



# **Encyclopedia of Children, Adolescents, and the Media**

## **Aggression, Television and**

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Since its introduction to American society at the 1939 World's Fair, television has become an integral part of nearly every home. Since 1985, about 98% of all households in the United States have owned at least one television set. It is estimated that there are more television sets in the United States today than there are toilets. TV ownership is also very high in most other industrial countries and even in many third world countries. There are not only more TV sets today than ever before, they are also on longer—more than 7 hours per day in most American homes. A large share of television programming contains violence, and researchers have found that TV violence increases aggression in both the short run and the long run. The effect is found among both children and adults.

### **Content Analysis of TV Programs**

Part of the National Television Violence Study in 1996, 1997, and 1998 included a comprehensive content analysis of more than 8,000 hours of television programming. Violence on television was defined as “any overt depiction of a credible threat of physical force or the actual use of such force intended to physically harm an animate being or group of beings.” The analysis revealed that about 60% of programs contained violence. Fewer than 4% of the violent programs contained an antiviolence theme. Violence portrayed on television is often glamorized, sanitized, or trivialized. Nearly 40% of the perpetrators of violence were “good” characters. Even when the perpetrators of violence were “bad” characters, more than 40% went unpunished. Almost 75% of the perpetrators of violence showed no remorse for their actions. More than half the victims of violence showed no pain or suffering. Only 15% of the violent programs portrayed the long-term consequences of the violence for the victim's family, friends, and community. Even though more than half the violent scenes on television were lethal, more than 40% of them were portrayed as humorous.

### **Effects of Televised Violence on Aggression**

For more than 50 years, social scientists have investigated the effects of televised violence on aggression and violence. *Aggression* is typically defined as any behavior intended to harm another person. *Violence* is typically defined as a severe act of physical aggression, such as an assault. Thus, all violent acts are aggressive acts, but not all aggressive acts are violent.

### **Short-Term Effects**

Experiments provide the best test of the short-term effects of TV violence on human aggression. Some experiments are conducted in a laboratory, and some experiments are conducted in a more natural setting (called a *field experiment*). In a typical laboratory experiment, participants are randomly assigned (by the flip of a coin) to watch a violent or a nonviolent TV show. Because participants are randomly assigned to groups, the same number of aggressive people who watch violent shows should watch nonviolent shows. The researcher treats the two groups the same, except for the show they watch. After the participants watch the show, the researcher measures how aggressively they behave. In laboratory experiments involving children, the aggressive behaviors tend to be somewhat mild (e.g., pushing and shoving another child). In field experiments with children, the aggressive behaviors tend to be stronger (e.g., fighting in hockey games). In laboratory experiments involving adults, participants often punish

another person (actually an accomplice of the researcher) using electric shocks or loud blasts of noise delivered through headphones.

The consistent finding is that participants who watch violent TV shows behave more aggressively immediately afterward than do those who watch nonviolent TV shows. The effect of TV violence on aggression occurs regardless of gender, race, income, intelligence, or chronic aggressive tendency. Because these are experimental studies, we can conclude that exposing viewers to TV violence *causes* them to behave more aggressively in the short run.

### **Long-Term Effects**

Longitudinal field studies provide the best test of the long-term effects of TV violence. A major issue in this type of research is whether watching violent TV increases aggression or whether aggressive children choose to watch more violent TV. However, the research indicates that the violent TV increases aggression. For example, in a longitudinal study by Eron, Huesmann, Lefkowitz, and Walder (1972), the correlation between boys' exposure to TV violence at age 8 and their aggression at age 18 was .31, whereas the correlation of age 8 aggression with age 18 exposure to TV violence was about zero. In a 15-year longitudinal study conducted by Huesmann, Moise-Titus, Podolski, and Eron (2003), the correlation between a child's exposure to TV violence at age 8 and aggression 15 years later was significant for both men and women, even after controlling for level of aggression at age 8. High television violence viewers at age 8 were much more likely to have abused their spouses and perpetrated acts of serious physical aggression than were low television violence viewers. Similar effects have been found in longitudinal studies conducted in other countries, such as Finland, Poland, and Israel.

In summary, longitudinal field studies have shown that children who grow up watching a lot of TV violence are likely to behave more aggressively later in childhood, in adolescence, and in young adulthood. This finding holds up even if one controls for differences in initial aggressiveness, intellectual functioning, and social class. The bottom line is that, on average, TV violence is making our children behave more aggressively in childhood, and the aggressive habits they learn from TV in childhood carry over into adolescence and even young adulthood.

### **Effect Size**

The entertainment industry claims that the effect of TV violence on aggression is so small that the risks to society and its members are negligible. However, Bushman and Anderson (2001) found that the effect of TV violence on aggression is larger than many other effects that people accept as indisputable facts, such as the effect of asbestos on cancer, the effect of lead poisoning on mental functioning, or the effect of secondhand smoke on lung cancer. A study by Bushman and Cooper (1990) found that the effect of TV violence on aggression is about the same size as the effect of alcohol on aggression. Thus, the size of the effect is substantial rather than trivial.

- violence and aggression
- effects of violence
- aggression
- television violence
- violence

- longitudinal study
- effect size

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See also

- [Aggression, Movies and Media Exposure](#)
- [Movies, Violence in Television Violence](#)
- [Television Violence, Susceptibility to Violence, Effects of](#)

### Further Readings

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