Does Exposure to Media Violence Promote Aggressive Behavior?

Instructions:
1. Read both the pro and con side of this article.

2. Type out the answers to the questions below. Your answers should take approximately one to two pages, double-spaced.

3. Be aware that everyone will be expected to make at least one comment in class. Consequently, you may want to take additional notes on the article or write down some on the points that you think are important to make during the debate.

Questions:
1. According to Signorelli, what is the research evidence supporting the claim that violence in the media causes aggression? Make certain to discuss the evidence from experimental, longitudinal, and meta-analytic studies. Relying upon information from both articles, what are the relative strengths of each of these three types of research designs in answering this question?

2. What does Signorelli claim about who is affected by media violence?

3. What are Freedman’s criticisms of research in this area?

4. Which author’s points did you find more compelling and why?
Does Exposure to Media Violence Promote Aggressive Behavior?

YES: Nancy Signorielli, from Violence in the Media: A Reference Handbook (ABC-CLIO, 2005)

NO: Jonathan L. Freedman, from Media Violence and Its Effect on Aggression: Assessing the Scientific Evidence (University of Toronto Press, 2002)

ISSUE SUMMARY

YES: Professor of communication Nancy Signorielli asserts that research supports the position that media violence affects viewers by fostering aggression, causing desensitization to violence, and promoting fear.

NO: Psychologist Jonathan L. Freedman argues that the scientific evidence does not support the notion that exposure to TV and film violence causes aggression, desensitization, or fear.

In recent years, video games have caught the attention of the public because of various reports about violent and sexually explicit imagery contained in products sold to young people. The debate about the potential impact of exposure to aggressive or sexually explicit media has raged for decades, with social critics expressing great concern about the impact on movies and television shows in which violence has become almost normative. The question has been raised about whether such imagery desensitizes viewers, and possibly even promotes a tolerance for the most unacceptable of interpersonal behaviors.

Nancy Signorielli asserts that there is a large body of research that delineates three ways in which media violence may affect viewers; she contends that exposure to such imagery fosters aggression, desensitizes viewers to violence, and causes people to develop a "mean world syndrome" in which they come to believe that the world is a scary place. Signorielli discusses research that points to the fact that exposure to media violence leads to aggressive behavior in children, teens, and adults.

Jonathan L. Freedman claims that scientific evidence does not support the notion that exposure to media violence leads to aggression in children or adults. Freedman contends that far fewer than half the research studies have found a causal connection between exposure to media violence and aggression, and that the research may be interpreted as showing that there is no causal effect. Freedman points out other factors relevant to this debate, such as the major decline in violent offenses over the past 10 years, the notion that violent media may just be exciting and arousing to people, that the impact of exposure to real violence hasn't been sufficiently considered, and that several of the studies conducted on media violence and its effects on aggression are methodologically flawed.

POINT

• Numerous controlled laboratory studies provide strong evidence that there is a causal relation between seeing violent media portrayals and the expression of subsequent aggression in children's behavior.

• Researchers have documented some compelling findings about childhood exposure to media violence and the development of aggression several years later. One longitudinal study of boys found that the amount of violence seen on television at age 8 was related to aggressiveness at age 18, as well as involvement in antisocial behavior (fights and spouse abuse) and criminal acts at age 30.

• In many representations of media violence, there is a lack of adequate context, as well as a failure to convey the message that "crimes do not pay." This may transmit the lesson that violence is not necessarily dealt, and that those characters who commit violence are not sorry for their actions and they may not be punished for their transgressions. These messages could lead viewers, especially children, to learn and even accept aggressive behaviors.

• Exposure to media violence may cause desensitization; that is, viewers may become less sensitive to the violence they see and thus become willing to tolerate a more violent society.

• Research shows a solid and consistent base of evidence supporting the relationship between watching media violence and subsequent aggressive behavior for children, teens, and adults.

COUNTERPOINT

• When considering laboratory experiments, there is an important difference between violent and non-violent media, in that violent media are generally more arousing and exciting. People who are aroused by provocative imagery tend to perform any activity more strongly than those less aroused. Thus, when viewers of violent films punch a punching bag more vigorously, this does not necessarily reflect heightened aggression.

• The pattern of evidence from research fails to support the hypothesis that exposure to media violence at a young age causes aggressive behavior later in life. Longitudinal and cross-sectional studies have produced more non-supportive results than supportive ones.

• Films and television programs that contain violence are not designed to convey the message that violence is good or that people should engage in violent acts. They do not contain information that is likely to convince anyone of anything; they do not contain explicit messages that favor aggression or violence. They are just entertainment. So it should not be surprising that they have no effect on aggressive behavior or on attitudes toward violence.

• There is little or no evidence for a desensitization effect, and there is some evidence that directly contradicts it.

• Perhaps it is not exposure to fictional media violence, but rather exposure to real-world violence that children, as well as adults, may then imitate.
What We Know about Media Violence

Who Is Involved?

... Any discussion of the amount of violence on television must examine the characters who are involved in violence—those who do the hurting and killing or are hurt and killed. CI [Cultural Indicators project] has shown that television violence illustrates and provides lessons about power. Violence shows who’s on top and who’s on the bottom, who gets hurt and who does the hurting, and who wins and who loses. These studies consistently find a power structure related to character demographics, with earlier studies showing women and minorities more likely to be hurt than to hurt others.

Research in the CI tradition consistently shows that during prime time, men are more likely than women to be hurt (victimized) or hurt others (commit violence) (Signorilelli 1990). There have been some changes in these patterns, however, in the past thirty-five years. In the programs of the 1980s, men were slightly less likely to be involved in violence than in the programs of the 1970s. Fewer characters still were involved in violence between 1993 and 2002 (Signorilelli 2003). Only one-third of the major and supporting characters were involved in violence during that period, and although more men than women were involved (38 percent of the men, compared to 27 percent of the women), whites and minorities were equal likely to be victimized or commit violence (about a quarter of both whites and minorities). During the 1990s, the ratios of hurting to being hurt changed from the patterns seen in the 1970s and 1980s for women but not for men. Today, for every ten male characters who hurt or kill, eleven are victimized, the same ratio found in the earlier analysis. For women, however, instead of sixteen women being victimized for each woman who hurts or kills, the odds are even—women are equally likely to hurt or kill as to be hurt or killed. Moreover, although whites are a little more likely to be victimized than hurt others, the odds for minority characters are even.

Although the NTVS [National Television Violence Study] did not generate a profile of all characters on television, it did examine the demographic characteristics of perpetrators (those who commit) and targets (victims) of violence. Most of the perpetrators (close to three-quarters) were men; only one in ten was a woman. Few perpetrators were categorized as heroes, and most were white. Similarly, most of the targets were men (71 percent)—only 10 percent were women—and most were white (Smith, et al. 1998). W. James Potter and colleagues (1995), in looking at a composite week of evening programming (6 PM to midnight) on four networks, also found that television typically presents an unrealistic picture of serious aggression in regard to the nature of those who commit the acts as well as those who are victimized. In short, television over-represents both white perpetrators and white victims of aggression. Although the study by Potter and colleagues, the NTVS, and the CI reports differ in how they isolate characters’ involvement in violence, the patterns are similar—more men than women and more whites than minorities. Similarly, studies conducted in the United Kingdom found that women were much less likely to be involved in violence and that the onscreen time devoted to female violence was considerably less than that devoted to male violence (Gunter et al. 2003).

Overall, it appears that the consensus of findings from studies of media content indicated that contemporary television programs may not adequately support or reinforce the lesson that “crime does not pay.” The lack of adequate contexts for violent behaviors may transmit the lesson that violence is “sanitary,” that it is not necessarily immoral, and that those characters who commit violence are not sorry for their actions and may not be punished for their transgressions—in short, there are few, if any, consequences for committing violence. From a social learning perspective, these messages could lead viewers, particularly children, to learn and even accept aggressive behaviors. Thus, the environment of violent entertainment in which many people, including children, spend most of their free time may be potentially harmful. Moreover, television’s lack of realistic contexts for violence may signal that aggression and violence are acceptable modes of behavior.

How Media Violence Affects Us

There are numerous ways media violence affects us. Potter (2003) differentiates effects that are immediate or short-term from those that are long-term. Researchers, including John Murray (2003) and Potter (2003), further delineate three ways in which media violence may affect viewers: fostering aggression, becoming desensitized to violence, and becoming fearful. Each of these effects, in turn, may have both short- and long-term consequences.

Aggression and Aggressive Behavior

One of the biggest concerns about media violence is that exposure to violent images will result in aggression and aggressive behavior. There is a sizable body of research that supports this position. Although there is some disagreement with this statement, the number of researchers in this camp is rather small, and some have ties to the broadcast industry. The strength of the evidence led the American Psychological Association (1985) to conclude that one factor in the development of aggressive and/or antisocial behavior in children...
is a steady diet of real and/or mediated violence. Similarly, the 1982 report by the National Institute of Mental Health concluded that children and teens who watch violence on television tend to exhibit more aggressive behavior. The research evidence on which these conclusions were based comes from experimental studies, longitudinal studies, and meta-analyses (a particular type of analysis that simultaneously compares the statistical results from a large number of existing studies on the same topic).

Some of the earliest research on mediated violence was experimental in nature and found that filmed or televised (mediated) images affected behavior. Glenn Ellis and Francis Sekya (1972) and O. Ivar Lovas (1961) found that children exposed to media violence behaved aggressively shortly after seeing violence. Another study comparing violent and prosocial (positive messages) programs (Stein and Friedrich 1972) found that children who saw positive or prosocial programs (e.g., Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood) increased their helping behaviors, whereas those who saw violent images behaved more aggressively. Overall, numerous studies have found a causal relation between seeing violent portrayals and later aggressive behavior. L. Rowell Huesmann and Laurie Miller conclude: “In these well-controlled laboratory studies there can be no doubt that it is the children’s observation of the scenes of violence that is causing the changes in behavior” (1994, 163).

Another strong line of evidence of long-term effects comes from studies conducted over several years (longitudinal studies), specifically the research of Leonard Eron and L. Rowell Huesmann. One study of young boys begun in the 1970s in New York state that was able to control for intelligence quotient (IQ), initial levels of aggressiveness, and social class found that the amount of violence seen on television at age eight was related to aggressiveness at age eighteen, as well as involvement in antisocial behavior (fights and spouse abuse) and criminal acts at age thirty (Huesmann and Miller 1994). Similar results were found in samples of youngsters in Chicago as well as children from other countries, including Finland, Poland, and Israel. These studies found that more aggressive children, compared to less aggressive children, watched more television, preferred programs that were more violent, and perceived mediated violence as closer to real life. The most recent study in this tradition (Huesmann, Moise-Titus, Potoñski, and Eron 2003) found that watching violence, identification with same-sex aggressive characters, and a perception that television violence is realistic were related to adult aggression, regardless of how much aggression was exhibited as a child.

A particularly interesting and important longitudinal study (Joy, Kimball, and Zabrack, 1986) was conducted in the late 1970s in three communities in Canada as part of a larger study by Tannis MacBeth (formerly Williams). While vacationing in Canada, MacBeth visited an area in which a new and more powerful transmission tower was being built that would have a major impact on television reception in the area. One town located in the valley, Notel, would receive television for the first time. Unitel, a town about 50 miles away that had been receiving one television channel, would increase its reception by a second channel with the new transmitter. The third community, Multitel, was located close to the U.S. border and received numerous television channels originating both in Canada and the United States. The researchers gathered data relating to aggression, gender roles, and academic achievement both before and two years after the installation of the more powerful transmitter. The results showed that the children in Notel exhibited more aggressive behavior (both verbal and physical) after the introduction of television. Aggressive behavior increased for both boys and girls, for children of different ages, and for those who had different initial levels of aggressiveness. Interestingly, this comprehensive study also found that after the introduction of television, that children’s gender role stereotyping increased and measures of academic success (reading levels) decreased (Williams 1986).

A recent cross-cultural study of twelve-year-old children (2,788 boys and 2,335 girls) from twenty-three different countries (funded by the United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, or UNESCO) found an interactive relationship between media violence and real violence such that “media can contribute to an aggressive culture” (Groebel 2001, 265). In short, these studies found that aggressive people, particularly those who live in more aggressive environments, use the media to confirm their attitudes and beliefs, which are then reinforced by media content. For example, the study found that one of the messages of aggressive content is that aggression is a good way to solve conflicts and that it is fun and provides status. Moreover, the study found that successful media figures, such as the Terminator (Arnold Schwarzenegger) and Rambo (Sylvester Stallone), have become cross-cultural heroes.

Another line of naturalistic research is the work of Brian Centerwall, MD (1989a; 1989b). Using an epidemiological approach, Centerwall examines relationships between the introduction of television in a society (e.g., the United States, Canada, and South Africa) and changes in homicide rates among the white population in these countries. In comparison with South Africa, where television was banned until 1975, Centerwall found that the white homicide rates in both the United States and Canada increased 90 percent between 1945 and 1975, whereas homicide rates for the white population in South Africa remained stable. These increases held despite the implementation of statistical controls for economic growth, urbanization, alcoholism, gun ownership, and so on. Moreover, in South Africa, homicide rates in South Africa’s white population increased by 56 percent between 1975, when television was introduced in the country, and 1983. Although most social scientists find Centerwall’s research compelling, Elizabeth Perse (2001) notes that South Africa may not have been a good choice for comparison because it was a highly controlled and repressed society and had a higher homicide rate before the introduction of television. Moreover, Perse notes that Centerwall’s method, a simple bivariate graphical analysis, does not dispel the possibility that the relationships may be due to a third, unmeasured, variable. Nevertheless, many find that these data are very compelling in that they show convincing, statistically significant increases in homicide rates of the white population over time.

Another solid base of evidence about the detrimental effects of media violence comes from a number of meta-analyses, a statistical technique that analyzes findings from a large number of studies about a particular topic.
The first meta-analysis (Andison 1977) examined sixty-seven separate studies (experiments, surveys, longitudinal) conducted between 1956 and 1996 that examined over 30,000 participants. This analysis found strong support for a relationship between watching media violence and subsequent aggression. An analysis of samples of children, teens, and adults in 230 separate studies found a positive relationship between antisocial behavior (behaving aggressively, rule breaking, etc.) and exposure to violent media in most of the studies (Hearold 1986). Similarly, Hae Jung Paik and George Comstock's (1994) meta-analysis of 217 studies found statistically significant and positive correlations between viewing and subsequent aggression in samples of adults, children, and teens. Meta-analyses thus show a solid and consistent base of evidence supporting the relationship between watching media violence and behaving aggressively.

**Desensitization**

A second major concern is that media violence may be related to increased desensitization; that is, viewers may become less sensitive to the violence they see and thus become willing to tolerate a more violent society (Murray 2003). Laboratory studies have shown that adults and children become calmer and even punitive after watching violent images. Children in the third grade, for example, who either did not see mediated violence or were shown a short clip from a violent western, were then asked to monitor two younger children by listening to the noise of them playing through an intercom. As they listened to the children, it became apparent that their play had become physically aggressive (Obermann and Thomas 1974). The children who saw the violent episode took considerably longer to get adult help than those who did not see violence. Similarly, Daniel Linz, Edward Donnerstein, and Steven Penrod (1984) found that a group of college men who viewed violent “slasher” films for five consecutive days rated the films as less violent and degrading to women at the end of the week. Moreover, after watching these films and then watching a documentary about a trial for sexual assault, these young men were less sympathetic toward the rape victim than the group of young men who had not seen the slasher films. Similarly, Stacy Smith and Edward Donnerstein (1998) note that the more viewers see graphic media violence, the more they rate material they originally perceived as offensive or degrading as less offensive or degrading.

Desensitization is particularly a concern as the amount of viewing increases. Several studies have shown that those who watch more violent programming may become more desensitized. Victor Cline, Roger Croft, and Steven Courrier (1973) found that those who saw more graphic violent portrayals were more likely to become physiologically desensitized—in short, the images stopped having an impact. In some situations, however, desensitization may have positive outcomes. Repeated exposure to an initially frightening or threatening image or character (e.g., the Incredible Hulk, the Wizard of Oz) can reduce children's fears (Cantor and Wilson 1984). Humor also contributes to desensitization (Potter 1999). Emotional

disturbed children (e.g., those with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) are especially vulnerable to media violence and desensitization. Tom Grimes, Eric Vernberg, and Teresa Catherals (1997) found that after watching television violence, children with emotional problems (compared to a matched group of children without these disorders) showed less concern for the victims of violence and believed that the media violence they saw characters commit was justified.

**Fear**

Media violence may be related to fear, in both the short and long terms. Joanne Cantor (2002) has studied fright as both a physiological and emotional reaction and found that children may become fearful after seeing violent media images. These reactions typically do not last very long, but it is possible for some to last for several days, months, or even longer. For example, Kristen Harrison and Cantor (1999) found that nine out of ten college students said that they had an intense fear reaction to a media depiction that lasted for a long time. Some of the things that evoke fear responses include injuries and dangers as well as deformities and/or distortions, such as monsters or ghosts. Several factors are likely to induce fear or fright reactions. Viewers who identify and/or empathize with the target of violence are likely to feel more fearful. Similarly, viewers who think the violence could happen to them often become more fearful. Although these reactions may be immediate and short-lived, there may be some long-term consequences. For example, children may become scared while watching a movie or program and perhaps hide their eyes or scream and have nightmares. Fear, however, differs by age. Young children typically are more fearful of images that are fantastic, threatening, and just look scary; older, children, however, are more fearful of more realistic dangers, things that could possibly happen to them.

There is also evidence of a generalized fear effect—the result of long-term exposure to violent media. Cultivation theory posits a positive relationship between watching more television and being fearful and exhibiting the “mean world syndrome.” Studies testing this theory show that those who watch more television believe that there are more people employed in law enforcement, exaggerate the number of people involved in violence in a given week, overestimate their own chances of being a victim of violence, are more likely to believe they need more protection, and believe that, in general, the world is a mean and scary place in that most people “cannot be trusted” and are “just looking out for themselves” (Gerbner et al. 2002, 52). Although there is some criticism of this approach (see Chapter 3), it is a position that takes into consideration the fact that the media are an ongoing facet of day-to-day life and that the influence of the media (cultivation) is a “continual, dynamic, ongoing process of interaction among messages, audiences, and contexts” (Gerbner et al. 2002, 49).

Cultivation, however, may be culturally determined. There is less evidence of fear-related cultivation effects in the United Kingdom. Mallory Weber (1978) reports no relationship between television viewing and
notions of fear and violence. There are, however, several cultural differences that may explain the lack of relationship. First, as noted above, U.K. television is considerably less violent and U.S. imports make up only a small portion of available programming. Second, programming in the United Kingdom must follow the government’s family viewing policy requirements. This policy ensures that programs with potentially objectionable content are scheduled later in the evening and that programs unsuitable for children cannot be shown before 9 PM. Moreover, in the United Kingdom televised films are given age-based ratings (Gunter, Harrison, and Wykes 2003). Similarly, in the Netherlands, Harry Bouwman (1984) found only weak associations between viewing and perceptions of violence, mistrust, and victimization. Even though the Netherlands imports a considerable amount of U.S. programming and Dutch and U.S. programming provides similar messages about violence, many viewers choose to watch programs that are more “informational” in nature.

Nevertheless, some cultures have shown cultivation effects. For example, students in Australia who watched more U.S. crime/adventure programs had higher scores on the “mean world” and “violence in society” indices (Pinigee and Hawkins 1981). Other analyses have found evidence of the cultivation of conceptions of sex roles and political orientations as well as violence. For example, in South Korea, watching U.S. television was related, for women, to more liberal perspectives about gender roles and family values. Among the male students, however, seeing more U.S. programming was related to exhibiting greater protectiveness of Korean culture and more hostility toward the United States (Kang and Morgan 1988). Overall, the findings from numerous studies conducted in the cultivation tradition show that if televised images are less homogeneous and repetitive than those seen in the United States, the results of cultivation analyses are less consistent and predictable (Gerbner et al. 2002).

Who Will Be Influenced?
The research discussed in this section can be interpreted in three different ways: (1) media violence is inconsequential and people, including children, are not affected by these images, particularly what they see on television (e.g., Fowles 1999); (2) that media violence will affect some people some of the time (Potter 2003); and (3) media violence will always have a very negative impact (as believed, for example, by grassroots groups such as the National Coalition on Television Violence).

The evidence from numerous research studies indicates that the first and third interpretations are too extreme. The position that media violence is inconsequential has only a few supporters. For example, during the 1970s, when NBC was actively involved in a research program, Ronald Milavsky and others (1982) conducted a three-year longitudinal study (1970–1973) of 2,400 elementary school children and 800 teenage boys and reported no evidence of a relationship between television violence and aggressive behavior. A re-analysis of this data set, however, found a relationship between television violence and aggression (Turner, Hesse, and Peterson-Lewis 1986). Huesmann and Miller (1994) also interpret the NBC data as consistent with other research findings that support a relationship.

Similarly, the position that television violence always has a negative impact on people, particularly impressionable children, is also too extreme and again has very few supporters. The one group that has supported this outcome, the National Coalition on Television Violence (http://www.nctcv.org) was founded in 1980 and has been active in both rating television programs for violence and assessing which companies advertise on the most violent programs. Although the lion’s share of the research shows a relationship between viewing and behaving aggressively, media violence is only one of many potential causes of aggression and/or violence in people. For example, child abuse or living in an excessively violent neighborhood may also play a critical role in subsequent aggressive behavior. Consequently, it is unreasonable to say that television violence will always have negative effects on viewers.

The most reasonable argument to make in understanding the effects of violent media content is to say that not everyone is affected in the same way; indeed, the same person may respond to violence differently on different occasions. Violent media content may have large effects on a small number of adults and/or children or small effects on large numbers of viewers. The large, consistent body of literature points to a positive relationship between television violence and aggressive behavior. Moreover, even though findings may be modest in size, the relationship must be taken seriously because of the large numbers of children who watch television each day, largely unsupervised. Even though their aggressive behavior may not put society at risk, it still may have negative social and cognitive consequences, such as the alienation of their peers and teachers (Singer and Singer 1988).

There is, however, another potentially important consequence. Although many people are reluctant to admit that they or their children could be affected by media violence, they believe that others are affected. This perspective, called “third-person effects” (Davison 1983), is particularly illusory because it allows people to believe that they (and their children) are immune from the effects of media, but their neighbors (and their children) are not. People tend to underestimate the media’s effects on others while underestimating its effects on themselves. An example might be the person who claims not to pay attention to advertising and states that advertising does not influence his or her purchasing decisions, yet won’t buy anything but brand-name products and typically wears brand-name clothing such as T-shirts from the Gap or Abercrombie and Fitch.

Potter (2003) believes that third-person effects constitutes one of the “myths of television violence” mentioned in the title of his book. This myth is troublesome because people do not understand how they may be affected by media violence. Although most people do not copy violent behavior they see in the media (and if they did with any regularity, the world would be extremely chaotic), that violence has numerous long-term effects, including physiological and/or emotional habituation and the cultivation of fear and the belief that the world is mean. Another of Potter’s myths is that “children are especially
vulnerable to the risks of negative exposure to media violence” (2003, 67). Classifying this statement as a myth does not mean that children are not vulnerable, for indeed they may be particularly influenced by media violence. Rather, this myth underscores the third-person effects because it diminishes the fact that people of all age groups may be negatively influenced by media violence.

Finally, as cultivation theory postulates, the ultimate long-term effects of watching television violence may pose threats for civil liberties and freedom. Cultivation studies have found that those who watch more television, compared to those who watch less, are more likely to overestimate their chances of being involved in violence, believe that fear of crime is an important personal problem, and assume that crime is rising. Those who spend more time watching television tend to believe that they are living in a mean and dangerous world and express feelings of alienation and gloom (Gerbner et al. 2002).

Because violent images are almost impossible to avoid, those who watch more television may express sentiments of dependency and be willing to accept deceptively simple, strong, and hard-line political and religious postures, if these beliefs seem to promise to relieve existing insecurities and anxieties. From the perspective of cultivation theory, the overall long-term effects of television violence may be the ready acceptance of repressive political and social environments that could translate into a loss of personal liberties.

**Conclusion**

This large and solid body of research about media violence shows generally stable levels of violence on television and interesting relationships between media use and violence, particularly aggression. As in any field of research, throughout the years there have been numerous controversies about different findings and ways of conducting research. Chapter 3 addresses some of the major controversies relating to media violence and offers some possible solutions to the problem of media violence.

**Note**

1. Although recent surveys (Kaiser Family Foundation 1999; Annenberg Policy Research Center 2000) located only on children ages eighteen and under, my personal experience (my college-age children, their friends, and students in my classes at the University of Delaware) indicates that video game playing does not end with graduation from high school and that earlier gender differences still prevail.

**References**


Summary and Conclusions

This review has considered in detail a great deal of research on the effects of exposure to media violence. Each study was described, analyzed, criticized, and evaluated. The previous sections summarized the results of each type of research. Several conclusions seem to be warranted.

First, the survey research, combined with the longitudinal studies, provides fairly good evidence that exposure to media violence—or perhaps only preference for more violent programs—is related to aggressiveness. Those who are exposed to more violence in the media and/or who prefer more violence in the media tend to be more aggressive than those who are exposed to or prefer less violence. The evidence for this is not entirely consistent, and the size of the relationship varies greatly from study to study. Nevertheless, most of the studies do find a correlation, and its magnitude seems to be between .1 and .2, although conceivably it is as high as .3. This means that between 1 percent and, at the very high end, 9 percent of the variation in aggression is predicted by exposure to media violence. This is not a big effect—especially at the low end—but it is a relationship, and if it were as high as 9 percent it would be a substantial one.

Of course, as explained in detail in this review, the existence of the relationship only raises the possibility that media violence causes aggression. There is a temptation to think that because there is a correlation, there must be a causal relationship. The correlation alone tells us nothing about causality: the relationship could be produced without any causal effect of media violence. All of the other research discussed in this review was designed to establish whether there is a causal link—whether exposure to violent media makes people more aggressive.

Second, the rest of the research does not demonstrate that exposure to media violence affects aggression. Some studies using each type of research have found some support for the causal connection, but far more have not found support. The largest group of studies are the laboratory experiments. Of these, 39 percent found results that were consistent with the causal hypothesis, and 41 percent obtained results that were not consistent with it and did not support it. Moreover, when studies that used questionable measures of aggression were eliminated, only 81 percent of the remaining
experiments supported the hypothesis, whereas 55 percent did not and the rest produced mixed results. This is not a pattern of results that scientists expect when a hypothesis is correct, nor is it one that would cause them to accept the hypothesis.

There were some significant effects in the laboratory experiments; however, this should not be interpreted to mean that exposure to media violence does cause aggression but not always. The significant effects that did occur were probably due to factors other than the violent content of the programs used in the experiments. In particular, I suggest that the violent programs were almost always much more interesting and more arousing than the non-violent programs. Few of the experiments even tried to equate the two types of films, even though it should have been clear that this was a crucial problem that had to be solved. You cannot show one group a film of a prizefight and another group a film of canal boating and argue that the only difference between the two films is the amount of violence. Almost all the laboratory experiments suffered from this problem; this casts doubt on the interpretation of the results in terms of the amount of violence in the films.

The most obvious difference between the violent and non-violent films was that the former were usually more arousing and exciting. This presents a very serious problem, because it is well established that differences in arousal affect behaviour. People who are more aroused tend to perform any activity more strongly than those who are less aroused. Given a bag to punch, they will punch it harder; given something to squeeze, they will squeeze it harder; and given almost any activity, they will do more of it. In the experiments at hand, subjects were often given a doll to punch or a button to press or a dial to turn. If we knew nothing about the subjects except their level of arousal, we would certainly expect those who were more aroused to punch the doll, press the button, or turn the dial more than those who were less aroused. Since the violent film produced more arousal, than alone could explain the effects of the films.

Perhaps an even more important problem with the laboratory experiments is that almost all of them had strong demand factors that, in essence, gave the subjects permission to behave aggressively or even instructed them to behave aggressively. When people are brought into a laboratory, they are very sensitive to what the experimenter does. If he shows them a film, they will wonder why that film was chosen. If no good explanation is provided, they will assume that the experimenter has a reason. And if the film is a violent film, many if not most people will infer that the experimenter likes the film, or approves of violence, or wants them to behave aggressively. This inference will be strengthened when they are later given a chance to behave aggressively—not something they would ordinarily expect to do in a laboratory. Having drawn that inference, they will be more likely to behave aggressively (since that is apparently what the experimenter wants). In other words, simply because of demand pressures, subjects shown violent films are more likely to behave aggressively than those shown non-violent films.

Psychologists are well aware of the problem of demand factors and usually make great efforts to eliminate or at least minimize them in laboratory research. Yet for some reason, in this group of experiments very little effort was made to do so. As a result, demand factors alone could explain the differences in aggressiveness that sometimes occurred.

In sum, the laboratory experiments produced inconsistent results, with more of them being non-supportive than supportive. And the results that were obtained were, in my opinion, more likely due to factors other than the violence in the programs. In any case, I firmly believe that the laboratory experiments tell us little about how exposure to violence in the media affects people in the real world—which is presumably our main concern.

The field experiments were in some sense the strongest test of the causal hypothesis. They involved relatively long-term effects, and full-length movies or actual television programs rather than short excerpts. Also, they were conducted in more natural settings: the programs were viewed and the behaviours were observed in locations that were familiar to the subjects. Perhaps most important, they were experiments, so any significant effects would have causal implications. For all these reasons, the field experiments were the best hope of getting evidence to support the causal hypothesis.

The results were, in fact, even less supportive of the hypothesis than were the results of the laboratory experiments. Only three of eleven field experiments obtained even slightly supportive results—three of twenty-four if one counts all the separate experiments. Those who favour the causal hypothesis often cite the research by the Leyens/Parke group as providing strong support. I agree that two of these studies (but not the third) produced results that are consistent with the hypothesis. However, as I discussed earlier, these studies suffered from having too few independent groups and from employing statistical procedures that were without question inappropriate (as admitted by Leyens). Yet even if these studies had produced strong, consistent results supporting the causal hypothesis, they would have been swamped by those that found either no effect of media violence on aggression, or a reverse effect, or a mixture of effects with most being inconsistent with the causal hypothesis. Moreover, the studies that obtained supportive results involved very small samples of subjects, whereas many of those that obtained non-supportive results had quite large samples. Even more so than with the laboratory experiments, this is an extremely discouraging pattern of results for the causal hypothesis.

The rest of the research related to the causal hypothesis is non-experimental. This means that regardless of the results, it could never provide terribly strong evidence that exposure to media violence causes aggression. Nevertheless, since the ideal experiment cannot be conducted, scientists can try to build a case for a causal effect using other methods. In this context, I consider longitudinal studies extremely important. They provide information relevant to two predictions from the causal hypothesis. First, they show whether the correlations between exposure to violent media and aggression change with age. If the causal hypothesis is correct, the correlations should probably increase as children get older. Even if this is not absolutely required by the hypothesis, there is little question that increasing correlations with age would be consistent with the hypothesis and provide some support for it. However, the longitudinal studies found no evidence for such a pattern. I consider this to be inconsistent with the hypothesis. In any case, it certainly does not support it.
An even more important aspect of these studies is that they provide evidence as to whether early exposure to media violence is associated with increased aggression at a later age after early aggression is held constant. The reasoning underlying this prediction and the statistical analyses have been discussed earlier. The basic point is that if children are equally aggressive at age eight but watch different amounts of media violence, those who watch more should become more aggressive than the others two or seven years later. As noted before, this spreading apart in terms of aggressiveness is the major prediction from the causal hypothesis. This prediction is tested with multiple regression analyses (or similar statistical analyses) that hold aggression constant at age eight and look at the remaining relationship between violence exposure at age eight and aggression at the later age. If this relationship is positive and significant, it is consistent with and to some extent supports the causal hypothesis. If it is not significant, it is inconsistent with the causal hypothesis.

As with all of this research, the results have been mixed. The supportive results were for males on one measure in the twenty-two-year study; from the cross-national study, for boys and girls in the Israeli city sample, and considerably weaker effects for boys and girls in Poland and for girls in the United States; and for boys and girls combined in the later phase of the nursery school study. Some of these results are open to serious criticisms, so they are less clear than they might appear. Moreover, both the twenty-two-year study and the cross-national study produced more non-supportive results than supportive ones. So considering only the results that are most consistent with the causal hypothesis, they are not impressive.

But even if one were to accept these supportive results entirely, there are many more studies that obtained results that are inconsistent with the causal hypothesis. The twenty-two-year study found no effect for girls or for boys on two other measures; the cross-national study found no effect for boys or girls in Australia, for boys or girls in the Netherlands, for boys or girls in Finland, for boys or girls in the Israeli kibbutz sample, or for boys in the United States. The nursery school study found no effect in the first phase. And none of the other studies found any support for the hypothesis. Although this body of research provides some supportive evidence, it obviously did not produce the kind of consistent support that would give one confidence in the hypothesis. Rather, the pattern of evidence generally fails to support the hypothesis.

Some studies compared communities that had television with those that did not and looked for differences in aggression. This research is perhaps the most discouraging for the causal hypothesis. One study reported an increase in aggression after television was introduced, but it is a flawed study, the results were inconsistent, and there are many possible explanations for the result. None of the other studies provided any evidence in favor of the causal hypothesis; in fact, they provided some quite strong evidence against it.

Finally, there was a small group of studies using a variety of methods. These studies offer no support at all for the causal hypothesis, and several of them provide quite convincing evidence against it.

It should be obvious from the individual reviews that the results of the research have been generally non-supportive of the causal hypothesis. Some studies of each type found results that could be considered as supporting the hypothesis, but more found results that did not support it. What should we make of this pattern of results?

Science depends on consistency. Before a theory or hypothesis can be considered correct, the research testing it must produce results that support it with great consistency. Ideally, every single study will support the hypothesis. More realistically—especially when dealing with complex hypotheses and situations—we would probably consider a hypothesis to be supported as long as the great majority of the studies support it. If 90 percent of the studies obtain the results predicted by the hypothesis, we can be reasonably confident that the hypothesis is correct. We may wish to know why the others failed, but even if we cannot establish why, we will still accept the hypothesis. If the results are less consistent than that—if, say, only 70 percent support the hypothesis and 30 percent do not—we will be considerably less confident. We may feel that the hypothesis is probably correct, but we will have serious concerns about the failures. And if only 50 percent support the hypothesis, we will be very unlikely to believe the hypothesis is correct. We may still think there is some slight truth to the hypothesis, but it will be clear that the effects are unreliable, probably very weak, and perhaps not there at all. In fact, if the results are this inconsistent, our focus may well shift to explaining why there were any positive results. We may then look for problems in the research that produced the effects even though the hypothesis is incorrect. If we still believe in the hypothesis despite the inconsistency and the lack of support, that belief is based on faith and hope rather than on the scientific results.

Turning to the research on media violence and aggression, it should be clear that not one type of research provided the kind of supportive evidence that is ordinarily required to support a hypothesis. Not one found 90 percent supportive or 80 percent or 70 percent or even 50 percent. In fact, regardless of the method used, fewer than half the studies found results that supported the hypothesis—sometimes considerably fewer than half. The results of this research have sometimes been described as overwhelmingly supportive of the causal hypothesis. That is not correct. Rather, the research is discouraging for the hypothesis, with most of the research not supporting it. I conclude that the scientific research does not support the hypothesis that exposure to violent media causes aggression.

Third, the small body of research on desensitization has tested two quite different effects. There is some evidence that exposure to media violence causes habituation and therefore reduced responsiveness to further media violence. The results are rather weak and inconclusive, but the effect may be real. Regarding the more important effect on actual violence, three small-scale studies found some support for this, but the effect failed to replicate and other studies did not support it. I conclude that there is little or no evidence for a desensitization effect and there is some evidence that directly contradicts it.

Where does this leave us? On the one hand, we have considerable justification for rejecting the hypotheses. If they were correct, we should expect to
see a pattern of results that consistently support them. We do not get that pattern, so the hypotheses are almost certainly incorrect. On the other hand, those who continue to believe in them can argue that the research is flawed, or that one should not expect perfect consistency, or even that the existence of some supportive results shows that the hypotheses are correct. This is not very good science, but it cannot easily be rejected.

However, those who believe in the hypotheses cannot argue that the research provides overwhelming or even strong support for them. I hope it is clear that the research does not support either hypothesis. After so much research, with many of the studies being of very high quality, if the hypotheses were correct, I believe that we would have found the evidence to support them.

Accordingly, this comprehensive review of the scientific evidence leads to two clear conclusions. First, despite the way it has sometimes been described, the research does not provide overwhelming support for either the causal hypothesis or the desensitization hypothesis. On the contrary, the evidence for both hypotheses is weak and inconsistent, with more non-supportive results than supportive results. Second, following from the first conclusion, exposure to media violence does not cause aggression, or if it does the effects are so weak that they cannot be detected and must therefore be vanishingly small. I would not make such a strong statement about the desensitization hypothesis, because there has been too little relevant research. Instead I would conclude that it is probably not true, but the case is not yet closed. . . .

Films and television programs that contain violence are not designed to convey the message that violence is good or that people should engage in violent acts. They do not contain information that is likely to convince anyone of anything; they do not contain explicit messages in favour of aggression or violence. They are just entertainment. The programs are not meant to be persuasive, just popular. So it should not be surprising that they have no effect on people's aggressive behaviour or on their attitudes toward violence.

What about implicit messages? Though most people would agree that the media almost never deliver a message that explicitly encourages violence, some people argue that violence in the media carries the implicit message that violence is acceptable. When Batman punches the bad guy, perhaps the message is that one must resort to violence to solve problems. When the Roadrunner turns the tables on the Coyote and blows him up, perhaps children are being taught to use violence against their enemies rather than other means of settling disputes. When Bruce Willis or the police or the Power Rangers use violence against terrorists or criminals or evil monsters, perhaps the implicit message is that only violence will work and therefore you (the viewer) should also be violent. Or maybe the message is not so much that violence works as that violence is acceptable or even desirable. If all these nice, honest, good people are committing acts of violence, maybe this says to the viewer that this kind of behaviour is all right. These messages—that violence is the only way to settle disputes, that violence is acceptable—might influence attitudes and behaviours. If viewers who get these messages accept them, we can expect their own attitudes toward violence to become more positive, and that they will be likely to become violent themselves.

There are several responses to this idea. First, I do not think these programs carry the message that violence is the only way to settle disputes, or that violence is generally acceptable. To the extent they convey any messages about violence, those messages are quite different from these. One possible message is that when a bad person or a bad monster or a bad animal starts a fight or commits a crime or threatens you or those you love, those who are entrusted with protecting society may have to use violence in return. In the great majority of all films and television programs containing violence, all or most of the violence committed by the bad guys is committed by police or criminals or others who are allowed to use violence. And they use violence only after it has been used by the bad guys; the good guys almost never (perhaps never) start the fight. While we would prefer a society without any violence, few of us would deny the police (and mythical protectors of society) the right to use violence when necessary. It would be nice if the police and other good guys could be shown trying a little harder to talk the bad guys out of the fight, convincing them to give up, and so on. Still, it is not realistic to expect many criminals, terrorists, monsters, and so on to be convinced by talk of this kind to give up their weapons and stop doing whatever bad stuff they are doing. The fact is that there is violence in our society and often it is dealt with by violence of some sort. I do not believe that those who watch these programs are getting the message that violence is the only way to deal with problems. If they get any message at all along these lines, it is that we should all be thankful that the good guys—those who are there to protect us—can also use violence when necessary. They are certainly not getting the message that they, the viewers, should engage in violence. So there is no reason to expect their behaviour to be affected.

A somewhat different concern of those who worry about the effects of media violence is that aggression is shown as effective. If so, viewers may come to believe this and may accordingly behave more aggressively themselves. The authors of the National Television Violence Study (NTVS) are especially adamant on this point. They assert that when violence is not punished—or even worse, when it is rewarded—it is especially likely to make viewers more aggressive. As we have seen, there is no scientific evidence to support this assertion. Despite that, it is repeated over and over as if it were a known fact. Scientific evidence of causation aside, the NTVS provides a highly useful picture of what occurs on television. It found that television programs often contain violent acts that are not punished immediately. However, the same study shows that bad characters in serious shows are almost always punished eventually. Although the authors of the study are concerned about the lack of immediate punishment, I think the viewers all know that punishment is coming. Much of the tension in the stories we watch on television comes from wondering when and how the bad guys will get punished, but there is no question that in almost every program, in almost every story, the bad people who start the violence will get what they have coming to them. One could argue that television presents an unrealistic picture in this respect: criminals on TV get caught and punished far more often than they do in the real world. So if viewers learn anything, if they get any message, it is that violence committed for a bad or illegal reason in a serious context will be punished.
The other possible message from most of the programs is that it is a bad idea, not a good one, to be the one who first uses violence. In almost every television program that has violence, and in most films, the person who starts the fight (the bad guy) eventually loses. The authors of the study are concerned that good characters are rarely punished after using violence. Naturally! They are allowed to use violence when it is necessary, so they should not get punished. When Batman punches a crook, should Batman get hurt? When Bruce Willis fights criminals, should Willis lose? When police officers get in a shoot-out with criminals, should the police get punished? Obviously not. In fact, to the extent that crime fighter shows have any message, it is not that police officers should get punished for using violence, but that it is dangerous to be a police officer or anyone who fights crime. This does not teach anyone that it is okay to use violence or that violence will be rewarded—if anything, it teaches the opposite.

Some have argued that the media glamorize violence. Certainly, some heroes are violent and glamorous. This is true of many of the comic book heroes (Batman, Superman, Power Rangers, Wonder Woman) and the non-cartoon versions of these characters. It is also true of some other characters, such as James Bond. But many violent heroes are anything but glamorous. Bruce Willis in *Die Hard*, most police officers in cop shows, and so on get dirty, are often hurt, and are typically shown doing their jobs, which are important but not at all glamorous. In fact, one theme that runs through many of the more realistic shows is that law enforcement people have tough, dangerous jobs and are not appreciated enough by the public or by politicians. Is there any evidence that the supposed glamour of these violent characters has caused more people to apply for jobs in law enforcement? I doubt it. So I do not accept that, in general, violence has been glamorized in the media. I agree that it is not made as awful and ugly as it really is, but not that it has been made especially attractive. Therefore, I am not surprised that children have not been influenced by the glamour of violence to engage in it.

I cannot prove that media violence carries no message or that it does not glamorize violence. But I ask those who believe it does to think seriously about whether the programs and films they know really urge people, explicitly or implicitly, to engage in violence; or suggest that violence is glamorous. A few films and programs may do this, but I think any reasonable view of the full range of programs would show that they do not encourage viewers to be violent themselves. They certainly do not directly try to sell violence the way ads for products try to sell those products. I cannot think of one television program that contains the explicit message that viewers should go out and commit violence.

One reason why some people are so convinced that media violence causes aggression is that they think they have seen it happen themselves. They know that children in schoolyards are imitating the Power Rangers and other television heroes who engage in martial arts. They see children watch a violent program and then get involved in fighting. Since they have witnessed it firsthand, they are totally convinced. At a congressional hearing, a congressman said he did not need any scientific evidence to prove that media violence causes aggression. The reason was that he had come home recently and been met at the door by his young son aiming a karate kick at him. Q.E.D. What more evidence does anyone need?

I understand the power of personal experience. However, it is important to step back and try to figure out what the experience means. The lawmaker's story is a perfect example. I did not get a chance to respond to him, but I would have said the following: Congressman, I assume that you and your son have a good relationship. I assume he did not harm you and that he did not mean to harm you. (If he meant to harm you, please get some professional help right away.) Congressman, your son was playing. He was not fighting; he did not hurt you; he was playing. He had probably seen someone on television doing karate kicks—or maybe he saw it in the schoolyard—and he was imitating them. Years ago, he might have pretended to punch you or to shoot you with a bow and arrow or with a gun. Would you have been as upset if he had put his fingers into the shape of a gun—as so many boys do—and said 'bang, bang'? Then I suppose you would have known he was playing, but it would have been the same thing. The precise behaviour is surely influenced by the media, but it is not aggression—it is play. You might not like that kind of play; you might prefer him to throw you a ball or do something really imaginative. If you want to complain that television does not foster imagination and creativity, you may have a point. But aggression? No.

Also, for those who have watched kids get into trouble after a violent program, maybe the effect is due entirely to the fact that they are excited. Violent programs tend to get kids aroused. When they are aroused, they engage in more active behaviour, and some of that may be aggressive. But it is the arousal that affects them, not the content of the show. Any show that aroused them would have had the same effect. There is even a study showing that kids are more aggressive after watching 'Sesame Street.' I can believe it. There is no aggression in the program. It is hard to imagine a more prosocial, educational, imaginative show. But it is a very active, lively, fast-paced show—that's one of the reasons children like it so much. If they are more aggressive after it, obviously it is not because of any aggressive content, but rather because of the arousal. Yes, children may be more aggressive after watching violent programs, but they may be equally aggressive after any action program or any program that is lively and exciting. You may prefer children to be quieter. I'm not so sure. I think it is probably good for them to get excited and aroused even if it sometimes leads to more trouble for the parents. Bored children can get into real trouble; interested, excited kids are probably better off in the long run. So don't blame media violence for increased action and sometimes increased aggression, unless you want to blame everything—movies, television programs, books, any arousing, exciting activity.

Another argument I hear is that since the advent of television, crime and aggression have increased. Supposedly the connection is obvious. I dealt with this at some length in my discussion of Centerwall's paper. The main point is that all sorts of things have changed since television was available, and these other changes are much more likely than television to have produced the
increase in crime. I do not want to rehash these arguments, but I urge those who see a connection to keep in mind that there are explanations other than television violence. Let me add that both aggression and crime have been with us for a long time, since well before television and movies. There is no indication that in general, either aggressiveness or crime has increased since the invention of movies or television. Moreover, the homicide rates in the United States and Canada have gone through many cycles. What people tend to focus on is that the rate of violent crime—for homicide in particular—increased sharply from about 1965 to 1980. That's true. But the rate then leveled off, and has been dropping sharply since around 1992. The rate is now back to about what it was in the early 1970s, not much above its low point in the 1960s. It is the increase that makes some people think it must be due to television, because the increase came soon after the introduction and spread of television. However, an almost identical pattern—a sharp increase followed by a sharper decrease—occurred in the early part of this century, long before there was any television. The increase then was certainly not due to television, but rather to social factors of various kinds. If that earlier increase occurred in the absence of television, why think that the later increase was due to television? It makes no sense.

Then there is the recent decrease in violent crime. All of the studies indicate that television and films have just as much violence as they used to, or even more, and that the violence is more graphic than ever. Also, violent video games started to become available and popular in the early 1990s and are now a major element in many children's lives. And I suppose the lyrics in popular music, especially rap music, are much more violent than they have ever been. Yet despite the continuing media violence, and the new violence in video games and music, the rates for homicide and other violent crimes have dropped seven years in a row. If media violence caused the increase, how can one explain the decrease? A more likely explanation is that media violence did not cause either the increase or the decrease; both of these were caused by major social forces.

Finally, it is important to remember that the research I have reviewed dealt almost exclusively with the effects of fictional or fictionalized programs and films. There has been almost no systematic research on the effects of exposure to real violence or to media coverage of real violence. Some ingenious work by Phillips (1979, 1983) suggests that watching prizefights may increase homicides and that hearing about suicides may cause an increase in suicides. This work has been criticized on methodological grounds, and in my earlier review I found many of the details of the results implausible. Phillips has answered the criticisms, and he may be right that highly publicized violent events of these kinds cause an increase in similar events. Although there is no systematic evidence to support it, many people believe that media coverage of horrific crimes causes some people to imitate those crimes. The killings at Columbine High School received an enormous amount of media attention and were followed by a number of similar attacks in other schools. It is possible that the later crimes were caused to some extent by coverage of the earlier one.

We do not know very much about the effects of coverage of actual violent events. However, I want to make it absolutely clear that this review does not deal with this issue. The lack of scientific support for the causal hypothesis relates entirely to fictional material. Indeed, I think it is likely that real violence and the coverage of real violence do affect aggression and crime. Children may imitate violence they observe directly. Both children and adults may be influenced by their knowledge that their society or their neighborhood has a lot of violence. Moreover, it seems likely that repeated exposure to real violence, either directly or in the media, causes desensitization to subsequent real violence. I believe that when there is a murder on the front page of the newspaper every day or as the lead story on the television news every day, people are less shocked than when murders are rare events. Thus, both the causal hypothesis and the desensitization hypothesis may be correct with respect to real violence or media coverage of real violence, and perhaps that is what people should be worrying about.

Let me end by acknowledging again that to many people it seems self-evident that media violence causes aggression. I think I have shown in this comprehensive, detailed review that the scientific evidence does not support that view. Perhaps some of the arguments in this chapter will make it seem less obvious, and people will be willing to change their views. In any case, I hope that neither organizations nor individuals will ever again say that the evidence for a causal effect of media violence is overwhelming or that the case is closed. Perhaps people will even begin to accept the clear fact that the evidence does not support the notion that exposure to media violence causes aggression or desensitization to aggression.

References


**Does Exposure to Media Violence Promote Aggressive Behavior?**

1. Some people would suggest that a child emulating a Power Ranger by doing a karate-kick is an aggressive act. Others might see the act as playful. If you were conducting research in this area, how would you operationally define the difference between playful behavior and aggressive behavior?

2. To what extent do you believe that media violence encourages or glorifies violence? Provide an example or two of film images that might have led to subsequent violence in society.

3. If you were a clinician treating a child who enacts behaviors seen in violent media, what kind of intervention would you try to develop in an effort to reduce the child's aggressive behavior?

4. Imagine that you are a researcher studying the differential impact of exposure to media violence and exposure to real-world violence. How would you go about studying this difference?

5. It is well-known that video games have become increasingly violent in the past decade. How do you explain this trend?

**Suggested Readings**


**Is Pornography Harmful?**

**YES:** Diana E. H. Russell, from *Dangerous Relationships: Pornography, Misogyny, and Rape* (Sage Publications, 1998)

**NO:** Nadine Strossen, from *Defending Pornography: Free Speech, Sex, and the Fight for Women's Rights* (Scribner, 1995)

**ISSUE SUMMARY**

**YES:** Sociology professor Diana E. H. Russell considers pornography profoundly harmful because it predisposes men to want to rape women and undermines internal and social inhibitions against acting out rape fantasies.

**NO:** Law professor Nadine Strossen contends that there is no credible research to support the claim that sexist, violent imagery leads to harmful behavior against women.

Social learning theorists have long held that people are prone to engage in behaviors that other people seem to find pleasurable. As exposure to graphic sexual imagery has become mainstream in American society, increasing numbers of people of all ages and both sexes have been stimulated by images that provoke intense, pleasurable biological responses. As the limits in social definitions of what is acceptable have been pushed further and further, the appetites of many people have turned toward images that are increasingly novel and unfamiliar. In the realm of pornography, images that were once unspeakable have become common ingredients on X-rated Internet sites and in adult videos. Debates over pornography have been based on a variety of arguments, including political, religious, psychological, and social. On one side are those who see pornography as an insidious force that undermines individual psychological functioning, interpersonal relationships, and social mores. On the other side are those who view pornography in political terms as involving a very personal choice about what people choose to read or watch.

Diana E. H. Russell considers pornography in the most negative of terms and as the basis for much of the violence that men perpetrate against women. In the following selection, she contends that pornography...