



TV and Video Games Affect Children, Culture

Excessive viewing of TV and violent video games by children is contributing to the rapid rise in violence among American youth since the 1970's, according to Dr. David Walsh, founder of the National Institute on Media and the Family.

Because one of the most common ways young children learn is by copying what they observe, television is "a natural teacher," according to Walsh. For many thousands of years, children have learned about their culture's values from the telling of stories, according to Walsh, and the same is true today. However, a tremendous revolution is occurring in which the telling of those stories is controlled primarily by the electronic media.

"Whoever tells the stories defines the culture," says Walsh. While there are some educational and high quality programs available, the escalating amount of violence on television and in video games has been identified as a major causal factor of violence and aggression in children and youth by many of the medical and health organizations across the country, including the surgeon general's office and the American Academy of Pediatrics. Over a thousand research studies have documented this link.

This doesn't mean that every child who watches a lot of violent TV will become violent, but "the real effect is in the setting of social norms." According to Walsh, the excessive amount of time spent by children watching television and playing video games is breeding a "culture of disrespect." "We have gone from 'have a good day,' to 'make my day,'" Walsh says.

Another effect of children's excessive television viewing is decreased reading levels and academic achievement. On average, children spend 32 hours per week watching television and playing video games, 2.2 hours on homework, and ½ hour reading for pleasure, according to Walsh.

Walsh agrees with the American Academy of Pediatrics' recommendation that children under age three should not be watching television. What's best for the development of young children's brains is to engage in active exploration and play, and interactions with parents and caregivers. They also recommend that children watch no more than 10 hours per week, on average, and that parents monitor and guide children in choosing higher quality programs.

An average of 65% of American children over age five have television sets in their bedrooms, and this amounts to having a private tutor in the bedroom, Walsh says. Most parents would not want children to learn from such a tutor, but children are always learning.

By Rachel Ozretich, M.S., Certified Family Life Educator, 2000

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