were girls. This element was the 2nd most improved by the Challenge.
- New dynamics in the community. 58% of teens say it improved, mostly girls. It was the 3<sup>rd</sup> most improved element witnessed during the Challenge.

### **Would They Strike Again?**

Few students considered the Challenge an intrusion into their privacy since 72% say they want to do it again. That wish is stronger in this high school compared to elementary schools that participated in the Challenge before. The majority of teens who want to repeat the Challenge are female students (222/371) while the majority of those opposing are males (73/141). Boys are more vulnerable to violent entertainment, showing that the pedagogical approach should focus more on their influence on masculinity. 8 parents out of 10 (79%) recommend other schools to try the Challenge. Answers from students, parents and teachers all show strong support for repeating the Challenge. The staff show strong support for repeating it (89.7%).

### **Good News for Parents, Teachers and Teens**

The big media trained us to believe that "Good news is no news". The Challenge is great news for all of us. North American parents need to take the opportunity on the Columbine High School 6th anniversary to question addiction to TV violence. The reduction of exposure to TV and video game violence seems to be one of the most efficient approach to youth violence prevention. All schools in North America should be informed about it. Youth violence is on the rise, it is a major public health issue, and the 10Day Challenge seems to be a good way to fight back. This is big news for teachers and parents both in Canada, in the U.S and Europe. The Challenge received funding from the Public Safety Departments of Canada and Quebec but received no funding from the big media. Most newspaper and TV stations made interviews with students and parents participating in the Challenge and all comments by reporters were unanimously positive. Media can help prevent youth violence.

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(1) Mokhiber and Weissman are from the Multinational Monitor <http://www.multinationalmonitor.org> and Corporate CrimeReporter, <http://www.corporatecrimereporter.com> .

(2) The article is posted here: [http://www.edupax.org/Assets/divers/documentation/1\\_articles/Columbine%206th%20anniversary.htm](http://www.edupax.org/Assets/divers/documentation/1_articles/Columbine%206th%20anniversary.htm)

(3) Violent crime rate of youth is twice higher than adults' according to the Public Safety Department of the Province of Quebec: "Statistiques 2001", page 24.  
[http://www.edupax.org/Assets/divers/documentation/3\\_criminalite/violent\\_youth\\_crime\\_rising.html](http://www.edupax.org/Assets/divers/documentation/3_criminalite/violent_youth_crime_rising.html)  
Data about youth crime and links about the influence of TV violence are available in French from the Quebec School Board Federation. [www.fcsq.qc.ca/Dossiers/ViolenceTV/doc/argumentaire.doc](http://www.fcsq.qc.ca/Dossiers/ViolenceTV/doc/argumentaire.doc)

(4) Le Monde diplomatique, Malaises dans l'éducation, November 2001:  
[www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2001/11/DUFOUR/15871?var\\_recherche=t%E9%E9+violence](http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2001/11/DUFOUR/15871?var_recherche=t%E9%E9+violence)

(5) "The Impact of Entertainment Violence on Children" - Joint Statement to the Congressional Public Health Summit. The statement posted on the AAP website was endorsed by the American Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, American Psychological Association, American Medical Association:  
<http://www.aap.org/advocacy/releases/jstmtevc.htm>

(6) Tools prepared by Dr. Tom Robinson are known as the "Student Media Awareness for Reducing Television" Program (SMART).  
<http://hprc.stanford.edu/pages/store/itemDetail.asp?169>

(7) Dr. Robinson's article about aggressivity published by the Journal of the AMA :  
[http://www.edupax.org/Assets/divers/documentation/4\\_defi/SMARTAggressivity.pdf](http://www.edupax.org/Assets/divers/documentation/4_defi/SMARTAggressivity.pdf)

(8) Dr. Robinson's article about the impact of TV reduction on obesity :  
[http://www.edupax.org/Assets/divers/documentation/4\\_defi/SMARTObesity.pdf](http://www.edupax.org/Assets/divers/documentation/4_defi/SMARTObesity.pdf)

(9) All information about the 10 Day Challenge is posted here :  
[http://www.edupax.org/Assets/divers/documentation/4\\_defi/10\\_days\\_challenge.html](http://www.edupax.org/Assets/divers/documentation/4_defi/10_days_challenge.html)

The Challenge has been experienced in April, November and January 2003. It can be done anytime during the school year, as long as it does not interfere with the teachers planning. Usually, it is recommended to be held to fit with the TV-Turn Off Campaign in the U.S. Success is made easier in the 2nd half of April. To know more about next year schedule, please check the Challenge webpage at this address: <http://www.edupax.org/defi.html>

(10) Complete analysis of the 10Day Challenge in a Quebec high school:  
[http://www.edupax.org/Assets/divers/documentation/1\\_articles/Teens%2010Day%20Strike.htm](http://www.edupax.org/Assets/divers/documentation/1_articles/Teens%2010Day%20Strike.htm)