Media violence and youth

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In the wake of the Port Arthur massacre, the political and media spotlight has fallen, yet again on the role of media violence in violent crime. The Prime Minister has set up a ministerial inquiry, and opinion polls are showing that the majority of the community favours stricter curbs on violent images (Newspoll in *The Australian* 14/5/96).

Just what is the research saying about the impact of media violence on society?

It is clear, from social science research over 40 years, that media violence contributes in significant ways to violence in society. While it may not be the single most important contributor, it may be the one that we can do most about.

The research will not tell us much about the role of violent media in tipping deranged individuals over the edge, though there are well documented instances where such persons have used techniques learnt from films. The effect of violent media in those cases may not be statistically significant, but is certainly socially significant.

Our biggest concern should be with the long term effects on children and adolescents. Well documented evidence has accumulated that we put this group at considerable risk from continued exposure to a violent media environment.

The most recent of such research is the National Television Violence Study, US (Mediascope, 1996). This ongoing study was commissioned by the US National Cable Television Association. A consortium from the University of California at Santa Barbara, and the Universities of North Carolina, Texas and Wisconsin was given complete freedom in its review of the literature, and content analysis of US TV programs.

The Study reports that repeated exposure to media violence puts the young at risk in three ways. Firstly, they show increased violence towards others (and may develop an aggressive behavioural 'script'), secondly, increased callousness to violence, and thirdly, increased fearfulness. The NTVS study also examines the types of materials that are the most problematic, and their location.

The media environment of Australian children has plenty of violence ('violence' meaning 'serious acts of aggression intended to physically harm or kill'). It includes the early morning violent toy-based cartoon shows on TV, the sometimes grossly graphic early evening news services and the 8.30pm block-buster movies. There's overly easy access to MA and R rated violent home videos, and for good measure, the blast-'em-away video and computer games.

There are practical steps that we can take to reduce media violence levels, and the long term risks to children.

Firstly, we should take note of the findings of the NTVS report about the importance of context in determining which types of media violence portrayals pose most problems. The report identified nine contextual factors that make some TV depictions more risky. Those that pose the greatest risk for the learning of aggression, feature an attractive perpetrator who is motivated by morally proper reasons, who engages in repeated violence that seems realistic, is rewarded, and employs conventional weapons. Risk for desensitisation is increased by violence that is repeated or extensive, and that is depicted as humorous. Fearfulness is increased by violence directed at a likeable target, that seems unjustified, that is extensive and realistic, and goes unpunished.

These findings should cause us to reflect on the appropriateness of criteria related to violence, presently used to classify TV programs, and films, video and video games. These currently place more emphasis on content, than influential 'contexts' as identified by the NTVS.

Access and availability are key issues in the violence debate.

M rated movies screening on TV at 8.30pm, are watched by many children. The home video hire system poses some particular problems. MA and R rated videos are not legally available to under-16 year olds. But they get them relatively easily, and they can be replayed repeatedly. Similar problems apply to computer games. Whose rights should prevail - children's for protection or adults' to see ...?

The V-Chip has been touted as one solution. It offers parents the ability to block out unwanted V for Violence TV programs. It's a long term 'middle class' solution for those who can afford to buy a new set (in several years time), or a 'black box' to sit on the TV, and are able to keep the PIN number from their kids. There are better and more immediate remedies.

While we're waiting for the production industry to produce more programs that avoid or deal more constructively with issues of violence, parents need to be aware of the risks at different ages and stages for their children. Politicians and regulators must fine tune our classification system, and set up systems to monitor levels of violence in the media environment. ❑