

*The letter below was emailed on behalf of Ontario's Violence in the Media coalition to the members of the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage in support of Bill C-327 An Act to Amend the Broadcasting Act.*

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April 2, 2007

Dear Committee Members:

I am writing in support of Bill C-327, An Act to amend the Broadcasting Act (reduction of violence in television broadcasts).

For the past two years, the Ontario Public School Boards' Association has coordinated the Violence in the Media Coalition. The coalition brings together people who are committed to work for change in combating the effects of media violence on children and youth. They represent a range of sectors, including parents, teacher federations, principal and student organizations from both the public and Catholic school systems, as well as police and community services.

We have been investigating the connection between media violence and maintaining safe school environments. We are looking at giving parents relevant, meaningful information on the multiple forms of media violence and finding helpful strategies to confront the problem. We are helping educators develop media violence awareness programs and are adopting approaches that are integrated into the curriculum already used in schools. We are making students more aware of the negative influences of media violence on their own attitudes and behaviours – and those of their peers. We are also exploring potential provincial and federal legislative changes to protect children from media violence.

Our coalition includes the following organizations: the Ontario Public School Boards' Association; Ontario Catholic Trustees' Association; Ontario Student Trustees' Association; Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation; Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario; Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association; Ontario Teachers' Federation; Ontario Principals' Council; Ontario Federation of Home & School Associations; Ontario Provincial Police, Crime Prevention Section; and the Canadian Centre for Abuse Awareness.

The coalition was formed out of a shared and deep concern about the negative impact of violent media on children and youth that is based on 30 years of research that shows that viewing entertainment violence can lead to increases in aggressive attitudes, values and behaviour, particularly in children. The effects are measurable and long-lasting. It is known that prolonged viewing of media violence can lead to emotional desensitization towards violence in real life.

The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and the American Academy of Pediatrics brought this to the U.S. Congressional Public Health Summit seven years ago. They cited over one thousand authoritative studies that point overwhelmingly to a causal connection between media violence and aggressive behaviour in some children. They said that after 30 years of research *"the conclusion of the public health community... is that viewing entertainment violence can lead to increases in aggressive attitudes, values and behavior – particularly in children."* In 2006, psychologists at Iowa State University released the results of the first study that uses objective physiological testing to demonstrate that exposure to violent video games

increases aggressive thoughts, angry feelings, physiological arousal and aggressive behaviours, while decreasing helpful behaviours. Just a few months ago, the research findings released by Dr. Dimitri Christakis of the University of Washington, Seattle, indicate that preschool boys exposed to violent television, even cartoons, are more likely to become aggressive later in life

The review of the literature points out the extensive nature of media violence in the lives of children. They can easily access violent material through many, many sources including the Internet, video games, television, movies, sports and music. "Gangsta" culture is a predominant theme of a whole genre of music and music videos regularly screened on television. There is no question that parents and professionals who work with children and adolescents are gravely concerned about the potential harmful effects of media violence.

Yet, beyond introducing classification of material that may be inappropriate for young children to watch, we have seen no societal intervention that matches the gravity of the problem. Recent publications, and I include here *Action Agenda: a Strategic Blueprint for Reducing Exposure to Media Violence in Canada*, published by the Ontario Ministry of the Attorney General in 2004, offer an alarming picture. The review of the literature points out the extensive nature of media violence in the lives of children.

Obviously, not every child who is exposed to media violence is at the same level of risk. Some children may have limited exposure to this material. They may also have other compensating, protective factors such as parents who are strong, informed role models and who supervise media consumption. Other children, however, may receive no guidance around their use of media. Some of them may be exposed to violence in their homes and have these images reinforced by video games, movies and the music they hear. When someone of the stature of Professor Leonard Eron, a renowned researcher in this field, tells us that the connection between media violence and violent attitudes and behaviour is as high as the correlation between smoking and lung cancer, I think we have to pay attention. Some people smoke and have few health problems or die of other causes. Yet, as a society, we have listened to the research, taken on board the facts and cigarette packages now carry large and graphic warnings of the dangers of smoking. We have to ask ourselves: "Where are the warnings on the many forms of violent media readily accessible by children?" Tiny ratings stickers just don't cut it.

Media violence is increasing and becomes more graphic every year. This generation of school age children spends approximately six and a half hours a day consuming various forms of media. Line that up with the estimated hour they spend on a combination of homework, chores and physical activities and I think we have some cause for concern. In 2003, the Kaiser Family Foundation in the United States released a study titled: *Zero to Six: Electronic Media in the Lives of Infants, Toddlers and Preschoolers*. The study found that even the youngest children – those under two – are widely exposed to electronic media. Forty-three percent of children under two watch TV every day. Twenty-six percent of all the children studied have televisions in their own bedrooms. This means that there is limited or no supervision of what they are watching.

As a society, we have to face the impact of media violence in individual homes and schools and in the broader community. We have to do this through public awareness campaigns, enhanced media literacy programs, and new legislation and standards for the industry. There is no question we are dealing with a problem that has wide-ranging implications for children and students, and for society as a whole. Because of the nature of the problems created by the growing trend of media violence, coalition members also agree that there are no quick fixes or

easy solutions. We believe that legislation is needed to reinforce and supplement the coalition's work and what we are doing in schools.

Self-regulation is rarely an effective replacement for legislation. I want to emphasize that we are not calling for censorship in the media to deal with the growing problem of exposure to media violence. What we are saying is take a lesson from what we as a society have done about cigarette smoking in Canada. There is an equally strong case - some would call it a societal imperative - to protect children from the harmful effects of some products. We believe that media violence is one of those consumer products where children require more protection.

If self-regulation worked, we would have seen a reduction in the volume of media violence, following the adoption of voluntary codes by the Canadian Association of Broadcasters. In fact, what we have seen is the exact opposite. Laval University researcher, Guy Paquette, in a study published in *Paediatric Child Health* stated: "*A thousand programs aired between 1993 and 2001 on major non-specialty television networks in Canada were analysed . . . The data collected revealed that the amount of violence has increased regularly since 1993 despite stated willingness on the part of broadcasters to produce programs with less violence. The total number of violent acts, as well as the number of violent acts per hour, is increasing. Researchers have also noted that a high proportion of violence occurs in programs airing before 9:00 p.m. thereby exposing a large number of children to this violence.*"

Because the amount and accessibility of violence in the media is growing for children, at a media conference in Toronto on January 17, 2007, we called on Federal government to establish a watershed hour to help protect them.

**More specifically, our recommendation is that the Federal government should amend the Broadcasting Act to establish a watershed hour of 9:00 p.m., applicable to both radio and television, for material intended for adult audiences to limit exposure to violence by young people.**

As stated earlier these changes to legislation by no means constitute comprehensive solutions to the problems we have identified. But they will, if introduced, supplement and reinforce what the coalition is trying to do on behalf of children with regard to prevention and education about the effects of media violence.

Respectfully submitted,

Dr. Peter Jaffe

On behalf of the Violence in the Media Coalition:

- Ontario Public School Boards' Association
- Ontario Catholic Trustees' Association
- Ontario Student Trustees' Association
- Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation
- Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario
- Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association
- Ontario Teachers' Federation
- Ontario Principals' Council
- Ontario Federation of Home & School Associations
- Ontario Provincial Police, Crime Prevention Section
- Canadian Centre for Abuse Awareness.