

Children and the Media: Choosing Peaceful Story Telling



Peaceful Childhoods Series

Our culture, like many others, teaches values to children predominantly through stories. But in our culture, an exceedingly large part of this story-telling comes through television and video games. The stories our culture chooses to tell and the role models it provides for children and adolescents repeatedly extol the use of violence in response to problems. Children in our society spend on average more than 20 hours a week watching television. Some children spend more time watching television than attending school or on any other activity except sleep. During this activity they are exposed to more than 12,000 violent acts per year.

TV Violence and Aggressive Behaviour

There is a definite link between television violence and aggressive behaviour in children. Since the 1950s, an overwhelming amount of evidence has been collected, demonstrating that watching violent shows influences children's behaviour towards aggression. Obviously television violence is not the only factor, but because of the inordinate amount of time that the average North American child is exposed, it is an important one.

Theories of how exposure to television violence results in such outcomes suggest that what is learned is more than modules of violent behaviour, such as a particular kick or martial arts technique. What is learned is also a "script" of how to cope with conflict situations, together with approval of this method of coping, especially if the viewer identifies with the perpetrator of the violence.

Many of the plot-lines of violent television shows could be styled "enemy forces scripts". A powerful and evil leader plans, with his or her lackeys, to take over the city, country, world or universe, and use it exploitively. The hero and his or her colleagues foil the evil forces, often by high technology violence. This version is common to many children's shows.

Elements of such scripts are:

- the world is divided into good and evil;
- sometimes the "evil others" are less than fully human, making it easier to justify exterminating them;
- the well-armed "good" team are the ones with whom to identify;
- right must be pursued and conflicts resolved only by the use of violence;
- apart from the justified crushing of the enemy, there are no significant effects of violence.

Video Games

Many of the youngsters who watch these shows on television also enjoy playing violent video games. Since most of their parents are not going to take the time to become sufficiently adept at these games to monitor them, they are not aware of what their children are actually playing. Parents might well be shocked at the brutal and sadistic violence in some of these games. Like the worst television shows, the worst video games teach children to associate violence and killing with pleasure, entertainment and feelings of achievement. As the technology becomes more sophisticated, players are rewarded with more and more realistic depictions of victims going down in blood and flames as they are hit. Children who spend hours improving their skill at these games are not only learning targeting skills, but are undergoing the same desensitization to killing other humans that the military uses to train soldiers to kill.

It would be difficult to think of a better way of socializing young children to accept war, militarism, and highly violent conflict resolution.

Our World

There are 35 to 40 armed conflicts going on in the world at any one time. (See "Further Reading") Only a few of these are considered sufficiently newsworthy that most of us are aware of them, usually when there is a U.S. connection. News reports of terrorist attacks, violent conflict and war bring violence right into our homes. Influenced by media reporting, the public frequently sees no alternatives to an escalating spiral of violence—the sequence of threats, insults and massive violence delivered by high technology weaponry seems regrettable but inevitable.



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Why inevitable? What makes decent and caring people accept the ready resort to large scale violence in response to conflict, and what makes so many of our citizens believe that war cannot be avoided?

In order to understand, we need to look at how our attitudes to war and to violence are acquired. What we accept as normal, and what we believe is good and proper, shape not only our everyday behaviour, but also what we accept in our country and in the world. Many of these assumptions are acquired in childhood, and persist with little revision into adulthood. The “scripts” we have learned, with all the values packaged within them, are applied to real life situations: conflicts are to be resolved by violence, the people on the other side are “evil”, and killing them is justified.

There are too few “scripts” for resolving conflicts nonviolently, for acknowledging the human worth of those with whom we are in conflict, for understanding the reasons for their behaviour. Thus, we accept war as inevitable and spend too little energy examining and trying the many alternatives.

Our attitudes have many complex causes, but among them are our assumptions about how the world works; assumptions acquired in childhood from the stories we are told.

What Can We Do?

We recommend the following measures:

- Choose only pro-social or morally neutral programs for young children. There is evidence that programs which show pro-social modes of cooperation increase pro-social behaviour in children—possibly by generating more positive “scripts”.
- Limit total ‘tube time’ (TV or video games) for children to one hour per day; encourage other activities.
- Encourage reading — children’s novels explore a greater range of values than does children’s television.
- Discuss with older children how the ideals portrayed on TV shows agree or do not agree with your own.
- Be pro-active: write to the advertisers on violent programs; write to television channels; help to raise public awareness. There are several groups working to curtail violent programming and violent video games. (See “Further Reading”).
- Teach nonviolent methods of conflict resolution. Many schools are already using programs such as “Second Step” with great success. (See “Further Reading”) Find out about anti-bullying programs at school.

- Paediatric hospitals and clinics should be “violence-free” areas, with no violent games or videos.
- Physicians, educators and others who work with children and adolescents should be aware of the relationship of aggression with media and entertainment violence, and might want to discuss it with parents and young people having difficulties with aggressive behaviour.

We hope that we can contribute to a large scale recognition that the teaching of violent conflict resolution through the media and entertainment is injurious not only to our children and to our national society, but also to our global society. We would like to change the stories that we tell our children and each other to ones that express greater compassion and understanding.



Further Reading

American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry. *Facts For Families #13 Children and TV Violence* www.aacap.org

Canadian Paediatric Society. *Children and the Media*. Position statement available at www.cps.ca or from the CPS at 100-2204 Walkley Rd., Ottawa, ON K1G 4G8. Includes a handout to give to parents.

Coalition Opposing Violent Entertainment (COVE) Information and advocacy against violent video games. Email: info@peacewire.org

The Effects of Media Violence on Children Available from the National Clearinghouse on Family Violence, Health Canada. Toll-free line: 1-800-267-1291

Martinez A. *Scientific Knowledge About Television Violence*. Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, Ottawa, 1992.

Media Awareness Network Includes an excellent overview, and advice on “What Parents Can Do”. www.media-awareness.ca

Project Ploughshares, Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, Waterloo ON N2L 6C2 Publishes annual Armed Conflicts Report. www.ploughshares.ca

‘Second Step’ A Violence Prevention Curriculum. www.cfchildren.org