

# Violence in Media: Effects on Children & Adolescents

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Exposure to violence in media, including television, movies, music, and video games, represents a significant risk to the health of children and adolescents. Like many (though not enough) parents, pediatricians are constantly appalled by the crude, brutal, and overtly sexualized nature of our popular culture.

There are growing bodies of research that not only show violent content and profanity in movies and television programming steadily on the rise in recent decades, but also that violent television and movies is associated with an increased risk of aggressive behavior (in boys), desensitization to violence, nightmares, and fear of being harmed.

Entertainment media also inflate the prevalence of violence in the world, cultivating in viewers the “**mean-world**” syndrome, a perception of the world as a violent place.

Thankfully, studies are also confirming what would seem to be common sense: that reducing television viewing, especially programming designed for mature audiences, reduces not only anxiety, but aggression among school-aged children.

This is very important to note, because we already know that aggressive behavior early in childhood is a reliable predictor of violence and juvenile delinquency later in childhood and adolescence. But because many parents are unaware the well-documented connection between exposure to violence and negative outcomes such as increased aggression, restriction to media violence may not be a top priority for some parents.

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Well over 1000 studies show a causal connection between media violence and real-life aggression. By the age of 18, the average adolescent will have seen an estimated **200,000** acts of violence on television alone.

And make no mistake: increased exposure to extreme violence in media IS associated with increases in seriously violent behavior in youth. Experts estimate that roughly 10 percent of real-life violence is attributable to the effect of media violence.

Witnessing violence vicariously on TV, in movies, and in video games effects children in three ways that can ultimately lead to aggression: it can desensitize children to violence through repeated exposure; it can induce children to behave more aggressively by conveying the message that aggression is acceptable or even desirable; and it can teach children to see the world as a fearful place and to initiate aggression as a way of protecting themselves from perceived threats.

Is every child or teen susceptible to media violence? Probably not. But it depends on a variety of factors: family stability, personality, witnessing violence firsthand, psychological factors. Importantly, brain-imaging studies have suggested that a young child’s brain does not distinguish between real acts of violence and viewing media violence.

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The *context* in which media violence is portrayed also makes a difference between learning about violence and learning to be violent. Plays such as *Macbeth* and films such as *Saving Private Ryan* treat violence as what it is – a human behavior that causes suffering, loss, and sadness to victims and perpetrators. In this

context, with helpful adult guidance on the real costs and consequences of violence, appropriately mature adolescent viewers can learn the danger and harm of violence by vicariously experiencing its outcomes.

Unfortunately, however, most violence on TV and in movies is presented in a sanitized and glamorized fashion, even sometimes as humorous. Weapons are glamorized as a source of personal power. Violence is typically used for immediate thrills without portraying any human cost. Comic violence and titillating violence in sexual contexts are particularly dangerous, because they associate positive feelings with hurting others. Prolonged exposure to such media portrayals results in increased acceptance of violence as an appropriate means of solving problems and achieving one's goals.

Aspects of violent portrayals that are especially risky for children include:

- \* likable perpetrators (seeing characters that children admire who use violence, including Superheroes)
- \* justified violence (violence portrayed as appropriate either as protection or retaliation, which has a potent effect on children's tendency to emulate it)
- \* prolonged or intense exposure (the more graphic the violence, the greater its desensitizing effects over time)
- \* realistic violence ("real" violence holds greater allure for children, and intensifies the interest and increases the impact)
- \* lack of consequences (violence portrayed with no or fantastical consequences, poses special risk by making aggression seem harmless or victimless)
- \* violence as a vehicle for laughs (making violence comedic is very common)

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PG-13 and R movies can be quite scary, and produce in young children and even pre-teens symptoms of anxiety. Parents are often shocked when presented with the violent scenes included from R-rated movies, because many older adults do not watch such movies.

Parents are urged to beware the phenomenon of **ratings creep**, whereby movie ratings categories contain steadily more violence, sex, and profanity than two decades ago. Parents should be aware that movies with the same rating can differ *significantly* in the amount and types of potentially objectionable content, and that the criteria for rating movies has become less stringent over the last two decades.

A 2000 FTC investigation found that violent movies, music and video games have been intentionally marketed to children and adolescents. Movie theaters did agree not to show trailers for R-rated movies before G-rated movies in response to the FTC report, but children continue to see advertising for violent media in other venues.

Many aspects of the modern media environment work against adequate parental oversight. With the advent of DVDs, movie channels, pay-per-view channels, and even Web-based movie downloads, adolescents in particular have unprecedented access to adult media. Director's cuts on DVDs are not subject to the ratings process and often include additional violent material that was edited out of the theatrically released version.

There is unfortunately high exposure among pre-teens as well to extremely violent movies, some of which are seen by almost half of the 10-to 14-year-olds in the U.S. This exposure occurs despite clear labeling that these movies were not intended for young adolescents. Boys, minorities, those with low SES, and those with poor school performance are all more likely to see extremely violent movies.

Even among adolescents who report that their parents never let them watch R-rated movies, 23% report having seen at least one of the violent movies from the researchers' list.



