

FACTS *for* FAMILIES

No. 13

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CHILDREN AND TV VIOLENCE

American children watch an average of three to four hours of television daily. Television can be a powerful influence in developing value systems and shaping behavior. Unfortunately, much of today's television programming is violent. Hundreds of studies of the effects of TV violence on children and teenagers have found that children may:

- become "immune" or numb to the horror of violence
- gradually accept violence as a way to solve problems
- imitate the violence they observe on television; and
- identify with certain characters, victims and/or victimizers

Extensive viewing of television violence by children causes greater aggressiveness. Sometimes, watching a single violent program can increase aggressiveness. Children who view shows in which violence is very realistic, frequently repeated or unpunished, are more likely to imitate what they see. Children with emotional, behavioral, learning or impulse control problems may be more easily influenced by TV violence. The impact of TV violence may be immediately evident in the child's behavior or may surface years later. Young people can even be affected when the family atmosphere shows no tendency toward violence.

While TV violence is not the only cause of aggressive or violent behavior, it is clearly a significant factor. Parents can protect children from excessive TV violence in the following ways:

- pay attention to the programs their children are watching and watch some with them
- set limits on the amount of time they spend with the television; consider removing the TV set from the child's bedroom
- point out that although the actor has not actually been hurt or killed, such violence in real life results in pain or death
- refuse to let the children see shows known to be violent, and change the channel or turn off the TV set when offensive material comes on, with an explanation of what is wrong with the program
- disapprove of the violent episodes in front of the children, stressing the belief that such behavior is not the best way to resolve a problem

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- to offset peer pressure among friends and classmates, contact other parents and agree to enforce similar rules about the length of time and type of program the children may watch

Parents can also use these measures to prevent harmful effects from television in other areas such as racial or sexual stereotyping. The amount of time children watch TV, regardless of content, should be moderated because it decreases time spent on more beneficial activities such as reading, playing with friends, and developing hobbies. If parents have serious difficulties setting limits, or have ongoing concerns about their child’s behavior, they should contact a child and adolescent psychiatrist for consultation and assistance.

For additional information see *Facts for Families*:

#40 Influence of Music and Rock Videos,

#55 Understanding Violent Behavior in Children,

#59 Children Online, and

#67 Children and the News.

See also: *Your Child* (1998 Harper Collins)/*Your Adolescent* (1999 Harper Collins).

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