

Confronting Violence in Entertainment: The Youth Vote and TV-Free Challenge

Schools can help young people to resist the influence of violence in entertainment and to wean themselves from the tube.

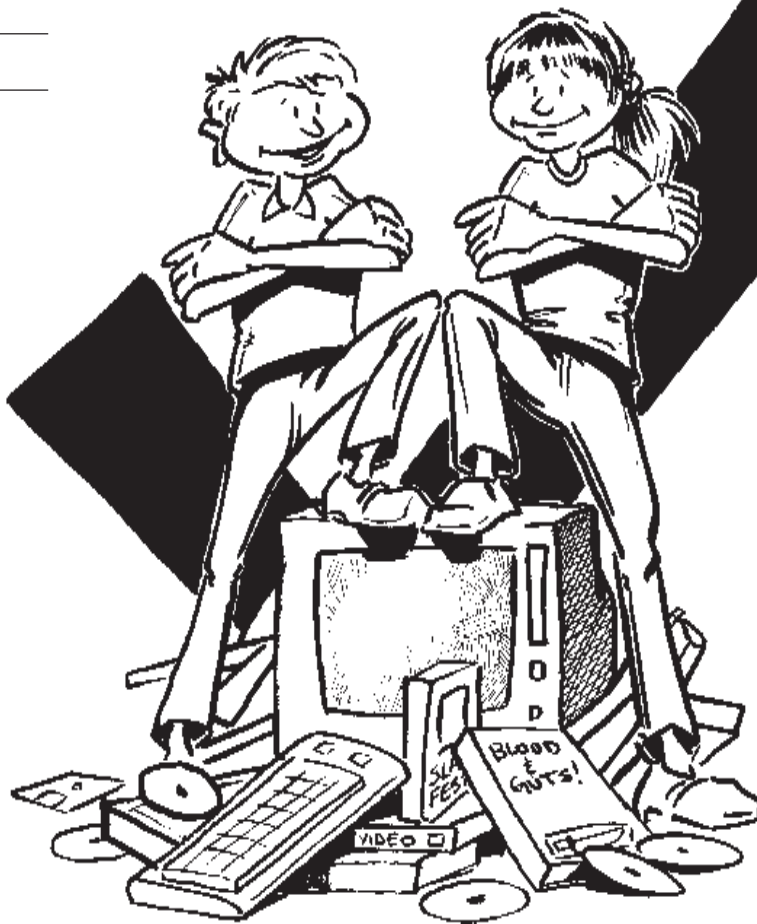
by Jacques Brodeur

OVER THE LAST quarter-century, violence in television programs, video games and other entertainment products has gradually polluted our children's cultural environment as effectively as some industries have poisoned our air, water and food. Of course, not all TV and other entertainment programs are toxic to children; many informative and even inspiring programs provide positive stimulation and help children and teens to understand the world. The majority, however, do not. As a result, parents and teachers need ways to protect children against mental manipulation and emotional desensitization. Fortunately, much can be done to reduce the impact of this type of pollution on young citizens. This article discusses the use of violence in media, the high cost of that use to young people, and some strategies to combat it.

Studies since the landmark 1977 LaMarsh Commission Report¹ — where the analogy to environmental contamination was first drawn — routinely confirm that violent entertainment influences children. In 1995, University of Winnipeg researcher Wendy Josephson, author of *Television Violence: A Review of the Effects on Children of Different Ages*, found more than 650 studies linking real-life violence by children to violence that they have watched on TV.² The American Academy of Pediatrics reported in 2000 that “violence in entertainment and aggressive behavior in chil-

dren have a closer correlation than second-hand smoke and lung cancer.”³ In a 2001 study, the Media Awareness Network found that “only 4% of violent programs have a strong anti-violence theme [and] only 13% of reality programs that depict violence present any alternatives to violence or show how it can be avoided.”⁴ And University of Washington epidemiologist Brandon Centerwall estimates that TV violence could account for 50 percent of real-life violence.⁵

Violence in entertainment seems to have three kinds of influence on children, depending on their age, whether they



Illustrations by Tom Goldsmith

watch with adults or peers, and how much they watch. Research suggests that children mimic TV violence and that some perceive it as approval for hitting, bullying and humiliating their peers. It also encourages between five and ten percent of victims to accept the treatment they suffer without seeking help. Finally, it reduces empathy in the witnesses, who then prefer ganging with the aggressor instead of helping the victim.⁶ With increasing exposure to violence in entertainment, children become mentally altered and physically inclined to commit, accept, or enjoy watching real-life violence.

Manipulating children

In recent years, children have been increasingly exposed to violence through toy manufacturers' television programs and by video games. In the early 1980s, the toy industry began to use violence as a marketing ingredient. In addition to advertising through commercials, companies such as Hasbro began producing their own TV programs and paid to have them broadcast on weekdays and Saturday mornings. In 1984, it was estimated that Hasbro's "GI Joe" included, on average, 84 acts of violence per hour and "Transformers" contained 81.⁷

This marketing strategy was so profitable that Hasbro reused it in 1989 with "Ninja Turtles," in 1993 with "Power Rangers," and in 1999 with "Pokemon." Their primary purpose was to persuade children to ask parents and Santa to give them Hasbro toys. Most of these programs, like many video games for children, include fantasies and stereotypes that support an aggressive culture of violence, sexism and war. Stereotypical "real" men are strong and insensitive, and solve conflicts by exterminating their opponents, while women are docile victims or decorative trophies incapable of solving problems. Gary Ruskin, executive director of Commercial Alert, explained at a 2002 World Health Organization conference:

Advertisers use many techniques to sell to youth. Mostly these involve manipulating their needs during the stages of their growth into adulthood. Some of the more common needs that advertisers take advantage of to sell products include youth needs for peer acceptance, love, safety, desire to feel powerful or independent, aspirations to be and to act older than they actually are, and the need to have an identity. Much of the child-targeted advertising is painstakingly researched and prepared, at times by some of the most talented and creative minds on the planet. Ad agencies retain people with doctorates in marketing, psychology and even child psychology for the purposes of marketing to youth. Some advertisers even openly discuss "owning" children's minds. ... In sum, corporations and their advertising agencies have succeeded in setting up their own authority structures to deliver commercial messages almost everywhere that children go.⁸

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Other aspects of this entertainment-induced social engineering project have also come under scrutiny. Apart from the tendency of video games to arouse aggression, researchers note that these games provide little mental stimulation. Professor Ryuta Kawashima and his research team measured the brain activity of hundreds of teenagers while they played a Nintendo® game and compared the results with those of another group who did a math exercise and read aloud. The researchers concluded that the thought processes required in playing computer games are too simple to stimulate crucial areas of the brain, leading to underdevelopment and such behavioural problems as violence.⁹ In particular, the video game did not stimulate the brain's frontal lobe, an area that plays an important role in the repression of anti-social impulses and is associated with memory, learning and emotion. Researchers believe that a lack of stimulation in this area before the age of 20 prevents the neurons from thickening and connecting, thereby impairing the brain's ability to control such impulses as violence and aggression. According to Tonmoy Sharma of the Institute of Psychiatry in the UK, Kawashima's findings are supported by other studies: "Com-

puter games do not lead to brain development because they require the repetition of simple actions and have more to do with developing quick reflexes than carrying out more mentally challenging activities."¹⁰

Growing public awareness of the dangers of media violence aimed at young people has put pressure on governments to regulate it. To try to prevent such intervention, Canadian broadcasters declared in 1994 that

they would regulate the industry themselves. Five years after self-regulation was implemented, professors Jacques deGuise and Guy Paquette of Laval University noted not only that it had failed to reduce violence, but that violence carried by private broadcasters had increased by 432 percent.¹¹ Two developments during this period helped to ease public concern about the growth of television violence. First, many broadcasters provided funding for media literacy programs, on the assumption that, by studying media in class, students would discover that TV violence is not "real" violence. While such programs seem progressive and useful, many media educators worry that they have become a smokescreen to allow broadcasters to project an ethical image while continuing to intoxicate children and teenagers. A second development intended to ease parental concern about violent programming was the V-Chip. Many parents work full-time and cannot always monitor what their children are watching. Devices such as V-Chips allow them to block reception of certain programs. While better than nothing, the V-Chip system depends on ratings that are made by the broadcasters themselves. As the amount of television violence has grown, the V-Chip has helped industry and government to shift responsibility for regulating TV violence onto parents. Those who believe that government regulation of media is an attack on freedom of expression tend not to see that manipulating children with sophisticated marketing strategies is closer to being a form of child abuse than a constitutional right.

The Youth Vote

The Youth Vote is an educational tool that was created to help young people learn to be critical of what they see on television and to recognize that, just as polluted water can carry dangerous bacteria, TV and other entertainment products can carry toxic messages. The exercise entails discussing specific TV programs, music videos and other entertainment products, and voting on which have the most influence, both positive and negative, on themselves and their peers.

As it is often easier for young people to observe the influence of media violence on those younger than themselves, the first step in the Youth Vote is to ask students: Who has seen children imitating what they have seen on TV? Encourage students to provide examples of imitative behaviour, language and clothing they have observed in the schoolyard, the neighbourhood and at family gatherings. Some may give examples from their babysitting experience of nightmares or fears that reflect what children have seen on TV. Some may even testify about their own personal behaviour. As students give examples, you may need to help them to clarify what the child was doing and which program, movie, or videogame inspired the behaviour in question. The point of this discussion is not to identify good or bad kids but, rather, to help students become more conscious that they imitate what they have been watching. Adults know this occurs but children need to bring their own experience into focus.

Tracking the toxins

The next step is to provide clues about the toxic “bacteria” inhabiting entertainment products. Just as a microscope helps us to see bacteria in water, critical viewing skills help us to notice the “bacteria” in TV and other forms of entertainment. Students will need some understanding of the four main toxic influences that they will be looking for: sexism, racism, violence and fear. Define each one and ask students to give a real-life example of each. Even grade one students can provide examples of fear and violence, and students in grade four and beyond can readily discuss examples of sexism and racism in their everyday lives.

Once students understand these toxic influences, explain that they will be looking for examples of two of these influences — violence and fear — in entertainment. Divide

the class into groups of three or four students, and separate entertainment products into six categories: television programs for young children, television programs for teens, movies, music videos/DVDs, video games and commercials. Ask each group to brainstorm examples and, for each category, list the three that contain the highest frequency of aggressive actions, shootings, explosions, and deaths or, more generally, are the most violent or disturbing. (Note: ask students in grades one through three for examples of TV programs only.) Most groups will be able to complete this task with only about 30 seconds’ discussion.

The third step is to select from the groups’ many suggestions the class nominees for “Worst of ...” in each of the six categories. To keep the selection manageable, you may wish to have a first ballot to reduce the list to four or five nominees in each category.

The names of nominees for each category should be written on the board. Then, ask the students to select their personal choice for each category. It is strongly recommended that, before they make a final decision, students discuss their selections and their reasons for them.

Bear in mind that some teens will say they enjoy violence and cruelty because

they think that hiding their fears and appearing to be insensitive

makes them look cool. Tough teenagers who are not used to expressing emotions may prefer to speak as if they have none. Rather than address such attitudes directly, teachers can instead focus on the influence of the media on very young children. When this discussion is handled sensitively by a teacher, even the most frequent viewers of toxic productions can become experts who look at the problem in a way that can be very useful for their peers. In their comments, they might reveal, for example, that they care about their younger brother or sister. The Youth Vote can become a powerful exercise in freedom of expression for these students. Before each student votes, therefore, teachers can mention that each student’s personal choice in each of the six categories is not intended to — nor does it have to — meet the approval of parents, teachers or friends. Emphasize that students’ own views, critical thinking, and free expression are of greater importance. Caution students that the vote is not a poll that seeks to determine what is the most popular program or entertainment, nor are you looking for the program with the most violence. Instead, you want them to state their evaluation of the *influence* that these productions have



on young people. Point out that a program that is extremely violent but seen by only a few may not have as much influence as a less violent program seen by many. Once all students have voted for their personal choices for “Worst of ...” in each category, you are ready to ask students the key question: Which program or video or game has the strongest influence on people around them, in their school, in their family, in their community?

Praising the positives

After the voting has been completed, the class should begin its search for the most positive entertainment products in the same six categories as above. Positive productions are those that emphasize any of the following:

- | Cooperation instead of competition: programs that bring out the best in everyone rather than celebrating only a winner (i.e., the first, the strongest, the quickest) and dismissing others as losers.
- | Non-violent conflict resolution: programs that show how we can all be winners by solving problems and reaching agreements without hitting or insulting each other.
- | Equality of men and women: programs in which no one dominates or is forced to serve another.
- | International and multicultural understanding: programs that promote understanding and avoid stereotypes. Too often, the Caucasian is the hero with the last-minute solution for justice, while the aboriginal, Arab or Asian person is portrayed as the hypocrite, the criminal or the terrorist.
- | Protecting the environment: programs that realistically reflect the need for a global effort to save our planet.

Ask students to list “Best of ...” examples in each of the six categories. Continue with the same process used to select toxic productions to arrive at four or five nominees, from which each student can make a final choice in each category.

Transforming results into power

To enhance the experience of the Youth Vote, teams of two or three high school students could work with younger students at a nearby elementary or middle school to help them conduct their own Youth Vote. Older students usually enjoy this project, and teachers in the elementary or middle schools enjoy watching their former students in action as they develop leadership abilities. In some schools, students in grade 6 have been given the responsibility to help grades 5, 4 and 3 participate in their vote. Another option would be for a group or class of students to prepare its own video before conducting a school-wide vote. The video should include a student commentator, discussion of local argu-

ments, and the nominees for whichever categories the students want to include.

In schools where many or all classes have participated in a Youth Vote, student volunteers can tabulate the results class by class. When students’ choices are known for the entire school, leaders from several classes can be given the responsibility of reporting to the school population, perhaps inviting the media to attend or holding a separate press conference at which they can inform the media of their assessment of entertainment products. Considering the hundreds of hours that young people spend consuming entertainment products, it seems only fair that the media should take a few minutes to listen to young citizens’ evaluations of those products. When properly conducted, Youth Votes represent the voice of youth and send a strong message to broadcasters, TV, movie, music video, and commercial producers as well as videogame designers. While their voices are largely ignored by producers, children and teenagers need to know that some adults helped them to develop some resistance to manipulation and mind control.

The 10-Day TV-Free Challenge

The 10-Day TV-Free Challenge is another educational tool for raising students’ awareness of the influence of media on their lives. Most children living in affluent industrialized countries suffer social detachment very early in their lives. In North America, for example, it is estimated that children spend between 20 to 25 hours a week watching television programs or playing video games, while they spend only 37 minutes a week talking with their parents.¹² In order to develop emotionally and socially, what children really need is interaction with others in activities such as sports, hobbies, or house and garden chores. The 10-Day TV-Free Challenge evolved from the 2001 research findings of Dr. Tom Robinson that, when young people watched less TV and played fewer video games, they were less aggressive at home and school.¹³ While previous research had linked exposure to media violence with increased aggression, few potential solutions had been evaluated. Robinson and his research team set out to change that through a study that compared students in grades 3 and 4 at two elementary schools in California during the 1996-97 school year. One group received no instruction and served as a control.

At the other school, specially trained teachers delivered 18 lessons over a six-month period on reducing the use of television, videos and video games. At the beginning of the study, students at the intervention school were asked to report the amount of time they spent each week watching TV and videos or playing video games. They were then challenged to abstain for ten days, and then to watch or play no more than seven hours a week afterward.

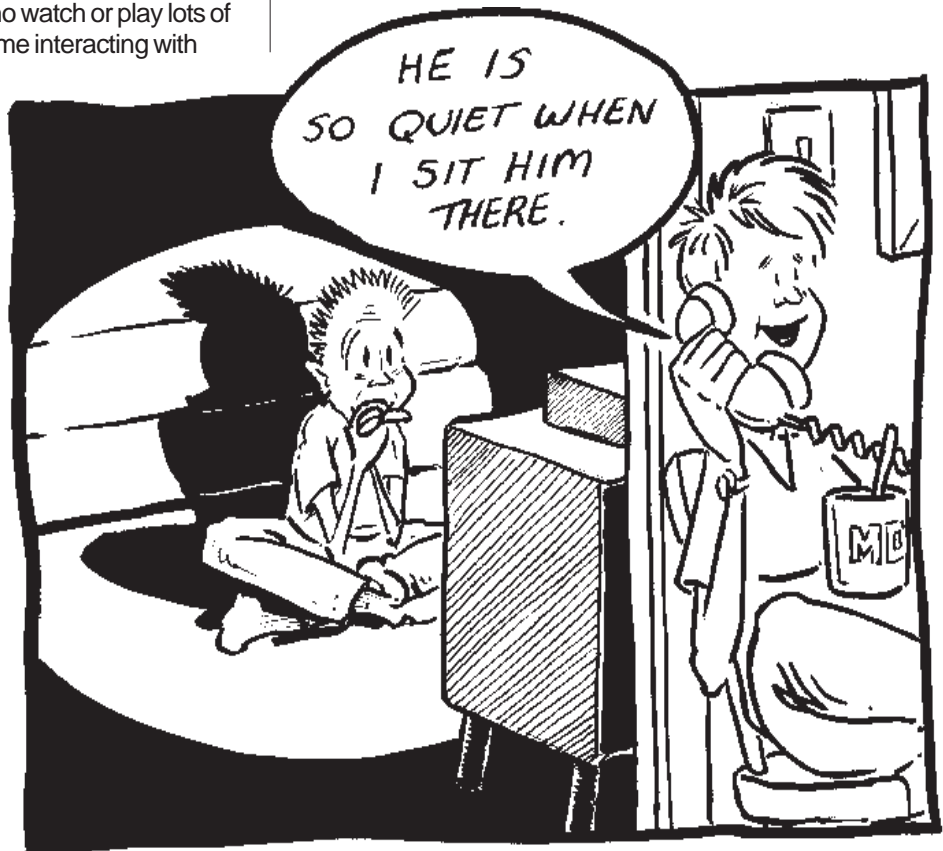
Prior to the challenge, the children in Robinson’s study reported an average of 15.5 hours of weekly television viewing, 5 hours of viewing videos, and 3 hours of playing video games. By the end of the course, these times fell 33 percent to an average of 9 hours of television viewing, 3.5

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hours of viewing videos, and 1.5 hours of playing video games. Children were asked to rate their classmates' aggression at the beginning of the study and at the end. At the outset, peer reports of aggression were similar at the two schools. By the study's end, such reports were down by about 25 percent among participants at the intervention school compared with those in the control school. Researchers also measured changes in verbal and physical aggression by regularly observing the playground behaviour of about 50 participants at each school. At the end of the study, there were 25 percent fewer observed incidents in the intervention group compared with those in the control school. Robinson's findings are consistent with research that suggests that overexposure to even nonviolent media can make young people more aggressive. Children who watch or play lots of TV or video games may spend less time interacting with others and, consequently, have fewer social skills. There is some debate, however, as to whether the decreases noted in the study are long lasting.

When some parents in Québec learned of Tom Robinson's research findings, they convinced 35 schools in the province to stage a 10-Day TV-Free Challenge in 2003. Here are some suggestions for organizing a 10-Day Challenge in your elementary or middle school, based on their experience. It is important to start with the support of the school's parent-teacher association or parent council, as the success of the challenge will depend on the participation of students' families. Some principals use the first parent meeting in the school year to introduce the challenge. Some schools send special invitations home with students to boost attendance; at one Québec school, teachers declared that the students' only homework assignment was to bring their parents to the meeting! The purpose of the first meeting is to seek parents' support and participation and to inform them that their children's participation is to be voluntary rather than enforced. A separate preparatory meeting with teachers can focus on various ways to encourage students to take up the challenge, to express their feelings, find new hobbies, and discover a better life with their families, neighbours and friends. Teachers will need to discuss how best to answer such typical questions from students as: What are we going to do without TV and video games for ten days? Where can I get books to read? Why is reading the news in newspapers better than watching TV news? What can I say to my Mom when she says it's ridiculous that I don't allow my brother to watch TV when I babysit him? Fortunately, students who pose such questions will also get suggestions from classmates for solving these problems.

At the first meeting with students, teachers can present them with the option of undertaking the 10-Day TV-Free Challenge, emphasizing that the decision to turn off the TV and video games is theirs alone. Some students will say it is impossible or that ten days is too long; teachers can ask those students how much they would be willing to do, encouraging them to set personal goals for themselves. Discuss which times of the day and week, including weekends, students feel most vulnerable to the lure of TV or video games, and ask students to brainstorm possible replacement activities. What can be done during good weather? in bad weather? What activities could involve neighbours or friends? and which ones can be done at home



or elsewhere? Teachers can provide time for students to plan their own flexible schedules for the ten-day period.

Meetings with students should also take place during and after the challenge. At each of these meetings, teachers can lead discussions on the influence of TV and video games in students' lives. They can encourage students to describe behaviour, language and attitudes that they have noticed, particularly among younger siblings, neighbours, and their peers, and can ask which types of media students think affect people the most. As not all parents will participate with their children or support the challenge, the second meetings with students could feature a class brainstorming session on ways to help students who are still sitting at home watching TV with their families. The idea of students helping one another with the challenge is powerful, one that students enjoy tackling. However, both students and teachers will have to be sensitive not to apply pressure on those who have chosen not to participate.

At each of the first two meetings, students should be given research homework to explore some of the themes associated with the 10-Day TV-Free Challenge: for example, they could be asked to survey their relatives, neighbours and community leaders about why verbal and physical violence is increasing in our culture. Or they could show their parents what they have learned in class about the links between violent entertainment and real violence. Teachers could also help students design a notice that can be posted at local stores and community gathering places to inform the public about the challenge — as the ultimate goal is to mobilize as much of the community as possible. In one Québec community, almost every local organization organized one of a series of activities for students each day, such as Irish dancing, baking, indoor hockey, picnics, campfires, music, sing-alongs and bingo. Those ten days became a community celebration of togetherness. Even the local priest joined in by holding a special Sunday Mass in which participating students told the congregation about obstacles they had faced and how pleased they were to succeed in watching less TV or playing fewer video games. On that day, the whole congregation prayed for their success in the remaining days of the challenge.

Keeping track of results on a chart posted at a central location can help the entire school monitor progress during the challenge. Every morning during the challenge, students should write — anonymously, to reduce competition and peer pressure — how many hours they saved by not watching TV or playing video games the previous day. During this daily process, remind students that every hour “stolen” from watching TV or playing video games contributes to the success of the challenge, and that they should be proud of their efforts, whether large or small. Students can add up and share the total with their classmates. Each class total from that day can be added to the chart.

After the 10-Day TV-Free Challenge, teachers should meet again to record how many students in their classes managed to avoid TV and video games along a continuum from all ten days to no days. They can note which alternative activities were favoured by the students. Finally, they can discuss whether or how the challenge changed students’ behaviour, attitudes or language when they were with their peers in school, on buses or at recess. Teachers can also ask parents how they felt about their children’s performance. If they participated with their children, did the experience

A 30-minute *Youth Vote* video is available for those who want to enliven this experience for their students. In it, a commentator explains why children should develop media awareness and freedom of expression. It differentiates toxic and positive bacteria by analogy and provides 48 clips of toxic and positive TV programs that are commonly nominated by students. The video is available for Cdn\$25/US\$20 from EDUPAX, 342, 17e rue, Québec City, QC G1L 2E4, (418) 522-2477, www.edupax.org. Additional guidance for the 10-Day TV Free Challenge is available in French at www.edupax.org and will be soon available there in English as well.

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make them feel closer to their participating son(s) or daughter(s)? Did the challenge affect their youngsters’ behaviour, attitudes, language, or interests at home? Did it affect their relations with other family members? If more than one class or school participates in your 10-Day TV-Free Challenge, your community might consider awarding certificates to

recognize the efforts of those who participated.

School is the ideal place for children to critique the cultural environment in which they live and to develop and articulate a vision of a more tolerant, peaceful and just society. Exercises such as the Youth Vote and the 10-Day TV-Free Challenge can help in this process by building young people’s capacity to express themselves and to resist the influence of corporate-controlled media on their attitudes and behaviour. Such exercises can also elicit support from parents and the community in helping children to discover their innate interests, to build relationships and to develop whole personalities. To paraphrase an African saying, “To raise a child, we need the whole village.”

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Notes

¹ The *Report of the Ontario Royal Commission on Violence in the Communications Industry* (LaMarsh Commission, 1977) brought forward a plethora of research on the potential harm to society of violence in the media. The prevalence of violence in the North American intellectual community is compared to chemical food additives and air or water pollutants such as lead, mercury and asbestos.

² Wendy Josephson, “Television Violence: A Review of the Effects on Children of Different Ages,” Department of Canadian Heritage, 1995, available free of charge from National Clearinghouse on Family Violence, Health Canada, (800) 267-1291.

³ Media Resource Team of American Association of Pediatrics, “Media Violence,” *Archives of Pediatric Adolescent Medicine* 108:5 (2001), pp. 17-23; report online at time of publication at <http://www.aap.org/policy/re0109.html>.

⁴ Media Awareness Network, accessed online September 30, 2001, at <http://www.mediaawarenessnetwork.com> (URL at time of publication <http://www.media-awareness.ca/>).

⁵ Brandon Centerwall, “Exposure to Television as a Risk Factor for Violence,” *American Journal of Epidemiology*, 129:4 (1989), p. 645.

⁶ Fred Molitor, “The effect of Media Violence on Children’s Tolerant of Real-Life Aggression,” Southampton Institute of Higher Education, UK, Presentation at the International Conference on Violence in the Media, New York City, October 3-4, 1994.

⁷ ICAVE, International Coalition Against Violent Entertainment, quoted in “Cessez-le-feu,” *Fides*, 1987.

⁸ Gary Ruskin, at World Health Organization Conference on Health Marketing and Youth held April 2002 at Treviso, Italy; presentation online at time of publication at http://www.commercialalert.org/index.php?category_id=5&subcategory_id=66&article_id=140.

⁹ “Computer Games Can Stunt Kids’ Brains,” *Daily Telegraph*, August 20, 2001.

¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹ DeGuise, Jacques and Guy Paquette, Centre d’études sur les médias, Laval University, “Principaux indicateurs de la violence sur les réseaux de télévision au Canada,” April 19, 2002, p. 35.

¹² TV-Free America, quoted by Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, *CCPA Monitor*, October 1995.

¹³ CNN, “Less Media = Less Aggression,” <http://www.cnn.com/2001/US/01/14/reducing.aggression.ap/index.html>.