

# TV Violence and Kids: How Much of a Concern Is It Really?

by Matthew Doll, PhD, Psychologist

“Mean guy.” I was caught. Flipping through the channel one afternoon while my 3-year-old son was in the room I momentarily (less than 60 seconds, honest) paused on Braveheart. The face paint, weapons and combat caught his attention with what must have been unimaginable color and intensity compared to his Barney world. But what can it really hurt? My children are the third generation of T.V. kids. We don’t have a long line of violent offenders in our family (never convicted anyway) and we all watched TV. It can’t be all that bad, can it? I mean how much Barney can you take? As a psychologist, of course, I immediately recognize this as one of the many justifications we all use, those small and big excuses that help us to feel okay about things even when we know they really *aren’t* okay. When I ask myself what the benefit is, the lesson I want to teach, the reason for having children watch TV or play video games, then I have to admit, more often than not there is no plan other than complacency or boredom with what would be of benefit to them. Sure signs of my own video heritage.

If you take nothing else from this article remember this point: No one wants to believe that TV affects our thinking and behavior – we all think we are somehow immune to its influence (then why is advertising a billion dollar business?). However, the scientific data on TV’s influence is very clear. Six medical organizations including the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Medical Association released a joint statement on the impact of media violence on children. They stated that studies point *overwhelmingly* to the fact that media violence *causes* aggressive attitudes, values and behaviors in some children. Negative effects include:

- seeing violence as an effective way of solving conflicts
- becoming desensitized to violence (it no longer bothers them)
- viewing the world as a violent and mean place
- developing a greater tendency for violent and aggressive behavior later in life

Experts have suggested that the link between media violence and aggressive behavior is stronger than the evidence linking smoking to lung cancer! So why aren’t more parents and professionals protesting and actively intervening in children’s exposure to media violence (TV, Video, Internet, and Electronic Games)? Because we still use justifications, or those little excuses, to tell ourselves that it’s not all that bad. Read on.

***How bad is it really?*** Violent media negatively impacts on the developing brain, emotions, and the developmental tasks of childhood. It hinders the development of appropriate social and emotional reciprocity (the give and take of a relationship). When watching TV alone or for long time periods, children do not benefit as they would from social interaction, because with media violence, the events unfold in front of them. There is no teaching of social skills, no pro-social wiring of the brain, only emotional numbing and eventual desensitization to violence. Nice. But wait, that’s not all. Children as young as 14 months imitate the violence they see on TV. Children between ages of 8 and 12 appear to be particularly sensitive to television violence as are children with emotional, behavioral, learning or impulse control problems. Violent media exposure increases the chance that children will endorse aggressive attitudes, act violently immediately after exposure and demonstrate aggressive behavior in school. When faced with stressful situations they are more likely to use aggressive and angry responses. Children who identify with aggressive heroes are more likely to be aggressive themselves. They learned that violence is effective, courageous, socially acceptable and rewarded. ***On top of that, visual electronic media (VEM) has also been linked to obesity and consumerism.***

***But TV is educational, right?*** The average young children watch 2 to 4 hours of TV per day. They will have watched 4000 hours of TV before entering kindergarten (they really should be ready for college at that pace, don't you think?). By the end of elementary school they will have seen approximately 8000 murders and 100,000 other acts of violence on TV. They are exposed to 20 to 25 acts of violence per hour on Saturday morning kids TV. Sixty percent of the cartoons and children's shows contain violence. Ask yourself whether the occasional useful thing your child may have learned from watching TV, balances all of these negatives. The benefits of "educational TV" quickly fade away in light of what our children are exposed to during the majority of TV watching time. So what can we do to prevent more damage? Consider the following suggestions:

- ***Turn the TV off.*** Studies have shown repeatedly that a significant amount of aggressive and disruptive behavior is actually decreased when TV viewing is eliminated or greatly reduced. Yes, the house is noisier; yes, you have to supervise the children more; yes, they create strange games and laugh and yell and make a bigger mess. But they also experience you, each other, and work out the needed tasks of growing and developing. You will create memories and a shared experience that will last a lifetime. How many times have you heard a child say "Remember that time we sat together and watched that show?" vs. "Remember that time we played, you read, we went to..." Before you give in to frequent and easy media use, think, "What is the benefit?" "How will this help my child?" It is such a short time that they are children, it is really a shame to miss it. It is definitely "must see" programming and one program you do not want to miss. It is not the same on reruns.
- ***Remove TV sets from children's bedrooms permanently.*** Also, arrange the family living room furniture so that the TV is not the focal point. Turn the TV off during conversations and meal times.
- ***Do not use TV as a reward or punishment*** because both make TV more important to children.
- ***Set limits on TV watching.*** The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends limiting TV time to 1 to 2 hours per day on school days and 2 to 3 hours a day on weekends and holidays. Limit preschoolers to no more than 1 hour of TV per day. Do not have children under 2 watch TV.
- ***Make the successful completion of homework a requirement prior to television viewing.*** If children have academic difficulties, decrease their viewing time to one hour or less a day.
- ***Plan viewing ahead of time*** and discuss reasons for proving or disproving shows (so much for channel surfing). Preview programs whenever possible. Forbid shows with graphic violence.
- ***Use children's videos and movies instead of TV shows.*** This way, you have a better chance to carefully choose, preview, and limit what they are watching, there is a consistent storyline for them to think about, and it's not interrupted by commercials!
- ***Watch shows with your children*** to help them interpret what they see. Watch their mood, and discuss their reactions. When watching commercials ask how they think they are "getting sucked in."

Children benefit greatly from reducing their use of VEM, and increasing family activities that foster adult-child interaction, focusing on problem solving, turn taking, emotional sharing, the five senses and creativity. VEM induced changes in behavior and mental processes are reversible. The least expensive and simplest intervention is for families to turn off the TV and play together. In rare cases where parents are resistant to this suggestion, it may indicate their own discomfort with intimacy. The possibility exists that their parents placed no limits on TV and they were themselves overexposed as children. They may have a decreased capacity to tolerate the demands of their own children.

Once the TV is off, children often become interested in books again, as well as board games, puzzles, coloring, or helping to prepare dinner. Reading books and talking to parents really do occur when the TV is off, and children really do like the attention. Why not try it tonight?