

Media Violence in Children's Lives

A position statement of the National Association for the Education of Young Children

Adopted April 1990
Reaffirmed July 1994

During the past decade, America has witnessed an alarming increase in the incidence of violence in the lives of children. On a daily basis, children in America are victims of violence, as witnesses to violent acts in their homes or communities, or as victims of abuse, neglect, or personal assault. The causes of violent behavior in society are complex and interrelated. Among the significant contributors are poverty, racism, unemployment, illegal drugs, inadequate or abusive parenting practices, and real-life adult models of violent problem-solving behavior. NAEYC, the nation's largest organization of early childhood professionals, is deeply concerned about the destructive effect of violent living conditions and experiences on many of our nation's children.

At the same time that there has been an increase in the number of reported violent acts directed at children, there has been an increase in the amount and severity of violent acts observed by children through the media, including television, movies, computer games, and videotapes, and an increase in the manufacture and distribution of weapon-like toys and other products directly linked to violent programming. NAEYC believes the trend toward increased depiction of violence in the media jeopardizes the healthy development of significant numbers of our nation's children.

In response, NAEYC's Governing Board appointed a panel of experts to guide the development of initiatives and resources to assist teachers and parents in confronting the issue of violence in the lives of children. This position statement addresses one aspect of the problem—media violence—and is the first in a series of projects the Association plans to address this important issue. We have chosen to address the issue of media violence first because, of all the sources and manifestations of violence in children's lives, it is perhaps the most easily corrected. The media industry ought to serve the public interest and ought to be subject to government regulation.

Position

NAEYC condemns violent television programming, movies, videotapes, computer games, and other forms of media directed to children. NAEYC believes that it is the

responsibility of adults and of public policy to protect children from unnecessary and potentially harmful exposure to violence through the media and to protect children from television content and advertising practices that exploit their special vulnerability (Huston, Watkins, & Kunkel, 1989). NAEYC believes that television and other media have the potential to be very effective educational tools for children. Research demonstrates that television viewing is a highly complex, cognitive activity, during which children are actively involved in learning (Anderson & Collins, 1988). Therefore, NAEYC supports efforts to use media constructively to expand children's knowledge and promote the development of positive social values. NAEYC also supports measures that can be taken by responsible adults to limit children's exposure to violence through the media. Such efforts include but are not limited to:

- legislation requiring reinstatement of guidelines for children's television by the Federal Communication Commission, including requirements for videotapes and elimination of television programs linked to toys
- legislation limiting advertising on children's programming, and standards for toys to ensure that they are not only physically safe but also psychologically safe
- legislation enabling the development of voluntary television-industry standards to alleviate violence in programming, specifically exempting such efforts from anti-trust regulation
- promotion of more developmentally appropriate, educational programming that meets children's diverse needs for information, entertainment, aesthetic appreciation, positive role models, and knowledge about the world (Huston et al., 1989)
- development and dissemination of curriculum for teachers to improve children's critical viewing skills and to teach nonviolent strategies for resolving conflicts
- development of resources to assist parents in the constructive and educational use of media with their children

During early childhood, the foundation is laid for future social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development. During this formative period, young children are particularly vulnerable to negative influences. In most instances, children have no control over the environmental messages they

receive. Up until age seven or eight, children have great difficulty distinguishing fantasy from reality, and their ability to comprehend nuances of behavior, motivation, or moral complexity is limited. This special vulnerability of children necessitates increased vigilance to protect them from potentially negative influences. Parents are ultimately responsible for monitoring their children's viewing habits; however, parents cannot be omniscient and omnipresent in their children's lives. Parents need assistance in protecting their children from unhealthy exposure to violence. Therefore, limits must be placed on the content of programming directed at children. Restricting violence in children's programming should not be considered censorship, any more than is protecting children from exposure to pornography (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1990). Likewise, industry standards to limit violence in children's programming should be developed as action taken in the public interest.

Rationale

This position statement is based on research examining the amount of violence present in the media as well as the effect of exposure to violent programming on children's development. Data clearly indicate that violence in the media has increased since 1980 and continues to increase. In addition, there is clear evidence to support the negative impact of viewing violence on children's development.

How violent are the media for children?

The problem of violence in the media is not new but has become much worse since the Federal Communication Commission's decision to deregulate children's commercial television in 1982. For example, air time for war cartoons jumped from 1-1/2 hours per week in 1982 to 43 hours per week in 1986 (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1987; Tuscherer, 1988). Children's programs featured 18.6 violent acts per hour a decade ago and now have about 26.4 violent acts each hour (Gerbner, 1990). Adults need to recognize that the content of programming has changed, and as a result the potential for negative effects on children's development is greater. Next to family, television and other media may be the most important sources of information for children, rivaling the school as a principal factor influencing their development.

How do violent media affect children's development?

Research consistently identifies three problems associated with heavy viewing of television violence: Children may

become less sensitive to the pain and suffering of others; they may become more fearful of the world around them; and they may be more likely to behave in aggressive or harmful ways toward others (National Institute of Mental Health, 1982; Singer & Singer, 1984, 1986; Singer, Singer, & Rapaczynski, 1984; Rule & Ferguson, 1986; Simon, 1989). Exposure to media violence leads children to see violence as a normal response to stress and as an acceptable means for resolving conflict.

Of great concern to early childhood educators is the negative effect of viewing violent programs on children's play. The importance of children's imaginative play to their cognitive and language development is well documented (Piaget, 1962, 1963; Johnson, Christie, & Yawkey, 1987). Research demonstrates that watching violent programs is related to less imaginative play and more imitative play in which the child simply mimics the aggressive acts observed on television (NIMH, 1982). In addition, many media productions that regularly depict violence also promote program-based toys, which encourage children to imitate and reproduce in their play the actual behaviors seen on television or in movies. In these situations, children's creative and imaginative play is undermined, thus robbing children of the benefits of play for their development (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1990). In their play, children imitate those characters reinforced for their aggressive behavior and rehearse the characters' scripts without creative or reflective thought. Children who repeatedly observe violent or aggressive problem-solving behavior in the media tend to rehearse what they see in their play and imitate those behaviors in real-life encounters (Huesmann, 1986; Rule & Ferguson, 1986; Eron & Huesmann, 1987). In short, children who are frequent viewers of media violence learn that aggression is a successful and acceptable way to achieve goals and solve problems; they are less likely to benefit from creative, imaginative play as the natural means to express feelings, overcome anger, and gain self-control.

Recommendations

What should policymakers and broadcasters do?

NAEYC supports the reinstatement of FCC standards establishing limits on violent depictions during hours children are likely to watch television. Standards would also control the degree to which violence is depicted so as to be perceived by children as a normal and acceptable response to problems, as equated with power, as leading to reward or glorification of the perpetrator. An additional strategy would be to develop a parental guidance rating system for network

and cable television, videotapes, and computer games similar to that established for movies.

NAEYC further supports the reestablishment of industry standards to limit children's exposure to violence. The self-regulating code of the National Association of Broadcasters (1980) was a responsible position of the television industry toward young children. As an immediate action, laws prohibiting the adoption of such voluntary standards as violations of anti-trust regulation should be repealed.

Industry standards should also limit advertising during children's programming in recognition of children's inability to distinguish the advertising from programming content and to prevent acts of aggression or violence being separated from consequences by intervening commercials. Studies show that children up to eight years of age are less likely to "learn the lesson" of a program when ads intervene between an anti-social act and its consequences.

Finally, broadcasting standards should prohibit product-based programming and feature-length programs whose primary purpose is to sell toys, especially when those toys facilitate imitation of violent or aggressive acts seen on television. Children are unable to evaluate the quality and play value of such products depicted on television. Program-based advertising creates in children an insatiable desire for these single-use toys; children start to believe that they can't play without the specific props seen on television (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1990).

What can teachers do?

NAEYC believes that early childhood teachers have a responsibility to assist children in developing skills in nonviolent conflict resolution, to assist children to become critical viewers of all forms of media, and to encourage the constructive use of the media for instilling positive social values. Teachers need to be aware of what is currently being broadcast to children and to inform parents of the impact of violent media on children's development. Unfortunately, the effect of deregulation on the quality of children's television has made it necessary for teachers and parents to be more vigilant that they would have to be if the government and television industry acted more responsibly toward children.

Teachers can work with children when themes of television violence appear in their play to facilitate more appropriate problem solving and/or creative, imaginative play. Teachers should inform parents when negative or violent themes appear as a regular part of their children's play and support parents in their efforts to monitor children's viewing habits.

As professionals, early childhood educators should share their knowledge of child development and the effects of

violent media viewing with legislators and sponsors of children's programming. It is the professional responsibility of early childhood educators to advocate for more developmentally and educationally appropriate programming for children. Teachers need to recognize that media are also a powerful teacher that can and should be used constructively with children. Contrary to popular belief, television viewing is not a passive activity; children are mentally active during television viewing (Anderson & Collins, 1988). The use of media as an educational tool should not be rejected because much of commercial television currently lacks educational value or promotes violence. Instead, early childhood professionals should advocate for policy that eliminates violence and improves the educational value of media, and should use media constructively in their work with children.

What can parents do?

The absence of government regulation of children's television has made parents' job more difficult, necessitating more parental monitoring of what children see on television. This unfortunate situation places additional, unnecessary pressure on parents. Even when industry standards are developed, NAEYC believes that parents are responsible for monitoring the quality and quantity of the media to which their children are exposed. Standards will make the job easier, however. In the meantime, parents can watch television and other media with their children and evaluate the shows together. Children do not interpret programs the same way adults do. Adults need to talk with children about what they observe through the media, to find out how children are interpreting what they see and to help clarify misinterpretations. Parents can designate an approved list of media options for their children and give children choices from among approved shows.

Parents need to be aware that much of what children watch on television is not specifically intended for children. It has been estimated that only 10% of children's viewing time is spent watching children's television; the other 90% is spent watching programs designed for adults (Van Dyck, 1983). Parents can assist children in finding alternatives to viewing adult television. In addition, parents can use videotapes of high quality children's programming and public television when commercial alternatives are not available.

As consumers, parents should recognize and use their influence with sponsors of children's programs. The primary purpose of commercial television is not to entertain or to educate but to sell products. Parents can communicate with advertisers on programs that are valuable, as well as spon-

sors of programs that are violent. Parents can also help their children become educated consumers and involve them in writing complaints to broadcasters and companies that use violent images in an attempt to sell toys and other products. As taxpayers, parents can encourage their legislators to adopt policies to protect children from media violence.

Conclusion

The prevalence of violence in American society is a complex social problem that will not be easily solved. Violence in the media is only one manifestation of the larger society's fascination with violence. However, media violence is not just a reflection of violent society, it is also a contributor. If our nation wishes to produce future generations of productive adults who reject violence as a means of problem solving, we must reassert the vital role of government in protecting its most vulnerable citizens and, together, work to make media part of the solution.

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