

Children's Television

There is considerable community concern about media violence and its effects on children. **Margot Prior**, Professor of Clinical Psychology, La Trobe University, examined the debate when she addressed the conference 'What stores are we telling our children' in Melbourne, August 1994. This is an abridged version of her address.

Media violence, children and

It is all rather fuzzy. On the one hand parents, teachers, and professionals are saying, we are worried about this, please do something about it, we don't want our children to become more violent and we don't want an increasingly violent community. On the other hand other professionals, media producers and other figures of authority are saying, you don't really need to worry, there are no clear demonstrated effects of media in increasing violence in children or in the community, I watch violent television and it doesn't affect me, and our homicide rate hasn't gone up anyway.

How are we as a community to make sense of these conflicting views?

Let me give you a summary of the evidence on this topic, then ask the question why should we be concerned about the issue. Finally I will make

some suggestions about what we should do in future.

The evidence

I will concentrate on television influences because that is the area where there is most research. I believe that the comments I make may be reasonably extrapolated to current influences such as movies, video and video games, including some computer games. I won't even bother to debate whether the community diet of various kinds of media violence is excessive. The evidence is there on our national screens every single day.

There have been more than a thousand papers published on the effects of media on behaviour. There have been studies in many countries of the world. Generally, the evidence converges to the conclusion that there is a consistent relationship between television violence viewing and subsequent aggressive behaviour. This has been shown in prospective longitudinal field studies such as those of Eron, Huesmann and colleagues. It has also been shown in laboratory investigations.

Children who watch violent episodes show increased likelihood of behaving aggressively after the viewing, and there are cumulative effects of a diet of violence over time. Heavy consumers grow up to be more aggressive than light consumers. US research has shown that the effects can cross generations as heavy violence consumers grow up to be aggressive and raise children who show similar patterns. In other words, there is a strong cultural transmission of the effect.

The associations hold up under a variety of experimental conditions and procedures and with differing kinds of measurements. Laboratory studies have shown that aggressive or prosocial behaviour can be induced by particular television presentations. The effects are not really in doubt.

There have been many debates about whether the effects are causal, and a number of studies designed to assess this question. These again converge to suggest that it is likely that the effect is causal not just correlational.

However, although the relationships between media violence and human behaviour are not trivial by comparison with other sociocultural influences, they are relatively weak. That is, not a great deal of the variance in aggressive behaviour can be explained by violence viewing.

This should not surprise us since human behaviour is multiply determined, and violence viewing is only one of a myriad of influences which impinge on the growing child. There are important moderating effects on this relationship between exposure to media violence and aggressive behaviour. These include parental attitudes and reactions to aggression in their children and the individual predispositions of the child. There is also the way the material is translated by the child into cognitive scripts about acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, and here parents have a particular influence in the ways that they talk to their children about what they see. I am talking here about what it is that children learn and internalise from what they see on the television. I am also talking about:



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- the child's intelligence, academic ability, aggressive behaviour, communication skills and problem solving abilities when faced with conflicts in personal interactions;
- the amount and kinds of punishment parents use to socialise their child; the models parents

critical so that if a pattern of aggressive behaviour is established by mid to late primary school it is likely it is likely to remain a dominant characteristic of the child and to prejudice long term adjustment.

Aggressive behaviour is a way of obtaining

aggressive behaviour

provide of aggressive versus prosocial behaviour; and

- the gender of the child and the gender role stereotypes in our society which they absorb from an early age.

This list could go on.

There has also been research aimed at understanding the mechanisms of the effects. Those identified include:

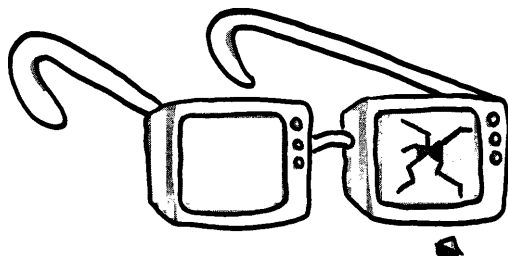
- increases in physiological arousal,
- decreases in inhibitions against antisocial behaviour,
- increase in negative mood states, activation of aggression related information in memory, learning and modelling of violent behaviours, and
- decreases in sensitivity to violence and its effects.

It is not hard to see how these mechanisms can contribute to an increase in the propensity for aggressive behaviour as a consequence of violence viewing.

It is important to emphasise that the effects of violent viewing are cumulative, i.e. each episode adding on to each previous episode so that the more the worse the effect.

Aggressive behaviour

It has also been argued that there are particular ages during which children are most vulnerable especially to the long term effects. Aggressive



behaviour is learned very early and it is very stable. It has a strong relationship with violence in adolescence and adulthood and with poor psychosocial adjustment. The early years are

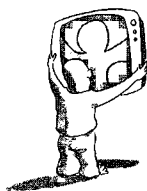
gratification and solving interpersonal problems very early in life. Some learning experiences need to be interrupted if we want a less aggressive society. We also know that some children and adults will act out in real life the scripts that they see on their televisions with occasional dire consequences.

However if the effects of television violence viewing are relatively weak at the individual level because of the complex nature and diversity of influences on behavioural development, should we be shouting for some action from the purveyors of this diet?

I would say emphatically yes for two reasons.

Firstly, we must consider the social effects on populations. A diet of violence and a promotion of aggressive reactions to conflict contributes to a general social culture in which such behaviour is acceptable, normative, inevitable and scarcely remarkable. It can lead to an increase in the general level of violence in the community because it is so pervasive an influence and because we accept that this is the way things are and will always be. We have to decide as a community whether this is really the way we want to be, or whether we should be proactive in demanding alternatives.

Secondly, consider the issue of individual differences and vulnerabilities. Many people will argue that we do not have a problem here because most individuals do not go out of their lounge rooms and act out violent scripts in society. This is true. If it were not we would have mayhem. But, some of them do. That is, there exists a population of at risk individuals whose levels of anger, aggression and antisocial tendencies are already quite high — for whatever reason. Such individuals preferentially feed on media violence which cumulates in its influence. Research has shown that this preference for watching violent media, in combination with existing tendencies to aggressive and antisocial behaviour, is what produces the highest levels of aggressive behaviour both concurrently in childhood and in the longer term into adult life. A vivid example of this was seen last year in the



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case of the murder of the Bulger child by two 11 year olds. In this case it appears that a combination of predisposing factors, including previous antisocial behaviour and some influence of violent video watching, were influential in creating a situation in which these very high risk children could engage in such horrifying behaviour.

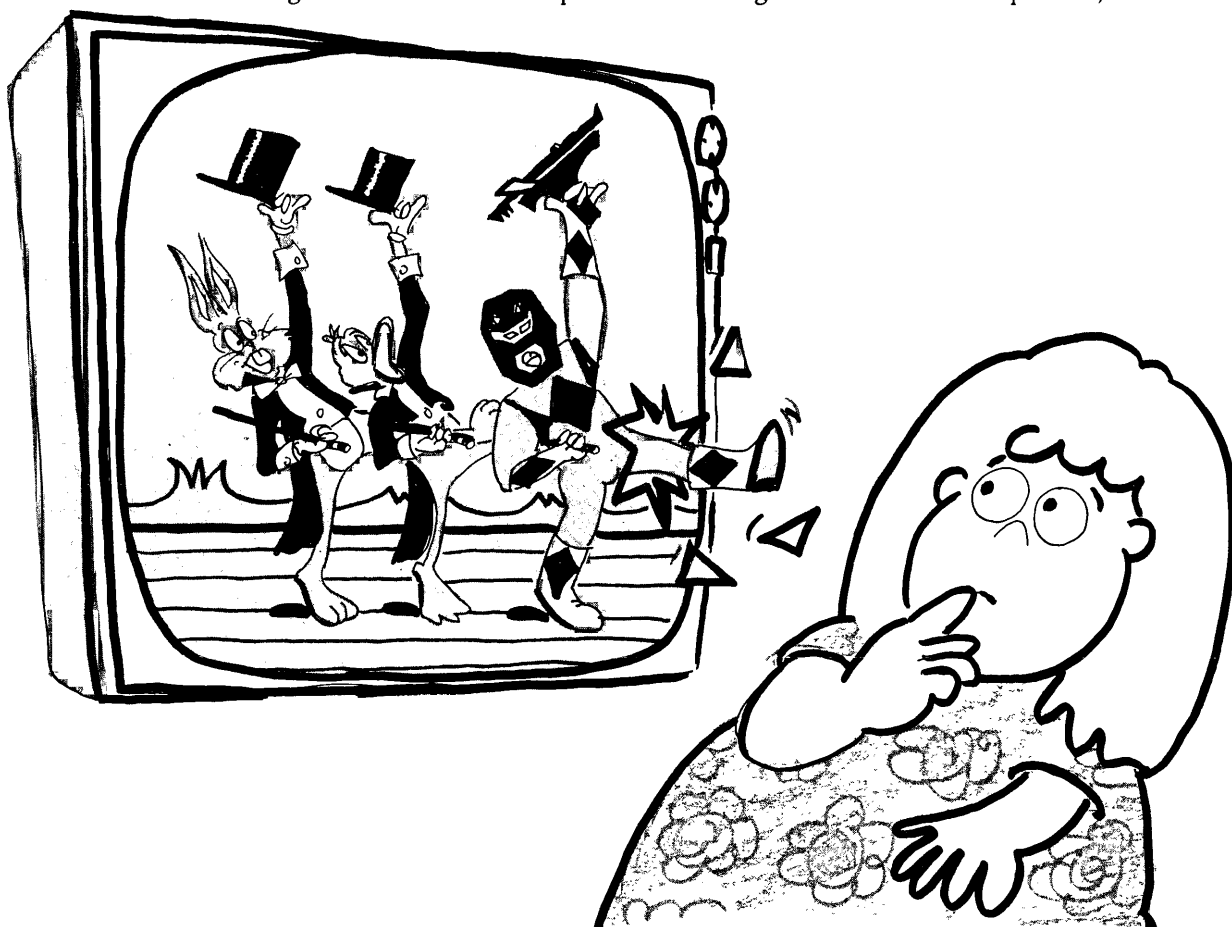
I want you to know that there are numerous children in our society who have these at risk characteristics, perhaps one or more in every classroom. It seems a reasonable proposition that we should modify our social climate to reduce the number of risk factors in the lives of these children and their families, and that media violence should be one target for our intervention. Of course this will not solve the problem of the number of antisocial children in our society, we need much more broad scale intervention to do this especially at the family level. But imagine the lives of some of these at risk children. Their parents provide models of aggressive behaviour, often using harsh but inconsistent punishment.

of learning or prosocial behaviour in their children. The television may be, for these children, a major and powerful source of the learning of attitudes and behaviour as they sit in front of it for many, many hours each week.

Cumulation of risk

There are bidirectional effects here. Aggressive children prefer violent media which then stimulates and feeds their aggression and provides them with models of behaviour which they take out into the world and try. Television is a powerful teacher. And nobody is providing them with alternative ways of being.

So there is a question for us as a society. Do we censor media violence in order to try to reduce the risk of these individuals to become violent, to act out what they see, and to prolong cycles of violence in families and in the community? What is best in the public interest. I think my first point might take care of this question, i.e. there is



They themselves watch and applaud media violence, they pay little attention to their children's television diet (or indeed often little attention to what their children are doing at all, and there is not a great deal of nurturing or encouragement

public as well as individual good in reducing exposure to and acceptance of aggressive behaviour.

What can we do? ☐