

The Dangers of Media Violence¹

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Violence in television programs and movies viewed by children and juveniles can be expected to be harmful for fundamental psychological reasons rarely touched upon in the public debate. Developing minds, particularly in children from the ages of 4 to 5 years and through puberty, form lasting mental models that embody understanding of what the world is about, how it works, and what is normal and permissible behavior. The clarity of these models is a function of the degree of exposure. As the child observes real or fictitious situations and episodes, he compares the observations with existing mental models (prior knowledge) and reinforces, expands, or revises them to form an ever-expanding set of concepts, expectations, and responses in the form of routines, scripts, and schemas to deal with the world. When the child repeatedly observes situations of a similar nature (violent behavior, for example), the mental models of such situations are reinforced, and very importantly, associations are constantly strengthened between the mental models of these situations and the responses that are observed as being typical.

A major issue with the mental models we develop during our formative years is that they are very difficult to unlearn. Early understandings and expectations will often guide our behavior later in life in spite of later having obtained what should count as better insights. A powerful example is “naive physics” which shows that early misunderstandings often are not reversed, even after college level physics courses. Another critical issue is that as we become more familiar with particular behaviors (i.e., after repeated exposures), we find them to be more acceptable -- even permissible and desirable -- as responses to situation types in whose contexts they have been observed. A third issue is that the more familiar we are with a situation type (i.e., the stronger our associations are), the more automatic is our response. When associations are very strong, we tend to react without reflection.

When the child -- or later, as a juvenile or adult -- is confronted with any situation, he relies on his library of mental models to interpret the situation and decide how to handle it. Selection of the mental model that will guide the situation is primarily based on the strength of the associations -- i.e., the number and intensity of exposures to similar situations, real or fictitious. Given a gun and a strong confrontation, he will point and shoot -- just as he has seen many a time on TV -- without a second thought.

From this model of how our minds build knowledge and use it to direct our future behavior, the issue of television violence becomes one of crucial importance. By watching television during the formative years, the average child is exposed to thousands of episodes with problem situations that depict acts, motives, and general behaviors that nobody in their right mind would prefer that people should adopt in real life. Yet, by repeatedly exposing viewers to this material, we make them build and accept mental models, expectations, and perspectives that will guide their behavior.

Given this understanding, it becomes crucially important to provide our children with stimuli which build the desired kinds of mental models and models of permissible behavior. We must prevent excessive exposure to violence -- in the media or in reality -- and to whatever we as parents or guardians would consider unethical, immoral, or undesirable behavior or role models. As research shows, it is a myth that children -- or adults for that matter -- can screen out and ignore such exposure from future reference.

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