

Children's and Adolescents' Exposure to Different Kinds of Media Violence:

Recurring Choices and Recurring Themes

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For over 40 years, parents, scholars, and policy makers have raised concerns about the impact of children's exposure to violent media content. Social scientists have extensively documented the detrimental effects of exposure to violent television content on children (Murray, 1995) while the content makers deny those effects (Valenti, 2000). Regardless of the debate or the findings, American children continue to be exposed to a steady stream of violent media images from both older and newer media (Calvert, 1999).

Two areas are included in this chapter that move beyond the effects issue. The first area involves our decisions to use violent media as a society. Why do we buy it? Why do we expose our children to it? If we didn't use it, it would cease to exist for lack of a market. The second area involves the kinds of content where violence is most likely to be found, how that content then travels to, and is transformed by, our newer media, and whether there are any different effects after exposure in older and newer media or after exposure to different kinds of programs containing violent content.

What Is Aggression?

The definition of aggression is one that researchers have grappled with over time. Does one, for example, focus only on the consequences of an action, or does one emphasize the motivations and intentions of the person committing the "aggressive" act? In courts of law, motive is a major discriminating factor in determining justice.

Accidental aggression, even if it results in mayhem, is treated with a reduced punishment compared to aggression that is done on purpose. There are also disagreements about when aggression is an acceptable behavior and when it is not (Fraczek, 1985). Conflict is a reality of life. For some, aggression is never an acceptable response whereas for others there are times when aggression is justified. For example, some parents believe that children should stand up for themselves, protect younger siblings, and protect other weaker children from bullies (Osterweil & Nagano-Nakamura, 1992). The intent in the latter situation is to protect, not to harm another person. That kind of aggression is also part of heroism. Children get these messages. For instance, elementary school aged children are more likely to accept aggression if used in self-defense than if it is not (Ginzler, 1998).

Two forms of aggression are often cited in the literature: hostile and instrumental. In hostile aggression, the intent is to inflict injury or to harm another person whereas instrumental aggression occurs in the quest of some object, often a toy when children are involved (Bushman & Anderson, 2001). Young children typically aggress for instrumental purposes. With development, however, children are more likely to aggress with the intent to hurt or harm, and to commit aggressive acts against others to get even, for revenge (Leahy, 1990). However, as they grow even older, preadolescents and adolescents come to understand that revenge is not the right moral path, even though they may grapple with their own yearnings for revenge. Only children who have weak social ties and few friends endorse revenge as a way of solving conflicts (Rose & Ascher, 1999).

With development, children make finer discriminations about violence. For example, Krmar and Cooke (2001) found that younger 4-7 year old children thought that unpunished violence was more acceptable than punished violence. Older children, by contrast, were more likely to assess an act of violence as justified if the act was provoked rather than unprovoked, which is a more subtle distinction than punished versus unpunished violence. In other words, to older children, there are subtle distinctions as to when violence is acceptable and when it is not.

The difference between physical and verbal aggression is another developmental milestone. Young children tend to hit; older children tend to fight with words (Leahy, 1990). The developmental change to verbal aggression is one that children increasingly employ. For instance, older children switch to name-calling rather than hitting a peer.

Similar struggles to understand the definition of violence occur in film, television, video games, and online presentations. Those arguing that the relationship between exposure to violent media and children's aggressive behavior is unclear often point to research definitions of aggression that lack the most important characteristics of violence: motives and context (Smith, 2002). Although different researchers have used different definitions of violence in their studies, a great deal of violent behavior is found on television regardless of the specific definition used. The most comprehensive study of television violence, conducted by National Television Violence Study (1996), found extensive levels of violence even when the context, motivation, and the type of portrayal was included. This study also found that children's television programs were particularly high in violent content.

In media portrayals, aggression is concentrated in certain kinds of programs (Wilson et al., 2002). In television and film, for example, the hero fights against the villain for justice. The evening news is filled with depictions of the dark deeds committed by people with the long arm of justice in active pursuit. Even our comedies have a dark side: we laugh at the expense and humiliation of others. These same formulas appear in our new media as well. The heroic tale travels to video as well as to online games. The news is available online as well as on television. Yet new forms of violent expression also take place in the new media. Hate speech occurs online. Adolescents, who are often anonymous online, can and sometimes do engage in the character assassination of others users (Greenfield, 2000). In this chapter, we examine these different kinds of aggressive media content and their respective impact on children.

Children's Attraction to Aggressive Content and its Impact on Behavior

In the aggression literature, media research has concentrated on the effects side of the equation. That is, what are the effects or the outcomes of exposure to media violence on children? Social cognitive theory, which emphasizes modeling and imitation, and arousal theory, which emphasizes physiological responses to violent material, are the two main paradigms used to demonstrate the harmful effects of violent media on children. With few exceptions, there are negative outcomes for children who view or interact with aggressive content, particularly for younger children, for boys, and for those who are strongly predisposed to aggressive behavior (Calvert, 1999). These

effects include imitation and disinhibition of aggressive responses (Bandura, 1997) as well as desensitization to aggressive content (Zillmann, 1991).

Little research, however, has been devoted to why children view or interact with violent content in the first place. Uses and gratification theory, which examines the needs of the viewer in relation to content, is one approach for understanding why we are drawn to aggressive portrayals. Psychoanalytic theory, an approach that deals with the underlying drives of human beings, is another approach. The concepts of Carl Jung (1954; 1959; 1968), who modified and extended psychoanalytic theory, are well known and used by those who create film and television programs (e.g., Voytilla, 1999), yet academic researchers have virtually ignored their importance.

Uses and Gratification Theory

In uses and gratification theory, users come to media with certain needs, and they fulfill them by using certain media (Rubin, 1994). In the area of aggression, one might speculate that children view and interact with media containing aggressive content because they are in search of interesting stories or because they are bored and looking for stimulation. One kind of program that fills this need and that contains high levels of violent content and action is the heroic tale. Children also look to media for role models who can serve as guides for their own actions. Heroic tales are again the most noticeable program type that fills that need.

Another need that media fill for children is one of entertainment (Rubin, 1994). Children use television, film, and videogames for their pleasure, and some of these programs, such as heroic tales and humorous cartoons, contain violent content. Funk

(in press) argues that children who are at risk for low self-esteem, such as bullies and victims, may fill their needs for mastery and power, in part, by playing violent video games. Another need that media fill is one for information (Rubin, 1994). While not the most intentionally sought after program by youth, there is still considerable exposure to news programming, much of which is violent. The news is also real rather than fictional, a quality that children increasingly understand with development. We examine children's use of, attraction to, and the effects of heroic tales, humorous cartoons, and the news on their aggression. We also enter into the newer domain of online Internet interactions, focusing on hate speech. For those who are antisocial, this forum provides an anonymous vehicle to fill one's desires to hurt and harm another person.

Heroic Tales

If one accepts the thesis that children come to media in search of stimulating and interesting stories, then the realm of myth has much to offer us in understanding children's viewing and play choices with old and new media. In myth, we capture the long-held values and beliefs about what is important to us.

The collective unconscious and the archetypes. Building on psychoanalytic theory, Carl Jung (1954; 1959; 1968) created the idea of the collective unconscious, the repository of the shared collective images of the human species. Within the collective unconscious, we have inherited the archetypes, prototypical images that are passed on anew to each new generation. These images, according to Jung (1954; 1959; 1968), exist in the collective unconscious as primitive images that are then developed by our individual and cultural experiences. These archetypes include the persona (our external

presentation of self to the world), the anima (the feminine side of the male psyche) and animus (the masculine side of the female psyche), the shadow (the life-preserving, yet potentially destructive facet of the personality), the self, the wizard, the hero, the crone, animals such as wolves howling, symbols of nature such as the full moon, and religious symbols such as birth and rebirth (Hall & Nordby, 1973). Of particular interest to our discussion are those archetypes most closely associated with aggression: the hero and the shadow (Calvert, Kondla, Ertel & Meisel, 2001).

In mythic tales that existed long before the appearance of a movie or television screen, the hero pursued a quest, faced obstacles, and eventually triumphed over them to be reborn as a new and more fully integrated person (Campbell, 1949). The travels of Odysseus after the Trojan War are one such quest, eventually resulting in his return to his homeland. But even there, Odysseus had to fight to regain his wife from those who thought him dead and who had pursued Penelope as their own wife. The trial of stringing his own bow and shooting an arrow straight through the sockets of twelve ax heads in a row, a task that had kept his wife's many suitors at bay, led to victory over his enemies and the restoration of his home and family. The heroic formula, built upon myths such as these, continues to appear in our culture as movie after movie and program after program reenact the personal struggles and triumphs that we all face in life. As these types of stories and myths are universal themes, children can relate to these tales (Poling, 2001).

The hero uses aggression in an instrumental way, not a hostile way. His goal is to restore order, to fight for justice, to defeat evil and tyranny. While his (or more

recently her) actions are aggressive, the motive is to protect, and the outcome is just. The moral intent of the hero raises an interesting question: if aggression involves hostile intent to hurt or harm others, is the hero aggressive? When do children understand the motives of the hero, making intent an important criterion for imitation? In what circumstances do children imitate the aggressive actions of heroes without the moral concern to protect others, and when does that understanding come to moderate aggressive effects?

In the hero's tale, there is also a dark force, the villain. It is that villain, or in Jung's conception the dark side of the shadow, that provides the countervailing force of the hero. So the white knight fights against dark evil forces (Calvert, 1999). In fiction, particularly children's television programs, the lines of good and evil are clearly marked. The good guys are good; the bad guys are evil. These plot lines simplify the plot comprehension skills that children must acquire to get the message. In adult programs, however, frequent commercial interruptions, particularly between the violent action and consequences, can impede children's understanding that the villain is punished for his dark deeds (Collins, 1973).

More recent depictions portray the hero as one who fights his or her own internal battle with their own shadow rather than the more simple external battle with the evil villain. Xena the Warrior Princess and Batman are two such heroes who fight with their own internal demons (Calvert et al., 2001; Zehnder, 2002). This more complex internal struggle, while more accurate, is also more difficult to understand. College students, for example, are more likely to advocate compassion and using your head before your

sword as qualities of heroes, particularly for those characters who are perceived to be role models (Calvert et al., 2001; Zehnder, 2002). However, even high school aged adolescents struggle to understand why revenge is not an acceptable solution when a hero is dealt a major blow, such as the murder of his parents. In film and television depictions, true heroes never kill for revenge; to do so would take them into the dark realm of the destructive side of their shadow. It is the moral strength to walk away from revenge that uplifts the hero and that make him or her worthy as a role model.

Unlike television and film, aggressive video, computer, and online games focus little on plot or the moral struggles of the hero. The action is conveyed visually with almost no verbal or written dialogue, and when dialogue does appear, many children just click through it.

When the heroic tale is applied to video games, it is virtually stripped of any moral tone (Calvert, 1999). The story consists of beating, or even being, the bad guys. The movie, *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon*, for example, depicts a complex struggle that characters face between being a hero and falling prey to the dark side of their shadow; heroic characters use their minds and compassion, not brute force (Calvert et al., 2001). By contrast, in the video game based on this movie, all characters seek revenge against Jade Fox through sword play and other martial arts fighting skills (Connell, 2002), a direction that violates the richness of the original story theme and moral message.

At best, games are often amoral or retain a passing reference to the hero trying to save a damsel in distress. The focus on aggressive action, with little reference to

motive beyond winning the game, probably undermines the potentially constructive parts of the mythic story that the game is based on: that good triumphs over evil. It is notable that videogames now surpass movies as moneymakers in American culture (Ashdown, 2002), and that children's favorite games, particularly those of boys, are often violent action adventure games (Children Now, 2001; Gailey, 1996; Buchman & Funk, 1996; Funk, Germann & Buchman, 1997).

In summary, the universal nature of the archetypes and the mythic tales associated with the tension between the hero and the shadow is one under researched area that can help explain our fascination with action-adventure, heroic programs. There are clear developmental differences in children's skills at understanding the motives of the hero and the qualities that make a person a hero. There are also clear differences in how children understand the duality of human nature, our ongoing conflict to do the right thing rather than give in to our dark side. For Jung (1968), an important developmental task was to integrate our shadow into our personalities in constructive ways as the shadow provides direction for a full-bodied life. This human struggle resonates with the audience: we want the hero to win just as we want ourselves to win over our darker impulses. The reduction of this formula to simple fight scenes, common in video games, encourages the aggressive action without the nuances of motive and internal struggle. It also provides a direct outlet for children to practice aggression, eliminating the step between observation and imitation (Calvert & Tan, 1994). Potential role models are provided to children, increasing the possibility that they will act aggressively, but how that aggression is manifested will depend on child characteristics,

qualities that are also mediated by their level of cognitive development. For example, girls are less likely to imitate aggression than are boys (Lemish, 1988), and those who are old enough to understand the intent of the hero are less likely to imitate the aggression than are younger children (e.g. Liss, Reinhardt, & Fredriksen, 1983).

Heroic tales: Role models for children. The exciting and often engaging stories that children see in entertainment media provide numerous potential role models that can influence children's behavior. The concern with children's exposure to violent media is that they will be more likely to imitate the actions, be more tolerant of aggression and violence in their own lives, and see violence as a venue for solving problems (Murray, 1995).

Social cognitive theory provides the best fit for explaining why children become aggressive after viewing heroic, aggressive models, and why those effects are attenuated as they grow older. In social cognitive theory, attractive role models demonstrate power and nurturance (Bandura, 1997), the qualities of a hero (Calvert et al., 2001). Indeed, television violence had a greater impact on children's behavior when it is exhibited by heroes rather than by villains (Vooijs & van der Voort, 1993). Children do not usually admire the villain; they admire the hero.

Even young children can figure out who the hero and the villain is, in part by relying on visual features depicting the characters. For example, young children are able to understand who the "bad guys" are in cartoons by their crooked, jagged features (Accuff, 2001).

Because superheroes are the “good people” who fight the “bad people”, it is not surprising that children and adolescents identify with them and tend to emulate their actions. In an experimental field study, Stein & Friedrich (1972) found that preschool children who were exposed to the Batman and Superman cartoons and not the prosocial program *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* were found to be more physically active, both in the classroom and in the playground. They were also more likely to get into fights and scrapes with each other. They played roughly with toys, broke toys, snatched toys from others, and got into little altercations. Similarly, elementary aged children who viewed Mighty Morphin Power Rangers committed 7 times more aggressive acts in a subsequent 2-minute play period than did a control group (Boyatzis, Matillo, & Nesbitt, 1995).

The arousing aspects of aggressive heroic stories can lead to aggression compared to arousing aspects of competition, for example. Molitor and Hirsch (1994), for example, showed 4th and 5th graders a clip of the *Karate Kid* versus an Olympic competition scene (both were considered to be highly arousing). Children who viewed the *Karate Kid* took more time to intervene when they saw a video with two children, who were presumably in another room, becoming more aggressive with each other. Perhaps if the movie was shown in its entirety, rather than solely an aggressive clip, children would understand the anti-violence message in the theme.

There is evidence, for example, that as children get older, they are able to understand the prosocial message in heroic portrayals even when it is combined with aggression. For example, Liss, Reinhardt, and Fredriksen (1983) found that

kindergarteners who viewed an episode of Superfriends that contained prosocial acts combined with aggression were more hurtful than helpful in a subsequent game than were those who saw a prosocial program or a strictly aggressive program. To understand the affect of cognitive development on this finding, the authors then showed kindergarten, second, and fourth grade children either the prosocial program or the mixed message program. The kindergarteners were still more likely to hurt than to help, and they showed the least comprehension of the program content. However, the second and fourth grade boys exposed to the mixed prosocial/aggressive episode were more helpful than hurtful. Furthermore, the more the boys understood the story, the more helpful they were. This highlights the importance of story comprehension and understanding of intent as a mediator of children's tendencies towards aggression after viewing televised violence (Calvert, 1999). That is, while older children are less aggressive because they can understand the program content, the younger children are more aggressive because they don't understand the program message, perhaps imitating the aggressive heroic role models.

The social impact of game play on aggression, by contrast, may be more consistent across developmental periods because there is no moral plot to moderate the aggression. Preschoolers, for example, became more physically aggressive after playing space invaders or karate games (Silvern & Williams, 1987; Schutte, Malouff, Post-Garden & Rodasta, 1988). Similarly, adolescent college students who played a virtual reality game, *Dactyl Nightmare*, were more aroused and had more aggressive thoughts than did game observers or a control group who only simulated non-

aggressive game movements (Calvert & Tan, 1994). Meta-analyses conducted on video game play supports the thesis that aggressive game play increases aggressive behavior, aggressive thoughts, aggressive affect, and physiological arousal for both adults and children (Anderson, 2002; Anderson & Bushman, 2002).

Slapstick Violence: Animated Cartoons

According to uses and gratification theory, a central reason that children use media is to be entertained (Rubin, 1994). Children consider humor to be one of the most important elements in successful television programming designed for them (Valkenburg & Janssen, 1999).

Humor is often paired with violent and anti-social content in children's television programs, particularly children's cartoons. Humor/slapstick types of programs, which focus on visual humor such as slipping on a banana peel and falling, contain approximately 29 acts of violence per hour with almost 30% of the total program time devoted to physical aggression (Wilson et al., 2002). Slapstick comedies are dominated by anthropomorphized perpetrators. Such programs contain unrealistic portrayals of harm with the victim getting up and going on as if nothing has happened.

Humor has been conceptualized in a few different ways by communication scholars, but one of the most common definitions describes humor as occurring in situations where we are made to feel superior to others because of some display of inadequacy or ineptitude on the part of another (McGhee & Lloyd, 1981). According to Zillmann (2000), contemporary media humor often occurs in the presence of put-downs, insults, and downright humiliations. Humor, therefore, is present in situations where

someone is debased. This type of humor is generally known as *superiority or dispositional humor* (McGhee & Lloyd, 1981) and it is antisocial by nature.

According to Freud, however, people become amused when innocuous displays are paired with the dispositional or hostile type of displays. It is not socially acceptable to find purely hostile acts or statements funny. The innocuous aspect of the humorous display masks some of the aggressive aspects of the situation and allows people to feel free to laugh and find merriment. (Zillman, 2000). Freud also suggests that as people become aware of the socially unacceptable themes that underlie the humor, they find such humor less funny. Guilt is aroused if they find themselves laughing at something that is truly hostile, but much of the time people do not fully know exactly why they are laughing (Gollob & Levine, 1967)

Young children, in particular, do not understand dispositional humor as it relies heavily on verbal skills and abstract thinking skills. Preschool children, for example, have difficulty understanding joke resolutions and verbal ambiguities (Schultz & Horibe, 1974; Schultz & Pilon, 1973; Spector, 1996). Because young children are attracted to the visually salient aspects of humor, slapstick humor may have the most impact on them. Slapstick humor often contains visual depictions of aggression that children can imitate (e.g., poking someone in the eyes or bonking them on the head). As children age, however, they perceive humor more as a psychological characteristic than as a behavioral one (Warnars-Kleverlann, Oppenheimer, & Sherman, 1996).

There are also gender differences in children's reactions to humor. Humorous elements disrupted 3rd -5th grade boys' understanding of main story themes but no such

effect was found for the same aged girls (Weiss & Wilson, 1998). This implies that the boys may focus on humorous elements of programs more than girls do. Interestingly, boys' assessments of the funniness of dispositional humor is higher when the victim is a person the child does not like or feels unrelated to. This is not consistently found with girls (McGhee & Lloyd, 1981). When both boys and girls were asked to think about the victims' feelings in a violent cartoon portrayal, they found the cartoon to be less funny than those who were not asked to think about the victim (Nathanson & Cantor, 2000). These findings point to the incompatibility of cruelty and empathy, making empathy an important moderator of potentially aggressive media outcomes.

While some argue that that the cathartic nature of humor would diffuse concurrent aggression, the evidence indicates that aggressive humor does lead to aggressive tendencies more so than neutral humor (Berkowitz, 1970). Perhaps because the violent portrayals in slapstick types of programs seem like they are all in good fun, violence may not be perceived as harmful because nothing truly bad happens to the characters. Preschool children who were exposed to a violent slapstick *Road Runner* cartoon, for example, became more aggressive afterwards compared to those who had not been exposed to the cartoon (Silvern & Williamson, 1987).

Slapstick humor remains amusing to children, even at older ages. For example, second through six-grade boys developed greater pro-violence attitudes after viewing a *Woody Woodpecker* cartoon compared to children who had not been exposed to the cartoon (Nathanson & Cantor, 2000).

One popular type of program that elementary school aged children view is wrestling. Although wrestling may not be considered slapstick in the same sense as humorous cartoons, they contain characters doing outrageous and silly things to each other. Lemish (1998) interviewed children in Israel about their viewing of the World Wrestling Federation (WWF) programs. Ten percent of the girls said that they imitated WWF fights frequently or occasionally during the current year, whereas 23% of the boys reported having done so. Boys' descriptions of the type of wrestling behaviors they performed at school were detailed and vivid. Girls hardly ever mentioned fighting at school, but some of them told stories of how they acted out wrestling behaviors at home. Because aggression is awarded for boys more so than girls, the findings are consistent with the modeling and imitation effects of social cognitive theory.

Real Violence: The News

Studies utilizing uses and gratification theory as a framework also document that we seek informational needs through media exposure. At no stage during childhood or adolescence, however, does the news become a favorite content type of children. However, children are greatly exposed to the news, probably due to secondary exposure when their parents are viewing it. For example in a National Children Now poll (Children Now, 1994), 65% of the adolescents surveyed said that they had viewed television news the day before. Even very young children, who probably do not understand much of the content, are routinely exposed to the news. Smith (2002) found that almost one-third of the kindergartners through 6th graders she interviewed reported watching television news "every day" or "most days" of the week.

Developmental differences have been found in children's reaction to local stories versus more distal news stories (Smith & Wilson, 2002). Older children exposed to local versions of crime stories reported more worry than those who were exposed to non-local versions of the same stories. Furthermore, older more than younger children exhibited more facial fear during the local as opposed to non-local version of crime stories. The results show that older children are more likely to understand, as well as be frightened by, television news than are younger children, probably because they are more likely to understand that the events are real and presumably can happen to them since the violence occurred near them.

Children are also exposed to, and sometimes seriously disturbed by, national tragedies via the news. Pfferbaum et al. (2001) found that middle-school children's viewing of bomb-related television in the aftermath of the Oklahoma City disaster was extensive. Approximately 2/3 of the sample said most or all of their television viewing in the aftermath of the bombing was bomb related. Children's television exposure to the events was associated with posttraumatic stress 7 weeks after the attack. Among children with no direct physical or emotional exposure, the degree of television exposure was directly related to posttraumatic stress symptomatology. Traumatic memories may persist in an active state because of the intrusion of distressing memories about the events and the arousal engendered by thinking about that negative experience (Pynoos & Nader, 1989). Other studies of media exposure to disasters, such as the explosion of the Challenger space-ship (Wright, Kunkel, Pinon, & Huston, 1989), the 1979 radiation warning, industrial disasters, and earthquakes (Handford et al.

1986; Breton, Valla & Lambert, 1993) all suggest that posttraumatic stress symptoms and other types of psychological disturbances are common among children, even if they are not directly affected by the traumatic event (Nader, Pynoos, Fairbanks, Al-Ajeel & Al-Asfour, 1993). The implication is that television viewing may cultivate and maintain stressful states in children even when other forms of exposure are absent.

In light of the events of September 11th and the World Events that have followed, we expect that children and adolescents were exposed to a tremendous amount of footage containing violent imagery, particularly the destruction of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Children's emotional responses to television programs suggest that young children are most affected by visual portrayals while older children are most affected by psychological factors (Valkenburg, Cantor, & Alleed, 2000). Because war and destruction images are highly visually salient, war and attacks are then expected to shock and scare children. We expect that many children were seriously traumatized after viewing the September 11 attack, just as adults were.

Interestingly, much of the war against terrorism is depicted as a war pitting good against evil, with the president using political rhetoric such as the "evil-doers" and the "axis of evil" in his speeches (Poling, 2001; Schneider, 2002). In so doing, he calls up archetypal images of the hero and the shadow in the audience.

We also know that adolescents use the Internet to read the news and to learn about local events (Subramanyam, Greenfield, Kraut & Gross, 2001). However, little is currently known about how this online exposure affects them.

Online Hate Speech

A final need that media can provide for people is an opportunity to express their darkest feelings with impunity. The Internet provides the opportunity for anonymous interactions with others, some of which are potentially destructive (Wallace, 1999).

One example of a new violent outlet that has emerged is online hate speech. Examples of online racial bigotry and hate speech have been documented (Greenfield, 2000), disproving the prediction that the Internet would remove racial adversity because of the lack of embodied persons. Similarly, some people attack other characters online with little consequences to them for their antisocial actions. Cyber-rape has been reported online (Wallace, 1999). For example, one online character took control of another person's character and raped her (Turkle, 1995). What kind of consequences can prevent such violent acts when the actor can simply disappear and return as a different online character, thereby escaping punishment for antisocial actions?

Some children have worked through their aggressive altercations with the support of their collective groups. For example, Cassell (2002) brought children together in an online forum and an online argument ensued with hateful speech taking place between an Israeli and Palestinian child. Other group members eventually intervened, resulting in more mutual understanding between the two children. Others, however, may not fare nearly as well, particularly when they are in anonymous, unsupervised settings.

Conclusions

Justice restoration, humor, and information seeking seem to be the underlying themes of the programs containing violence that children view the most. Such themes may also be the reasons that children are drawn to programs that contain violence. Underlying each of these themes is the idea that children want good things to happen to good people and for the bad people to get their just deserves. It is struggle of the hero versus the shadow that seems to be pervasive in programs for children and that reflects children's own struggle to form their own identities.

Children's skills at understanding these messages, however, develop over time. For young and immature children, particularly those with little conscience, the temptation to imitate effective aggressive strategies may result in antisocial activity. However, older and emotionally mature children who have developed a sense of empathy are less affected by the dark portrayals. Instead, they look for compassionate, heroic role models who have a sense of conscience, suggesting that they are able to moderate aggressive effects. Based on the literature, we think that 9-10 year olds initially begin to understand the motives and intent of characters reasonably well, thereby potentially moderating the effects of aggressive television exposure. These same cognitive skills, however, bring with them an appreciation of humorous messages that demean and humiliate others, a popular kind of content amongst our developing youth, and they can be frightened by news messages that bring violent current events into their homes that they now understand are real rather than fictional.

Newer media, particularly violent video games, strip the moral message from heroic television or film content. Playing with aggressive video game content poses potentially harmful effects on children due to their interactive nature, where behavior can be directly incorporated into the behavioral repertoire. For children who are at risk, game play can undermine the development of empathy and moral development (Funk, 2002). In particular, acting in antisocial aggressive ways in game play can impede empathic skill development where children take the perspective of another, a potential moderator of real-life aggressive actions. Playing video games where children can assume the identity of the villain poses a special threat to the developing character of our youth. Online forums provide yet another avenue for people to act with impunity on their dark impulses via hate speech and antisocial symbolic actions.

The struggle of good over evil is a recurring media theme, one that touches the very hearts and souls of all human beings because it is a struggle that we all face. Helping children to construct images and themes in ways that encourage heroic, compassionate youth are goals worthy of pursuit, ones that a free society cannot ignore. Many heroes stepped forward to rescue and protect our people after the attack on our country on September 11. The internal struggles that our youth face to make the right moral decisions should be supported by our society and by our media. The main task, as we perceive it, is to be sensitive to how children of different ages perceive and understand these messages, and to begin to emphasize the compassionate and thinking aspects of heroism rather than the aggression.

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