

# The Interplay of Media Violence Effects and Behaviorally Disordered Children and Adolescents

## Guidelines for Practitioners

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### KEYWORDS

- Media violence effects • Aggression • Child development • Externalizing behaviors
- Treatment guidelines • Disordered youths

### KEY POINTS

- The importance of this topic is that children and youths are immersed in media, much of it violent.
- The clinical significance is that mental health practitioners are challenged with treating children and adolescents that have extensive exposure to violent media.
- Research has demonstrated that exposure to violent media has short- and long-term effects and contributes to aggressive behaviors.

Violence is an established genre in the media dating back to ancient civilizations. The dissemination of violent themes was part of an oral tradition of storytelling. The *Epic of Gilgamesh* precedes Christ by 3000 years and has themes of demons, disaster, anxiety, death by the gods, battles, and revenge.<sup>1</sup> Concern about the impact of exposure to violence on youths was a matter of importance to the early philosophers. Aristotle and Plato discussed the pros and cons of exposure to emotionally charged content with regard to character development. Such concerns continue

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today and manifest in a plethora of academic research as well as in public policy debates and cultural manifestations.<sup>2</sup>

In contemporary society, violence appears in religious texts, mythology, literature, newspapers, books, comic books, theater, film, television, cartoons, animation, radio, music, music videos, video games, and virtual reality. As a research construct, violence is usually defined as any intentionally harmful act perpetrated by one human being toward another human being, with the intention to cause significant injury or death.<sup>3,4</sup>

## ACCESS AND CONSUMPTION

The range, quantity, and accessibility of media devices available to youths were evaluated for public policy makers by the Kaiser Family Foundation in a 2010 study.<sup>5</sup> Youths aged 8 to 18 years report the following devices in their homes and bedrooms, respectively: TV (99%, 71%), DVD/VCR (97%, 57%), radio (94%, 75%), computer (93%, 36%), video game console (87%, 50%), CD player (87%, 68%), TiVo/DVR (52%, 13%).<sup>5</sup> Usage findings are as follows: media consumption for 8 to 10 year olds is less than for 11 to 14 year olds (12 hours); boys consume more media than girls because of video game usage; white youths report lower consumption (8:36 hours) than black (12:59 hours) and Hispanic (13:00 hours) youths; at risk for higher usage are also tweens and early teens aged 11 to 14 years.<sup>5</sup> Huesmann,<sup>6</sup> a prolific researcher on media and aggression, describes this ubiquitous environment as a "saturation of our culture and daily lives."<sup>6</sup>

As technology has evolved, so have the media platforms that depict violence. Portable devices with Internet, photo, and video capacities provide unsupervised venues to share and observe real-time, unrated violence.<sup>7</sup> Viewers can select from an endless variety of real violence for viewing, including, terrorism, police shootings, sexual violence, suicides, and so forth.<sup>7</sup> The plethora of media genres and available outlets enables high consumption. After sleeping, media is the leading childhood activity.<sup>5</sup> It is not uncommon for children less than a year old to begin viewing television.<sup>8</sup> Children and teenagers spend more hours using media than they are in school (8–11 hours daily).<sup>5</sup> In terms of violent content and programming, these statistics translate into youths viewing up to 24 violent acts per hour<sup>9</sup>; cumulatively, by 18 years of age, a child will have watched thousands of murders and hundreds of thousands of acts of violence.

## CAUSE

Since the emergence of television in the 1940s, the harmful effects of programming content have been a cause for concern.<sup>8</sup> Research did not emerge until the 1960s. In the early part of the decade, Alfred Bandura's research with Bobo dolls established social learning theory and the effect of role models on human behavior; children exposed to adult aggression were more likely to be aggressive.<sup>10</sup> By 1969, the Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior was formed to "focus on the effects of televised violence on the behavior, attitudes, development, and mental health of children."<sup>3</sup> The 1972 US Surgeon General's Report established TV as a form of social learning. The study concluded viewing violent programming does not adversely affect most youths. However, it does adversely impact a small group of children with a predisposition for aggressive tendencies.<sup>3</sup> In 1982, the National Institute of Mental Health published a follow-up report to the surgeon general and found that children who are exposed to violent media may experience desensitization to pain and suffering of others, become fearful about the world, and behave aggressively toward others.<sup>11</sup>

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