

MEDIA VIOLENCE AND CHILDREN

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Last week, I tried to summarize Steyer's comments on media's use of sex in television, the movies, magazines and advertisements, which has been exploited in the race to achieve a hefty bottom line, because "sex sells". All of this emphasis on sex has "stolen childhood" from our children, making them "instant adults" in behavior, dress, and attitude – so early a loss of innocence, has been my heart-sickening feeling.

Steyer, in his book "The Other Parent" also discussed at length the effect of media violence on children, and how a steady diet of television, movies, and interactive video games has led children to become so steeped in a hyperviolent culture. He noted that many young people saw massacres as a way not just to get even but to make themselves the center of media's attention. We have all read about the Columbine shootings as well as other high school shootings, and studies about these dreadful incidents showed that the high school killers were into such gory video games, "music" with sadistic lyrics, and felt that it was "pretty cool" to go on a killing rampage just like the movie characters. He cites the results of over a thousand studies by major medical and public health groups that have concluded that media violence has an impact on children on four particular ways:

- "It can make them fearful and lead them to believe that the world is a mean and violent place.
- It can cause some kids to act violently and aggressively toward others
- It can teach them that violence is an acceptable way to deal with conflict
- And it can desensitize them toward the use of violence in the real world."

Other studies which tracked children who watched TV violence at the age of eight up to age eighteen found that aggressive behavior was not confined to their boyhood acts but that the aggression of the 18-year olds was most closely correlated with violent television viewing at the younger age. A similar study followed the behavior of boys until they turned thirty, and found that "those who had viewed the most televised violence at age eight were convicted of more serious crimes, punished their own children

more violently, and were considered more aggressive by their wives than other males examined in the study.”

Another concern Steyer raised was on violent video games that have become a \$6 billion-a-year industry. Researchers found have found that these interactive electronic games “provide a forum for learning and practicing aggressive solutions to conflict situations.” Moreover, in video games “the viewer as player is actively involved in constructing the violence.” Worrisome is that this interactivity repeated over and over again of committing extreme violence against others may eventually lead to its being committed in real life. Compared to TV and movies which are more passive experiences of violence, research had shown that these electronic games have, through practice, elicited a “learned response,” as well as caused intense physiological effects – researchers noted increased heart rate and blood pressure, and in some cases even triggered epileptic seizures.

News stories too, either in print or television, often show such gory scenes as the result of a shoot-out, murder victims, terrorist attacks, etc. As an old newsroom saying goes, “If it bleeds, it leads,” just like the justification that “sex sells.” Even general patronage movies unwittingly promote violence, in that the previews or advance teasers for future films which are inappropriate for young children are shown in between screening times.

In the end all of this is about profits. Pressure on television networks and the film industry to produce heftier bottom lines has resulted in more and more of violence-laced products. Worse, there is the marketing of media-violence themed toys through the merchandising of related action figures and other items such as guns.

Media often hide behind such excuses as “creative freedom.” “A film is nothing but art,” is what they say, “and art has no responsibility but to be true to itself. It is not there to educate, set a good example, or change the world.” Thus they shift the blame to parents, schools, government – everyone else but themselves.

Of course this is not to say that violence in media will directly cause children to become murderers, sadists, and criminally-inclined adults. Of course, it is also correct that the values inculcated in the home can prevent such horrific futures for our young, and that indeed parents have the duty to supervise and ensure that what their children are

watching in the various forms of media are wholesome, and that they are there to offset with advice or explanations because children don't often understand the link between action and consequences. Parents cannot simply say that their children will "outgrow" the tendency to imitate their action heroes. Parents have to realize that the marketing of inappropriate games, music, and television and movies while ostensibly addressed to adults in fact has for its most lucrative market the youth, who at present now have their own purchasing power.

Just as I earlier expressed concern over children's early exposure to sex as resulting in the loss of innocence, Steyer also says that "a generation that has been repeatedly exposed to intense, realistic violence grows up with more acceptance of aggression, less resistance to brutality, and less compassion...indeed...a numbing effect." Media cannot disclaim responsibility over violence eventually robbing us of "the tragic sense of life necessary for compassion...and a compassionless society is something that all of us should fear."

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