

Violence and the Electronic Media

Their Impact on Children

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(This article originally appeared in the Fall 1993 issue of the Waldorf Kindergarten Newsletter and was revised in February 1996. Information about the newsletter and other publications of the Waldorf Kindergarten Association of North America may be obtained by writing to Lydia Roberson, 1359 Alderton Lane, Silver Spring, MD 20906)

For years people have spoken about the relationship between violence on television and aggressive behavior in children. There was a strong assumption that there was a relationship even if it was not officially recognized, and many parents explained that they did let their children watch television, but “never anything violent.” Indeed, it has been quite an effort to help parents see that it is not only violent television that has a negative impact on children, but all media viewing. Watching Sesame Street, with its 40 or 50 short takes, is as much an attack on the senses of the young child as watching a cartoon that averages 25 acts of violence per hour.

Popular wisdom about violence on TV was threatened a few years ago when headlines everywhere featured a study that found no relationship between violence on the television and violent behavior. Many of us were stunned by the publicity given to this study, compared to the little notice paid to hundreds of studies showing a relationship between violence and TV. One could almost hear a collective sigh of relief in the land as people thought that children could watch violent programming without effect.

It seems that that study and its headlines marked the low point of a trough from which we are emerging. In complete contrast to the news of a few years earlier, headlines in June 1993 spoke of Senate hearings in Washington and Los Angeles that revealed strong and appalling links between violence on the screen and violence in real life. Then an excellent article entitled “Screen Violence is Killing Us” appeared in *Harvard Magazine* (Nov./Dec. 1993).

The article began by reminding us of those halcyon days of the 1950s that appeared so peaceful that the release of films like *Blackboard Jungle* and *Rebel Without a Cause* shocked the nation. Could there really be such violence in the safe and prosperous United States? Forty-five years later, the United States is considered very unsafe. The national homicide rate, when corrected for population growth, has increased 100 percent during these 4 decades, and in some cities it is much higher. In 1953 there were 130 homicides in Detroit; in 1992 there were 726. During that same span of years, the population of Los Angeles County doubled while homicides grew from 82 to 2,512! Clearly we are in a very different era than we were in the 1950s, and homicides are only part of the picture. Throughout America there is a general level of fear regarding violence, and that fear leads to a great many social difficulties as lines tend to become more clearly drawn between races and among economic groups.

One could write books on all the factors that contribute to such a growth of violence, for there is never a single cause of such a tremendous social change. There can be no doubt that the vast changes in home life and the greater prevalence of drug use alone are significant factors, and there are many other factors such as the decline of educational quality and the lack of values presented in schools and elsewhere. But we must not forget that in the 1950s the world of television was just beginning. My memory of programming at that time was that it was fairly tranquil. Cartoons were silly, but not particularly violent. Superman appeared, but he was a fairly tame character compared to the superheroes who followed. There has been a

steady escalation of violence in programming and a steady growth in violence in the streets, and the experts are now saying that this is not a coincidence. There is a relationship that cannot be ignored.

Among the many studies cited in the Harvard article, a particularly extensive one was done by Dr. Brandon Centrowell of the University of Washington's Department of Epidemiology and Psychiatry. He viewed the increase in violence as a modern epidemic and approached it like any other epidemic, trying to isolate causes. He did a comparative study of the United States, Canada and South Africa. In the first two countries television entered in 1945; in South Africa it was not permitted until the mid-1970s. The study paid attention to similarities and differences in the three countries and took these into account. In South Africa an effort was made to eliminate the effect of racial tensions by looking at homicide rates only in the white population. Taking all these factors into account, the results were quite startling:

Homicide rates in Canada and the United States increased almost 100% between 1945 and 1970. In both countries TV-set ownership increased in almost the same proportion as the homicide rate. In South Africa... the (white) homicide rate had been in gradual decline between 1945 and 1970. When the government allowed TV in 1975, the homicide rate (again, white only) exploded, increasing 130 percent by 1983 after decades of decline. The statistical implication is that TV is a cause of violence. (page 42)

Especially interesting here is the conclusion that TV itself is a cause of violence, not only the violence on TV. The experience of Waldorf educators is that this is a justified conclusion, for TV watching -whether it is Sesame Street or the Ninja Turtles - has an effect on the children that could best be described as a stripping away of children's natural protection, which leaves them very vulnerable. In this state of vulnerability children feel themselves under attack, and the more aggressive ones will lash out, often for no apparent reason. I had such a fellow in my kindergarten. In his play he always identified enemies, be they sharks, monsters or other children, and fortified himself and attacked them. Gradually, as TV was minimized in his life (unfortunately, it was never eliminated), his play became more social and less aggressive. However, several times during the year he visited his grandparents for a week at a time, where the TV was on most of the time. He came back in full attack mode. At such times he would push children down on the playground, and he would say to me, "They were going to hurt me," yet I could see no signs of the other children having any such intent. The TV watching itself left him with a strong sense of insecurity and excessive vulnerability. He reacted with aggression, and it is easy to imagine this projected into adolescence as real violence. The problem is compounded for youngsters already under stress because of difficult life situations. They can be pushed right over the edge by the continual bombardment of television images, especially violent ones.

Although television violence is not the only contributing factor to violence in society, it is regarded as one that could be corrected more easily than widespread poverty, joblessness, drug use and other social strains. From the media's point of view, this is unfair thinking, and studio heads are growing very concerned about their First Amendment rights. We do not live in a country in which one can simply ban violence from the screen, but the public can become much more cognizant of its effects and find ways to shield children from it. For example, there is now talk about rating shows so that parents are forewarned about violent content, in a manner similar to the ratings for movies. It will soon be possible to program televisions so that no shows with certain ratings can be viewed. In this way parents can again begin to exercise control over their children's television viewing, a control that had generally been relinquished to children in recent decades. It is only a partial solution to the media problem for children, but perhaps this first step will give some parents the courage to take further steps in curtailing viewing for their children.

What is the actual situation with media violence and how it affects children? To begin with, the incidence of violent programming varies, and there have actually been some positive changes made by the leading networks. In a survey of programming, an activist organization, the Center for Media and Public Affairs,

found that there was less violence than expected in prime time adult shows among the major networks. Indeed, their rate was not much higher than public television, which had always had a reputation for non-violent programming. This meant an average of two or three acts of violence per hour, which is considered good - although for those of us who are not regular viewers even this seems like an unnecessary and even dangerous level of violence. It is a sad commentary on a society that it considers programming to be positive and healthy if it shows only two or three acts of violence each hour.

There were two areas of great concern in the survey mentioned above. One is that the bulk of violence on the networks is found in children's programs. Cartoons and toy commercials register an astonishing 25 violent acts per hour. This is reminiscent of a remark made by Joseph Chilton Pearce in his recent book, *Evolution's End*:

A major television filmmaker asked me to consult on a series for children, supposedly designed to stimulate development of imagination. The film company had already signed with sponsoring toy companies who stipulated the "usually sixteen acts of violence per hour" (otherwise, the rationale goes, children lose interest). The filmmaker's concern was how to incorporate that much violence into the programming without having it affect the child. I quietly bowed out.¹

The other area of concern is that on non-network programs the rate of violence is much higher. A number of cable stations, including MTV and HBO, range from 13 to 19 acts of violence per hour in adult viewing. The adult appetite for violence on the screen is enormous, as evidenced by the body count in recent popular films. Robocop II had a body count of 81, Rambo III had 106 and Die Hard had 2,264. One reads statistics such as these and sees modern adults as having a huge hunger for sensation that is satisfied only with more and more gore and violence. The gentler sensations of life cease to appeal or satisfy, and this pattern begins in childhood.

One parent quoted in the Harvard article was Alan Marcil, a TV and movie producer. He was shocked when his three-year-old watched a Ninja Turtle film and proceeded to punch his sister, something he had never done before. He also began kicking and attacked the piano with a hammer. Now he makes weapons out of all sorts of toys. For this father, the worst aspect of the situation is the change in his son's TV watching appetite. "He used to like Mister Rogers and Sesame Street, but he's not interested in these shows anymore. I turn them on and he wants something futuristic, with lots of violent action."

Following the Congressional hearings little more was heard about violence and media in the general press. However, at the beginning of 1996 this situation again changed when, during his State of the Union address, President Clinton pointed to a relationship between violence in the United States and violence in the media. Within two weeks articles began to appear and public radio interviews indicated that serious work was taking place in the offices of President Clinton and Vice President Gore.

At the same time, a report was issued about a massive study of the effect of media violence on children and adults. The headline in the Washington Post of February 6, 1996 announced, "Study Finds Real Harm in TV Violence." The \$1.5 million study was funded by the cable television industry and carried out by four universities. It concluded that "psychologically harmful violence is pervasive on broadcast and cable TV programs." Of special concern to the researchers was the fact that in 73 percent of acts of violence, perpetrators of violence went unpunished. Financial and emotional consequences were shown only 16 percent of the time, whereas 47 percent of violence was portrayed with no harm to victims and 58 percent depicted no pain. The overall message that violence causes little pain or harm and rarely calls for punishment seems to be permeating the country. This is not just a problem for children, of course. Violence is carried out by adults who seem powerfully influenced by media, a fact well known to every

advertiser. Whereas media could be used as a means of encouraging nonviolent alternatives in solving problems, only four percent of programs focused on this.

Meanwhile, within Waldorf kindergartens we have seen many children affected by media and violent programming. What reaches them and helps to heal them? There is no single answer, but what many teachers have found is that real work is a key to the healing process. One example is a child who was described by his teacher as being completely addicted to superhero play. Nothing that she or his parents did could break the hold of the superhero on this child. One day, however, his carpenter father had to take the boy with him to his job site, where he and others were building a house. For safety's sake, the child had to sit on the roof of their van so that he wouldn't play near the power tools in use, and the father expected him to be quickly bored. Instead, the child sat in rapt concentration for hours, watching the workers build the house. After this the spell of the superheroes was broken, and he began to engage in new, healthier play.

All young children have a hunger for meaningful will activity, as well as opportunities for healthy artistic expression. When we offer real work in the kindergarten, whether it is threshing and grinding the grain for bread, churning the butter we need, carving toys or sewing them, scrubbing a room from top to bottom for spring house cleaning, or dozens of other real work activities, we fill a space in the child that is often left empty in our modern, technological homes and communities. Where the healthy will is not developing, the unhealthy will comes into being, and violence can be seen as a manifestation of the unhealthy will.

In addition, children need beautiful sense experiences. They are a form of nourishment. Again, where there is a vacuum the children will seek coarser sensory stimulation such as they find on the screen. To see an artistic table puppet play or marionette play is one way to feed the hungry senses. To engage in watercolor painting or beeswax modeling is another. To meet this need, some kindergarten teachers have been experimenting with painting several times a week for a few months, rather than once a week, in order to bring a stronger experience to children in need of healing. Others work regularly with marionettes, recalling Rudolf Steiner's indications that the marionette theater was a "remedy against civilization's ills."²

Such life activities have always been part of the home, and it is a major problem for young children that on the one hand they spend very little time in the warmth of their own home, and on the other that the modern home is not a very warm place to be. The image of families sitting around the table in conversation is rapidly disappearing although such moments are as important for today's children as they were for past generations.

Furthermore, work in the home is done with so many machines and so much machine noise, that it is no longer a pleasure to work together on household chores. Human interaction is receding while electronic media and machines predominate. An example often given by working mothers is that they come home and need to cook dinner quickly. The children are hungry and will start fighting if not fed soon. Thus, there is no time to let children help with the cooking, and they are often banished to the television room so that the mother can work undisturbed. It would be far better to give a small, healthy snack to stave off hunger and take time to change clothes and cook the meal in a relaxed family atmosphere. Then the children gather near, the older ones helping or working on homework, the little ones helping or playing at the mother's feet, and the atmosphere of hearth and home fills the family. In such an atmosphere media have little to offer and the child's addiction to them is easily overcome. In addition, when the will of the child flows towards the work of the home, it is much easier to transform the patterns of aggressive and violent behavior.

Today's problems of electronic media and violence could be overcome with sufficient understanding of the nature of the child and the nature of such media. The two are basically incompatible. Having such media in the home is like having a liquor cabinet. Most adults have liquor in the home and most know how to use it moderately - but they do not allow their children free access to it. Media are the same. They are part of our modern life, and most adults will want to use them, but one hopes they will do so with moderation, and not indulge in viewing that over stimulates their lower nature. For children, however, exposure to media can be likened to exposure to alcohol, tobacco or drugs. Their developing body is simply not ready for it, and media have a negative long-term effect on the child at many levels - in the nervous system and the senses, in the acquisition of language and reading skills, in developing social skills, and much more. At the moment, it is wonderful that the United States is focusing on the problem of violence in the electronic media. A next step is to understand the effect of all media on the development of children, and encourage families and schools to radically curtail their usage. A final step is to bring healing to those children who have been damaged by them so that they have a chance to grow up to become healthy active human beings.

There is a growing movement among parents to turn off the TV, and this is being encouraged by an organization that sponsors a TV-turnoff week, when families across the country turn off their televisions and find alternative activities. For more information, contact TV-Free America at 1322 18th Street NW, Washington, DC 20036. Phone 202-887-0436. They have prepared a packet of organizing materials for those interested. The cost of the packet is \$5.

Notes

¹ *Evolution's End* Harper San Francisco, 1992, page 240

² *An Overview of the Kindergarten* Waldorf Kindergarten Association, page 43.