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Violence and Suffering in Television News: Toward a Broader Conception of Harmful Television Content for Children

Juliette H. Walma van der Molen, PhD*

ABSTRACT. Traditionally, the public and professional debate about the inappropriateness of media violence for children focuses mainly on the negative effects of violence in entertainment programming. However, since the terrorist attacks on September 11th and the recent coverage of the war in Iraq, the suitability of real-life news violence for children may be doubted more than ever. To draw attention to the potential harmful effects of violence presented in news programs, it is argued in the present article that health care professionals should advocate a broader conception of media violence than thus far has been used. On the basis of recent research, potential effects of violent news content, such as fear, aggression, and desensitization, are discussed and recommendations are provided on how to abate these outcomes.

Television news is filled with violence and suffering. Local news, which is widely used by Americans, is often found to overemphasize brutal crime and to rely heavily on sensational presentations of violence. In addition, analyses of the major network newscasts have shown that crime and violent world events are among the most frequently covered topics. Much of the major national and international news content of the past few years, such as the school shootings, the Oklahoma City bombing, kidnappings of children, reports of ethnic cleansing in Yugoslavia and Kosovo, terror in the Middle East and African countries, the September 11th attacks, and, most recently, “operation Iraqi freedom,” contained elements that could well affect children, either because they involved victims or situations that children could easily identify with or because they provided recurring and sometimes even glamorized images of weapons and war.

Although most television news programs are clearly not intended for a child audience, children depend heavily on television for their knowledge about news events and they watch more news broadcasts than many parents and other caregivers might think they do. Most children in the highest grades of elementary school watch the news at least several times a week and even many 3- to 8-year-olds regularly watch television news. Many older elementary school children claim that they watch the news because they find it important to stay informed, but even if children do not choose to watch the news themselves, they still are frequently confronted with it when they are looking for other programs or when their parents are watching. Survey research has shown that about one quarter of US children have a television set in their own bedroom and that in a substantial number of homes, television is turned on all day. With the rise of television channels and Internet services that broadcast news around the clock and with the growing practice of interrupting other television programming to report on “breaking news stories,” children of all ages thus may be regularly confronted with highly distressing and violent accounts of murders, catastrophic accidents, war, and other suffering.

It is interesting, however, that the enormous amount of public concern and research effort that has been directed at the prevalence of media violence and at the harmful effects that it may have on children thus far largely has ignored the regularity of real-life violence depicted in television news. For example, the large-scale content analyses of media violence that were specifically aimed at detecting harmful television content for children all excluded from their analyses broadcast news programs. Second, the legislative proposals that have been put forward to protect children from violent media content all disregard television news. Thus far, there has been no serious discussion about prohibiting television news during “family viewing hours” or about providing a warning before news programs. In addition, the television parental guidelines (V-chip ratings), which were the result of the 1996 Telecommunications Act, are not applied to news and sports programs. The American Academy of Pediatrics is one of the most active professional organizations when it comes to focusing public attention on unhealthy media environments for children and on advocating media education. Nevertheless, in its publications, the American Academy of Pediatrics thus far also focused primarily on preventing the harmful effects of fictional violence. Although that focus should be continued, it should be supplemented with a more in-depth discussion of the potential negative outcomes of real violence portrayed in news programs.
POTENTIAL EFFECTS

Research suggests that realism is an important contextual feature of media violence. Studies have shown that more realistic portrayals of violence may heighten levels of involvement and aggression, immediate fright reactions, fear of the world as a scary place, and desensitization, particularly in older, school-aged children, who are able to distinguish the real from the unreal on television. Given the inherent realistic nature of news violence and given other researchers’ observations that television news is becoming increasingly sensational and graphic, there is reason to assume that violence in television news has the same impact on children as violence portrayed in fictional television.

Thus far, a handful of studies have specifically investigated the harmful effects that violence portrayed in news broadcasts may have on children. Some of these studies investigated children’s reactions to specific events, such as the explosion of the Challenger, or children’s reactions to news coverage of the first Gulf War. These studies revealed that many children experienced fairly strong and enduring emotional reactions as a result of their exposure to these news contents. In addition, studies of children’s emotional reactions to news about the September 11th terrorist attacks showed that the majority of children experienced profound stress reactions, even if they were not geographically affected by the attacks, and that in some cases these disturbances could lead to posttraumatic stress disorders. Apart from these investigations, several recent studies have shown that the harmful effects of news content are not limited to major catastrophic incidents. In general, these studies indicated that many elementary school children sometimes experience fear in reaction to regular news, such as reports of crime, natural disasters, and “ordinary” plane or traffic accidents, and that 10% to 20% of the children described their feelings as intense to very intense.

Although all of the above-mentioned studies showed that violence in television news may affect a considerable proportion of the child audience and could lead to serious health effects for certain subgroups of children, their investigations were limited to the effect of violent news content on children’s direct frights and their fears of being victimized. It could be that reactions such as stress, frights and worries, and associated effects such as sleep disturbances or nightmares are the most prevailing negative effects of violent news consumption. However, other important effects that are usually associated only with violent entertainment content are conceivable as well.

First, short-term aggressive behavior, which is fostered by arousal processes and imitation of violence, could be encouraged by violent news portrayals, especially when news pictures show sensational images of weapons and actually occurring violence. In addition, frequent watching of news programs that overemphasize crime, terror, and war could enhance long-term observational learning of violent schemas or scripts. As has been found for fictional violence, news presentations that are skewed toward violence could encourage people to believe that the world is a hostile place. As a consequence, children could get the impression that violence is a justified means to protect oneself or to resolve conflict. Last, on the basis of the various studies that have demonstrated desensitization effects after repeated exposure to dramatized violence, frequent viewing of real-life violence in news programs could also make young viewers less sensitive to other people’s distress and more accepting of violent behavior.

Despite the evident importance of teaching children to become critical viewers of violence in entertainment programs, health care professionals and parents thus also should emphasize the potential negative effects of real violence portrayed in news programs. To understand fully such harmful news contents, however, we should adopt a broader conception of media violence than thus far has been used in the debate about fictional violence.

TOWARD A BROADER CONCEPTION OF MEDIA VIOLENCE

The vast amount of research that investigated the prevalence and harmful effects of mediated violence is based on a definition of (fictional) media violence that encompasses the threat, actual use, or physically harmful consequences of violent behavior that is committed by individuals and that is deliberately intended to inflict harm on animate beings. Especially in the case of news content, one needs to conclude that such a notion of violence is too narrow, because it excludes 1) the emotionally harmful consequences of violence; 2) all accidents and natural disasters; 3) any violence that is related to political or economic structure, for which no individual perpetrator can be discerned (eg, war and hunger); and 4) violence directed at inanimate objects or property (eg, vandalism, plundering).

In the case of news content, including the emotionally hurtful outcomes of violence is important because news practitioners are often unable to witness an actual violent event and therefore supplement their stories with images of the physical or emotional results of the violent incident. Because research has shown that not only the physical consequences, such as blood or dead bodies, but also the emotional results, such as people screaming or crying, may seriously affect children, both types of consequences should be included when identifying harmful news content for children. Showing the harmful consequences of violence may have different effects. On the one hand, it may increase fear reactions, especially when children identify with the victims. On the other hand, however, the conveyance of realistic harm and pain cues may decrease aggression and desensitization in children.

When looking at the nature of violence, unintended and structural violence could not be disregarded when identifying harmful news content for children. The traditional restricted focus on intentional harm probably lies in the fact that studies on fictional violence were predominantly linked to the
effects of media violence on aggression. However, when other conceivable effects such as immediate fear, fear of being victimized, or desensitization are considered, it is likely that unintended violence, such as accidents or natural disasters, and structural violence, such as war and human suffering, also affect children. For example, studies on news-induced fright reactions have shown that children of 7 to 8 years of age are almost as frightened by fires and accidents as they are by intended interpersonal violence. In addition, the most recent events related to the second Gulf War underscore the importance of including war and suffering into a conception of media violence. Apart from leading to general fear reactions, images of war could increase aggression in children, especially when actual violent incidents are conveyed without showing the harmful results of those actions. For example, the novel practice during several of the army attacks in Iraq of filming ongoing violence with cameras that were positioned on military vehicles could contribute to the glorification of violence and weapons.

Finally, when looking at the target of violence, it seems reasonable to include not only violence that is directed at animate beings but also violence that is directed at inanimate objects or property. It is interesting that vandalism was not included in previous notions of harmful media content. However, it is conceivable that, apart from frequent viewing of interpersonal violence, repeated exposure to vandalism enhances aggression and desensitization, because it may increase imitation of destructive behavior and could make viewers more accepting of such conduct.

**PREVENTION AND REASSURANCE**

Step by step, as children grow up, they should be made aware of problems in the world around them. Although children may get information about human or political crises from different sources, the news media are their main resource for such knowledge. On the positive side, the news media thus provide special children's news shows, there is no nationwide daily news program that makes the main news comprehensible to young viewers. In several...
European countries, such a program does exist. Especially in the United Kingdom and The Netherlands, the public broadcasting cooperatives have >20 years of experience with producing a highly professional 15-minute news program that is broadcast daily in the early evening hours for children aged 8 to 12. Both programs are linked to their adult counterparts, and although they also present special children’s topics, most of their time is devoted to covering the main national and international news events. Thus, unavoidably, the children’s news covers violence and crime. However, to offset possible harmful effects of violent news topics, the producers usually apply several “consolation strategies.” For example, they ask experts to explain the events in a reassuring manner, they avoid overt graphic film footage, and they do not use additional set or background sounds, such as people screaming or melodramatic music. Research has shown that most British and Dutch children prefer to watch the special children’s news shows, that they learn much from the information presented, and that they are less negatively affected by violent news presented in these programs than by presentations of the same news in programs that are intended for an adult audience.7–10

Finally, pediatricians could promote research into the harmful effects of violent news presentations. Thus far, little to no research attention has been paid to the influence of violent news content on important issues such as 1) children’s admiration for weapons and violence, 2) their ideas about violence as a justified means to resolve conflict, 3) their estimates of the amount of violence in real life and estimates of their chance of becoming a victim, 4) their habituation and desensitization toward violence, or 5) their coping with fears and worries induced by violent news content. These issues warrant interdisciplinary attention of media researchers, developmental psychologists, and health care specialists. Unlike most researchers in other disciplines, pediatricians are able to translate scientific results directly into functional advice.

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RANDOM AND NONRANDOM SEQUENCES

“In the first day of class in his course on probability, Professor Hill asks students to do an experiment. If their mother’s maiden name begins with A through L, they are to flip a coin 200 times and record the results. The rest of the class is asked to fake a sequence of 200 heads and tails. Hill collects the results the following day, and within a short time he is able to separate the genuine from the fake with 95 percent accuracy. How does he do that? Any sequence of 200 genuine coin tosses contains a run of 6 consecutive heads or 6 consecutive tails with a very high probability. On the other hand, people trying to fake a sequence of coin tosses very rarely believe that they should record such a sequence.”


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