

Chapter 56

Media Violence

Why Is It Used to Abuse Children?
How to Oppose It and Win

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Introduction

Over the last quarter century, while some industries polluted our air, water, and food, the entertainment industry increasingly poisoned children's cultural environment with violence carried by television programs, video games, and movies. While society has agreed to regulate the pollution of air, food, and water, governments have been unable to regulate the use of violence in entertainment products for children. The increasing power of the media on public opinion has inspired such fear on decision makers that when having to choose between children's rights and accusation of censorship, none dare to put their political party at risk. This lack of moral fortitude has left the media free to decide what our children will watch, what values will be pushed down their throats, and what cruelty will be used to feed their fantasies. George Gerbner used to call the big media the Secret Ministers of Global Culture. The executives of a handful of big media conglomerates think they own the freedom of the press and that it is their privilege to decide alone what will be aired to children on the global market, "with little to tell but a lot to sell." After witnessing the increased amount of violence carried by entertainment products for children, more citizens ask why they should let children be abused by the media.

Not all TV and other entertainment programs are toxic for children; some informative and even inspiring programs provide positive stimulation and help children and teens to understand the world. In fact, though, an increasing number of programs and movies do exactly the opposite. As a result, parents and teachers have searched for, lobbied, petitioned, requested, and finally created ways to protect children against mental manipulation and emotional desensitization. Fortunately, some of these efforts have allowed discoveries to help reduce the impact of pollution on the cultural environment of young people.

Influence of Toxic Culture

Since the 1977 LaMarsh Commission Report¹—where the analogy to environmental contamination was first drawn in Canada—well over one thousand studies have routinely confirmed 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 watched on TV.²

In 2001, 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.”³ University of Washington epidemiologist Brandon Centerwall estimated that TV violence could account for 50% of real-life violence.⁴

Violent entertainment has three kinds of influence on children, depending on their age, how much they watch, and whether they watch alone, with adults, or with peers. Research has revealed that children mimic TV violence because they perceive it as approval for hitting, bullying, and humiliating their peers. It also encourages between 5% and 10% 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.⁵ With increasing exposure to violence in entertainment, children become mentally altered and physically inclined to commit, accept, or enjoy watching real-life violence.

The Industry of 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 used violence as a marketing ingredient. In addition to advertising through commercials, companies such as Hasbro produced their own TV programs and paid to have them broadcast on weekdays and Saturday mornings. In 1984, “GI Joe” carried 84 acts of violence per hour and “Transformers,” 81.⁶ 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 Claus to give them Hasbro toys. Most of these programs, like many video games, include fantasies and stereo-

types that support an aggressive culture of violence, sexism, and war. Stereotypical “real” men are strong, insensitive, and solve conflicts by exterminating their opponents. 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. [. . .] Advertisers [. . .] sometimes discuss it in terms of the battle over what they chillingly call “mind share.” Some 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.⁷

Public Airwaves Controlled Against Public Interests

Growing public awareness of the dangers of media violence aimed at young people has put pressure on governments to regulate it. In 1994, to prevent such intervention, Canadian broadcasters promised to regulate themselves. Six years later, researchers at Laval University noted that self-regulation had failed to reduce violence, and that violence carried by private broadcasters had increased by 432%.⁸ Two developments during this period helped to neutralize public concern. 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.” While such programs seem progressive and useful, they have actually been used as a smokescreen to help broadcasters project an ethical image while increasing the intoxication of children. A second development was the V-Chip. Many parents work full-time and cannot always monitor what their children are watching. Devices such as V-Chips were supposed to allow them to block reception of violent programs. The V-Chip system depends on ratings that are made by the broadcasters themselves. The V-Chip has helped to shift responsibility for regulating TV violence away from polluters onto parents. Those who believe that government regulation of media is an attack on freedom of speech see nothing wrong with manipulating children. They consider this form of child abuse as their constitutional right. Moreover, governments, by fear of being bullied, gave control of pollution to polluters.

Censorship

When citizens request regulation of the use of media violence in cultural products for children, the industry is prompt to consider it as an attack against freedom of expression. These corporations speak about freedom of expression as if they owned it, as if they bought it. The fact that thousands of these media belong to the same owner allows them to reach consid-

erable numbers of viewers, listeners, and readers. They then easily make their views much more familiar to citizens and make them forget that the airwaves belong to the public. The use of violence by big media has nothing to do with freedom of speech. Media violence is the result of choices made by the industry, and it is the result of censorship controlled by the media. The use of violence to attract more children is motivated by commercial interests.

Mary Megee explained why gratuitous violence on TV is a form of censorship by commerce. "In the U.S., most cultural messages are strained through a commercial filter which uses gratuitous violence as an industrial ingredient to keep viewers tuned in, ratings high, and profits up."⁹ The first—if not the only—rule that the big media agree to respect is the market. Their argument is simple: whenever people are ready to watch violent programs, broadcasters have the right to air them and NO government should interfere. For leaders of the industry, the law of commerce is the ultimate and most natural rule. All other rules and laws are viewed as obstacles to their interest and appetite for profits. Health, safety, and happiness of vulnerable citizens never appear on their radar screen. Control of the airwaves gives them the authorization to ignore the right of children to live in a safe cultural environment. If the transportation industry acted in a similar way, there would be no speed reduction in school areas and no interdiction of carrying dangerous chemicals in tunnels. Why would owning a big truck or even thousands of them give someone permission to drive on public streets and highways with no care for the public's interest? Why would the artists who build beds for babies get the freedom to space the bars so that they might turn out to be dangerous traps for small children? The argument of airing material despite the interest of children is the opposite of freedom. If there is a choice between freedom of speech and safety for children, all civilized societies give priority to children's safety.

Parents and teachers who request regulation of TV programs and video games for children quickly are stamped with the CENSORSHIP label. In 1997, George Gerbner was Dean Emeritus of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania and a pioneer of research on television violence. He had monitored television for over 30 years and found prime time television saturated by an average of five scenes of violence per hour. He found Saturday morning children's programs filled by 20 scenes of violence per hour. "When you can dump Power Rangers on 300 million children in 80 countries, shutting down domestic artists and cultural products, you don't have to care who wants it and who gets hurt in the process. Mindless TV violence is not an expression of artistic freedom or of any measure of reality. On the contrary, it is the product of de facto censorship: a global marketing formula imposed on program creators and foisted on the children of the world."¹⁰

The reason why parents who request less violence in TV programs for children are labelled as pro-censorship is to hide censorship by the industry and to make citizens forget that they own the airwaves. Why should people who own the airwaves restrict themselves from demanding that they be healthy, free, and fair? Why would the owners be treated in such an abusive way? When any violent program is chosen to be aired, citizens are aware

that censorship by the industry allowed some decision makers to eliminate other programs and films that could have contributed to their children's health and safety. The preference for violence is a decision made by somebody, elected by nobody, prisoner of a toxic culture, who knows that the authority expects him or her to give priority to cruelty, aggression, and hatred. Why did this program selector pick these Ninja Turtles to come and fight in our homes instead of other healthy programs for our children and their folks on our street? Did the network receive money for making that decision? Did profit increase after airing violent programs? Censorship exists; it is controlled by the industry, and millions of children pay the price today. Science also revealed that they will pay the price for their entire life, and the price becomes higher every year as increased doses of verbal and physical violence find their way into their brains.

The Purpose of Media Violence

Media violence is used by the entertainment industry for the main purpose of attracting more viewers, no matter their age, damages to their brains, or cost to society. When used by providers of entertainment products for youths, media violence has become one of the most sophisticated and cruel forms of child abuse. Pokemons, Terminators, Doom, Quake, Basketball Diaries, Grand Theft Auto, Howard Sterns, South Parks, Jackasses, all these cultural products have proven to damage children and teens across the continent.¹¹ They carry and promote values that help guide and inspire children's attitudes, behaviours, clothing, and relationships with each other. Eminem, Fifty Cents, and Marilyn Manson are the products of the music industry circulating hate propaganda against women and profiting from it. These singers and characters are often portrayed as rebels. In fact, they are nothing but submissive tools for the ideology of profit. They are slaves, rich and famous slaves, but slaves anyway. Valerie Smith monitored the music industry for decades. She wrote: "These guys would still whine in their garage if it was not for the industry that gave them a microphone, print their lyrics, sell their albums and promote them on MTV."¹² Music videos, TV programs, and video games have become the most child-abusive babysitters in North America. Much of their audiences are young people who easily believe that rudeness is an act of courage, of independence, and of freedom. It takes experience, knowledge, critical viewing skills, and empathy to understand that these role models actually teach submission, frustration, and anger. Verbal violence, physical violence, sexism, racism, and consumerism have nothing in common with freedom and justice—they are the opposite. These cultural products glorify violence and misogyny, although they have been the enemy of humanity for centuries, for millenniums. How would children know that? These products glamorize submissiveness of women and prostitution which have been fought by humanity for centuries, for millenniums. How would children know that? They trivialize verbal humiliations of others as if they were humoristic, acceptable, fun, natural, and entertaining. How would children know that? Damages are profound and painful.

A Sophisticated Form of Child Abuse

When compared to many forms of violence against children, media violence looks minor. Many children seem to enjoy it, and parents can get more freedom as their child watches TV. When researchers studied damages made to children by media violence, they discovered that television hurts millions of them very deeply and that most damages will affect them for the rest of their lives. Parents have many reasons to consider the use of media violence as a cruel and sophisticated form of child abuse. Because media violence is primarily used in entertainment to attract human beings, particularly the youngest, we need to ask the question: Why does it work?

Curiosity is not the only reason. We know for a fact that many human beings can hardly turn their head away when they witness their peers suffering or when they see pain inflicted on them. Sane human beings feel guilty to abandon their peers in a situation of danger. Using violence in entertainment for children is a very cruel form of child abuse because children cannot differentiate between fiction and reality. The process of making that difference starts at the age of 7 and is not over before the age of 13. This is a fact despite all the spontaneous answers given by children when parents ask them if they can make that difference. For an increasing number of teens, the process of making that difference is actually completed much later than 13. The Supreme Court of Canada has analysed the issue of children's vulnerability before the age of 13 and the 83-page Irwin Toys Decision is a media literacy lesson all by itself.¹³

The use of violent fiction to lure children before the age of 13 is clearly an unacceptable lack of ethics by the most lucrative industry of the world. In the United States, marketing targeting children has gone from \$100 million in 1990 to two billion a decade later. That is a 2000% increase. This appetite for reaching children has allowed advertisers to compete and try various hooking ingredients to lure children and reduce gatekeepers' authority. Violence and the nag factor are two well known marketing ingredients, the most offensive and criminal.

Multiple Victims

It is the business of television to attract audiences and to sell them to advertisers, who then find ways to manipulate their preferences and choices for goods and services. Despite children's vulnerability, violence is commonly used by both the entertainment and the marketing industries for commercial purposes. These industries have studied the psychology of children, similarly to what predators do with their prey. They scrutinized children's needs, hopes, fears, dreams, and desires.¹⁴ Increasing the audience means enormous monetary profits in the short term for these industries. However, media exposure also has enormous short-, mid- and long-term effects on children and society. Well over a thousand studies have linked television to numerous marketing related diseases (MRD) such as obesity, body image, self-esteem, violent crime, physical and verbal abuse, eating disorders, smoking, alcohol,

attention deficit disorder and hyperactivity, compulsive consumerism, perilous driving, and so on.¹⁵ What other industry can afford to generate so much damage to society without any consequences? When *ecoli* bacteria are found in water, meat, or spinach, the public is quickly informed about the risks. Why would research about MRD be deprived of similar coverage?

Exposure to violent entertainment does not only show and teach how to act violently. In the child's inexperienced brain, it links pain infliction with pleasure. Violence was certainly not created by the media, but the use of violence in entertainment by the media has helped to increase the amount, the damages, and the pain for millions of children around the world. Does the industry try to prevent damages? Unfortunately, every time accusations could incriminate them, their answer is simple: raising children is the parents' job, not theirs. Imagine any other industry (guns, alcohol, and so on) trying that line?

'I knew that kid was 10, and, yes, he walked into my pawn shop, bought a fifth of liqueur and a gun, but where were the parents? It's the parents' job to keep him out!' No other industry would try that line. The only other group of individuals who would say that are child abusers: 'I know that little girl was 8, but it's the parents' job to keep me away from her.'

This (media) industry is functioning with child abuser logic, and they will pay a profound price for it."¹⁶ If raising a child requires a whole village, it seems that television is not a member of the village.

Size of the Effect

Research has proven that the effect of media violence is bigger than the effect of exposure to lead on children's brain activity, bigger than the effect of calcium intake on bone mass, bigger than the effect of homework on academic achievement, bigger than the effect of asbestos exposure on cancer, bigger than the effect of exposure to secondhand smoke on lung cancer.¹⁷ Professor Craig Anderson testified before the U.S. Senate Commerce Committee hearing in 2004. He explained that research revealed three effects of exposure to media violence.

- Short-term effects: aggression increases immediately after viewing a violent TV show or movie, and it lasts for at least 20 minutes.
- Long-term effects: children who watch a lot of violent shows become more violent as adults than they would have become had they not been exposed to so much TV and movie violence.
- Long-term and short-term effects occur to both boys and girls.¹⁸

Video Games Are Murder Simulators

Dr. Michael Rich testified on behalf of the American Academy of Pediatrics before the Public Health Summit on Entertainment Violence. Here is what he had to say about video games:

Video game revenues are \$10 billion a year, larger than that of television and movies, and increasing. 50% of 4th graders choose “first person shooter” (FPS) video games as their favorites. The average 7th grader plays these video games for more than 4 hours each week. [. . .] After playing video games, young people exhibit measurable decreases in prosocial and helping behaviours, a 43% increase in aggressive thoughts, and a 17% increase in violent retaliation to provocation. Playing violent video games accounted for 13–22% of the variance in teenagers’ violent behavior. By comparison, smoking tobacco accounts for 14% of the variance in lung cancer. [. . .] Active participation increases effective learning. Video games are an ideal environment in which to learn violence: a) they place the player in the role of the aggressor and reward him or her for success at violent behaviour; b) rather than observing part of a violent interaction, video games allow the player to rehearse an entire behavioural script from provocation to choosing to respond violently to resolution of the conflict—this is more effective learning than watching or rehearsing part of the sequence; c) video games are immersive and addictive—kids want to play them for long periods of time to become better. Repetition increases learning. While violent video games are clearly not the sole factor contributing to violence, they are clearly a factor.¹⁹

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 video game and compared the results with those of other groups who did math exercises and read aloud. The researcher found out that computer games do not stimulate crucial areas of the brain, leading to underdevelopment and such behavioral problems as violence.²⁰ 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; the frontal lobe is also associated with memory, learning, and emotions. 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. Professor Kawashima’s findings are supported by other studies: “Computer 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.”²¹

Lt Col Dave Grossman, a retired psychologist from the U.S. Army, co-authored with Gloria DeGaetano a book about the influence of video games on human brains: *Stop Teaching Our Kids to Kill*. Grossman knows that video games were used by the U.S. army as murder simulators for the purpose of conditioning young recruits to “kill without thinking.” In many interviews and speeches, Lt Col Grossman explained that “video games give kids and teens the skill, the will and the thrill to kill.”²²

Media Violence Linked with Bullying and Crime

Time exposure to television is actually linked with bullying. Research by Frederick Zimmerman, professor in the University of Washington’s School of Public Health, found that “youngsters who spent a typical amount of time—about 3 1/2 hours daily—in front of the tube had a 25% increased risk of becoming bullies between the ages of 6 and 11. This is a very clear independent effect of television on children’s bullying. More kids who

watch a lot of TV go on to become bullies than kids who don't watch very much TV, so that's the risk. Watching a lot of TV doesn't mean that you're going to become a bully, it just means that you have a higher chance that it might happen."²³

During the last 15 years, school authorities in the United States have noticed that violence has hit lower grades. In California, for example, the latest school crime figures show that from 1995 to 2001, rates of vandalism and other offenses dropped among elementary school students, while assaults nearly doubled. In Philadelphia, the first part of (this) school year 2002–2003 brought the suspensions of 22 kindergartners. Minneapolis schools have suspended more than 500 kindergartners over the past two school years for fighting, indecent exposure, and persistent lack of co-operation. Minnesota schools have suspended nearly 4,000 kindergartners, first- and second- graders, most for fighting, disorderly conduct and the like. In Massachusetts, the percentage of suspended students in pre-kindergarten through third grade more than doubled between 1995 and 2000. In 2001–2002, schools in Greenville, S.C., suspended 132 first-graders, 75 kindergartners and two preschoolers.²⁴

In Québec, between 1985 and 2000, the number of elementary school students with troubled behaviors has increased by 300%.²⁵ Media violence is also linked with later criminal activity, as shown by this 17-year-study in which 700 young people were tracked down into their adult lives. Hours of viewing were correlated with acts of aggression. Surprisingly, viewers watching more TV as children committed more crimes as adults than those already involved in violence when they were kids.²⁶ In Canada, the violent crime rate for youths is growing much faster than that for adults, and, in the Province of Québec, the violent crime rate of youths is now two times higher than that of adults.²⁷

The Social Cost of Desensitization

The most worrying effect of exposure to media violence (more than imitation) is desensitization, the reduction of empathy. Massive exposure to violent entertainment has shown to reduce the capacity of children (and their will) to rescue victims or report about them. Many young criminals often show and feel no remorse after committing horrible crimes. Increasing the punishments or judging them before a court for adults has little or no positive effect. Early desensitization of young humans will carry a heavy cost for the coming generation and the future of civilization. Massive exposure to violent entertainment reduces—if not destroys—the value of life and the power of solidarity in our societies.

Various Responses of Civil Society

All civilized societies show concern about child abuse. Concern about violence against children inspired reactions against the marketing of violence by the entertainment industry. Spontaneously, civil society across North America has developed a wide variety of promising practices to protect children from media violence. If society wants to reduce the manipulation of children by the media, and regulate violence carried by TV programs for

children, increased legislation is necessary. In 2004, the U.S. Federal Trade Commission found that the entertainment industry had marketed products to children that their own ratings do not consider appropriate for them. Children under 17 could easily purchase tickets for movies, music recordings, and video games labelled as suitable “for adults only.” Self-regulation has clearly proven to be non-efficient.²⁸

Such marketing practices clearly contravene with the Child Rights Convention, where article 17e makes it obligatory to all States to recognize the importance of the media and protect children against “material (danger) injurious to their well-being.” Despite such a clear statement, many states, including the United States and Canada, have shown reluctance to enforce it.

If there are going to be attempts by decision makers to legislate this issue, successful efforts must be supported by a wide mobilization throughout civil society. Media have gradually become so powerful to influence public opinion that governments fear to intervene. Solid coalitions of parents, health professionals, education professionals, grassroots organizations, and activists could succeed where legislators alone have failed.

Parents' Education

Such wide mobilization from all sides of the political spectrum requires knowledge and motivation. In 2002, researchers Doug Gentile and David Walsh surveyed parental guidance over children's consumption of media violence and concluded that it was not sufficient. A study conducted by Joanne Cantor in 2002 revealed that most parents have little or no knowledge of the harmful effects of media violence on their child. Other Canadian and U.S. studies have revealed that parents are not aware of the amount of violence their children are exposed to on television, the Internet, and video games. It is therefore obvious that media education is needed. UNICEF Canada also believes that “complementary regulations with parent and child education are needed. Families are important in reducing the harmful effects of media violence. Children themselves believe they should be protected from frightening television programs, websites, and video games.”²⁹ Many parents would be happy to learn why they should avoid purchasing toys that promote imitative play of violent programming, why monitoring their children's video game habits is helpful, why using TV as a babysitter is perilous, and why they should spend more time talking with their children.

Resistance by the Industry

History has shown that other industries have tried to oppose increased legislation to protect citizens. The automobile industry, the tobacco industry, and the food industry, for example, have spent tremendous efforts to deprive citizens and society from protection. The problem with media violence is that the industry accused of abusing children is at the same time responsible of preparing the news. Informing the public therefore becomes barely possible if not impossible. A few countries or states have succeeded in regulating the media

industry targeting children: Greece, Sweden, and Québec are among them.

Legislation Against Advertising to Children

The success story in the Province of Québec is interesting because it was realized right here in North America. Advertising became illegal in the province of Québec in 1976. This type of legislation requires not only courage from political decision makers but also strong support from society at large. The Québec Consumer's Protection Law forbidding advertising to children under 13 became fully enforced in 1980. The toy industry—Irwin Toys Ltd—has challenged this law up to the Supreme Court of Canada, arguing that it restricted its own freedom of expression protected by the Canadian Charter of Rights. The court declared the Québec legislation fully constitutional. The Irwin Toys Decision takes 83 pages to describe pretty accurately (a) sophisticated manipulation techniques used by the marketing industry, (b) why any provincial jurisdiction in Canada has constitutional legitimacy to protect its vulnerable citizens, (c) why children need such protection until the age of 13. This legislation made Québec the first, and still to this day, 30 years later, the only State in North America to protect children from advertising.

During the years following its adoption, lobbying by advertisers argued that the children of Québec were punished by this legislation because TV networks could not sell advertising time. Lack of income had then reduced, they said, the quality and quantity of TV programs for kids. Adopting the law supposedly punished children instead of protecting them. Fifteen years after the law was fully enforced, the Government of Québec asked Professor André Caron, researcher from the University of Montreal, to evaluate the actual impact of the law. The study revealed that programming for children was richer, more diverse, and more educational in Montreal, Quebec, compared to Toronto, Ontario, a city where such protection did not exist.³⁰ Ruling out advertising to kids has proven to be a very efficient and promising practice to protect children. The Canadian Supreme Court Decision in itself offers a rich media education lesson.³¹ An analysis of the decision gives important strategic insights for decision makers in other states and countries trying to legislate and lawyers trying to defend the legitimacy of the legislation in court.

Further research will be necessary to evaluate if regulating advertising to children also impacted child obesity and other MRD diseases. Lately, the American Psychological Association (APA) requested a similar legislation for protecting children in the United States along with a coalition of organizations advocating in favor of children's rights.³² The *Washington Post* reported about the APA position.³³ A survey conducted in 2006 showed that more than 80% of U.S. citizens agree that advertising to children under 9 should be prohibited. Commercial Alert campaigns for a similar legislation to ban advertising targeting children under 12.³⁵

Other (Most) Promising Practices to Protect Children

Despite powerful opposition against regulation from the media, many promising practices

have been experienced in North America to protect children from media violence. A report sent recently to UN Secretary General as a contribution to the Study on Violence against Children highlights 20 such promising practices by civil society. The report was posted on the Child Rights Information Network (CRIN) Web site.³⁴ Among these innovative practices, the SMART Program and the 10Day Challenge have proven to be the most efficient to help parents, students, and teachers come together and oppose the media culture of violence.

Student Media Awareness to Reduce Television (SMART)

The SMART Program was tested in 1998 by Dr. Thomas N. Robinson in two elementary schools of San Jose, California. It consists of 18 lessons for teachers preparing students and motivating them to turn off the TV for 10 days and keeping their consumption under 7 hours per week during the following months. The research was reported in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* in 2001. Reducing TV and video games helped reduce verbal violence by 50% and physical violence by 40%.³⁵ The SMART Program was made available in 2004 by the Stanford Health Promotion Resource Center (SHPRC) affiliated to the Stanford University School of Medicine, CA. Information about the SMART program is posted on their Web site.³⁶ Dr. Robinson also proved that reducing the time of television watched and video games played helped reduce another MRD. According to the Stanford Study reported by the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, reducing TV had a significant impact on a decrease in obesity.³⁷

The SMART Program was successfully implemented in Michigan in 2004. Principal Mike Smajda learned that one of his first-grade pupils at Lemmer Elementary School had watched *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. Not long afterward, the boy was playing in a leaf pile with a girl when he suddenly began kicking her in the head. Another boy joined in. "They felt it was part of the game," Smajda said. "They both kicked her until her head was bleeding and she had to go to the hospital." Smajda can't prove the R-rated slasher movie provoked the child, but the November 2004 incident reinforced his commitment to an anti-violence program getting under way at his school. It challenged students to do without TV and all other screen entertainment for 10 days, then limit themselves to just seven hours a week.³⁸ Other schools joined in over the next year. Administrators and teachers say short-term results were striking: less aggressive behaviour and, in some cases, better standardized test scores.³⁹

The SMART Program was successfully implemented in eight schools in 2005–2006. The school district was allowed 2.3 millions dollars for sharing the program in 2006–2007.⁴⁰

The Delta-Schoolcraft School District, based in Escanaba, Michigan, was the first school district in the world to use the SMART curriculum across the entire district. The 10Day TV/videogame turnoff resulted in an 80% reduction in violence. In the spring of 2005, more schools participated in the program. The result was a statistically significant reduction

in violence and bullying. They also witnessed a 15% increase in math scores and an 18% increase in writing scores as compared to the seven schools that did not have the program in place at that point. SMART showed to be effective at reducing violence in a double-blind, controlled experiment conducted by Stanford Medical School. In October 2006, the district had its fourth international conference to teach educators about the curriculum. All attendees were provided with the curriculum and given instruction in the implementation of the curriculum by educators and administrators who had firsthand experience with it.⁴¹

The SMART Program is surely the most promising practice in North America to Protect Children from Media Violence

The “10Day Challenge” TV and Video Game Free

The Challenge was a success because of the media education sessions with students, teachers, and parents. It was experienced for the first time in April 2003 in partnership with the parents association of the Québec City region. It received funding from the Public Safety departments of both Québec and Canada.

In May 2003, the Canadian Press (CP) covered the Challenge in St-Malachie.⁴² The Challenge was reported in the *Green Teacher Magazine*.⁴³ Since then, the Challenge has been experienced in over 50 schools in the provinces of Québec and Ontario. Everywhere, the Challenge obtained huge success, as shown in the evaluation by parents, students, and teachers from six elementary schools.⁴⁴ In April 2004, the Parents Association launched a 20-minute video (in French) telling the story of the Challenge as it was experienced in two schools. The Canadian Observatory on School Violence Prevention (COSVP) posted the PA press release on its Web site.⁴⁵

In all regions or cities where the Challenge was experienced, it received coverage and support by the media. In April 2005, three daily French newspapers covered the Challenge.

Le Nouvelliste told the story in Trois-Rivières, Québec. *Le Droit* covered the Challenge in Ottawa, Ontario. *Le Soleil* made its front page with the Challenge in Québec City. In the spring of 2005, the Québec Consumers Protection Office added the Challenge to its list of recommended consuming practices and posted it on its Youth Page.⁴⁶

The 10Day Challenge with Teenagers

Commemoration of the 6th anniversary of the Columbine High School shooting in Littleton, Colorado, was the opportunity to analyze the factors around this tragedy. Such an event deserves better attention than what was presented in the movie *Bowling for Columbine*. Despite efforts by the producer to take blame away from the entertainment industry, the media play an important role in the shooting as shown by further inquiry in the lives of the young killers.⁴⁷ The preparation of the students for the 10Day Challenge in Louis-Jacques-Casault high school, in Montmagny, Québec, showed how media education could

actually help prevent teen violence. One thousand teenagers attending the high school were offered to turn off the TV and video games for 10 days. Teachers, parents, and students evaluated the outcome of the Challenge. Interviews with teenagers who participated in the Challenge were aired all across Canada by CBC radio and TV. The evaluation below confirms the value of the 10Day Challenge as a “promising practice” with teenagers. The 10Day Challenge has shown to offer a motivating approach, an efficient way to mobilize entire communities in improving protection from media violence.

As mentioned by UNICEF Canada in its consultation document, additional legislation is certainly among promising practices. However, legislation alone will be ineffective unless civil society mobilizes to counter the enormous power of the media, including the video game industry.

Independence of Media Education

Two reporters investigated the funding sources of major public health groups and found that big corporations dump big money into these groups, and pretty soon, the groups start taking the line of the big corporations. They concluded their inquiry by suggesting that such funding was causing the losing of the wars on cancer, heart disease, and diabetes.⁴⁸ In the summer of 2006, McDonald’s launched its own exercise program to prevent obesity. Again, the P. R. strategy helped take blame away from the impact of junk food on children’s health. Canadians and Americans face a similar problem with media education. Organizations funded by media conglomerates were created to promote a kind of media literacy that will take blame away from the media for intoxicating kids and teens. The funding “naturally” helps put the blame on parents, just like the food industry funding helps put the blame for diabetes and obesity on the lack of exercise. Big media corporations know how to protect their image.

The media need to divert the blame for the increasing crime rate among young people for violent offenses in the United States and Canada. During three decades, organizations were created to produce “educational material” with the financial contributions of big media. Naturally, the funding helps keep blame away from the polluters and prevent further accusations of child abuse. North American schools receive free kits, including “educational” tools, but the price is disregard for the impact of media violence on society.⁴⁹

Evaluation of the 10Day Challenge by Parents, Students, and Teachers

In the school year of 2003–2004, 20 elementary schools in Québec and Ontario offered media education workshops to prepare students and parents to turn off their television sets. Tabulation of participation revealed that 1,354 students succeeded in saving 19,377 hours of time they would have spent watching TV or playing video games. Students succeeded

in turning off their TV for an average of seven days. In April 2004, one high school did the same with its 1,000 students. In six elementary schools and this single high school, two to three weeks after the turn-off ended, an evaluation form was given to all students, parents, and teachers.

TABLE

Evaluation by 6 elementary schools 2003–2004	Evaluation in one high school, April 2004
<p>Parents, students and teachers evaluated the benefits</p> <p>The following evaluation is based on answers from 365 students, 27 teachers and 247 parents.</p> <p>Students spent an average of 7 days away from the tube. Girls succeeded in turning off one day more than boys.</p> <p>30% of children kept their TV turned off completely for the whole 10 days.</p> <p>Useful</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 70% of students found the Challenge «very or quite» useful, • 76% of parents found it “very or quite” useful, • 66% of teachers found it “very or quite” useful, <p>Benefits</p> <p>Time spent in front of the tube deprives children from time to develop social skills. What happened during the turn-off? The Challenge has shown to increase,</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical activity (62.2%) • Time spent with parents (58.5%) • Time spent with friends (45%) • Helping at home (44.4%) • Relationship with brothers and sisters (31.8%) • Better humor (30.2%) 	<p>One thousand students participated in 3 workshops to find motivations to participate in a 10Day turn off.</p> <p>522 students participated in the evaluation, 168 parents and 32 teachers.</p> <p>Teens succeeded an average of 4.8 days.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 78% of students aged 12–16 say they participated in the Challenge • 6% succeeded in turning off TV and videogames completely for 10 days., • 23% reduced consumption by 75%, • 36% by half, • 35% by a quarter <p>Useful</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 80% found the Challenge very or quite useful. • Preparation reached all students, including non participants; media literacy workshops helped them obtain some benefits anyway. • Two thirds of parents found the Challenge very or quite useful • 86.2% of staff considered the profit very or quite important <p>Benefits</p> <p>TV and videogames deprive teens of time that to develop social skills. Self-deprivation of TV had an impact on their quality of life.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical activity increased (50%) • 45% of students increased time spent with friends • 25% spent more time with parents and increased help for tasks at home <p>Influence of TV. 76% of parents say that they are conscious of it.</p>

(Table continued on page 682)

<p>Answers show that social relations and family ties were positive influences. Participating families have observed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Closer relations between parents and children (more time together, encouragements to turn-off, help with home chores. • Improved relations between brothers and sisters • Better relationship between school and community. • Community mobilization to support children. • Reduced exposure to TV and videogames after the Challenge 	<p>New dynamics in the school. 63% of teens say that the Challenge improved it. Majority were girls. This element was the 2nd most improved by the challenge.</p> <p>New dynamics in the community. 58% of teens say it improved, mostly girls. It was the 3rd most improved element witnessed during the Challenge.</p>
<p>Critical viewing skills</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 52% of students say it improved. 3rd most positive benefit. • TV and videogames influence children "much or quite" say 80.3% of parents. • 100% of teachers say that their students' viewing skills have improved. 	<p>Critical viewing skills</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They improved say 65% of teens, mostly girls. Benefit no. 1 Six parents out of 10 (59%) say that they witnessed the improvement of their child's viewing skills. • 9 teachers out of 10 say the same.
<p>Violence</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At home. Decrease of verbal violence witnessed by 54.7% of students. Benefit no 1 from the Challenge. Decrease of physical violence was witnessed by 54.2% of students. Benefit no 2. • At school. Decrease of physical violence witnessed by 44% of students. Decrease of verbal violence witnessed by 40.5% of students. 	<p>Violence</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At home. Decrease of verbal violence witnessed by 39% of students. Decrease of physical violence witnessed by 38% of students. That is more than one third. • At school. Decrease of physical violence witnessed by 32% of students. Decrease of verbal violence witnessed by 27% of students.
<p>Comments.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decrease of violence seen by all 3 partners (students, parents and teachers) was significant for both physical and verbal violence, at home and at school. • Decrease of verbal violence has been observed by children more at home (54.7%) than at school (40.5%). Similar result with teens (39% versus 27%). • Decrease of physical violence has been observed by children more at home than at school (54.2% versus 44%). By teens (38 versus 32%). • Evaluation focused more on the sense of security than the actual number of aggressions. The Challenge has ameliorated that sense for 50% of children and 32% of teens 	
<p>Repeating the Challenge</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Half of student (52.3%) say yes. • Over 2 third of parents (69.1%) say yes. • 2/3 of teachers say yes. <p>Complete analysis.</p>	<p>Repeating the 10Day Challenge</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 72% of students say yes. That wish is stronger in high school compared to elementary schools. 8 parents out of 10 (79%) recommend other schools try it. The strongest support for repeating the Challenge came from teachers (89.7%). Complete analysis of the 10Day Challenge in a high school available.
<p>Report to Public Safety Departments of Quebec and Canada, May 2005. (50)</p>	

Conclusion

The fact that participation in the Challenge is decided by parents is very important. The Challenge is (and should be) presented as an adult's mobilization to support children's decision and motivation, and hence the Challenge has created a precious opportunity to value the *family government*. The fact that the Challenge is offered to all children of entire schools also helps create a tremendous momentum that contributes to the success of the mobilization.

Preparation for the 10Day Challenge is even more important than the turn-off itself. Workshops for students, professional development training, conferences for parents, follow-up activities by teachers, and advertising in the community are integral parts of the process and help make the Challenge a success.

The involvement of communities in the 10Day Challenge increases the reputation of schools, emphasizes the importance of education, and the children's sense of belonging. Because the challenge is perceived as comparable to an Olympic performance, communities express admiration and support for students and thus reinforce young people's self-esteem and pride.

Surprisingly, during and after the 10Day Challenge, students find themselves in the middle of intense media coverage, particularly on TV. Newspapers, broadcasters, and magazines rush to cover their effort and performance . . . positively. In areas where poverty is common, the media usually come to report about crimes and fights. This time, when students organize to stand up against the small screen addiction, they attract attention and admiration to their neighbourhood. All principals agree to consider the Challenge as an empowering exercise with parents, students, staff, and the whole community.

The 10Day Challenge is great news for all North American parents. It was inspired by the SMART Program from Stanford University, CA. Success obtained with SMART in Escabana, MI, should also be known all across North America.

Teachers appreciate this innovative approach to violence prevention. The reduction of exposure to TV and video game violence, along with lessons to motivate children and parents, have proven to be very efficient ways to prevent violence and bullying in our schools. All health professionals and education professionals in North America should be informed. Many TV stations that reported about the 10Day Challenge conducted interviews with students, parents, and teachers. All media expressed support, showing that they can also actually contribute to youth violence prevention in the global village.

NOTES

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