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**Dr. Bushman Addresses Your Questions***"The Impact of Violent Television Programs and Movies"*

Dr. Brad Bushman, Associate Professor, Psychology, Iowa State University

**VIEWER CHARACTERISTICS****1. Are males more affected by viewing violence than females.**

Sex differences in media-related aggression have changed over time, especially during the past quarter century as female sex roles have changed in most industrialized societies (see Bushman & Huesmann, 2001, for a review). An examination of a few specific studies suggests that the effect of TV violence on females' behaviors has only become apparent during recent years as more aggressive female models have appeared on TV and as it has become more socially acceptable for females to behave aggressively. TV violence increases aggression in both males and females as long as society treats them similarly and as long as female aggressive models are shown on TV.

**2. Are there studies of the effects of violent TV programs on children 2 and under?**

I know of no published studies that have examined the effects of violent media on very young children. In most studies, the youngest viewers are in pre-school.

**3. Does the media violence affect any particular age group more than others?**

TV violence is more likely to increase aggression in younger viewers than in older viewers. The figure below shows the relationship between violent media and aggression for different age groups (based on data from Paik & Comstock, 1994).

Effects of TV violence on anti-social behavior for viewers of different ages.

There are several reasons why younger children are especially susceptible to the effects of violent media (see Bushman & Huesmann, 2001, for a review). Younger children have a more difficult time distinguishing fantasy from reality everything looks real to them. Young children are more likely to imitate the unrealistic violence of cartoons and fantasy shows than are older children, and they are less likely to perceive crime shows, etc. as unrealistic. Children who think that TV violence is

realistic are more influenced by it. Previous research has also shown that TV violence is more likely to increase aggression when the violence is perceived as justified than when it is perceived as unjustified. But younger children have a more difficult time understanding such things as portrayed motives for aggression. TV violence is also more likely to increase aggression when viewers identify with the aggressive character than when they don't identify with the aggressive character. The age group most susceptible to the influence of television role models is young children. Young children are more likely to identify with violent TV characters and imitate them than are older children or adults.

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## **MEDIA CHARACTERISTICS**

### **4. Does violent music increase aggression?**

There are very few studies on this topic, but those that have been conducted suggest that music and music videos with violent themes increase aggression (e.g., Barongan, Hall, & Gordon, 1995; Waite, Hillbrand, & Foster, 1992). Dr. Anderson, the second speaker in this series, has done some research on music with violent lyrics.

### **5. What about reading violent stories? How do these effects compare to viewing?**

Reading violent materials (e.g., rape scenes in books, violent comic books) also increase aggression.

### **6. How do violent news programs influence aggression compared to other types of violence?**

Violent news programs do increase aggression, although the effect is slightly smaller than for other types of programming (Paik & Comstock, 1994).

### **7. Does viewing aggressive sports increase aggression?**

Viewing aggressive sports does increase aggression, and the effect is larger than for other types of programming, such as action/adventure/crime programs and news/public-affairs programs (Paik & Comstock, 1994).

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## **OTHER QUESTIONS**

### **8. How strong is the effect of media violence on aggression compared to other factors?**

Of course violent media isn't the only factor that increases societal violence. It is not even the most important factor. There is no better predictor of the chances that an adult will behave aggressively than whether that adult was an aggressive child (e.g., Huesmann, Eron, Lefkowitz, & Walder, 1984).

Statistically, violent media explains about 10% of the variance in societal violence (Paik & Comstock, 1994). Similarly, smoking cigarettes explains about 10% of the variance in lung cancer (Wynder & Graham, 1950). Although 10% might seem very small, aggressive behavior is complex and very difficult to predict.

### **9. Do violent TV programs attract larger audiences than non-violent TV programs?**

Historically, violent TV programs have actually attracted smaller audiences than have nonviolent programs (Hamilton, 1998). Although they don't attract larger audiences, violent programs are valued by advertisers for at least two other reasons (see

Hamilton, 1998). First, violent programs attract younger viewers. Viewers of violent programs tend to be men aged 18-34, followed by women aged 18-34. This age group of viewers is highly valuable to advertisers because it takes more money, time, and effort to persuade older consumers to switch brands or to try something new. Second, violent programs are less expensive for advertisers to sponsor than are nonviolent programs, in terms of cost per thousand viewers in the 18-49 year age range.

**10. How do we contact sponsors of violent programs? How effective would this be?**

The Internet provides a useful means of contacting companies. Many company web pages contain a CONTACT US link that provides the address, phone number, and e-mail address for the company.

According to the Parents Television Council (PTC), this approach is effective. One of the Frequently Asked Questions on the PTC web page is: **Do my letters and phone calls to corporations make a difference?** Here is their answer: "Yes! The PTC has seen corporations stop advertising on offensive programming, and has effected changes in some of the worst programming, primarily because of the phone calls, e-mails, and letters of our members. Keep up the good work. Corporations do listen to you, and the networks listen to the corporations they depend on for advertising dollars. The networks produce programming primarily with a view to what will bring in the most ad dollars. So, please contact those corporations we list as sponsors of offensive programming and let them know of your dissatisfaction with their advertising practices" <http://www.parentstv.org/about/faq/faq.asp>

**11. Do other countries air as much violence in TV and movies as does America?**

Very few studies have systematically compared the content of television across different countries. One study (Sutil et al., 1995) compared various types of TV violence in Japan, Spain, and the USA. Japanese television depicted fewer scenes of physical or fatal injuries than did Spanish or American television.

Research has shown that TV violence is linked to aggression in other countries. For example, one study (Huesmann & Eron, 1986) found that exposure to TV violence at ages 6 or 8 predicted aggression 2 years later among many boys and girls in the United States, Finland, Poland, and Israel.

It is also important to note that the USA exports TV programs and films to many other countries.

**12. Violent TV programs increase aggression. Can some TV programs have the opposite effect?**

Research has shown that some nonviolent TV programs such as *Lassie*, *Mr. Roger's Neighborhood*, and *Sesame Street* can increase pro-social behaviors such as helping and cooperation (e.g., Poulos, Rubinstein, & Liebert, 1975).

**13. If violent TV programs increase aggressive behavior, what about violent video games?**

Dr. Anderson, the second speaker in this series, will address this question.

**14. Is there a correlation between Super Bowl Sunday and domestic abuse?**

At least one published study has shown that there might be a correlation (Sachs & Chu, 2000). However, much more research is needed on this topic.

**15. How was violence defined in the National Television Violence Study?**

The definition of violence used in the National Television Violence Study emphasizes

three elements: (a) intention to harm, (b) the physical nature of the harm, and (c) the involvement of animate beings. Here is the actual definition: "Violence is defined as any overt depiction of a credible threat of physical force or the actual use of such force intended to physically harm an animate being or group of beings. Violence also includes certain depictions of physically harmful consequences against an animate being or group that occur as a result of unseen violent means. Thus, there are three primary types of violent depictions: credible threats, behavioral acts and harmful consequences. This definition insures that depictions classified as violent represent actual physical aggression directed against living beings. Such physical action lies at the heart of any conception of violence, and limiting our definition to this type of portrayal (as opposed to including, for example, verbal aggression that might intimidate) renders it a conservative measure of violence on television" (National Television Violence Study, 1996, p. I-36).

### **16. Do any studies show that viewing violence decreases aggression?**

Some studies do show that viewing violence decreases aggression, but many more studies show that viewing violence increases aggression. Aggression is a random variable, not a fixed variable. Even something as simple as flipping a coin is a random variable. For example, think about repeatedly flipping a coin 10 times. On average, you should get 5 heads, but this will not happen every single time (e.g., you might get 4 heads). The same study run repeatedly will also yield some different results. The average from the studies is the best guess of what the overall "true" effect size is. The average effect size from hundreds of studies on violent media and aggression is positive, even though a few studies have negative findings

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