

# Media Violence and Children

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A COMPLETE GUIDE FOR PARENTS AND  
PROFESSIONALS

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Advances in Applied Developmental Psychology  
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**PRAEGER**

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The truth knocks on the door and you say,  
“Go away, I’m looking for the truth,” and so it goes away. Puzzling.

Robert M. Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*

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## Introduction

A clear and consistent pattern of empirical results has emerged from over four decades of research on the effects of media violence. It is therefore surprising that many people still resist the idea that media violence has negative effects. A simple test will demonstrate that people are reluctant to accept this idea. Ask a large group of people, “How many of you think the media have a really large effect on people?” and most will raise their hands. Then ask, “How many of you think the media have a really large effect on *you*?” and many of the hands will go back down. This can also be replicated with parents, asking about media effects on “children” and “*your* children.” Why does the public remain resistant to the idea that we or our children might be affected by the media in general, and by media violence in particular? Perhaps many don’t think watching media violence can change attitudes. Or perhaps some recognize that media exposure does change attitudes about aggression, but don’t think that those changes will be reflected in behavior.

In contrast, most people will readily admit that advertisements work (though perhaps not on them personally!), and we all know that the goal of an ad is to motivate us to change our behavior—to stop buying “brand X” and start buying “brand Y.” Advertisements work through exactly this process of changing attitudes slowly over time; these altered attitudes are later reflected in product awareness, preferences, purchases, and brand loyalty. As demonstrated by the chapters in this book, this same process is one of the mechanisms by which media violence affects individuals.

Similarly, most people recognize that changes in information and attitudes about physical health can lead to altered behaviors. For example, we routinely hear stories in the news that broccoli reduces the risk of cancer, that calcium

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supplements increase bone mass, or that a low-fat diet is good for one's health. Many people immediately trust these stories, and change their behaviors as a result.

Two important points should be apparent after reading this book. First, the evidence for or against any of these types of health issues is often much more flimsy than the evidence regarding the effects of a steady diet of media violence. Second, often the size of the effect of diet on health issues (e.g., *how much* changing your diet really helps, or *how much* a calcium supplement actually reduces your risk of osteoporosis) is much smaller than the size of the effect of media violence (see chapter 11).

Youth violence is a complex phenomenon. Multiple factors influence aggression, and multiple perspectives inform the role that media violence plays in affecting aggression. This complexity means that research is particularly valuable. Research-based information can cut through all of the opinions and rhetoric surrounding this issue. While individuals may continue to ignore or disbelieve the accumulated evidence, many credible organizations have reviewed the research and are on record stating that media violence is one of the *causes* of aggression in society. A partial list of these organizations includes:

- The American Medical Association
- The American Academy of Pediatrics
- The American Psychological Association
- The National Institute of Mental Health
- The National Institutes of Health
- The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry

Perhaps what needs to be recognized is that media violence *is* a health issue, just as diet is. As with changing diets, changing media habits is difficult. But with much of media violence, as with medicine, prevention is often the best cure.

It has often been suggested that children are more vulnerable to the effects of media violence because they cannot tell the difference between fantasy and reality. It is certainly a true research finding that children under eight generally do not have the same understanding of fantasy and reality that adults do. This matters a great deal when thinking about what types of issues might scare them more (see chapter 10). But many parents say, "It is a little violent, but we think he [the child] can differentiate between a game and real life" (Leland, 2000). The notion that the ability to distinguish between fantasy and reality inoculates a person from media effects is a false one. For example, adults all know that advertisements are "fake," but they still work. Similarly, knowing that a program or game is "only entertainment" does not ameliorate its effects. In fact, we often notice emotional and sometimes physical effects of watching violent entertainment—we get scared, we get excited, we laugh,

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we notice our palms sweating or hearts racing. Ironically, some of the effects of media violence may be so obvious that we fail to notice them.

This book is designed to provide a complete and up-to-date picture of the field of media violence research. The book has three goals. First, it is designed to be an interdisciplinary review of media violence research across a variety of media (e.g., TV, video games, music, etc.). It is intended to give the reader a sophisticated understanding of the complexity of these studies, applying advances in modern developmental theory to the vast body of knowledge that has been generated by psychologists, physicians, and communications scholars. Second, it is intended to be useful as a textbook for undergraduate and graduate students in a range of disciplines, including psychology, education, communication, journalism, medicine, public health, and other related fields. Third, it is intended to define the course of future research by describing what we know, what remains to be studied, and how we can utilize limited resources most effectively by drawing on the advances from several disciplines.

The success of any undertaking of this size requires the support of many people, only some of whom I have space to thank personally. I am grateful to each of the contributing authors for sharing their expertise and time in this venture. My longtime friend and colleague Irving Sigel provided the opportunity for this book to be written. David Walsh and the National Institute on Media and the Family provided the time and resources I needed. Many students have challenged my thinking, helping me to integrate many points of view. In particular, I wish to thank Jamie Ostrov, Elizabeth Jansen, Mari Cary, Ingrid Hoffman, Amelia Alexander, and Gina Lazar, all of whom gave a great deal of their time and consideration. I also must thank my family for their support, especially my wife, Tara van Brederode, and my father, J. Ronald Gentile. Finally, this book is dedicated to my daughter, Lauren, because trying to learn the truth so that we can do the right thing for our children is the most important job we can perform.

*Douglas A. Gentile*