

# WHAT MATTERS IN AMERICA: Reading and Writing about Contemporary Culture

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# 8

## Can Television Violence Influence Behavior?

**T**elevision is the prime mover of modern culture. Over five decades, it has become the country's foremost source of entertainment and news. More than any other medium, television regulates commerce, lifestyles, and social values. But the medium is also the object of considerable scorn. For years, television has been blamed for nearly all our social ills—the rise in crime, juvenile violence, racism, increased sexual promiscuity, drug addiction, and the collapse of the family. In short, it has been cited as the cause of the decline of Western civilization.

The average 20-year-old viewer will have spent nearly three years of his or her life in front of the television set. But what has that 20-year-old spent his or her time watching? From afternoon cartoons to prime-time programs, the shows that tend to attract a child audience are increasingly violent, featuring aggressive superheroes, action-packed fights, bloodshed, and even murder. What influence, if any, does such programming have on young minds? If television can indeed shape society, can it shape children too? This chapter will explore in greater depth the issue of violent television's influence on children.

Does violent television programming influence children to be more violent themselves, and thus, more likely grow into violent adults? Is it the responsibility of parents to monitor what their children see and hear, or should the television industry also be held accountable for its programming? As a society, are we simply becoming insensitive to violence? Are children today more likely to bring guns to school or solve conflicts through violence than children in the past? This chapter takes a look at the possible connections between television and violent behavior in kids.

**CRITICAL THINKING**

1. What are the visual clichés in this cartoon? How do stock props convey a moment in time to the viewer? Explain.
2. What issues is the cartoonist addressing in this cartoon? Explain.
3. Why are the boy's words to the girl appropriate to the subject matter of the cartoon? Why are they funny?



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## **Violence on Television— What Do Children Learn? What Can Parents Do?**

*American Psychological Association*

Based in Washington, D.C., the American Psychological Association (APA) is a scientific and professional organization that represents psychology in the United States. It promotes the advancement and distribution of psychological knowledge to promote health, education, and public welfare. This fact sheet is available on their Web site: [www.apa.org](http://www.apa.org).

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### **CONNECTING TO THE TOPIC**

Almost 20 years ago, the National Institute of Mental Health reported that television violence could be dangerous for children. Since then, and despite such warnings, violence on television has significantly increased both in quantity and intensity. Studies indicate that children who watch a lot of violent television programming tend to be less bothered by violence. Other studies reveal that children who watch violent programming are less likely to call for help or intervene when they witness violent acts among their peers. Should the television industry be more responsible for its programming? Is this an issue for parents, or the medium of television itself? And is society as a whole at risk?

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### **WORDS IN CONTEXT**

**psychology:** the study of the mind and behavior

**intervene:** to interfere; to get involved with

**National Institute of Mental Health:** a division of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the federal government's principal biomedical and behavioral research agency. Its mission is to reduce the burden of mental illness and behavioral disorders through research on mind, brain, and behavior.

**prosecute:** to impose legal punishment

**accumulate:** gathered in a substantial quantity

**“Violent programs on television lead to aggressive behavior by children and teenagers who watch those programs.”**

- 1 That was the word from a 1982 report by the National Institute of Mental Health, a report that confirmed and extended an earlier study done by the surgeon general. As a result of these and other research findings, the American Psychological Association passed a resolution in February of 1985 informing broadcasters and the public of the potential dangers that viewing violence on television can have for children.

**What Does the Research Show?**

- 2 Psychological research has shown three major effects of seeing violence on television:
  - Children may become less sensitive to the pain and suffering of others.
  - Children may be more fearful of the world around them.
  - Children may be more likely to behave in aggressive or harmful ways toward others.
- 3 Children who watch a lot of TV are less aroused by violent scenes than are those who only watch a little; in other words, they're less bothered by violence in general, and less likely to see anything wrong with it. One example: in several studies, those who watched a violent program instead of a nonviolent one were slower to intervene or to call for help when, a little later, they saw younger children fighting or playing destructively.
- 4 Studies by George Gerbner, Ph.D., at the University of Pennsylvania, have shown that children's TV shows contain about 20 violent acts each hour and also that children who watch a lot of television are more likely to think that the world is a mean and dangerous place.
- 5 Children often behave differently after they've been watching violent programs on TV. In one study done at Pennsylvania State University, about 100 preschool children were observed both before and after watching television; some watched cartoons that had a lot of aggressive and violent acts in them, and others watched shows that didn't have any kind of violence. The researchers noticed real differences between the kids who watched the violent shows and those who watched nonviolent ones.

- 6 “Children who watch the violent shows, even ‘just funny’ cartoons, were more likely to hit out at their playmates, argue, disobey class rules, leave tasks unfinished, and were less willing to wait for things than those who watched the nonviolent programs,” says Aletha Huston, Ph.D., now at the University of Kansas.

### **Real-Life Studies**

- 7 Findings from the laboratory are further supported by field studies which have shown the long-range effects of televised violence. Leonard Eron, Ph.D., and his associates at the University of Illinois, found that children who watched many hours of TV violence when they were in elementary school tended to also show a higher level of aggressive behavior when they became teenagers. By observing these youngsters until they were 30 years old, Dr. Eron found that the ones who’d watched a lot of TV when they were eight years old were more likely to be arrested and prosecuted for criminal acts as adults.

### **A Continuing Debate**

- 8 In spite of this accumulated evidence, broadcasters and scientists continue to debate the link between viewing TV violence and children’s aggressive behavior. Some broadcasters believe that there is not enough evidence to prove that TV violence is harmful. But scientists who have studied this issue say that there is a link between TV violence and aggression, and in 1992, the American Psychological Association’s Task Force on Television and Society published a report that confirms this view. The report, entitled *Big World, Small Screen: The Role of Television in American Society*, shows that the harmful effects of TV violence do exist.

### **What Parents Can Do**

- 9 While most scientists are convinced that children can learn aggressive behavior from television, they also point out that parents have tremendous power to moderate that influence.
- 10 Because there is a great deal of violence in both adult and children’s programming, just limiting the number of hours children watch television will probably reduce the amount of aggression they see.

11 Parents should watch at least one episode of the programs their children watch. That way they'll know what their children are watching and be able to talk about it with them.

12 When they see a violent incident, parents can discuss with their child what caused the character to act in a violent way. They should also point out that this kind of behavior is not characteristic, not the way adults usually solve their problems. They can ask their children to talk about other ways the character could have reacted, or other nonviolent solutions to the character's problem.

13 Parents can outright ban any programs that they find too offensive. They can also restrict their children's viewing to shows that they feel are more beneficial, such as documentaries, educational shows and so on.

14 Parents can limit the amount of time children spend watching television, and encourage children to spend their time on sports, hobbies, or with friends; parents and kids can even draw up a list of other enjoyable activities to do instead of watching TV.

15 Parents can encourage their children to watch programs that demonstrate helping, caring and cooperation. Studies show that these types of programs can influence children to become more kind and considerate. ♦

### **CONSIDERING THE ISSUES**

1. Think about the level and frequency of violence in the programs you watch on television. Is violence a common theme? What types of television programs do you like to watch, and why?
2. In this article, the APA provides recommendations to parents, but not to television broadcasters. In your opinion, does control over television's violent content belong at home, or at the network? Explain.

### **CRAFT AND CONTENT**

3. This article was produced by the APA to provide guidance and information for parents on the issue of children and television violence. Does the fact that the APA is a scientific body make its statements seem more credible? What sources of information do we tend to trust, and why?

4. What information does this document convey most strongly? What visual and organizational devices does it use to make certain points stand out? Explain.
5. What authorities and sources does the APA cite to support its point? How do these authorities influence the reader?

### CRITICAL THINKING

6. The APA notes that George Gerbner's research indicates that children who watch violent television programs are more likely to think that the world is "a mean and dangerous place." What effect might such a belief have on a child? What about when that child grows up? Explain.
7. According to the APA, what are the real-life ramifications for children who view violent television programming?

### WRITING ABOUT THE ISSUES

8. The APA article notes that despite significant evidence indicating that television violence influences children, the issue continues to be debated. Why do you think that is? Why is this issue so controversial?
9. The APA provides some recommendations to parents at the end of its article. Evaluate the practicality and logic of the advice they offer. Respond to each recommendation with your own viewpoint.

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## Beyond Banning War and Superhero Play

*Diane E. Levin*

Diane E. Levin is a professor of education at Wheelock College in Boston. Her current research focuses on how to promote children's healthy development, learning, and behavior in violent times. She is the author of and contributor to several books, including *Teaching Young Children in Violent Times: Building a Peaceable Classroom* (1994). This article appeared in the May 2003 issue of *Young Children*. The fully referenced article may be viewed at [www.journal.nacyc.org/btj/200305/warandsuperhero.pdf](http://www.journal.nacyc.org/btj/200305/warandsuperhero.pdf).

**CONNECTING TO THE TOPIC** 

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The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry has found that TV violence may encourage children to imitate the violence they observe on television. Moreover, children may identify with certain characters featured on violent programming. Usually, imitated violence emerges during “war” or “superhero” play, with “good guys” and “bad guys.” Such play can pose challenges for teachers of young children. However, play is one way children learn to work out issues that bother them and things that they find troubling in the adult world. How do teachers balance children’s need for play with the need to maintain a safe classroom environment? Is the answer to banish play from the classroom?

**WORDS IN CONTEXT** 

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**obsess:** to be excessively preoccupied

**suppress:** to forcibly subdue or restrain

**therapeutic:** having healing effects

**cognitive:** relating to the process of understanding factual knowledge

**salient:** conspicuous; prominent; noticeable

**generic:** general; not specific

**replicate:** to reproduce or repeat; to copy

**diversion:** a turning aside; distraction

**veteran:** experienced; having a great deal of practice in a particular area

**circumvent:** to go around

**guerilla wars:** covert, irregular warfare, usually hidden and not immediately obvious, marked by sneak attacks

**sustained:** of longer duration; enduring

**elaborated:** developed thoughtfully and carefully with attention to details

**one-dimensional:** flat and lacking in any depth

1 **“F**our-year-old Jules is particularly obsessed. Telling him no guns or pretend fighting just doesn’t work. When he’s a good guy, like a Power Ranger, or Spiderman, he thinks it’s okay to use whatever force is needed to suppress the bad guy, “because that’s what a superhero does!” And then someone ends up getting hurt. When we try to enforce a ban, the children say it’s not superhero play, it’s some other kind of play. Many children don’t seem to know more positive ways to play, or they play the same thing over and over without having any ideas of their own. I need some new ideas.”

- 2 This experienced teacher's account captures the kinds of concerns I often hear from teachers worried about how to respond to war play in their classrooms. Expressions of concern about play with violence tend to increase when violent world events, like 9/11 and the war against Iraq, dominate the news.
- 3 Play, viewed for decades as an essential part of the early childhood years, has become a problem in many classrooms, even something to avoid. Teachers ask why play is deemed so important to children's development when it is so focused on fighting. Some are led to plan other activities that are easier to manage and appear at first glance to be more productive. Reducing playtime may seem in the short term to reduce problems, but this approach does not address the wide-ranging needs children address through play.

### **Why Are Children Fascinated with War Play?**

- 4 There are many reasons why children bring violent content and themes into their play. They are related to the role of play in development and learning as well as to the nature of the society in which war play occurs.
- 5 From both therapeutic and cognitive perspectives, children use play to work out an understanding of experience, including the violence to which they are exposed. Young children may see violence in their homes and communities as well as in entertainment and news on the screen. We should not be surprised when children are intent on bringing it to their play. Children's play often focuses on the most salient and graphic, confusing or scary, and aggressive aspects of violence. It is this content they struggle to work out and understand. Typically, the children who seem most obsessed with war play have been exposed to the most violence and have the greatest need to work it out.
- 6 Most young children look for ways to feel powerful and strong. Play can be a safe way to achieve a sense of power. From a child's point of view, play with violence is very seductive, especially when connected to the power and invincibility portrayed in entertainment. The children who use war play to help them feel powerful and safe are the children who feel the most powerless and vulnerable.
- 7 Children's toys give powerful messages about what and how to play. Open-ended toys, like blocks, stuffed animals, and generic dinosaurs, can be used in many ways that the child controls. Highly structured toys, such as action figures that talk and playdough kits with molds to make movie characters, tend to have built-in features

that show children how and what to play. Many of today's best-selling toys are of the highly structured variety and are linked to violent media. Such toys are appealing because they promise dramatic power and excitement. These toys channel children into replicating the violent stories they see on screen. Some children, like Jules, get "stuck" imitating media-linked violence instead of developing creative, imaginative, and beneficial play.

### **Teachers' Concerns About War Play**

- 8 There are many reasons why teachers are concerned about war play and why they seek help figuring out how to deal with it. Play with violence tends to end up with children out of control, scared, and hurt. Managing aggressive play and keeping everyone safe can feel like a never-ending struggle and a major diversion from the positive lessons we want children to learn.
- 9 Many veteran teachers say that the bans they used to impose on war play no longer work. Children have a hard time accepting limits or controlling their intense desire or need to engage in the play. And children find ways to circumvent the ban—they deny that their play is really war play (that is, they learn to lie) or sneak around conducting guerilla wars the teacher does not detect (they learn to deceive).
- 10 Like Jules, some children engage in the same play with violence day after day and bring in few new or creative ideas of their own. Piaget called this kind of behavior imitation, not play. These children are less likely to work out their needs regarding the violence they bring to their play or benefit from more sustained and elaborated play.
- 11 Seeing children pretend to hurt others is the opposite of what we hope they will learn about how to treat each other and solve problems. Children learn as they play—and what they play affects what they learn. When children are exposed to large amounts of violence, they learn harmful lessons about violence, whether they are allowed to play it in the classroom or not.
- 12 At the same time, children do not think about the violence they bring into their play in the same way adults do. Jules focuses on one thing at a time; he sees the bad guy as one dimensional without thinking about what makes him bad. He thinks good guys can do whatever hurtful things they want because they are good. Except when he gets carried away and hurts another child, Jules probably does know that at some level his play is different from the real violence he is imitating.

### More Important Now Than Ever

- 13 There is no perfect approach for dealing with children’s play with violence in these times. The best strategy is to vastly reduce the amount of violence children see. This would require adults to create a more peaceful world and limit children’s exposure to media violence and toys marketed with media violence.
- 14 Given the state of the world—including the war against Iraq—children now more than ever need to find ways to work out the violence they see. For many, play helps them do so. We have a vital role in helping children meet their needs through play. We must create an approach that addresses the unique needs of children growing up in the midst of violence as well as the concerns of adults about how play with violence contributes to the harmful lessons children learn. ♦

### CONSIDERING THE ISSUES

1. Levin begins her article with the case of four-year-old Jules and then asks the question, “Why are children fascinated with war play?” Answer this question based on observations and experiences of your own. As a child, did you engage in violent play such as “cops and robbers,” war, G.I. Joe, Power Rangers, or other superhero-related role-playing?
2. At the end of her article, Levin notes that the American war in Iraq has made children more likely to engage in war play as they “work out” things they see on TV. This idea raises the question whether parents should shield their children from the nightly news, just as they might discourage violent children’s programs such as Power Rangers or Superman. What do you think? Should children be allowed to view the nightly news?

### CRAFT AND CONTENT

3. How does Levin’s use of the case of a real child (Jules) help introduce her topic? Is this an effective way to catch the attention of an audience? Why or why not?
4. This essay is organized as a problem/solution—that is, Levin presents a problem in the case of Jules, discusses the issue in larger scope, and then suggests a solution. In your own words,

summarize each of these components—the problem, the discussion, and the solution.

### CRITICAL THINKING

5. In paragraph 3, Levin notes that some teachers have reduced or even banned playtime in order to avoid the problem of having children act up and engage in violent play. Why is this solution unlikely to work? Explain.
6. Why is role-playing and imaginative play important for young children? In your opinion, if war play does not harm other children, do you think it is permissible? Should it be discouraged? Why or why not?

### WRITING ABOUT THE ISSUES

7. In a short essay, evaluate the solutions Levin offers on how to channel children's desire for war play. Are these solutions likely to work? Why or why not? Can you offer additional solutions? Describe some other possible ideas in a short essay.
8. Are there reasons other than those Levin mentions that children like war play? Write a short essay identifying that some of the reasons children like to play war, drawing from your personal experience and some of the points Levin makes in her article.

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## Hate Violence? Turn It Off!

*Tim Goodman*

Columnist Tim Goodman is a television and media critic for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, in which this article first appeared on April 29, 2001.

### CONNECTING TO THE TOPIC

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Not everyone agrees that television violence is a problem. Some people argue that if you don't like what you see on television, change the channel, or turn it off. The author of the next piece is tired of critics whining that television

violence is damaging to children. He says, “vote with your remote” and stop trying to ruin television for everyone else.

## WORDS IN CONTEXT

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**plethora:** a superabundance; an excess

**ensorship:** the practice of restricting, suppressing, or removing material that is considered morally, politically, or socially objectionable

**scapegoat:** one that is made to bear the blame of others

**lax:** lacking in strictness; overly permissive; negligent

**vaunted:** boasted; bragged

**pap:** material lacking real value or substance

**prominent:** immediately noticeable; conspicuous

**ratcheted:** to increase or decrease by increments

**erode:** to wear away

**chaos:** condition or place of great disorder or confusion

1 **P**erhaps it’s a sign of progress that Americans are becoming just as concerned about violence on television as they are about sex. For years, a barely concealed nipple or a tame bed scene was deemed worse than hundreds of people being brutally shot down on cop shows and the like.

2 Now you can’t pick up the paper without some watchdog group denouncing Hollywood for ruining their children’s lives with a plethora of violent images nightly. Some kid goes postal at his high school and “Starsky and Hutch” is the root cause.

3 We’re getting our priorities right and wrong simultaneously. If sexuality is now not the enemy, great. But to continue to demonize Hollywood for its portrayals of violence is to put our heads in the sand about the world we live in.

4 Worse, it’s just plain wrong, reeks of censorship and, in the context of parents worried about their children, it’s looking for a scapegoat when lax parenting skills are more to blame.

5 For example, parents have put pressure on their elected officials to “do something” about violence, and the result has been a ratings system that surveys suggest most parents never use. And then there’s the vaunted “V-chip,” which effectively shifted parental responsibility to the government and doesn’t consider the simplest way for everyone to solve this problem: Vote with your remote.

6 Some of us like violence. Some of us like shows that have a gritty realism to them, rather than the glossy pap offered up by most networks. And think of all the people without children who, as grown-ups, choose to watch programming clearly geared to adults. Just because you've given little Jimmy his own TV set upstairs and now you can't stop him from watching "Jackass" on MTV or "Oz" on HBO, don't cry foul and ruin it for the rest of us.

7 This is an old and now increasingly tired defense of art, anti-censorship and the need for parents to take more responsibility for what their children are watching. Don't like it? Don't watch it. There are enough elements in place now—blocking devices, ratings, V-chips, etc.—that to whine about how Hollywood should tone it down (as you allow the blood-and-guts nightly news to waft over dinner) completely misses the point about whose kid it is.

8 Then again, many adults also dislike violence. Fine. Vote with the remote. Go to PBS, the History Channel, Disney—whatever—just stop writing letters to politicians who have already had a chilling effect (thus a watering- and dumbing-down of content) on what we already see.

9 Most recently, there has been a backlash against "The Sopranos," with many people thinking there's been an amping up of the violence and at least two very disturbing episodes filled with violence toward women.

10 First off, yes, those were difficult to watch. But HBO runs a very prominent content advisory at the front of every episode. And, more important, "The Sopranos" is not "Leave It to Beaver," despite near universal acclaim from critics and an almost scary loyalty among viewers.

11 It's just a hunch, but perhaps creator David Chase, sensing this weird, uncomfortable embracing of—let's be honest here—bad people, ratcheted up the violence as a reminder of what exactly it is we're watching.

12 If this moved people out of their comfort zones, they should stop watching. Many have. Others have complained to HBO and some are asking that such behavior be toned down. The short answer to that is this: No. "The Sopranos" is art. As a viewer, your reaction to that art can be anything you want it to be, but restricting it instead of looking away is not the right course.

13 This goes beyond freedom of expression, of course, and those who do not embrace their own freedom to choose other programming. People assume that television has somehow helped erode the social contract that keeps chaos and horror at bay. They blame television for the downfall of the nation's morals.

14 But we have always been a violent country. People were killed at a pretty good clip before television appeared. It's the dark side of our nature, but it didn't come out of the bogeyman's closet 50 years ago.

15 Violence as entertainment, or as a realistic expression of what is really going on in our world, will never appeal to some people. But no one is forcing them to watch. There are dozens of other channels, hundreds of other programs.

16 There's also an off button. Sometimes that gets forgotten.

17 Television is not the problem in our society. It may always be the scapegoat, but it's nothing more than a bastard machine, not half as disturbing as the real thing. ♦

### CONSIDERING THE ISSUES

1. Goodman states that pressuring Hollywood to change violent programming “reeks of censorship.” Do you agree with Goodman? What do you think censorship means? Are you opposed to censorship of this kind? Why or why not?
2. Do you enjoy watching violent television programs? Would you be upset if a “watchdog” group forced one of your favorite programs off the air? Explain.

### CRAFT AND CONTENT

3. Evaluate the author's use of language in paragraphs 6, 7, 16, and 17. What does it reveal about people who wish to change television programming? Is this language likely to appeal to or anger his readers? Or does the answer depend on who is reading his column? Explain.
4. What phrases does Goodman repeat in his essay? Why do you think he repeats certain words?

### CRITICAL THINKING

5. What is Goodman's opinion of parents who want to influence television programming? Do parents have a right to pressure Hollywood to change violent shows?
6. How might the other side respond to Goodman's claim that he has a right to watch violent programs if he wants to?

7. Goodman urges people to “vote with your remote.” Is changing the channel the equivalent to “voting” on what programs should air on television? Is it a solution that could work? Or is it just a catchy phrase? Explain.
8. Goodman notes that “we have always been a violent country” (paragraph 14). Does this statement justify television violence? Why or why not?

### WRITING ABOUT THE ISSUES

9. Goodman argues that if parents or other adults object to a television program, they should change the channel, or just turn off the television set. Is this a reasonable solution? Why or why not? Write about your thoughts on this issue in a short essay.
10. What is “art”? Are violent television programs, such as the ones Goodman cites (*Jackass*, *Oz*, *The Sopranos*), art? Does the claim that these programs are a form of artistic expression support Goodman’s argument? Explain.
11. Write a short essay exploring the connection between censorship and television programming. Who is likely to control the airwaves? What programs would survive, and what would be cut? Explain.

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## Television's Global Marketing Strategy Creates a Damaging and Alienated Window on the World

*George Gerbner*

George Gerbner is professor of communications and dean emeritus of the Annenberg School of Communication in Philadelphia, where he directed a number of studies of mass communications and its effects on culture. For over 30 years, Gerbner and his team of researchers have studied the role of media violence in American society. He is also a founder of the Cultural Environment Movement, which is working to reassert democratic influence on the media. This article appeared in the Spring 1994 issue of *The Ecology of Justice*, published by the Context Institute.

**CONNECTING TO THE TOPIC** 

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George Gerbner headed the Cultural Indicators project, a research team probing the issue of media violence in America. One of the most disturbing estimates made by the project is that the average American child will have watched over 8,000 murders on television by the time he or she reaches 12 years of age. But is the argument over whether television violence causes real violence missing the point? In our desire to demonstrate a cause/effect relationship between violence on television and violent behavior, are we neglecting deeper issues? Gerbner argues that the alienating culture of television has replaced other forms of communication that once tied family and community together. It erodes culture by substituting social traditions in favor of general media messaging—and often this message is one of violence. Gerbner also advocates for impartial committees to democratically vote on television content, ensuring that alternative options are available to people who do not want violent programming.

**WORDS IN CONTEXT** 

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**conglomerate:** a corporation made up of a number of different companies that operate in different businesses

**mythology:** a body or collection of stories told by a particular people or culture that reveals their origin, history, deities, ancestors, and heroes and values

**cultivate:** to promote growth

**paranoia:** unfounded or unreasonable fear; delusional beliefs without logic or reason

**pervasive:** tending to spread throughout

**empathize:** to understand another's situation, feelings, and motives

**hallmark:** mark indicating quality or excellence

**repression:** holding back or controlling

**de facto:** exercising power or serving a function without being legally or officially established

**foist:** to impose (something or someone unwanted) upon another by trickery

**levy:** a tax or mandatory fee

**subsidize:** to financially assist

**liberate:** to free

**abridge:** to curtail; to shorten

**allocate:** to designate; to set apart for a special purpose

**plurality:** state of being multiple

**monopoly:** exclusive control by one group of the means of producing or selling a product or service

**equitable:** fair; balanced

1 **F**or the first time in human history, children are hearing most of the stories, most of the time, not from their parents or school or churches or neighbors, but from a handful of global conglomerates that have something to sell. It is impossible to overestimate the radical effect that this has on the way our children grow up, the way we live, and the way we conduct our affairs.

2 People think of television as programs, but television is more than that; television is a mythology—highly organically connected, repeated every day so that the themes that run through all programming and news have the effect of cultivating conceptions of reality.

3 Violence on television is just one of the areas that causes a distorted concept of reality. Most of the violence we have on television is what I call happy violence. It's swift, it's thrilling, it's cool, it's effective, it's painless, and it always leads to a happy ending because you have to deliver the audience to the next commercial in a receptive mood.

4 Our studies have shown that growing up from infancy with this unprecedented diet of violence has three consequences, which, in combination, I call the "mean world syndrome." What this means is that if you are growing up in a home where there is more than say three hours of television per day, for all practical purposes you live in a meaner world—and act accordingly—than your next-door neighbor who lives in the same world but watches less television. The programming reinforces the worst fears and apprehensions and paranoia of people.

5 Another consequence of watching a lot of television is that one comes to believe that the violence portrayed on television is normal—that everybody does it, and that it's a good way of solving problems.

6 A more pervasive effect is that television desensitizes viewers to victimization and suffering; they lose the ability to understand the consequence of violence, to empathize, to resist, to protest.

7 The third consequence, and I think the most debilitating one, is the pervasive sense of insecurity and vulnerability. Our surveys tell us that the more television people watch, the more they are likely to be afraid to go out on the street in their own community, especially at night. They are afraid of strangers and meeting other people. A hallmark of civilization, which is kindness to strangers, has been lost.

8 That sense of insecurity and vulnerability is not randomly distributed. For every 10 violent characters on television there are about 11 victims; that's basically a tooth for a tooth. But for every 10 women who exert that kind of power—because violence is a kind of power—

there are 16 women victims, of young women there are 17; of women of color there are 22.

9 The mean world syndrome results in a reduced sensitivity to the consequences of violence along with an increased sense of vulnerability and dependence—and therefore a demand for repression from the government.

10 This has enormous political fallout. It's impossible to run an election campaign without advocating more jails, harsher punishment, more executions, all the things that have never worked to reduce crime but have always worked to get votes. It's driven largely, although not exclusively, by television-cultivated insecurity.

### **Images That Sell**

11 Why are we awash in such a tidal wave of violent imagery despite the fact that 85 percent of the people in every poll say they are opposed to violent programming and it gets lower ratings? The reason is that violent programs travel well on the global market. Since there are only a few buyers of television programs, American producers can't break even on the domestic market, so they are forced onto the world market to make a profit. When you are forced onto the world market you are looking for a formula that will travel well, that needs no translation, and speaks action in any language.

12 So many of the stereotypes and violent images are the result of the imposition of a de facto censorship in the form of the marketing formulas that are imposed on the creative people who write, produce, direct, and act in them, and many of these people in Hollywood hate it. It is also foisted on children of the world; no country likes it, it doesn't serve any of our needs, but it is driven by the existing system of global marketing.

13 Cultural decision making is now out of democratic reach. It's highly centralized and run by an invisible Ministry of Culture of people whose names we don't know, who have never been elected, and who are supported by a form of taxation without representation.

14 That taxation is the price—the levy—that is included in the price of every advertised product and is turned over to the advertiser and then to the broadcaster, the magazine, and the newspaper publisher, and subsidizes—to the tune of \$16 to 17 billion a year—popular

culture. That expenditure, which is also a tax deductible business expense, is public money channeled through private hands to serve private purposes.

- 15 That is why I call these conglomerates a private government that is as powerful as any public government and that exercises control that is out of democratic reach.

### **Reclaiming the First Amendment**

- 16 We need to liberate cultural decision-making from the censorship that is imposed on the creative people in the media by these private governments, which the current interpretation of the First Amendment shields.

- 17 I believe the First Amendment should be extended to these private governments as well as to public government. No government—private or public—should abridge the freedom of speech. The First Amendment should be extended, according to its basic and original concept, to provide alternatives, to provide diversity, to provide freedom.

- 18 These issues have been discussed in European parliaments and even in South Asian countries for many years. Every democratic country has found a way of allocating resources to maintain a sense of plurality, a sense of choice, a sense of alternatives. For example, in France there is a tax on theater admissions and video tape, which funds loans for independent production, magazines, newspapers, and television programs and motion pictures. In some Scandinavian countries, there is a law that requires government to support opposition newspapers.

- 19 Every other democratic country has advisory committees working with broadcasters or with government ministries that run broadcasting. Sometimes these committees are elected. In a number of countries, there are laws that forbid the owners and those who run the finances to dictate editorial policy or program policy.

- 20 We're the only ones who have allowed the First Amendment to the Constitution to shield monopolies instead of provide freedom. The primary objective of the media to sell goods is legitimate in a limited sphere, but it should not drive the entire culture. We have to recognize and implement the right of a child to be born into a more diverse, more fair, more sane, more equitable cultural environment. ♦

### CONSIDERING THE ISSUES

1. Before television, adults told children stories about their traditions, history, and culture as they sat around firesides, dinner tables, and on front porches. Where did you learn about the society you live in, the people in your culture, laws, traditions, and history? How important was television in informing your perspective on the world? What did it teach you? What messages are children likely to “hear” on television about their culture and society today?
2. If you were from another country and watched American television as a means to learn about American society, what do you think you would determine about American society based on prime time programming? Explain.

### CRAFT AND CONTENT

3. Evaluate Gerbner’s use of examples to support his essay’s points. How effective are his examples? Do they seem credible and/or appropriate? Are they balanced and fair? Explain.
4. Gerbner coins several phrases to describe the type of violence we see on television and its effects. What is “happy violence”? What is the “mean world syndrome”? Do you think his creation of such phrases helps him make his point? Explain.

### CRITICAL THINKING

5. What messages about violence does violent TV convey to children? According to Gerbner, what are the consequences of these messages? Explain.
6. What does Gerbner hope to achieve by writing this article? Identify areas of the essay that reveal his objective.
7. In his final section, Gerbner advocates for impartial committees to ensure that balanced programming options are available to everyone. Evaluate the quality and nature of television programming today. Is there something for everyone? Is it skewed toward particular audiences? Explain.

### WRITING ABOUT THE ISSUES

8. Conduct a media study of your own. Track the number of violent acts in children’s programming for a specific period of time, such

as during prime time or Saturday morning cartoons. Count and describe violent acts on a single network during the specified time period. Discuss the implications of your research in a short essay.

9. Review the definition of the word *mythology* given before the article. How does television construct our mythology? Write a short essay on how TV constructs our cultural mythology, referring specifically back to the definition provided. Give some examples from television programs to support your points.

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## Stop Blaming Kids and TV

*Mike Males*

Mike Males is the author of several books on media and youth culture, including *The Scapegoat Generation: American's War Against Adolescents* (1996), *Framing Youth: 10 Myths About the Next Generation* (1999), and *Kids and Guns* (2001). His articles have appeared in many journals and newspapers including the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Washington Post*. He teaches at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and is a senior researcher at the Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice in San Francisco. This article was written for the October 1997 issue of the *Progressive*.

### CONNECTING TO THE TOPIC

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Children learn many behaviors from their parents. This connection between children and parents is as old as the human race and is usually universally accepted. However, in the debate over kids and violence, the connection between parents and children is often overlooked in favor of placing the blame on television and the media. Could the home actually be more responsible for children's violent behavior than television? Do children learn violent behavior mostly by watching their parents? How responsible are parents (and elders) for youth violence today?

### WORDS IN CONTEXT

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**exploitative:** manipulative; influencing for one's own gain

**mogul:** a rich or powerful person

**conservative:** traditional; opposing change; associated with the political right

**progressive:** promoting or favoring progress toward new policies, ideas, or methods; associated with the political left

**elicit:** to draw out; to provoke

**counterpart:** that which closely resembles another thing of similar form or function

**inherently:** having as an essential characteristic or quality

**candor:** frankness; openness

**perfidy:** calculated violation of trust; treachery

**impolitic:** unwise

**malleable:** easily controlled or influenced

1 **“C**hildren have never been very good at listening to their elders,” James Baldwin wrote in *Nobody Knows My Name*. “But they have never failed to imitate them.” This basic truth has all but disappeared as the public increasingly treats teenagers as a robot-like population under sway of an exploitative media. White House officials lecture film, music, Internet, fashion, and pop-culture moguls and accuse them of programming kids to smoke, drink, shoot up, have sex, and kill.

2 So do conservatives, led by William Bennett and Dan Quayle. Professional organizations are also into media-bashing. In its famous report on youth risks, the Carnegie Corporation devoted a full chapter to media influences.

3 Progressives are no exception. *Mother Jones* claims it has “proof that TV makes kids violent.” And the Institute for Alternative Media emphasizes, “the average American child will witness . . . 200,000 acts of [TV] violence” by the time that child graduates from high school.

4 None of these varied interests notes that during the eighteen years between a child’s birth and graduation from high school, there will be fifteen million cases of real violence in American homes grave enough to require hospital emergency treatment. These assaults will cause ten million serious injuries and 40,000 deaths to children. In October 1996, the Department of Health and Human Services reported 565,000 serious injuries that abusive parents inflicted on children and youths in 1993. The number is up four-fold since 1986.

5 The Department of Health report disappeared from the news in one day. It elicited virtually no comment from the White House, Republicans, or law-enforcement officials. Nor from Carnegie scholars, whose 150-page study, “Great Transitions; Preparing Adolescents for a

New Century,” devotes two sentences to household violence. The left press took no particular interest in the story, either.

6 All sides seem to agree that fictional violence, sex on the screen, Joe Camel, beer-drinking frogs, or naked bodies on the Internet pose a bigger threat to children than do actual beatings, rape, or parental ad-dictions. This, in turn, upholds the doctrine that youth behavior is the problem, and curbing young people’s rights the answer.

7 Claims that TV causes violence bear little relation to real behavior. Japanese and European kids behold media as graphically brutal as that which appears on American screens, but seventeen-year-olds in those countries commit murder at rates lower than those of American seventy-year-olds.

8 Likewise, youths in different parts of the United States are exposed to the same media but display drastically different violence levels. TV violence does not account for the fact that the murder rate among black teens in Washington, D.C., is twenty-five times higher than that of white teens living a few Metro stops away. It doesn’t explain why, nationally, murder doubled among nonwhite and Latino youth over the last decade, but declined among white Anglo teens. Furthermore, contrary to the TV brainwashing theory, Anglo sixteen-year-olds have lower violent-crime rates than black sixty-year-olds, Latino forty-year-olds, and Anglo thirty-year-olds. Men, women, whites, Latinos, blacks, Asians, teens, young adults, middle-agers, and senior citizens in Fresno County—California’s poorest urban area—display murder and violent-crime rates double those of their counterparts in Ventura County, the state’s richest.

9 Confounding every theory, America’s biggest explosion in felony violent crime is not street crime among minorities or teens of any color, but domestic violence among aging, mostly white baby boomers. Should we arm Junior with a V-chip to protect him from Mom and Dad?

10 In practical terms, media-violence theories are not about kids, but about race and class: If TV accounts for any meaningful fraction of murder levels among poorer, nonwhite youth, why doesn’t it have the same effect on white kids? Are minorities inherently programmable?

11 I worked for a dozen years in youth programs in Montana and California. When problems arose, they usually crossed generations. I saw violent kids with dads or uncles in jail for assault. I saw middle-schoolers molested in childhood by mom’s boyfriend. I saw budding teen alcoholics hoisting forty-ouncers alongside forty-year-old sots. I also

saw again and again how kids start to smoke. In countless trailers and small apartments dense with blue haze, children roamed the rugs as grownups puffed. Mom and seventh-grade daughter swapped Dorals while bemoaning the evils of men. A junior-high basketball center slept outside before a big game because a dozen elders—from her non-inhaling sixteen-year-old brother to her grandma—were all chain smokers. Two years later, she'd given up and joined the party.

12 As a result, teen smoking mimicked adult smoking by gender, race, locale, era, and household. I could discern no pop-culture puppetry. My survey of 400 Los Angeles middle schoolers for a 1994 *Journal of School Health* article found children of smoking parents three times more likely to smoke by age fifteen than children of non-smokers. Parents were the most influential but not the only adults kids emulated. Nor did youngsters copy elders slavishly. Youths often picked slightly different habits (like chewing tobacco, or their own brands).

13 In 1989, the Centers for Disease Control lamented, “75 percent of all teenage smokers come from homes where parents smoke.” You don’t hear such candor from today’s put-politics-first health agencies. Centers for Disease Control tobacco chieftain Michael Eriksen informed me that his agency doesn’t make an issue of parental smoking. Nor do anti-smoking groups. Asked Kathy Mulvey, research director of INFACT: “Why make enemies of fifty million adult smokers” when advertising creates the real “appeal of tobacco to youth?”

14 Do ads hook kids on cigarettes? Studies of the effects of the Joe Camel logo show only that a larger fraction of teen smokers than veteran adult smokers choose the Camel brand. When asked, some researchers admit they cannot demonstrate that advertising causes kids to smoke who would not otherwise. And that’s the real issue. In fact, surveys found smoking declining among teens (especially the youngest) during Joe’s advent from 1985 to 1990.

15 The University of California’s Stanton Glantz, whose exposure of 10,000 tobacco documents enraged the industry, found corporate perfidy far shrewder than camels and cowboys.

16 “As the tobacco industry knows well,” Glantz reported, “kids want to be like adults.” An industry marketing document advises: “To reach young smokers, present the cigarette as one of the initiations into adult life . . . . The basic symbols of growing up.”

17 The biggest predictor of whether a teen will become a smoker, a drunk, or a druggie is whether or not the child grows up amid adult addicts. Three-fourths of murdered kids are killed by adults. Suicide and

murder rates among white teenagers resemble those of white adults, and suicide and murder rates among black teens track those of black adults. And as far as teen pregnancy goes, for minor mothers, four-fifths of the fathers are adults over eighteen, and half are adults over twenty.

18 The inescapable conclusion is this: If you want to change juvenile behavior, change adult behavior. But instead of focusing on adults, almost everyone points a finger at kids—and at the TV culture that supposedly addicts them.

19 Groups like Mothers Against Drunk Driving charge, for instance, that Budweiser's frogs entice teens to drink. Yet the 1995 National Household Survey found teen alcohol use declining. "Youths aren't buying the cute and flashy beer images," an in-depth *USA Today* survey found. Most teens found the ads amusing, but they did not consume Bud as a result.

20 By squabbling over frogs, political interests can sidestep the im-politic tragedy that adults over the age of twenty-one cause 90 percent of America's 16,000 alcohol-related traffic deaths every year. Clinton and drug-policy chief Barry McCaffrey ignore federal reports that show a skyrocketing toll of booze and drug-related casualties among adults in their thirties and forties—the age group that is parenting most American teens. But both officials get favorable press attention by blaming alcohol ads and heroin chic for corrupting our kids.

21 Progressive reformers who insist kids are so malleable that beer frogs and Joe Camel and Ace Ventura push them to evil are not so different from those on the Christian right who claim that *Our Bodies, Ourselves* promotes teen sex and that the group Rage Against the Machine persuades pubescents to roll down Rodeo Drive with a shotgun.

22 America's increasingly marginalized young deserve better than grownup escapism. Millions of children and teenagers face real destitution, drug abuse, and violence in their homes. Yet these profound men-aces continue to lurk in the background, even as the frogs, V-chips, and Mighty Morphins take center stage. ♦

### CONSIDERING THE ISSUES

1. How much violence or angry behavior did you witness in your family and community environment as a child? What impact, if any, did it have on you?
2. Males questions the claim by conservatives and progressives that television influences children's violent behavior. Consider

the things that influence children's behavior in addition to television. Make a list of these factors and rank them in order of what you feel has the greatest and least influence. Where does television fall in your list?

### **CRAFT AND CONTENT**

3. In your own words, explain Males's quote from James Baldwin, "Children have never been very good at listening to their elders. But they have never failed to imitate them." How does this quotation support his argument?
4. Are you convinced by Males's argument that parents are the number-one source of violent behavior in children? What evidence or facts does he offer to convince you of his points? Do you agree with him? Why or why not?

### **CRITICAL THINKING**

5. Despite the public outcry that America's teens are undergoing a violence crisis, Males cites several studies that claim the contrary. In your opinion, are America's youth indeed facing a crisis in youth violence? Are we overreacting? If so, what drives this perception that youth are out of control?
6. Males uses the example of teen smoking to support his argument on television and youth violence. Is this example parallel? What similarities exist between teen smoking behaviors and violent behavior in children? Explain.

### **WRITING ABOUT THE ISSUES**

7. Males claims that juvenile violence is not due to television and media violence. Instead, he asserts that violence begins at home—that is where children learn to react to violence. Develop an essay where you illustrate the truth of Males's argument using an example you experienced or witnessed in your own childhood.
8. Males goes against the status quo by arguing that television is not to blame for violent behavior in children. Write a response to this article, addressing each of Males's primary points. You may support or question his viewpoint.

## VISUAL CONNECTIONS

### Through the Eyes of a Child

These drawings come from the book *Helping Young Children Understand Peace and War* (1985) by Diane Levin and Nancy Carlsson-Paige. (See the second article in this chapter for more information on Diane Levin.) Nancy Carlsson-Paige is a professor of education at Lesley University and the author of *Best Day of the Week*, a children's book about conflict resolution. She has coauthored (with Diane Levin) several books, including *Before Push Comes to Shove: Building Conflict Resolution Skills with Children* (1998). Together, they have consulted on a number of projects for public broadcasting, including the "Ready to Learn About Conflict" project.

#### CONNECTING TO THE TOPIC

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Diane Levin observed in her book *Teaching Young Children in Violent Times* that "art and play allow children to work out what they've heard or seen about war and violence." Children will often draw what they don't want to talk about. Or they may inadvertently reveal what they are feeling in what they chose to draw and how they draw it. For example, while they may remember to draw a sun in the sky—a visual device common in children's drawings—they may depict the sun frowning. Sometimes it can be something or someone missing from the picture, such as a father or mother after a recent divorce or death. For many children, art can be a powerful tool for working out feelings about war and violence.



### CONSIDERING THE ISSUES

1. Think back to the types of pictures you drew as a child. If you were not told what to draw, what types of pictures did you prefer to sketch? What colors did you like? Drawing tools? Subject matter? What do you think your pictures might have revealed about your state of mind?
2. Do you think art is a good way to help children work out their feelings? Explain.

**CRITICAL THINKING**

3. Take a look at these two pictures and analyze what is happening in each. Try to imagine what each child was thinking when they drew these pictures. What elements, if any, do you find surprising?
4. If you were a parent and your child brought home one of these pictures from school, how would you respond? Would you discuss the images with the child? What would you say?
5. Ask a child under the age of eight to draw a happy moment in his or her life, and a sad or scary one. After they have finished the pictures, try to analyze them, without first speaking to the child. Then, ask the child to describe in his or her own words what is happening in the drawing. How accurate were you in your interpretation of the drawings? Did anything the child said surprise you? Did you learn anything about child psychology through this exercise? Explain.

**TOPICAL CONNECTIONS****GROUP PROJECTS**

1. Prepare a questionnaire for your peer group that tests some of the claims made by the organizations and authors in this section. You could develop a survey on the connection between aggressive children and television violence. Or whether parents have a right to demand changes in television programming. Or whether the general public feels that children's television programs are too violent. Carefully consider and discuss the questions you will ask in order to get reliable information and feedback, and then evaluate the results.
2. Many television programs feature violent heroes. In fact, an entire genre based on violent heroes has developed to feed consumer demand for such programming. With your group, develop a list of programs that feature a specific violent hero or heroes. How many of these programs appeal to children? Discuss the

appeal of these programs and what effects, if any, they might have on young minds.

### **WEB PROJECT**

3. There are several nonprofit organizations that focus on increasing public awareness of media violence. Visit the Media Awareness Web site at [www.media-awareness.ca/english/issues/violence/violence\\_debates.cfm](http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/issues/violence/violence_debates.cfm) and review the debate on media violence. Write an essay explaining your view on the issue of media violence using examples from the information provided on the Media Awareness Web site and its linked articles.

### **FOR FURTHER INQUIRY**

4. Several authors in this section mention that violent programs can influence children to act violently themselves, or to imitate what they see on TV. In several court cases, violent media (television, film, music) has been blamed as the reason why some young people have committed violent crimes. Research this issue in greater depth. What programs have been blamed for violent behavior? Is there any merit to the accusation that violent television programs and movies influence young people? Write a research paper exploring this topic.

