

Media Violence Cited As 'Critical Risk Factor' For Aggression

ScienceDaily (Nov. 20, 2008) — You are what you watch, when it comes to violence in the media and its influence on violent behavior in young people, and a new paper, lead-authored by Rutgers University, Newark, researcher Paul Boxer, provides new evidence that violent media does indeed impact adolescent behavior.

The research shows that even when other factors are considered, such as academic skills, encounters with community violence, or emotional problems, “childhood and adolescent violent media preferences contributed significantly to the prediction of violence and general aggression” in the study subjects.

Boxer, an assistant professor of psychology at Rutgers University in Newark, has been involved since 2004 in research funded by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) into media violence and its relation to serious youth violence and criminal behavior. Although a relationship between media violence and violent behavior has been acknowledged for some 40 years, much of the research was usually done in a laboratory setting rather than in the field, with very little emphasis on documenting links between media violence and actual engagement in serious violent and antisocial behavior, explains Boxer.

What’s more, many studies did not sufficiently address other influences on the children’s behaviors, such as exposure to violent or aggressive behavior at school or in the community, academic difficulties, and psychopathic tendencies or other emotional problems, according to Boxer.

Because violence is a “multiply determined behavior,” Boxer and the research team collected data on several risk factors for aggression, to examine whether violent media exposure has an impact on behavior even when those other influences are present. “Even in conjunction with other factors, our research shows that media violence does enhance violent behavior,” Boxer states. “On average, adolescents who were not exposed to violent media are not as prone to violent behavior.”

Boxer was the lead author on the paper, the first paper produced through the CDC project. It reports the results of the research team’s extensive interviews of 820 adolescents from the state of Michigan – 430 high school students from rural, suburban and urban communities, and 390 juvenile delinquents held in county and state facilities. The adolescents were about evenly split between male and female, minority and non-minority. Parents or guardians of 720 of the youths also were interviewed, as were teachers/staff of 717 of them. Each subject was asked about favorites TV shows, movies and video/computer games, both as a child and as a teen, and questioned to determine if they had engaged in specific antisocial behaviors, such as throwing rocks or using a weapon.

Interviewers also investigated the youths’ exposures to aggression or violence, as well as other risk factors for aggressive behavior, such as emotional disorders or being victimized. The parents, guardians, teachers and staff also were interviewed about the behaviors they had observed in their children or students.

After collecting the data, researchers analyzed findings by integrating “violent media exposure scores” into

cumulative risk totals. Their findings: high violent risk scores “added significantly to the prediction of both violence and general aggression.” What’s more, “even for those lowest in other risk factors, a preference for violent media was predictive of violent behavior and general aggression,” according to the findings.

Boxer believes the study results can be used to assess, intervene and treat young people displaying aggressive behavior. He also knows more detailed research is needed, such as analyzing the impact on behavior when violent interactive video games are banned.

Boxer is co-investigator on the CDC grant; Principal Investigator is Dr. Rowell Huesmann, University of Michigan; the other co-investigator is Dr. Brad Bushman, University of Michigan.

Boxer and his team also are in the process of analyzing data collected through interviews with pre-school children and their parents to determine how violent media consumption impacts very young children. “Young children react to what they see and they mimic behavior,” but are unable to distinguish between reality and fantasy, or right and wrong, says Boxer. By investigating the mechanisms that influence their development, researchers can try to learn how to intervene in potentially aggressive or anti-social behaviors, and effect change at a very young age, he notes.

Boxer’s research into media violence and its impact is only one aspect of his overall work, which “focuses on the impact of violence in all aspects of the social environment on child and adolescent development.” Boxer is currently working on research that emphasizes the role of family violence and community violence in children's aggressive behaviors. Boxer also is involved in federally funded research investigating the role of political violence in childhood adjustment, as part of a team directing research with children growing up in Israel and the Palestinian Territory.

Journal reference:

1. Boxer et al. **The Role of Violent Media Preference in Cumulative Developmental Risk for Violence and General Aggression.** *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, February 2009 Print edition, online early DOI: [10.1007/s10964-008-9335-2](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-008-9335-2)

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