

Standing Up against media violence

Challenges for educators, parents
and community professionals

AS a child psychologist, I found that giving advice to other parents was always easier before I had my own children. As a father of four boys, I am learning every day about the challenges of raising nurturing, caring, thoughtful young men to reach their full potential. I have come to understand more about personality, temperament and the valuable role of extended family, friends and wonderful teachers in their lives. I depend on the whole village to help me do my most important job. I have also become painfully aware that there are many negative influences that require special attention. I would like to address one of the most overlooked and damaging influences in this article: the harmful impact of media violence.

Media violence is everywhere. We ignore it at our peril. We can become so overwhelmed with the problem that we

become paralyzed. The problem is an expanding one. We can't just worry about television and movies. Now we worry about video games, access to violence through the Internet and violence in sports. I grew up as a dedicated hockey fan in Montreal. My professional work in the area of domestic violence and child abuse made me less tolerant of the fights in hockey. Recently, I had to face the severity of hockey violence as a father when a friend gave my sons and I tickets to a London Knights' game. When a fight broke out during the game, two of my younger sons asked me why the players were fighting. "Isn't that wrong?" they asked. My 10-year-old said he would be in the principal's office and likely suspended if he were ever to do that on the playground. As I pondered my answer, we witnessed the fight replayed in all its

glory on the scoreboard screen, much to the delight of the majority of 9,000 fans. It's entertainment to watch adolescents who dream of being in the NHL to beat up on each other. It's part of the game (except during Olympic hockey when we can win gold medals without a single fight).

The problem

The impact of media violence is beyond debate. Perhaps the media industry will try to convince us that the problem is poor parents or that there is no scientific evidence to support the concern. The industry forgets to mention that sponsors spend millions of dollars for ads during the Stanley Cup or Grey Cup or Super Bowl to shape our purchasing impulses based on 30 seconds of television. Obviously, the media can shape us as adults and hamper positive child development. The majority of medical

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and mental health experts agree there is a serious problem. A joint statement by national associations of pediatricians, psychologists, psychiatrists and family physicians summarized this concern at a July 2000 US Congressional Public Health Summit in the following words: "At this time well over 1,000 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 behaviour 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. Its effects are measurable and long-lasting."

Not every child who is exposed to media violence will have the same reaction. Some children have small dosages of this material. Children may have many compensating, protective factors. Other children may be exposed to violence in their homes and have these images reinforced by hockey violence, video games, movies and the music they hear. Professor Leonard Eron, a distinguished University of

Michigan researcher in this area has stated that the association between media violence and violent attitudes and behaviour is as high as the correlation between smoking and lung cancer. Many people smoke and have few health problems or die of other causes. Yet cigarettes have large warnings on the package that could be a model for warnings on many forms of media rather than small PG or R stickers.

Media violence is growing worse every year. This generation spends approximately six and a half hours a day consuming various forms of media (compared to an hour for homework, chores or physical activities). Some of this mate-

rial is dedicated to violence. For example, over 90 percent of video games involve themes of violence. Popular games involve killing police officers, women and people of diverse cultures. The object of the game is to kill and/or destroy human beings. The best-selling games show the most graphic violence and recently have moved to first-person shooter perspectives where the player takes the killer's view. Many researchers have pointed to the repetition of these acts as parallel to the training available to police and the military. The outcome is accurate shooters who practise their skills and can become desensitized to the impact of real violence.



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Although we all try to teach children and adolescents that violence is harmful in real life and people should resolve their differences in non-violent ways, the media provides very mixed messages. The media tells us that violence is entertainment through movies and video games or that violence is to be admired in World Wrestling Entertainment or even necessary in hockey (according to Don Cherry). In many instances parents have lost control of these messages due to fatigue, absence or the establishment of new norms. For example, surveys have shown that half of all parents set no guidelines for media (for example, televi-

sion) and allow children unsupervised access to the Internet or cable television in their bedrooms. It is time to say "enough" to the industry and consider effective strategies to confront the harm to our children.

The solutions

There is no quick fix to this enormous problem. The issues have to be faced in individual homes, schools and the broader community through public awareness campaigns, enhanced media literacy programs and new legislation and standards for the industry.

Although censorship is not a possibility

at a government level, parents need to assert their rights and responsibility to limit what younger children see. Television shows that promote violence, sexism or racism of any kind need to be turned off. Your children need to know what you believe in and why it is important. Watching or playing with various forms of media with your children and offering guidance is an essential parenting skill. At the same time we have to be role models for children in what we consume and the messages that we send with our behaviour. One of my favorite expressions is "don't worry that children don't listen to you, worry that they are always watching you." Children and adolescents identify hypocrisy

very quickly in their parents so we all are rightfully forced to practise what we preach. There are many alternatives to the media in healthy activities and games. Setting limits to the influence of violent media is critical and it may begin with more thoughtful planning of what gets watched rather than surfing channels. Media and technology can play an important educational function in our families and need not be focused on violence and stereotyping of genders and race.

At the school level, this topic is one that many educators and parents care about deeply. Most parents struggle to understand what their children are con-

suming and find ways to control the harmful impact. We can organize parent nights on media violence and invite local experts from health and social services to talk about the problems and effective strategies. Many student leaders have organized programs to address bullying and violence in schools that often have media as one of the contributing problems that need to be discussed. Creative teachers find ways to integrate this topic into various courses or curriculum material. Some groups are working together at the provincial level to develop more teacher-friendly lesson plans that could be integrated in elementary and secondary schools. A team of educators and researchers from London, Ont., have developed a comprehensive school-based prevention program called the Fourth R. The foundation of the program is a 21-lesson skill-based curriculum that promotes healthy relationships and targets violence, high-risk sexual behaviour and substance use among adolescents. The lessons engage students in extensive skill development and were designed to satisfy the Ministry expectations for the health component of Grade 9 physical and health education. (For more information see the website www.thefourthr.ca.)

We also have to engage politicians at all levels of government as well as the corporate sector to examine more effective monitoring of the media. Parents and educators need to tell sponsors and producers of violent material that it is unacceptable and there will be economic consequences. Family, friends and neighbours need a similar discussion about community action around these issues. Silence is not an option when it comes to the potential harm of our children.

Future directions

As a parent, educator and psychologist, I have to face this issue every day. I struggle to do my best in the face of heavy advertising and peer pressure to accept violent entertainment as normal or inevitable. As a man, I have to think about the impact of this violence in my sons' views of masculinity and how we treat each other. Not only do the images provide a narrow definition of manhood, many of the media por-

trays are an insult to women and undermine gender equality. Everyone has to look in a mirror and ask themselves if they are doing what they can to challenge this onslaught.

What do we do? In our school district, we have made violence prevention a priority. We have dedicated staff who have ensured that prevention programs are available for all students. We have surveyed students to identify their priorities in addressing bullying and develop a better understanding of why many incidents are not reported to adults. Violence prevention has become more integrated into the school climate and curriculum. Many teachers address this issue in current lesson plans.

We are currently working with groups of trustees, federations, parent organizations, student leaders and community agencies to develop an action plan to enhance awareness and expand programs that deal with media violence. We want to ensure that new curriculum material fits appropriately into student and teacher expectations outlined by the Ministry of Education. In our Faculty of Education, my colleague Ray Hughes and I have developed the first "safe school" course that is preparing future teachers to be leaders in handling bullying (including cyber-bullying), harassment, the aftermath of violence in the family and the harmful impact of the media. I am optimistic about the growing awareness and the shift to action rather than passive acceptance of this problem. I want every parent, educator and other community professional to ask themselves what they can do to make a difference. There is no time to wait.

Recommended reading

Office for Victims of Crime (2004); *Research on Media Violence—Action Agenda: A Strategic Blueprint for Reducing Exposure to Media Violence in Canada*. Toronto: Ontario Ministry of the Attorney General.

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