

Howling in pain she springs away from her captors. Her laugh is diabolical and it spurs them on. Dressed in black, she is the symbol of evil—it is their mission to eliminate her. Brandishing a bevy of dire weapons they pursue her, she is captured. Ever wily, she coaxes and cajoles. Her pursuers, however, are wary—it could be a trick. Better not risk it. The battle continues. She scores a few hits against her white-clad opponents, but inevitably righteousness prevails. The last one to hit the dust, she confirms her own flaw of character and cause. Brutalized and humiliated she lies inert. Justice has been done.

Though the scene is worthy of a gladiatorial match in the reign of Nero, the setting is far from Roman. This savagery has taken place in my living room. It is 10:00 on Saturday morning and it's the *Kid Video Show*.

My expressions of shock and outrage at this display, however, have not been shared by my 10-year-old viewing companion. "This is stupid," she says, "on He Man and the Masters of the Universe they would have used their lazer swords and destroyed her—that would have been awesome."

It would appear that we are drowning our youngsters in television violence. The grandchildren of the kids who used to weep because the little match girl froze to death, now feel cheated if she isn't drugged, raped, and disembowelled.

Recent surveys estimate that a child born today will by the age of 18, have spent more time watching TV than in any other single activity but sleep. By that age the average child will have witnessed 13,400 televised killings. What are and what will be the effects of this continuous exposure?

The question is not a new one. It has been posed repeatedly since the advent of TV sets as a common fixture in the home. Indeed the best documented fact about television is that it is violent.

Violence occurs in 84.7 per cent of all television shows. With eight out of every ten programs and six out of every ten major characters involved in violence, there are approximately 7½ episodes of violence broadcast into our livingrooms every hour.

The prime time for killing is the Children's Hour—10:30 to 12:30 on Saturday mornings. In that period there is a killing every 11 minutes and an act of violence every three.

The bulk of violence is committed by non-criminals—otherwise admirable citizens, who use violence to solve their problems. Far from being depicted as wrong, violence is seen as a great adventure and a sure solution. Where law, justice and arbitration almost never succeed in the world of television, violence almost inevitably works.

Witness the latest episode of the *Transformers*—a Saturday morning cartoon program where cars, planes and guns transform into robots to do battle with the evil Destructa-cons.

In this episode the Destructa-cons are bent on expanding their territory and it is the robots' mission to stop them. Nary a thought to negotiation, their robot leader intones, "Men, they've got to be extinguished—permanently." Amid the devastation and violence the rhetoric abounds. "O.K. men, the whole universe depends on us. When we're done with them, they're going to wish they'd never been born. Are you with me or do I take care of them myself?" Creating a virtual storm of mushroom-shaped clouds the team enforces their territorial boundaries using nuclear weapons, heat seeking missiles and the latest lazer technology. Each one a graduate of the 'shoot first, ask questions later' school of diplomacy, they settle the question—forcibly. Aided by their young companion, a figure every viewer yearns to identify with, the enemy legions are vanquished. Held up as the hero of the day, he's given the order's highest praise—"Son, you've shown us how tough you are, now we're proud to have you as our friend."

MURDER IN THE LIVINGROOM

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B Y E R I N S T E U T E R

'Entertainment' of this type is standard not only in cartoon programming. Rather it is graphically paralled during evening prime-time shows such as *Matt Houston*, *The Fall Guy* and the ever popular *A-Team*.

The impact that such programs have on a child's social development has been the subject of considerable research by the sociological and psychological community.

"When our kids see that the battered hero triumphs over evil by subduing the bad guy in the end, they learn that to be able to hit hard and to strike terror into the hearts of one's opponents is a virtue," writes psychologist George Gerbner in his book, *Growing Up With Television*. "Killing is depicted as the ultimate measure of man," he says, "and loss of life or limb is the price of weakness or sin in the symbolic shorthand of ritual drama."

Gerbner is one of many social scientists who believe that television teaches aggressive behaviour; that it is a school for violence.

It is a philosophy which purports that a constant diet of violence on television encourages violent forms of behaviour, that it has an adverse effect on human character and attitudes, and fosters moral and social values about violence in daily life which are unacceptable in a civilized society.

It is a conclusion which arises from analysis of 50 studies covering the behaviour of 10,000 children between the ages 3 and 19. The research suggests that regardless of age, sex or social background, the more violence and aggression a youngster sees on television, the more aggressive he is likely to be in his attitudes and behaviour. And it has revealed some disturbing results.

- the majority of young viewers who watch a lot of television agree that it is 'almost always alright' to hit someone 'if you are mad at them for a good reason.'

- observation of children who watched a film of a bobo doll being attacked by a live model or a cartoon character, revealed that in the majority of instances when the children were given the opportunity to play with other toys or with a bobo doll, they preferred the latter and tended to imitate the aggressive behaviour they had seen on television.

While the research reveals that television encourages aggressive behaviour, reality suggests that it also teaches methods of crime and shows the best ways to get away with it.

- A young Oakville youth was arrested after he mailed letters threatening to kill the wife of a bank president unless he was paid \$5000. At the time of his arrest, he stated he got his idea from television shows.

- In a Boston suburb, a nine-year-old boy

reluctantly brought home his poor report card and then proposed one way of getting at the heart of the matter; they could give the teacher a box of poisoned chocolates for Christmas. "It's easy, Dad, they did it on television last night. A man wanted to kill his wife, so he gave her candy with poison in it and she didn't know."

Notes psychologist Albert Bandura in a 1981 interview with *Centre Magazine*, "I don't think anyone will deny that people who observe forty different ways of killing people have learned forty different ways of killing someone. Television is an electronic Pied Piper leading our children into a sea of undesirable and harmful influences. The effects are evident in both children and adults."

Another focus of the research appears to prove that children who are heavy TV watchers can become 'habituated' or 'desensitized' to violence in the real world.

Writes psychiatrist Frederic S. Wertham in his book, *School for Violence*, "Our children are becoming passively jaded. As a kind of self protection they develop thick skins to avoid being upset by the gougings, smashings and stompings they see on TV. They keep 'cool', distantly unaffected. Boredom sets in, and the whole cycle starts over again. Bring on another show with even more bone-crushing and teeth-smashing so the viewers will react."

In addition to these findings there is the question of reality. The fact that there are more people murdered on U.S. television in one day than in Canada in one year, reflects the kind of distortion that is standard in television portrayals.

For example, in real life violence most often stems from close personal relationships, while television violence is usually done by strangers. Where the crimes shown on television almost always involve violence, real life crimes most often involve money or property with no violence at all. Where approximately one-fifth of the characters in television drama are law officers who act violently in about two-thirds of their appearances, police in the every day world rarely, if ever, even draw their guns.

But who really believes this?

Children do.

Not only do young children learn about the outside world primarily through television, but it would appear that children accept as authentic the portrayals they see on television.

In a survey study submitted to the Ontario Royal Commission on Violence in the Communications Industry, about half the grade ones interviewed said that the people on television were like everyday people. Some older children also believed that television characters and real people were alike most of the time. Even children in grades 4 and 5 were uncertain about the reality of what they see on entertainment television.

The ramifications of this situation are extensive.

"Violence plays a key role in television's portrayal of the social order," writes Gerbner in his 1979 profile in violence on television, *The Demonstration of Power*. "Television tells us who are the aggressors and who are the victims," he says. "It demonstrates who has the power and who must acquiesce to that power. Both roles are there to be learned by young viewers. In generating among the many a fear of the power of the few, television violence may achieve its greatest effect."

But in spite of such overwhelming results, the networks have instituted few or no program changes.

While much of the research on the topic of television violence has been American in origin, this is not a problem that Canadians can ignore. It is a Canadian television network, CTV—a private, commercial enterprise scrambling to meet the desires of ordinary people—that has been cited by UNESCO as being the most violent of 30 TV networks around the world.

Indeed most networks have denied that a valid cause-effect relationship has been established between televised violence and aggression. And to support their position they've called upon a school of theory that challenges all findings to the contrary.

This school tends to argue that television is a neutral force, that children who are more irresponsibly inclined, who have a need to express violence, will use the television to discharge their aggressive feelings.

"I think more children have had nightmares from fairy tales read to them than from television shows they've watched," notes Ronald Milavsky, who reports that his study found no evidence that television violence was causally linked to the later development of aggressive behaviour patterns.

He adds, "Kids have a whole series of defenses to protect themselves from various things. For example, a child watches a horror show and is going to be scared. But still he differentiates these TV characters from real-life people. He already knows that television has a long history of lying to him and is not presenting him with accurate facts."

But last month the American Psychological Association urged parents that if they indeed wanted a better way of life for their kids they should, 'monitor and control television viewing by children.' It asked the television industry to exercise social responsibility by reducing 'imitable violence in real-life fictional children's programming.'

These sentiments were echoed in a recent *Globe and Mail* editorial which stated, "Parents should, where possible, monitor their children's viewing and direct them away from violent material; but we must acknowledge that this is no easy task, when such programming is scheduled at all hours of the day and television signals pour into the house like tapwater. The buck passes back to those producers and programmers who prepare for children material which is unsuitable for children and broadcast shows glorying in force and brutality in the daylight hours. They are the ones whose sense and ethical responsibility is missing."

With evidence that children as young as six months old are already attentive to television, it appears that parents need to recognize TV as more than an extraneous and occasional intruder in their child's lives.

The solution does not appear complicated. An immediate and sharp decrease in the amount of violence in programs directed primarily to children, and an equally enthusiastic effort to increase the number of programs designed to teach positive lessons should do the trick.

"After all," writes psychologist Robert Liebert in his study, *The Early Window*, "we don't want to take the babysitter away, we just want to stop her from committing murder in the livingroom."