

Author: Levin, Diane, Ph.D.

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Diane Levin, Ph.D

Children and Media Violence

(A presentation given in Lisbon, Portugal, October 2000)

It is a pleasure to be here today. I have to make a confession: this is the first time that I have ever given a talk without having slept all night because I just arrived this morning and it is also the first time that I have ever given a talk when my suitcase didn't arrive so that some of the props I wanted to show you, to help you understand quickly what I wanted to talk about, are not here. So I hope that you'll bear with me and I think we'll do just fine anyway but I wanted to warn you that I will be improvising a little more than I expected I would be.

I have been studying the issue of what I call media culture for many years. When we think about the media, we need to think about it in the context of the whole range of ways media is entering children's lives of which the new media is one part. I am not a total expert on the new media but more on the whole range of media that are in children's lives and how we need to deal with them. I have especially looked at media violence and the violent media culture that surrounds children so we are not just talking about the violence we saw on the Internet, which children are seeing, including little children. My speciality is young children who start seeing images like this that come from the TV shows that are on for them, from the toys that are marketed for them, from the movies that they see. They grow into this kind of violence so that this steady appetite for violence starts at a very young age. One of the things that I ask is why is it so appealing for children, why are they lured into it?

The industry wouldn't make this kind of violence if it didn't make a lot of money. We can't talk about the issue of violence in the media without first asking why is it being made. It is being made in part because it makes lots of money and, in part, because the industry knows that it lures children in. It has to do with how children think, what they understand about the world and how they make sense of what they are exposed to. And that is what I want to talk about in the few minutes that I have.

I started looking at this issue in 1985 when, in my work with teachers around issues of violence, they started saying something was different, something had changed. These were American teachers. They were having more kids engaged in war play, more kids obsessed with war play, more children who seemed not to be able to get anything else on their minds, more children who took everything from a cracker they bit a corner out of and started using it as a gun, to using things on the playground to turn into weapons. I found out that there was a reason for teachers' concerns—American television had been deregulated in 1984. That is when it became possible to market toys and other products with shows. Many of the best selling toys were linked to shows and many of those shows and toys were violent.

That was the beginning of the violent media culture for children as we know it and the beginning of the violent media culture that the US now exports all around the world. It paved the way for the socialisation of children into a culture of violence, beginning when they were young with toys linked to violent shows, then graduating to video and computer games as they got older these "deregulation" children are the teenagers of today who are heavy consumers of violent media of all sorts and involved in increasing levels of real world violence too.

One of the examples which captures what I mean by the media culture is the current one. Well after deregulation, did you have masters of the universe or he-man here? That was the first really popular media link series and it was a whole line of action figures that had big muscles and fought and it was hard to tell the good guys and the bad guys apart. Then came the Teen-age Mutant Ninja Turtles show and movie with over 1000 toys and other products that went with them. With Ninja Turtles, the kids karate chopping bodies became the weapons and children started using their weapons to hurt each other more and more and started becoming obsessed with it in their play. Then we had the Mighty Morphin

Power Rangers which teachers got even more upset about. (I have been interviewing teachers on this topic for a long time.) What we figured out was that real actors were now doing what had been done, until that time, by animated figures.

Then we had a lot of media cross-feeding. We had the video and computer games, we had the shows, we had the movies, we had the all the toys and other products. The big one in the US at the moment is the world professional wrestling. It will be here - I was in Australia last summer and I arrived with the wrestlers there.

I was going to show you an example of toys that go with the professional wrestlers. (*Shows sample and reads instructions from the back of box*) - "these action figures are ready to unload for those who are ready to step in the ring with pulverising accessories included." Now you will notice on the left is Al Snow who is holding the severed head of a woman. Often when we think about media violence with children, we don't think about how it is becoming highly gender divided. Boys are really involved with more and more violent, grotesque images of women. This is the action figure of one of the real wrestlers children see on the world wrestling federation show. Does anyone have any idea of what the age recommendation is on the toy box? Four years old. Then also on the back of the toy box we have Billy Gunn who has lipstick marks on his shorts, the biggest of which are on his genitals. He comes with a shovel. Next we have Sable, one of the World Wrestling Federation woman - she is dressed in black leather, her breasts are about 50% of her weight, she is wearing a leather bra which is unzipped to her waist, shoes with spiky red heels, and she comes with a whip. For those of you who have looked at any of the pornography on the web, or any place else, you'll know that this imagery comes right out of pornography and sado-masochistic sex. This 'toy' is marketed for ages four and up as well. It doesn't necessarily mean that parents will buy it for their four year olds but when you walk into a toy store in the US, one of those mass market ones, this toy is right on the shelves down low so when you go there with a child it will be right there. I go and watch kids in toy stores and little children are drawn to what is most salient and dramatic and disturbing and different to what they have seen before. So they are drawn to figures like these and say, "What's that mummy?" And mummy hasn't been trained how to talk about masochistic sex with a four year old and that is one of the issues. We, as adults, need to learn more about how to talk to kids about these issues and that's what a lot of my work has been about.

Professional wrestling programs are now the most watched shows in the US. There are wrestlers who go around to stadiums and do live shows: there are all these toys and there is soon to be a movie. It will probably come here (Europe) with all these toys, if they are not here already. It is the first time that teachers are upset across the grades, not just teachers of younger children, because wrestling interests adolescents, it interests little children and it interests parents. Families go to the show, families watch it on television together - they have finally succeeded in getting from masters of the universe, which only little children were interested in, to violent themes that attract the whole family. In part it is because young parents grew up with masters of the universe. So we are dealing with a problem, which has escalated and is getting embedded in the US culture. One reason why I was really happy to come to talk to you today is that I think that you are not as far along as we are with these issues and hopefully some of the things I have learned will help you plan better strategies here.

There is standard research on how media violence affects children. I want to go over that with you. Just this summer, five of the most important professional associations in the US involved with children and health issues, including the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Medical Association, and the American Psychological Association, came out with a joint statement. It is unusual that such groups can all agree on anything. The statement said they reviewed more than 1000 research studies conducted over thirty years and concluded unequivocally that media violence contributes to violence among youth.

Now here are some of the main things they said. It doesn't mean that if a child sees a killing on or in a movie that he or she will go out and kill but that the media violence that is seen does contribute to increases in aggressive behaviour. It also causes increased fearfulness and mistrust and self-protective behaviour. One of the most important developmental needs children have when they are young is to feel safe: that the world is a safe place for them; that the adults in their lives will take care of them. When they see, over and over and over again, that there are dangers everywhere, that people are always fighting, then some children who don't feel safe will start fighting out and using that aggression to try to keep themselves safe. They may feel that that is the only way to be safe. So that this kind of protective behaviour leads to children lashing out more or it can. Media violence also contributes to a desensitisation and callousness to violence and its

effects on others. This means that the more media violence you see, the more it seems normal, it is what happens. You get cut off from people and their feelings, and being connected to people and how behaviour really affects them. So it is much easier to be callous and it also means that you get desensitised which means that the entertainment industry has to escalate the violence to get you interested again, to capture your interest. And this is just what has been happening with children's media since the deregulation of television in 1984.

I buy toys every year as part of my work - the worst toys that I can find. I have wrestling figures for the last four years, and each year they are much more extreme and graphic than the year before. The muscles get bigger, the faces get meaner, the women are more sexualised. Now the ones from five years ago don't look so horrible at all: it is the new ones. I get desensitised too.

Another thing, the media provides violent heroes which children seek to emulate. One recent informal study that has not been published yet but the person who did it told me about, was that a survey of children's heroes showed that wrestling figures are among the most popular and coolest media characters chosen by American children aged seven to twelve, girls and boys.

Seeing media violence also creates an increased appetite for viewing more violence and more extreme violence. The more you see the more you want to watch. People who are doing brain research and looking at the physiological effects of violence, are theorising that the adrenaline flashes you get when you are watching violence can get you addicted to having those flashes, and make everything else feel boring. So you can even develop a physical dependence.

Lastly, a phenomena which has to do with many issues that we are certainly dealing with in the US and you need to tell me if you are here, is a "culture of disrespect". US teachers are saying that there are t kids as young as five year olds who seem not to respect adults anymore. That culture of disrespect comes from the violence children see in the media, but also from increasingly mean-spirited language and behaviour where no one is actually physically hurting someone. Children learn how to interact in the world, they are not born knowing that, it doesn't develop automatically. They take the content of the environment

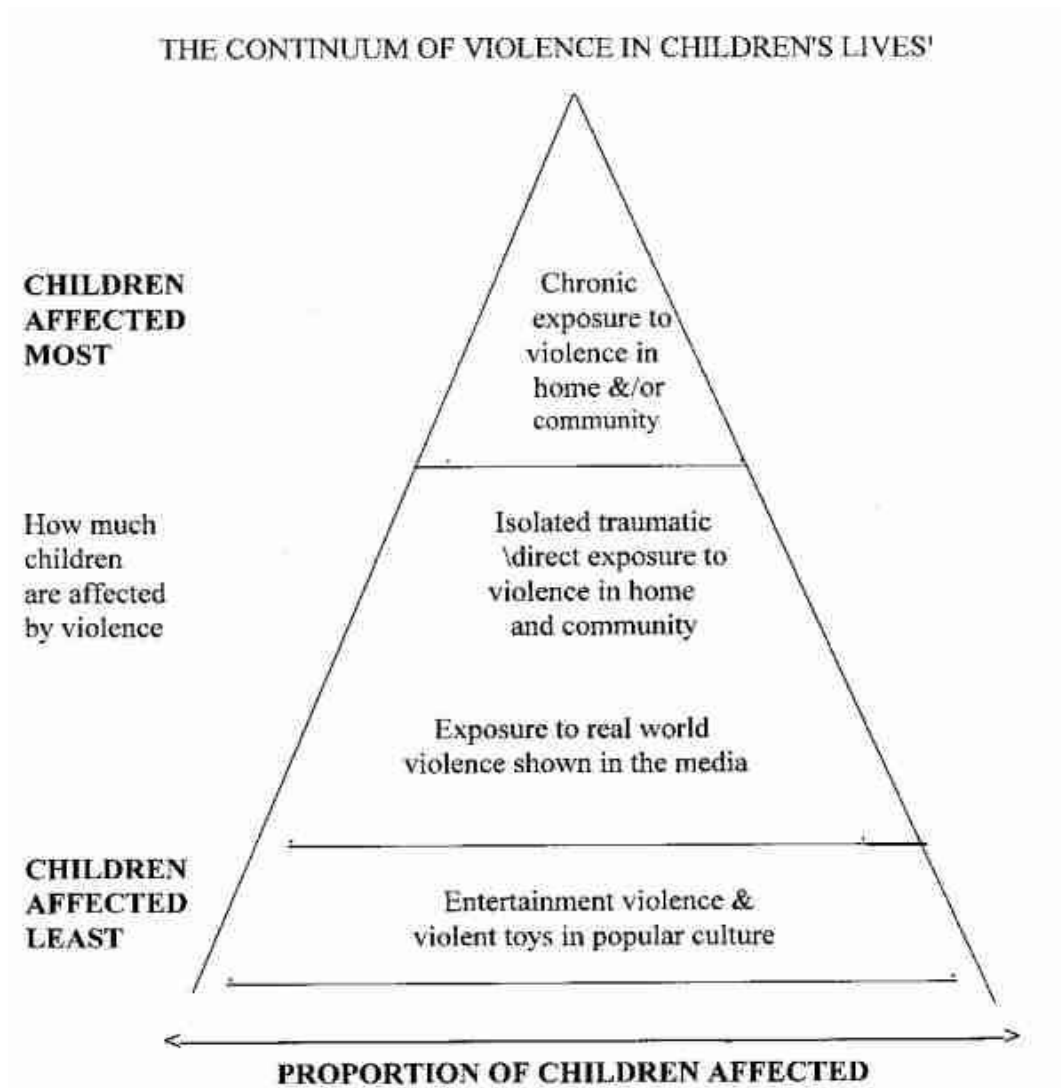
around them to try to figure out how people treat each other. How they are treated in their own families is certainly very important but when they are seeing acts of violence and disrespectful behaviour over and over and over again in the media, it can come to be seen as just a normal way people treat each other. Children will see around 12,000 acts of violence per year on television alone in the US. To see it over and over and over again is especially harmful to the developing social skills of young children, who can't think about the logical causes or consequences or fantasy and reality of all that violence because you don't have the intellectual ability to do that.

We talk about the culture of disrespect in the US as causing premature adolescent rebellions meaning that, at younger and younger ages, many children just seem to disregard adults' guidance and try to have nothing to do with them.

Here we need to go back to the marketing issue. In the US, all the advertisements that are geared to children rarely have adults in positive roles. The adults are always in roles where they are stupid, they just don't get it and the kids do, or they are obstructionists, they stand in the way of kids getting what they want. That is done by design. The marketing people don't want kids to see adults as their friends and allies. They have done market research to show that the way you get kids to nag a lot to get their parents to buy things is to make them feel not allied with their parents. So the kind of marketing that goes on teaches kids that you shouldn't listen to your parents. Furthermore, from a young child's perspective, when they see a toy or product that promises to be fun and exciting and what you do to have a good time and then the parent says, "no, no it is a bad toy", it sets up the parent as the "bad guy" depriving the child of happiness. I have talked to parents who have tried so hard to say no to things but they realise that you can't say no to everything they think is bad because of what it does to their relationship with their kids and what it does to their relationships with other parents. The media culture and the marketing culture go hand in hand and contribute to the effects of violence on children, and contribute to the difficulties that adults have working with children to help them become healthy, socially positive human beings.

Before I talk about what we can do to deal with the media violence in children's life there is another thing that I want to talk about. In the US there are a lot of people who have a hard time thinking about the relationship between media violence and real world violence.

I find it helpful to think of all of the violence that enters children's lives as fitting along a continuum of severity (as represented by the pyramid below). At the bottom of the pyramid is entertainment and media violence (which is most prevalent in society and touches most children's lives); at the top are the most extreme forms of violence—chronic and direct exposure to violence in the immediate environment (which fewer children experience but which builds on the more prevalent forms of violence below it on the pyramid). Each type of violence plays a role in the lessons children learn about violence and the severity of those lessons. The degree to which children are affected is likely to increase as they move up the continuum. And they will often use the content from all the levels they have been exposed to when trying to understand new content in any of the levels. This can be especially confusing when, for instance, they experienced entertainment violence as fun and exciting and then experience the pain of a violent event in real life.



From: Levin, D. (1994) Teaching Young Children in Violent Times: Building a Peaceable Classroom, Cambridge, MA, Educators for Social Responsibility

But we do know that when children are exposed to violence, they try to figure it out and as they do they use what they have learned about violence from the past to try to understand the new experience. I have an example here of children who are three and four years old who are playing the bombing of the courthouse building in Oklahoma City. These children were not in Oklahoma City but South Carolina but they heard about it and they are playing it. But it turned into power ranger play, the power rangers were going to get the bombers. Children take what they learn in entertainment violence, they don't make neat and tidy distinctions and they are completely confused about how it all works. They often use their play to try to figure it all out.

One of the things that happens when children have highly realistic toys that are linked to the media, is that the toys tell them how to play and give them the message that when you play you should act out the violence you saw on the screen. When this happens children's play becomes imitation, not creative play. The reason I am talking about imitation is that the children acting out Oklahoma City are working out the violence that they saw, they are trying to make meaning out of it and kids need to do that. Their play is unique, they are working out in their own way. Many children who play wrestlers or Power Rangers in the US, and other countries which I have had input on, play in the same way. They are like robots acting out the violence. The toys channel them into that, they are not using their play to develop meaning and understanding as whole human beings. Children make meaning in their play. The same problem occurs when children play video games, they are using someone else's agenda. They go from single purpose toys and scripts to video games where they also imitate someone else's script. It is not their agenda it is someone else's agenda. When that happens children don't develop a kind of internal power that comes from working things out for themselves, seeing that they can solve problems, that they can work creatively in the world; instead they become passive recipients of their environment, including the violence. The reason that this point is so important is that when children do not develop the sense of power that comes from learning how to solve their own problems and work on their own agenda, then they have a greater their need to use the violence they see on the screen to feel powerful and strong. So it is not just the violent content kids are getting that makes media violence so problematic for them, it is the lack of internal power that they experience when they are part of the media culture.

Now I want to talk about what we can do about the media violence in children's lives. Many of the strategies for thinking about how to deal with the effects of media violence don't mean just dealing with the media violence directly.

There are ways we work with children to help them become good players, to help them become not so dependent on the media, to help them learn to be problem solvers. Teachers and parents can learn a lot about how to do this in the midst of the media culture.

We also try to limit their exposure to the kinds of media which we don't think is okay but it does find ways to get in despite our best efforts. It is like having a finger in the hole in the

dyke but water keeps coming in. And we deal with the water when it gets in, but we still keep our finger in the hole.

We heard earlier that kids don't tell their parents when they see violence or scary things on the Internet. Kids learn very quickly that their parents don't want to hear or that their parents are uncomfortable. One of the most important things we can do is stay connected with children around what they are being exposed to and develop ways to talk to them about it, finding out what they understand, trying to clear up misconceptions and getting our own values in.

All the players need to share responsibility for creating healthy media culture for children. Parents are always told that it is their job to protect their children from the violent media culture, if they just did their job there would not be a problem. I think it is clear that that is not how we are going to solve the problem, parents need help doing their job, society should not be making harder for them. Schools need to think how they can work with parents to help them, to work as communities to come up with ways of working together to support each other's efforts. The entertainment industry has to take responsibility for dealing with the problem too; they can't hide behind the "blame the parent" position which is their official position on the subject.

Lastly government has always had a responsibility to protect its children. Today industry interests in the US, using the first amendment freedom of speech argument, have created a power imbalance in their favour. In the past, government regulations of children's television served to balance the interests of the parents and the public, with those of the entertainment industry. Right now the US government is not doing this job. Many European governments are doing this job a lot better than we are. Government can require across the board ratings so that you can't market a toy for four year olds that goes with a movie that says it is rated for seventeen year olds which is what is happening now. So that you cannot have a video game rated m and then have toys and shows that are rated for five year olds. We need consistent ratings. We need to fund more research so we have stronger data to say here are the problems. Right now there is almost no money going into such research into the internet and new media for children much less the old media because the people who give money often have vested interests in maintaining the status quo. One thing that I don't believe people have thought about very much, is that all

of the industry does research with children on how to create their products in ways that will sell. They are not subject to going before a human subject review board the way I am when I do research with human subjects. They can do what ever they want. So having standards for how marketing and research is done is very important.

There are many organisations in the US and around the world trying to deal with pieces of this issue and I just want to close by mentioning the Center For Media Education (CME), based in Washington, DC, which has really been at the forefront of trying to create policies around media in the US. Just about any policies that the US has, they have helped structure and lobby for. CME have helped get the policies on internet guidelines, they have helped get educational programming for children on commercial television and they did send me here with some advice they wanted to give you: don't just deal with the problems that you have right now, try to keep up with what is happening for the next year and the year after because what we find is that by the time we try to make policies to deal with the problems now they are obsolete because the industry moves on so fast.

Thank you.

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