

Violence in the Media

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Violence has become an increasing problem in today's society. It is quite evident in light of greater access to weapons, recent school and mall shootings. Causes of violence are multifactorial. Some include poverty, abuse, mental illness, substance use and domestic violence. A recent study (Gentile et al) suggests that there are 6 risk factors that later predict aggression – media violence, male sex, low parental involvement, physical victimization, prior physical fights, and hostility.

Exposure to media violence plays a crucial role in the etiology of aggressive behaviors. Watching violent television or playing violent video games increases the likelihood for aggressive behavior. There is increasing evidence that increased exposure to violent games can lead to changes in brain function when processing violent images, including decreases in both executive control and emotional responses to violence. Children that engage in violent video games and watch violent TV shows become desensitized to it and view violence as an ordinary occurrence. As a result, they are unable to empathize with the situation or with the parties involved. On television shows, violence is often justified, as it is routinely used as a means of handling problems—in which, the “good guys” use firearms against the “bad guys” and are viewed as heroes and role models. Video games raise another concern-- children are acting out the violence (as opposed to television where they are mere observers).

Repeated viewings of violence in television can be traumatic as well. For instance, a recent study (Holman et al) showed that people exposed to more than six hours a day of bombing-related media coverage (from the Boston Marathon bombing) were nine times more likely to report high acute stress than those with less than an hour of exposure. Symptoms included hypervigilance, feeling restless and intrusive thoughts related to the event. There is also increasing evidence that live and video images can trigger flashbacks as well. Symptoms of acute stress are greater in those with previous exposure to trauma and in those with preexisting mental health conditions.

As access to media becomes faster, parents, health professionals, policymakers, and media sources should be aware of the possible consequences. As mentioned previously, there are several risk factors to increased violence.

Treatment should be also focused on addressing the underlying cause of aggression. A collaborative team approach should include the physician-psychiatrist, pediatrician, child, parents, and other mental health professionals. Treatment options may include education and consultations, behavior strategies, family interventions, and possibly pharmacotherapy. The best treatment outcome is based on multidisciplinary approach and includes professional and parental involvement.

Holman A et al. **Media's role in broadcasting acute stress following the Boston Marathon bombings.** PNAS. Dec 2013.

Gentile DA, Bushman BJ. **Reassessing media violence effects using a risk and resilience approach to understanding aggression.** Psychology of Popular Media Culture. 2012;1:138-151.

Kaplan A. **Violence in the Media: What Effects on Behavior?** Psychiatric Times. Oct. 2012.