

**EDUPAX**



## **Media Literacy Can Help Prevent Youth Violence**

### **Taking Lessons From the Columbine High School Shooting in Littleton, Colorado**

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Youth violence prevention has become a major public health issue in schools all over North America and Europe since 1990. Hundreds of studies showed that TV time exposure has a significant correlation with bullying behaviours in schools and later criminal offences. A recent research made on a 17 years period has shown that exposure to TV is an accurate predictor of future criminal violence as adult (1). Since TV, movies and videogames carry more verbal and physical violence, media literacy seems to be a good way to prevent violence.

### **Hijacking Media Literacy**

Most media education material in Canada and in the U.S. (sometimes schools receive free kits) get funding from big media. The funding "naturally" helps put the blame away from the media, just like the food industry funding helps put the blame for diabetes and obesity on the lack of exercise. The ACME Coalition (Action Coalition for Media Education) was founded in 2003 to allow media literacy to grow free from big media. Dr Sut Jhally, from the Media Education Foundation, one of the founding members of ACME, declared: "Media literacy is so dangerous to media corporations that they have moved to hijack the movement as it builds momentum. ACME's formation and launch therefore is an important political moment."(2)

### **The Columbine High School Shooting**

Experienced in some schools in Canada, independent media literacy tools were used to increase kids and teens awareness against the influence of violent entertainment and prevent violence. On the 6th Anniversary of the Columbine High School shooting, in Littleton, Colorado, EDUPAX released an interpretation of the event (3). It points at the cultural environment feeding kids and teens and discuss aggression and the occurrence and development of youth crime. In the text many questions are raised. What factors have made this nightmare event possible? Why did such a horrible event happen in a high school? Why has the increase of youth violence become a major public health issue in America and Europe? And, why is the number of kids with troubled behaviour in our elementary schools on the rise? According to EDUPAX' interpretation, the blame must not be carried by schools, but that is where the increase is witnessed. Inevitably, some kids reach secondary school with their social skills underdeveloped. They become labelled "at risk" teens. If their peers are not trained to respect and enjoy differences, if sarcasm and humiliation are common in their environment, frustration heats up and the media culture of revenge comes to the "rescue" and pushes these teens to act out. Imitation is not the only effect of media violence. Massive exposure to media violence also desensitizes teens and reduces empathy, the capacity to rescue their peers, victims of bullying and violence (ibid).

### **Reversible Trend ?**

Conscious of many hundreds of studies about the toxic influence of TV and curious to verify if that influence is reversible, Dr Thomas Robinson, professor of medicine at Stanford University, directed an audacious research project with children in San Jose, California. He produced teaching tools for teachers who agreed to prepare 3rd and 4th graders to turn off television and videogames for 10 days. The tools are part of the so called 'SMART Program', Student Media Awareness to Reduce Television (4). Dr Robinson measured verbal and physical violence before and immediately after the program was accomplished with a follow up 20 weeks later.

Reduction of exposure to TV and video games made verbal and physical violence diminish with 50 respectively 40 per cent. The most aggressive kids made the most progress.

### **The 10Day Challenge**

Informed of Robinson's study, in 2003 and 2004, teachers and parents in 20 elementary schools in Quebec and Ontario became curious to see if a similar project could produce the same results with their students. Would turning off TV make a difference? How would families respond to a call for action? The 10Day Challenge was created and evaluated by kids, teachers and parents (5).

In April 2005, three more elementary schools participated in the Challenge and 1,159 new children were offered to participate. The 2005 Challenge was evaluated as well (6). 120 out of 400 kids (30%) kept their TV turned off completely for the whole 10 days. Among the 400, most have replaced TV with physical activities and reading, with parents and friends. Young Zachary tells his story. "The first day, I went to my friend's home to play; the second day, he visited me. With my parents, I did some clean up of our house. I enjoyed the Challenge" he said. Before the Challenge, Zachary used to spend his whole weekends in front of the screen, but now, he says, I will watch it a little bit in the morning. All students and teachers participated.

Not all succeeded, but all tried. "The rainy weekend didn't help" said Louise Bolduc, a teacher. "Everyday, an average of 250 children (62,5%) replaced TV with something more useful." Sophie, a second grader, said that it was not easy, since her older brother attending another school did not participate. A similar statement was made by Philippe, who felt a little lonesome in his effort: "But my dad brought me to watch a football game with him. I also did a lot of homework", he said. Chantal, a mom met at the closing ceremony, said that she and her husband understood that children needed help to succeed. "The four of us together made us stronger. We glued a big card on our TV and in the end, it was easier than we expected", she added.

Children found tons of activities to stay away from TV. Margot, a third grader, participated in a poetry evening at school Olivier took a few board games from the closet. "One Monopoly Game lasted over 4 hours", he said. Alexandre went to a karate show and made a lot of bicycling. "During supper, I noticed that we talked more instead of watching TV ", says Marc-Étienne. Mother of two, Chantal noticed that the "fast" benefited her family. "It made the links stronger, for sure. My kids played together more frequently during these 10 days", she said. Unplugging our children from TV and videogames allows them to communicate with parents and peers and helps them to become more responsible. (7)

### **Can It Work With Teens ?**

Only one high school, totalizing 1 000 students aged from 11 to 16 years, has participated in the Challenge so far. 522 high school students participated in the evaluation, 168 parents and 32 teachers. Evaluation reveals that 78% of students participated in the Challenge. 6% of students turned off TV and videogames completely for 10 days, 23% reduced consumption by 75%, 36% by half and 35% by a quarter. Teens succeeded an average of 4.8 days without TV and videogames. Four out of 5 found the Challenge very or quite useful. Preparation reached all students, including non-participants, and media literacy sessions helped them obtain some benefits. Two thirds of parents found the Challenge very or quite useful. All teachers (100%) found the 10Day Challenge very or quite useful. (8)

### **Benefits**

TV and videogames deprive teens of time (well over 25 hours) that they could use to develop social skills (9).

The Challenge helped increase physical activities (50% of students), time spent with friends (45%), time spent with parents and help for tasks at home (25%). The Challenge allowed improvement of teens' social relationships; family links also improved.

- Physical violence in school went down for 32% of teens, 27% say the same for verbal violence.
- Verbal violence went down at home for 39% of students, 38% say the same for physical violence.
- Critical sense became better for 65% of teens. 6 parents out of 10 (59%) witnessed improvement of their child's viewing skills; 9 teachers out of 10 say the same. This was the most improved element.
- Dynamics in the school, 63% of teens saw it improved. 2nd most improved element.
- Dynamics in the community. 58% of teens saw it improved. 3rd most improved element.

## **Repeat ?**

Three quarters of students (72%) want to do it again. Parents agreed. Teachers showed stronger support for repeating the Challenge (89,7%).

The Challenge is great news for all North American parents who question addiction to media violence. The reduction of exposure to TV and video game violence seems to be a very efficient way to prevent violence. All schools in North America should be informed. Many TV stations made interviews with students and parents participating in the Challenge and all the stations expressed support, showing that they also can help prevent youth violence. A new challenge will take place April 18-27 in 2006.

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## **Note:**

A complete analysis of the 10Day Challenge with teenage students and required documentation is available.

[http://www.edupax.org/Assets/divers/documentation/1\\_articles/Teens%2010Day%20Strike.htm](http://www.edupax.org/Assets/divers/documentation/1_articles/Teens%2010Day%20Strike.htm)

The full title of the evaluation presented to the governments of Canada and Québec (in French) in 2004 is « Bilan détaillé du DÉFI de la DIZAINÉ sans télé ni jeu vidéo 2003-2004 réalisé conjointement par l'Association des comités de parents des régions de la Capitale-Nationale et de la Chaudière-Appalaches en collaboration avec EDUPAX. Rapport au Secrétariat de la Stratégie nationale pour la prévention du crime du Gouvernement du Canada et au Ministère de la Sécurité publique du Québec. »

[http://www.edupax.org/Assets/divers/documentation/4\\_defi/defi\\_acp0312/bilan\\_2003/Le\\_rapport.htm](http://www.edupax.org/Assets/divers/documentation/4_defi/defi_acp0312/bilan_2003/Le_rapport.htm)

## **References:**

1. Study Ties Television Viewing to Aggression. Adults Affected As Well as Children, By Shankar Vedantam, Washington Post, Friday, March 29, 2002, page A01, reprinted on The Free Radical web site: [http://www.fradical.com/March\\_2002\\_tv\\_violence\\_study.htm](http://www.fradical.com/March_2002_tv_violence_study.htm)

2. ACME's website: <http://www.acmecoalition.org/>

3. More than half of Students participated in the 10Day Challenge. How they managed to survive.

[www.edupax.org/Assets/divers/documentation/1\\_articles/Columbine%206th%20anniversary.htm](http://www.edupax.org/Assets/divers/documentation/1_articles/Columbine%206th%20anniversary.htm)

4. Effects of Reducing Children's Television and Video Game Use on Aggressive Behaviour. A Randomized Controlled Trial, by Thomas N. Robinson & al. in *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*, Vol. 155, No. 1, 2001.

<http://hprc.stanford.edu/pages/store/itemDetail.asp?169>

5. Report to the National Strategy for Crime Prevention Secretariat, Government of Canada and Quebec, in French.

[http://www.edupax.org/Assets/divers/documentation/4\\_defi/defi\\_acp0312/bilan\\_2003/Le\\_rapport.htm](http://www.edupax.org/Assets/divers/documentation/4_defi/defi_acp0312/bilan_2003/Le_rapport.htm)

6.

[http://www.edupax.org/Assets/divers/documentation/4\\_defi/DEFI%20communiqué%20Bilan%20preli.htm](http://www.edupax.org/Assets/divers/documentation/4_defi/DEFI%20communiqué%20Bilan%20preli.htm)

**7. Quoted from the daily newspaper in Québec City, Le Soleil, on the front page article, May 1<sup>st</sup> 2005.**

[www.edupax.org/Assets/divers/documentation/4\\_defi/lecole%20Les%20Bocages%20a%20relev%E9%20e%20defi.html](http://www.edupax.org/Assets/divers/documentation/4_defi/lecole%20Les%20Bocages%20a%20relev%E9%20e%20defi.html)

**8. Evaluation of the 10Day Challenge by students of L-J-Casault High School, in Montmagny, Québec.**

[http://www.edupax.org/Assets/divers/documentation/1\\_articles/Teens%2010Day%20Strike.htm](http://www.edupax.org/Assets/divers/documentation/1_articles/Teens%2010Day%20Strike.htm)

**9. The amount of TV exposure (5½ hours a day = 38½ hours a week) is reported in "The Role of the Media In Childhood Obesity" by The Kaiser Family Foundation, February 2004. According to a new report, March 2005, "Media Multi-tasking. Changing the Amount and Nature of Young People's Media", by the Kaiser Family Foundation, Young people spend an average of 44½ hours per week with the media. <http://www.kff.org>**