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A Study of Factors Related to Children's Interest in Television Violence

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A STUDY OF FACTORS RELATED TO CHILDREN'S INTEREST IN TELEVISION VIOLENCE

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Abstract

Since television is so pervasive in our lives, many researchers have come to study the connection of television on children's development. Research to date strongly indicates associations between aggressive behavior and viewing violent material on television. The present study looked, from the parent's perspective, at the relationship of television on their child's behavior at home. The study examined the amount of television programming children are watching, the kinds of programming children are watching, how they react to what they see, whether forbidding certain violent programming had an effect on children's interest in a program and whether gender played a role in aggressiveness.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Public attention to violence on television has been evident since the early 1950's. Concerns about violence and the media, especially their effects on children, have elicited considerable interest in society. Research as far back as the 1930's concluded that violence in the movies had a marked effect on an adolescent audience.

Today, more and more Americans are watching television. Over 90 percent of Americans have at least one television set in their homes, with many families having more than one (Newman and Newman, 1995). Televisions are operating on average of about seven hours per day in American homes (Steinberg, 1985).

For many children, watching television is a solitary activity. Social interaction is an important factor for cognitive growth. Children benefit by interacting with others who express ideas and opinions that differ from their own. With children watching so much television many parents, educators and counselors worry that television is turning our children into a generation of couch potatoes. Counselors are seeing more and more children, parents and families coming to

them for help with reduced attention spans, aggressive behaviors and certain beliefs and values that children have. Counselors need to help parents and families become more actively involved in planning and guiding a child's experiences with television. Counselors can help these individuals by doing research to learn about what is happening in society, reading current literature published in the field and continuing with their own education.

Purpose

Since television is so pervasive in our lives, many researchers have come to study the effects of television on children's development. The accumulative effects of television violence can only be hypothesized. However, research to date strongly indicates associations between aggressive behavior and viewing violent material on television. The purpose of this study is to determine how television influences children's behavior.

Statement of Hypothesis

This study examined four hypotheses:

(1) Children's aggressive behavior is positively related to attraction to violent content on television.

(2) Male children will be more interested than female

children to violent television shows.

(3) Children who have been frightened by violence will show greater interest in violent programs than those who have not been frightened.

(4) Children's parents who restrict violent television will be more interested in violent television shows than those children whose parents did not restrict violent television shows.

CHAPTER II

Review of Literature

Definition of Violence

Violence has no single commonly accepted definition in research; it is treated as a construct. Many different researchers have different ways to assemble elements into their definition. For example, George Gerbner and his colleagues (1980) have conducted the most consistent and widely cited assessments of the amount of violence on American television, since the late 1960s. Gerbner, Gross, Morgan and Signorielli (1980) defines violence as "the overt expression of physical force (with or without a weapon) against self or other, compelling action against one's will on pain of being hurt or killed, or actually hurting or killing" (pp. 10-29). This definition is limited to overt physical acts. Studies conducted in both the U.S. and Britain who used Gerbner's definition of violence have consistently found 4-6 violent acts per hour of prime time programming, with substantially more on American children's cartoons (Cumberbatch, Lee, Hardy and Jones, 1987).

Williams, Zabrack and Joy (1982) use a wider concept of aggression defined as "behavior inflicting

harm, either physically or psychologically, including explicit or implicit threats and nonverbal behavior" (p. 366). The researchers found, by using this definition, which includes verbal aggression, 18.5 aggressive acts per hour occurred in a mix of U.S. and Canadian programming.

Potter and his colleagues (1995) used a broader definition, "any action that serves to diminish something in a physical, psychological, social or emotional manner" (National Television Violence Study, 1997, p. 37)." Victims of aggression could be a person or a non-human entity (e.g., animal, object, or society); the perpetrator could fall within any one of these types. An average of 36.6 acts per hour, of which 13.2 were physical in nature, was found by using this definition. Greenberg and his colleagues (1980) use a broad concept, including verbal acts of aggression and anti-social behavior such as deceit. Their study reported 38 acts of violence per hour, 12 of which were physical in nature.

These three different definitions of violence are just a few examples to demonstrate the broad definition of violence used in research. The elements that broaden the definition of violence are the inclusion of

verbal as well as physical violence, the inclusion of accidents as well as intentional acts and the inclusion of threats as well as acts that involve actual harm (National Television Violence Study, 1997).

Statistics on Violence

The United States ranks first among all developed countries in the world in homicides per capita. The U.S. is a violent society with violence among children and adolescents escalating. According to the American Psychological Association (National Television Violence Study, 1997, p. 8):

- Every five minutes a child is arrested for a violent crime.
- Gun related violence takes the life of an American child every three hours.
- Every day over 100,000 children carry guns to schools.
- In a recent survey of fifth graders in New Orleans, more than 50% report being a victim of violence and 70% have seen weapons being used.
- Adolescents account for 24% of all violent crimes leading to arrest. The rate has

increased over time for the age groups 12-19 and is down for age groups 35 and older.

- Among individuals age 15 to 24 years old, homicide is the second leading cause of death and for African American youth it is the leading cause.
- A child growing up in Chicago is 15 times more likely to be murdered than a child growing up in Northern Ireland.

There are many factors contributing to violent behavior, such as gangs, guns, drugs, poverty, and racism. Many groups like the American Psychological Association, American Medical Association, National Academy of Science and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have been examining the problem of violent behavior. "There is clear evidence that exposure to media violence contributes in significant ways to violence in society" (National Television Violence Study, 1997, p. 8). This conclusion is based on research collected over the last 40 years.

History of Violence on Television

Concerns about violence on television and their effects on children have been evident since the early

1950s. Himmelweit, Oppenheim and Vince (1958) did one of the first large-scale studies examining the effects of television violence on children in England. Results from a sample of over 1800 British children found crime and detective stories did not make children more aggressive. Violent programming were found not to be beneficial to children and they took up a large amount of children's viewing time.

There was growing concern in the United States at this time, where many crime and detective stories were being produced. "In 1951, the National Association of Educational Broadcasters found crime and horror programs comprised 10% of programming time in four large American cities" (Rubinstein, 1976, pp. 18-34). Senator Estes Kefauver initiated a congressional inquiry into the effects of television violence after a series of hearings by a Senate subcommittee in 1954 examining the causes of juvenile delinquency. The subcommittee concluded in 1956 that television violence could be potentially harmful to young viewers. In 1961 and in 1964 the Senate subcommittee found the amount of violence on television had increased with much of the violence being shown during times when young viewers were a large part of the audience (Judiciary Committee,

U.S. Senate, 1965).

Despite the conclusions by these congressional committees, no definitive body of research data had been accumulated at that time (Rubinstein, 1981). Klapper (1960) concluded that there was no case in the previous published research for the relationship between juvenile delinquency and media crime and violence. Klapper noted the media was likely to reinforce tendencies, good or ill, of the viewer (Klapper, 1960). Klapper's position was partially supported by the conclusions of the first major American study of television violence and its effects on children, which was published in 1961 by Schramm, Lyle and Parker. These researchers concluded from a sample of 6000 American and Canadian school children that, children who were not already somewhat aggressive and who did not confuse fantasy with reality were less likely to be influenced towards violence. A disturbed family relationship was a much more likely precursor of delinquency than was the act of watching television violence (Schramm, Lyle and Parker, 1961).

The assassinations of President John Kennedy, Senator Robert Kennedy and the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. were the next major event in the

examination of television violence. President Johnson established a national commission on the causes and prevention of violence in 1968. Part of the Eisenhower Commission's task was to examine the mass media on violence. National commissions were set up to examine, issue findings and recommendations on a variety of issues of major concern, including television and violence.

The Eisenhower Commission faced many problems. The commission was given too little time to complete the task on violence and the media, and many of the findings and conclusions stirred up much controversy in the public. The final report also was upstaged by the Surgeon General's program of research on television and social behavior. Despite all the problems, the report from the Eisenhower Commission provided an important survey in the field. The report concluded that watching television violence taught the viewer how to engage in violent behavior (Baker and Ball, 1969). A series of recommendations made by the Commission was developed to help make television less harmful to the viewer. A center for media study, which would serve as an independent agency to monitor media performance and conduct research into the social effects of the media

was one recommendation, proposed by the commission.

Before the Eisenhower Commission report was issued, a new national examination of violence on television had been introduced. In March 1969, Senator John Pastore, Chairman of the Senate Subcommittee on Communications, requested the Surgeon General to appoint a committee of distinguished scientists to conduct a scientific study to establish whether or not televised violence produced antisocial behavior in children. Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior (1972) came to a unanimous conclusion that there was evidence of a causal relationship between television violence and later aggressive behavior.

Immediately after the results of both the Eisenhower Commission's examination of media violence and the Surgeon General's program of research, both the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) and the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) announced they were going to launch major studies of their own. NBC began a large-scale panel study in 1969 designed to be completed in five years, examining the impact of televised violence on young children and adolescents. As of the beginning of 1980 only some preliminary results had been

released, no final report.

In 1969, CBS authorized two major pieces of research concerning television violence, both of which have been published. Milgram and Shotland (1973) did a field study designed to measure whether viewers would imitate, in real life, an antisocial act portrayed on a television program. Subjects watched one episode of a drama series, which showed the main character stealing money from an openly displayed charity collection box. After watching the series, subjects were put through a frustrating experience and given an opportunity to imitate the behavior shown on the program. Other opportunities to imitate antisocial behavior were also built into the research design the results provided no clear evidence of imitation. The researchers could not prove the hypothesis.

In 1978, W. A. Belson examined the relationship between heavy viewing of televised violence and antisocial behavior. A large sample of adolescent boys in London were divided into heavy and light viewers of television violence. Results found that the viewing of television violence was related to antisocial behavior. Earlier studies, including one important longitudinal study under the Surgeon General's program identified

primarily aggressive behavior, such as pushing and shoving, as the consequence of viewing violence on television (Lefkowitz, Eron, Walder and Huesmann, 1972). The Belson study identified actual acts that could be called juvenile delinquency, through self-reporting, including property damage and bodily harm to others. The various studies sponsored by the television networks and the federal government are just part of the significant increase in research on television violence.

More Recent Research on Television Violence

Since television is so pervasive in our lives, many other researchers have studied the effects of television on children's development. In 1985, the American Psychological Association made a statement confirming that television violence does have a causal effect on aggressive behavior for children and adolescents (Friedrich-Cofer and Huston, 1986).

In a series of experiments in Belgium and the United States (1975, 1977), violent and nonviolent movies were shown to groups of institutionalized delinquents and neglected boys for one week. In the Belgian study, physical aggression increased significantly after viewing in both cottages assigned

to violent films, but did not increase in the neutral film cottages. Total aggression, including both physical and verbal aggression, increased primarily in the violent film cottage. In two U.S., studies total aggression was significantly higher in two cottages viewing television violence for five days than in cottages viewing neutral films (Leyens, Parke, Camino, and Berkowitz, 1975; Parke, Berkowitz, Leyens, West, and Sebastian, 1977). Longitudinal findings also support a bi-directional model of causality (Friedrich-Cofer and Huston, 1986). This means that television violence influences aggression and aggressive predisposition's influence the preference for television violence. Singer and Singer (1981) stated there was a positive correlation between preschool children's viewing habits and aggression. The children's viewing habits were recorded by their parents in a diary and observers studied the aggression in the preschoolers. Children's viewing of "action" programs was positively related to later aggression for both sexes. The reverse was also found to be positively correlated, early aggression is related to later viewing habits (Singer, Singer and Rapaczynski, 1984).

The Television Rating System

With more and more Americans watching television and the large body of research suggesting that television violence may lead to aggressive tendencies, the US Federal Communications Commission is requiring a ratings system to be put into use by cable and broadcast television. All shows will be required to bear a rating in the upper left-hand corner, except in news telecasts.

The new television rating system gives parents more information about the television shows their children are watching. This rating system is used in conjunction with the new V-chip control device. All television programs would be rated in six broad categories: TV-Y, TV-Y7, TV-G, TV-PG, TV-14 and TV-M (Zoglin, 1996). TV-Y is for all children. The themes and elements in the programs are specifically designed for children ages two to six. TY-Y7 is directed to older children. The themes and elements in the program may include mild physical, comedic violence or may frighten children under the age of seven. TV-G contains little or no violence, no strong language and little or no sexual dialog or situations. TV-PG, parental guidance suggested. Programming may contain

infrequent coarse language, limited violence, some sexual dialogue and situations. TV-14 contains sophisticated themes, sexual content, strong language, and more intense violence; parents are strongly cautioned. TV-M is for mature audiences only. Programming contains mature themes, profane language, graphic violence and explicate sexual content. The new rating system alerts parents of the content that is contained in the television shows their children may be watching. By using this rating system with the V-chip parents can screen out shows they do not think are appropriate for their children.

However, it has been shown that once parents start restricting access to television shows the actual shows start becoming more attractive to children. Christenson (1992) calls this the forbidden fruit hypothesis. Christenson's hypothesis is based on Brehm's (1972) reactance theory. Brehm's theory states that when an individual's freedom is threatened or taken away, the individual is motivated to restore that freedom. Violent television is made less accessible to children through advisories and parental restrictions. Children therefore may become more attracted to violent content because of its restrictions.

Effects of Exposure to Media Violence

Over the last three decades the research literature has been highly consistent in its findings in three major area of effects associated with exposure to media violence. First, increased violence results primarily due to the effect of learning and imitation. Second, there is increased inattention towards violence among others, commonly called desensitization effect. Third, there is increased fearfulness, both short and long term, about becoming a victim of violence.

Learning and Imitation

Violence on television can have a profound effect on viewer's actions. Through the process of modeling and imitative learning, individuals and their behaviors can be influenced by violence witnessed on the television.

The Social Learning Theory. The Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1971) is one of the most important models that explains how learning and imitation of violence occurs. Individuals learn to respond to different situations acquired either through direct experience or indirectly through the observation of models. Children see the aggressive behavior in the media and tend to adopt and copy the behaviors. Young viewers who are

exposed to frequent episodes of televised violence are more likely to believe aggressive behavior is an acceptable way to resolve conflicts, and become hardened to the use of aggression in peer interactions. As a response to frustration children become more accepting of the use of aggression. "Children and adults who are exposed to televised violence are more likely to expect others will be aggressive toward them; they are more likely to worry about being victims of aggression; and they are more likely to see the world as a dangerous place" (Bryant, Carveth and Brown, 1981, pp. 368-375).

Research outside the laboratory, primarily field studies, has also supported the social learning model. For example, Huesmann and Eron (1986) suggest that aggression, as a characteristic way of solving problems, is learned at a young age and becomes more impervious to change as the child grows older. Huesmann, Eron, Lefkowitz and Walder (1984) did a longitudinal study over a 22-year period examining the long-term effects of television violence on aggressive and criminal behavior. The study collected data on aggression and television viewing when the subjects were 8, 18 and 30 years old. The researchers found

evidence of a longitudinal effect that spanned the 22 years from age 8 to 30. For boys, early television violence viewing correlated with self-reported aggression at age 30 and added significantly to the prediction of serious criminal arrests accumulated by age 30. The effects occurred independently of social class, intellectual capability and parenting variables (Huesmann, 1986). Huesmann and Eron (1986) concluded, early exposure to television violence stimulates aggression and that early aggression is a statistical precursor of later criminal behavior. A longitudinal relationship exists between habitual childhood exposure to television violence and adult crime. Analysis suggests that approximately 10% of the variability in later criminal behavior can be attributed to television violence (Huesmann and Eron, 1986).

Priming Effects Theory. A new theoretical proposal has emerged which is grounded in cognitive psychology theory. When people witness an event through the media, ideas are "activated" and for a short period of time tend to prime or evoke other semantically related thoughts. After an idea is activated there is a greater likelihood that it and associated thought elements will come to mind again. The process of

thought activation has been termed a "priming effect" (Berkowitz, 1984).

Many studies provide evidence that the activation of aggressive ideas through exposure to media violence primes other aggression-related thought, which in turn may have important social consequences. For example, a study by Carver, Ganellan, Froming and Chambers (1983) presented participants with a brief film depicting a hostile interaction between a businessman and his secretary. Afterward, subjects evaluated an ambiguous person as more hostile than did those who had not seen the film. In another experiment, children who read aggressive comic books were more likely to choose words with aggressive connotations to complete sentences later presented by the experimenters than subjects who had read neutral comics (Berkowitz, 1973). There is also evidence to suggest that being primed with aggressive thoughts often lead to aggressive acts. Carver et al. (1983) showed that men who were induced to have aggressive thoughts delivered the most intense electric shocks to other men.

The Social Development Model. There are many questions surrounding the issue of media violence and its effects later in life. Once an individual has been exposed to

media violence, does he/she seek further violence viewing? How can we explain the fact that some individuals are affected by televised violence differently than others?

Researchers have addressed these questions with a recent theoretical model that emphasizes the reciprocal nature of the viewer and his/her interest in media violence, and which also adds consideration of individual viewer characteristics in explaining media violence (Huesmann, 1986). This model is the developmental theory of media violence. Huesmann (1986) "uses the ideas in social cognition to explain the effects of televised violence, especially the notion that learning the appropriate course of action in a situation involves the retention of behavioral rules or scripts" (pp. 125-140). Behavioral strategies learned through watching violent television are tried in the immediate environment and if reinforced are retained and used again. Huesmann believes the most important contribution of the social development model is the "explication of personal and interpersonal factors as intervening variables that link violence viewing and aggressive behavior" (National Television Violence Study, 1997, pp. 10-13).

Five variables have been established in maintaining the television viewing-aggression relationship. The key factors in the relationship are the child's "(1) intellectual achievement, (2) social popularity, (3) identification with the television characters, (4) belief in the realism of the violence shown on television, and (5) amount of fantasizing about aggression" (Huesmann, 1986, pp. 125-140). Based on these personal and interpersonal factors, a large amount of television violence may result in viewers becoming not only aggressive but also developing increased interest in seeing more television violence.

Children who have poorer academic skills tend to behave more aggressively. They watch more television, watch more violent programs and believe violent programs are more accurate portrayals of life (Huesmann and Eron, 1986). Huesmann (1986) speculated that "aggressiveness interferes with the social interactions between the viewer and his/her teacher and peers that are needed in order to develop academic potential" (pp. 125-140. Research by Lefkowitz, Eron, Walder and Huesmann (1977) has found that television violence may interfere with intellectual achievement. Children who cannot obtain gratification from success in school may

turn to television shows to obtain vicariously the successes they cannot otherwise achieve.

Aggressive children also may be less popular with their peers. Longitudinal studies also suggests that the relationship between unpopularity and aggression is bi-directional (Huesmann and Eron, 1986). Not only do more aggressive children become less popular, but less popular children seem to become more aggressive.

Children identify with television characters that they perceive are more like themselves. When children see characters that are similar to them they can relate to these characters and will be influenced by them. For an aggressive behavior to be encoded in memory and maintained it must be noticeable to a child. Realistic scenes are the most salient depictions. If a violent action is perceived to be totally unrealistic, it is likely to receive less attention than material, which is more directly pertinent to the viewer.

Desensitization

Desensitization towards violence has also become part of our culture. It is a process in which viewers come to lose their emotional dislike toward violence, accept it as normal behavior and come to behave aggressively themselves (Newman and Newman, 1995).

Eysenck (1963) suggest that "when people have been exposed to a great deal of prior violence, either directly or vicariously as in newspapers, movies, television programming, and other media, there may occur in time a kind of psychological blunting, 'tuning off' or 'tuning out,' of the normal emotional responses to violent events" (pp. 12-18). For example, Kitty Genovese, a Brooklyn girl was assaulted, raped, and murdered in a New York apartment complex over a half-hour period. Later investigations revealed more than 40 people were aware of her distress and need for help, but no one came to her aid directly or indirectly; such as, anonymously calling the police. The fact that over 40 people heard her cries for help and did not help may be a result of systematic desensitization (National Television Violence Study, 1997).

Lazarus, Speisman, Mordkoff and Davidson (1962) wanted to find out if children, in real life, become desensitized to violence. The researchers exposed subjects to films of a primitive tribal ritual, involving painful and bloody genital mutilations. With repeated observations of the scene, viewers became increasingly less emotionally responsive, thus indicating progressive desensitization to a specific

filmed stimulus.

Fear

The media, particularly television communicates facts, norms and values about our social world. Television is a main source for information about critical aspects of our environment. The viewing of media violence can lead many to believe the world is a dangerous, scary place. George Gerbner's (1969) cultivation theory presumes that "extensive, cumulative television exposure shapes viewers' perceptions of social reality" (pp. 311-340). Individuals develop beliefs about their environment from observing the world through television. Researchers believe people store media information automatically and utilize it to formulate their perceptions and beliefs about the world (Harris, 1994). Gerbner and his colleagues presented elaborate evidence indicating heavy viewers of television believe the world they live in is more violent and unsafe than do light television viewers. For example, heavy viewers evidence greater fear of walking alone at night; greater estimations of the prevalence of violence; and greater overall fear of crime (Gerbner and Gross, 1976). The media can cultivate fear and this has been found to be true in

adults as well as children.

Bryant, Carveth and Brown (1981) did a study showing how the cultivation effect could be obtained in a relatively short period of time. Subjects were assigned to a six-week TV diet of either light or heavy viewing. Those assigned to the heavy viewing condition were divided into two groups: one who saw only justified violence in which the "good guys" won and the other which saw only unjustified violence in which the "bad guys" got away with violence. Subjects in the heavy viewing/unjustified condition showed the highest increases in anxiety and perceived likelihood of being a victim of crime, in comparison to the other groups. Viewing media violence can have long-term as well as short-term influence on fear reactions.

Some fear effects may be more specific and urgent for children. Child viewers may scream or hide their faces in their hands after seeing a frightful scene. Nightmares and recurring thoughts may keep children as well as parents awake at night. Most research on children's emotional reactions emphasize immediate impacts, although some research indicates the effects of viewing frightening media can last several days or weeks (Wilson and Cantor, 1985). Longer lasting

effects may be acute and disabling, like severe anxiety states which can last up to several weeks (Mathai, 1983). To account for these fear reactions it appears that the generalization process is operating with the television viewer. Although viewers are in no real danger from the violence witnessed on television, the reaction experienced is similar, usually less intense, as if the encounter had actually happened in real life to the viewer (National Television Violence Study, 1997).

Although children become frightened by media violence it has been found that children will seek this type of stimuli out. Orbach, Winkler and Har-Evan (1993) hypothesis that children who are frightened by stories are also motivated to select similarly frightening stimuli in order to gain control and master their unpleasant emotions. They defined this as the repetition compulsion hypothesis.

Gender Differences In Attraction To Violence On Television

Boys and girls are often taught different emotional and attitudinal responses to violence and their attitudes appear to influence their reactions to media violence (Eron, 1980; Edgar, 1977; Greenburg and

Cordon, 1972; McIntyre and Teevan, 1972). Males tend to be more aggressive than females. Males are taught that violence, to some degree, is acceptable for them (Baron, 1977; Johnson, 1972; Zillmann, 1979). Many theorists propose that gender differences in aggressive behavior account for the fact that males are more interested than females in violent television. Donohue (1979), Lyle and Hoffman (1972) found that male children seem to like and choose media violence more than females. In addition, little boys express greater interest than little girls in a variety of violent material including violent toys (Goldstein, in press), cartoons (Lyle and Hoffman, 1972), fairy tale stories (Collins-Standley, Gan, Yu and Zillman, 1995) and television shows (Atkin, Greenberg, Korzenny, and McDermott, 1979).

CHAPTER III

Method

Participants

Parent's perceptions of their children's television viewing habits were examined. A total of 27 mothers and 23 fathers answered the questionnaire. The parents had children between grades one to six; twenty-five females and twenty-five males were reported on. Table 1 shows the distribution of grade levels for the observed children (11 first graders, 8 second graders, 11 third graders, 8 fourth graders, 8 fifth graders and 4 sixth graders).

Table 1

Grade Level

	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th
Males	5	3	5	6	4	2
Females	6	5	6	2	4	2

This sample was drawn from personal contacts of the researcher. The subjects who participated in the study were white, middle to upper middle class families who lived in the St. Louis, Missouri area.

Instrumentation

Data was collected via questionnaires (see Appendix B). The questionnaire was developed based on a survey done by Joanne Cantor and Amy Nathanson (1997) from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

The questionnaire was a self-report measure and pre-tested by 5 volunteers to assure that all questions were easy to read and understandable. Parents who participated in the study were asked to read and sign a consent form (see Appendix A). The consent form told parents their answers on the questionnaire would be used as part of a research project on children and television viewing habits. The questionnaire took approximately 10 minutes and contained 14 questions on a variety of topics related to television.

Parents were first asked to provide information about their regulation and guidance of their children's television viewing. An estimation of the number of hours their child watched television per day was recorded. Parents were asked if they forbid their child to watch specific television programs. They were then asked about their child's fright reactions to television from what parents had observed from their child in the past. Subsequent sections of the

questionnaire asked about their child's interest in violent programming and their perceived child's aggression level.

The predictor variables measured in the study were:

(i). Aggression. Parents rate their child's aggression level on a five point scale (1 = not at all aggressive, 5 = extremely aggressive).

(ii). Parental restriction of television violence. Parents were asked if they forbid their child to watch any particular programs. Affirmative answers to this question received a code of "1" and negative responses received a "0". Parents are then probed to reveal the restricted shows. Parents are then asked for their major concerns about these programs and why they want to restrict them. Two independent coders for violence (1) or no violence (0) categorized the reasons parents provided for restricting shows.

(iii). Fright reactions to television. Parents were asked if television has ever had a disturbing, upsetting or frightening response by their child to the extent that the effect endured after the program was over. Affirmative answers are coded as "1" and negative responses will receive a code of "0".

The criterion variable measured was attraction to violent content. Parents were asked to estimate their child's level of interest in three types of violent programming. On a four-point scale, parents reported their child's level of interest (1=not at all interested, 4=extremely interested) in action cartoons (e.g., Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, GI-Joe), live-action programs (e.g., Mighty Morphin Power Rangers), and reality-based action shows (e.g., Cops, Rescue 911).

Procedures

Data was collected using a questionnaire. A consent form and a questionnaire were hand delivered to seventy parents through personal contact by the experimenter. The consent form attached to the questionnaire briefly described the study to the parents. The questionnaire was a self-report measure, that parents answered, to gather information concerning child's television viewing habits. The questionnaires included a self addressed stamped envelope to be returned to the experimenter. Once the experimenter received the questionnaire, the consent form was immediately torn off the questionnaire to ensure confidentiality.

CHAPTER IV

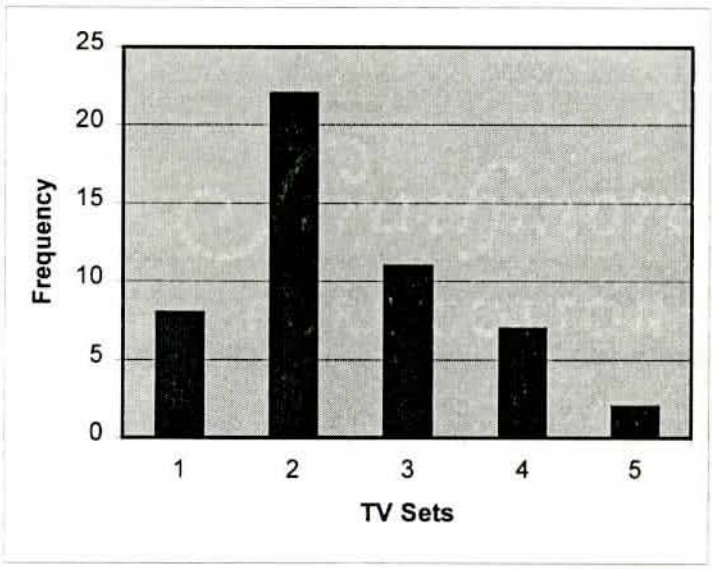
RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

All of the parents who answered the questionnaire owned at least one television set and at least one VCR. Table 2 indicates the distribution of television sets in the homes.

Table 2

Distribution of Television Sets



The questionnaire proceeded to ask parents a series of questions about their child's television viewing habits. Table 3 (see page 34) demonstrates the number of television hour's children watch on regular school days as well as on the weekends.

Table 3

Means and Standard Deviations of the Number of Television Hours Watched

	N	M	SD
School Days			
Females	25	2.52	1.05
Males	25	2.52	0.96
Total	50	3.12	0.99
Weekends			
Females	25	3.2	1.41
Males	25	2.96	1.02
Total	50	3.08	1.23

Boys and girls generally watched the same amount of television both on regular school days and on the weekends.

Parents were also asked if they specifically encouraged their child to watch any television programming, 72% of parents answered "yes" while 28% answered "no". Parents were also asked whether they forbid their child to watch any television programming, 92% of parents answered "yes" and 8% answered "no".

Sixty-four percent of parents forbid television shows due to violence.

Parents were asked whether their child had been frightened by something they had seen on television. Sixty-eight percent of parents said their child had been frightened by something witnessed on television; while thirty-two percent of parents replied their child had not been frightened by something on television.

Parents were then asked to rate on a scale of 1 to 4 their child's interest in action cartoon, live action, teenage-oriented programs and reality-based action shows. Table 4 (see page 36) shows the interest scores of the male and female children for each type of programming and for the total summed across the three types of programming.

Table 4

Means and Standard Deviations of Television Interest Levels

	N	M	SD
Action Cartoons			
Females	25	1.56	0.71
Males	25	2.6	0.76
Total	50	2.08	0.9
Live Action, Teen-Oriented Programming			
Females	25	1.92	1
Males	25	2.72	0.61
Total	50	2.32	0.91
Reality-based Action Shows			
Females	25	2.12	0.88
Males	25	2.88	0.83
Total	50	2.5	0.93
Total Interest Scores			
Females	25	5.6	1.53
Males	25	8.2	1.47
Total	50	6.9	1.98

From Table 4, it would seem that male children appeared more interested in the aggressive, violent television programming than the female children.

The final question on the questionnaire asked parents to what degree their child was physically aggressive with others on a scale of 1 to 5. Table 5 (see page 37) shows the distribution of scores. Parents rated male children as being more physically aggressive than female children. The mean score for the males was 2.92 with a standard deviation of 0.81 as

compared with the females mean score of 1.68 and a standard deviation of 0.69.

Table 5

Means and Standard Deviations of Physical Aggressiveness With Others

Physically Aggressive With Others

	N	M	SD
Female	25	1.68	0.69
Males	25	2.92	0.81
Total	50	2.3	0.097

Hypothesis Testing

This study looked at the following four hypotheses:

(1). Children's aggressive behavior is positively related to attraction to violent content on television.

(2). Male children will be more interested than female children to violent television shows.

(3). Children who have been frightened by violence will show greater interest in violent programs than those who have not been frightened.

(4). Children's parents who restrict violent television will be more interested in violent

television shows than those children whose parents did not restrict violent television shows.

For the first hypothesis, children's aggressive behavior was found to be positively related to attraction to violent content on television. A Pearson's correlation of 0.58 was found ($p < 0.05$); indicating a significant relationship between the two factors.

For the second hypothesis, an independent t-test was use to examine the difference in interest level of violent television between male and females children. The t-test on the total interest scores concluded that male children were significantly more interested than female children in violent television ($t = -6.128$, $p = 0.000$). Table 4 (see page 36) contains the means and standard deviations.

The third hypothesis was not rejected. There was no significance difference in interest in violent programming between children who have been frightened by violence and those who have not ($t = 0.547$, $p = 0.587$). Table 6 (see page 39) for the means and standard deviations.

Table 6

Means and Standard Deviation of Children's Interest in Violent Television Content Based on Previous Fright Reactions

	N	M	SD	t	p
Previously Frightened	34	6.79	2.00	0.547	0.587
Not Frightened	16	7.13	2.00		

An independent t-test on the fourth hypothesis did not provide statistically significant evidence that when parents restrict violent television it will make children more interested in violent television programming ($t = 0.86$, $p = 0.394$). Table 7 shows the means and standard deviations.

Table 7

Means and Standard Deviation of Children's Interest in Violent Television Content Based on Parent's Forbidding Violent Television Shows

	N	M	SD	t	p
Parent's Forbid	32	6.72	1.94	0.86	0.394
Parent's did not Forbid	18	7.22	2.07		

CHAPTER V

Discussion

The major purpose of this study was to look at factors related to children's interest in television violence. The results of this study suggest that gender plays a major role in the interest in violent programming and that children's aggressive behaviors are to some degree related to attraction to violent content. These results are consistent with Joanne Cantor and Amy Nathanson's study done in 1997. They also found that male children were more interested than female children in the various television programming. It is also consistent with their finding that the more aggressive children tended to be more interested in violent television programming. Donohue (1979) and Lyle and Hoffman (1972) found that male children seem to like and choose media violence more than females. Boys express greater interest than girls in a variety of violent material, which includes television shows (Atkin, Greenberg, Korzenny, and McDermott, 1979).

Children who have been frightened by violence are no more interested in violent programming than when not frightened. This finding does not concur with the findings of the study done by Joanne Cantor and Amy

Nathanson who proposed the repetition compulsion theory. The repetition compulsion theory concludes that although children become frightened by media violence they will seek out this type of stimuli in order to master and gain control of their unpleasant emotions. Cantor and Nathanson (1997) found a significant positive relationship between children's fright reactions and their interest in the different cartoons.

Cantor and Nathanson (1997) also concluded that there was no support for the forbidden fruit hypothesis, which was similar to the findings in the present body of research. However, the study failed to replicate their findings that there is no evidence that children whose parents restricted violent content were any more interested in it than when not restricted.

There are many limitations to this study that must be considered when examining this research. For example:

(1). Subjects were not randomly chosen for the experiment. The snowballing method was used in order to gather participants. Participants were either friends of the experimenter or friends of the participating volunteers. All of the participants came

from the same geographical and socioeconomic area. Future research will need to have the subjects randomly selected and more diverse to have a more generalizable.

(2). The age range of the children was too great. The study looked at children between the ages of 6-12. Children go through many changes during these years, developmental, physically and socially. Future research might consider more homogeneous groups with respect to age.

(3). The coding of some of the factors in the study limited parent's choices by allowing only two choices. Dichotomous scoring has very low reliability.

(4). Parents may have underestimated the negative effects the media has on their children, relative to self-reports. In the future it might be more helpful to do observations of children in their natural settings participating in different activities, such as, watching television, playing with their peers, in the classroom and in the home.

(5). It is also possible that parents only perceive aggression when it is enacted in socially inappropriate ways. Perhaps more objective reports of children's aggression would have been a better measure and should be considered for future research.

There are controversies surrounding the issue that television has negative consequence on children's behavior. Freedman (1984) does not support a causal relationship between television violence and aggression. He argues that laboratory research is irrelevant to the issue because it lacks external validity. He also states that field studies, such as this one, have produced weak and inconsistent results.

Television networks also question much of the research being done in this area. The networks would like to see proof of unidirectional, direct causality. "Responsible psychologists and other social scientists have been obliged to acknowledge the limits of their theoretical and research paradigms" (Friedrich-Cofer and Huston, 1986, pp. 364-371). The research these professionals do will not satisfy the networks because the current methods being used today cannot prove causality; probabilities are the only evidence that can be shown.

Past and present research being done on the negative consequences of television on children's behavior fails to establish a cause and effect relationship. Future studies should look at ways to try to prove a cause and effect relationship in order

for the television networks to take notice.

Today, counselors are seeing more and more children, parents and families seeking help with communication problems, reduced attention spans, aggressive behaviors, and opposing beliefs and value systems that their children may have. There are many explanations as to why children have these behaviors. Television is just one factor that been shown to have negative consequences on behavior. Jacquelyn Gentry, Ph.D., Director of Public Interest Initiatives for the APA, emphasizes there is much that parents of young children can do to prevent violent behavior. She states, a child may have a predisposition to violent behavior, but violence is, to a large extent, a learned behavior (Rosenblum, 1998).

Counselors need to help parents and families take a proactive approach in planning and guiding a child's experiences with television. Counselors can encourage parents and families to experiment with several viewing options. For example, parents and families need to watch television with children and talk about the information presented in the programs. They should talk about how situations presented on television may or may not reflect real life. Families can follow up

on ideas and suggestions presented in educational programming with activities at home. These activities provide children with a positive experience and response to the information being presented on television. Parents and families can encourage children to sample a wide variety of television programming. Alternatives to programmed television can also be presented to children. Video rentals or using the VCR to tape programs that are developmentally appropriate for children will provide another viewing option (Newman and Newman, 1995). These are just a few ideas that may help children, as well as parents, gain a more comprehensive understand of television programming to which they are exposed.

Through research and education children and parents can be helped to understand the consequences of violence on television. Once an understanding has been established, aggressive, disturbing and disrupting behaviors seen among children and adults in society can be mitigated.

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Appendix A

Consent Form

I consent to participate in the study entitled "Television 1" sponsored by the Counseling Department at Lindenwood University under the direction of Stacy Renfrow. I understand my participation will involve answering a brief questionnaire. The questionnaire should take approximately 10 minutes and contains questions on a variety of topics related to television. The questionnaire is expected to help the experimenter gather information for a research project concerning television and children. In the future this research may have potential benefits to adults as well as children in the home, in educational and work settings.

I understand that the results of this research will be coded in such a manner that my identiy will not be attached physically to the data I contribute. I will remain strictly anonymous. In addition, I realize the purpose of this project is to examine the relations between scientific variables in groups of people, not to evaluate a particular individual. The results of this research may be published or reported to government agencies, funding agencies, or scientific bodies, but I will not be identified in any publication at any time. I will not be penalized in any way should I choose to discontinue participation before I complete the questionnaire.

Name _____ Date_____

Appendix B

Questionnaire[1]

1. What grade is your child in? _____

2. Is your child a:
   a. Girl b. Boy

3. How many operating TV sets do you have in your home?
   (0) (1) (2) (3) (4) (5) (6) (more)_____

4. Do you own a VCR?
   a. Yes b. No

5. Please list the names of the television shows your child has watched in the past year.

_____

_____

_____

_____

6. About how many hours of television does your child watch on a regular school day? This includes bought or rented videotapes.

a. 0-1 b. 1-2 c. 2-3 d. 3-4 e. 4+

7. About how many total hours of television does your child watch on a Saturday and Sunday (combine total for both days)? This includes bought or rented videotapes.

a. 0-3 b. 3-6 c. 6-9 d. 9-12 e. 12-15 f. 15+

[1] The questions on this questionnaire were taken from a survey done by Joanne Cantor and Amy Nathanson (1997) from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Some of the original items from the survey have been eliminated. Eliminated variables from the original survey will not be studied in the present body of research.

8. Are there any programs that you specifically encourage your child to watch? If so, please list and briefly tell why.

_____

_____

_____

_____

9. Are there any programs that you forbid your child to watch? If so, please list and briefly tell why.

_____

_____

_____

10. To your knowledge, has anything on television ever disturbed, upset or frightened your child so much that the effect was still there after the program was over? If so, please describe the incident and the image or event that produced this reaction to the best of your knowledge.

_____

_____

_____

11. Interest in action cartoons, such as, the "Ninja Turtles" and "GI-Joe."
(1) Not at all interested
(2) Mildly interested
(3) Moderately interested
(4) Extremely interested

12. Interest in live action, teenage-oriented programs, such as, "Mighty Morphin Power Rangers."
(1) Not at all interested
(2) Mildly interested
(3) Moderately interested
(4) Extremely interested

13. Interest in reality-based action shows, such as, "Rescue-911" and "Cops."
(1) Not at all interested
(2) Mildly interested
(3) Moderately interested
(4) Extremely interested

14. In your eyes, to what degree is your child physically aggressive with other children, that is, getting involved in fights or hitting and shoving other kids?
(1) Not at all aggressive
(2) A little bit aggressive
(3) Moderately aggressive
(4) Very aggressive
(5) Extremely aggressive

I would like to thank you for participating in this study. I appreciate the time and effort you put forth in completing the questionnaire.