

Parent *pages*

A Growing
Christian
makes the
Best Parent!

Resources for Christian parents in the 21st Century

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Is television violence a real threat?

There is no debate about one thing: television offers an astonishing amount of violence for children to see. A study done by the National Cable Television Association finds that 85 percent of the programs on its own networks show violence. When network television is included, the overall percentage is 57. Between cartoon violence and glorified murders, our children are inundated with acts of violence.

But will hours and hours of television viewing make our children more aggressive or perhaps even violent themselves?

A murky picture

A review of research does not give us a clear picture of the connection between television viewing and aggression in children. There are simply too many variables: how many viewing hours, what was watched, whether or not it was “healthy” violence (violence that teaches a lesson such as documentaries or violence that results in consequences for the perpetrator) or what other factors in any child’s life can cause violence. We would need to conduct a study only on children who were not subjected to poverty, racial conflict, drug abuse, poor parenting, and genetic influences. Because our children live in a world of sin we can assume that this study will not be happening anytime soon.

A review of the literature regarding violence and television does afford us some useful information. It is generally accepted that there are three major concerns regarding children and repeated exposure to violence:

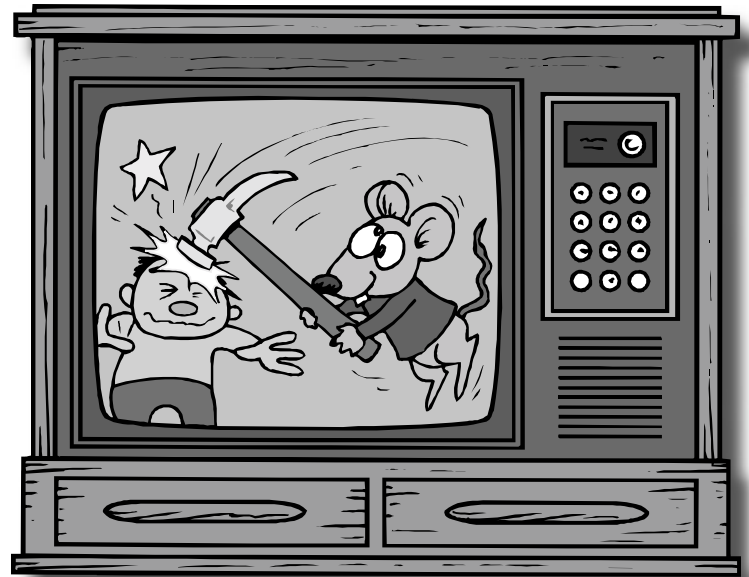
- Aggressive attitudes.
- Desensitization.
- Fear.

As an early childhood teacher of nearly

25 years, I can attest to the fact that recess duty was much easier during the Care Bear fad than the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle years. We understand that when children watch violent behavior, they role play violent behavior during play time. Being consistently exposed to violence will encourage aggressive behavior in children. The question remains, however, of the long term effects. When the Smurfs replaced He Man, did recess play return to a state of peace?

Television advertising has an effect on our children. Repeated commercials convince them that they “need” the cereal with the laser action turbo powered decoder ring. Once they get the cereal and its prize, however, their enthusiasm for both wanes. But we do not know the long-term effects of exposure to violence.

The second concern is desensitization. By about the third visit to the dentist, our children are no longer anxious about the visit. The demeanor of the dentist and staff, the positive experience of surviving previous visits, and possibly the thrill of watching television on the ceiling have helped the child to be desensitized to the potential anxiety of a visit to the dentist. While we are glad of this result, we do not want the same to be true of our children’s attitude toward violence. We want them



to abhor violence, to speak out against it, and to go to the aid of victims.

Empathy and compassion

This is the Christian response to violence. The saddest result is when children, after watching a violent program, become less willing to help someone who is hurt. Television viewing may not cause your child to hit another child but it may encourage your child to not care if a playmate has been hurt. It is a vital part of child development to be able to empathize with the situations and experiences of other children. Be warned that, as parents, it is easier to encourage your children into less violent kinds of play than it is to re-sensitize them to the feelings of others.

While some children become desensitized to violence, repeated exposure can have a different effect on others. There are children who become victims of fear. The violence they see on television seems to be a real possibility in their world. This

is true, not only for children still learning the difference between reality and fantasy, but also for those who are older. They come to the conclusion that “if it can happen in that neighborhood or in that family on TV, it can happen to me.” Repeated exposure to violence on television can cause some children to be fearful and anxious in their own lives. This is not God’s Will for them.

Use moderation

Some parents chose to eliminate television from the home. Most families do not find this to be a workable solution. What can parents do to ameliorate the effects of television in the development of their children? First of all, we can limit the amount of time our children watch television. Children need to be active to learn. The things they do each day actually participate in the maturation process of the brain. *Limit television hours by substituting activities that do not involve a screen* (television, computer, video games) as this represents the bulk of the media’s influence on your child.

Secondly, *educate yourself on what the media has deemed to be popular.* Watch

the shows, ask other parents what their children are watching, and make use of the many organizations that review and report on the media. Keeping up with the popular culture that surrounds our children is time consuming yet essential. We can’t know what to do to protect or prepare our children if we don’t understand the battle they face. As parents we certainly don’t need to be “cool” but we should be “savvy.”

Thirdly, *watch with your children, talk about what you see, compare the disturbing shows with shows that are healthier, and teach your children to discern.* Discernment is learned in context which means that we can’t just give our children a list of rules to follow to teach them how to evaluate what is good to watch. We need to model discernment, we need to guide our children in this process and help them to be aware of the goals of the media. The media may not be evil but it certainly does not have our best interests at heart. Its goal is to keep us watching and to encourage us to buy from their sponsors. As parents we are on a different page, from a different chapter, in fact, a different book.

We have God’s help

The Lord tells us in Prov. 16:2 that:

“All a man’s ways seem innocent to him, but motives are weighed by the Lord.”

Parents and children need to be aware of the motives of the media and of the effect it has on viewers. The television industry has made a study of what motivates its viewers and it uses this information to its advantage. Our children need to be similarly armed when they reach for the remote. This may seem like a daunting task but God has given you some advantages. As parents, we are the most important people in our children’s lives.

We are their first and best teachers. With the help of the Holy Spirit we can influence our children far more effectively than the media. Remember God’s Word as spoken through His servant, Job:

“Does not the ear test words as the tongue tastes food?” (Job 12:11).

Armed with God’s help, we can teach this skill to our children and prepare them for much more than watching television.

Questions for discussion

- Can you list the favorite television shows of your children? If your children are older than 5, ask them what they watch and compare this to your list.
- Find out why your children watch these shows. Do they watch because of influence from friends? Out of interest for the topic or format of the show? Or perhaps because of reasons of convenience?
- What concerns you the most about the shows your children watch? Violence? Sexual innuendo? Other values issues like consumerism or fostering disrespect for authority?
- What else do you need to include in your lessons on discernment? In what other ways are your children being influenced by the media?
- Choose a Bible verse that can be part of your prayers on this issue. Perhaps Jer. 31:33 or Phil. 4:13?

Recommended Reading

- “Is It a Lost Cause? Having the Heart of God for the Church’s Children” by Marva J. Dawn
- American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry
www.aacap.org/publications/factsfam/violence.htm
- Focus on the Family’s Plugged In
www.pluggedinonline.com

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