

## Kids' aggressive behavior linked to watching TV violence

The new television season is here, and Mr. T is still not minding his Ps and Qs, at least when it comes to crunching bad guys. In fact, television violence is more widespread than ever. But on the other side of the screen, researchers report that exposure to violent television programs is significantly related to current levels of aggression and future changes in aggression among girls in the United States and boys in both the United States and Finland.

Children do not absorb television violence in a vacuum, but when violence viewing is combined with several other factors it is likely to lead to heightened aggressiveness, say psychologists L. Rowell Huesmann and Leonard D. Eron of the University of Illinois in Chicago and Kirsti Lagerspetz of Åbo Akademi in Turku, Finland.

They find that, for boys, violence viewing has a greater effect on aggression if the child strongly identifies with violent television characters. For both sexes in the United States, aggression, academic problems, social unpopularity and violence viewing appear to feed on each other in a circular fashion.

The regularity with which a child watches violent television shows appears

to be as important a predictor of aggression as is the level of violence in the programs, note the investigators in the September *DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY*.

No evidence was found that only those children already aggressive or those with aggressive parents are affected by television violence.

In both countries, the child most likely to be aggressive also watches violent programs most of the time they are on, believes these shows portray life just as it is, frequently has aggressive fantasies and, if a girl, prefers "masculine" activities more than "feminine" or "neutral" activities. The latter finding suggests that, particularly in the United States, girls are behaving more like boys than in the past, say the researchers.

The study consisted of 758 children in the United States and 220 children in Finland who were interviewed and tested in two groups, about half from grades 1 through 3, the rest from grades 3 through 5. Data were also collected from each child's parents, classmates and teachers.

"We found that kids who are 6 or 7 years old don't discriminate well between realistic and unrealistic violence," Huesmann told *SCIENCE NEWS*. "They tend to think, for

example, that cartoon characters behave like real people. We found nothing to confirm that unrealistic violence doesn't affect kids."

Huesmann is "somewhat surprised" that violence viewing and aggression are significantly related among Finnish boys. This indicates that television violence can affect children even in countries with a limited number of violent shows, he says. Finnish girls, he adds, may be more encouraged to inhibit aggressive behavior stimulated by violence viewing than are boys.

Huesmann cautions that the findings are open to interpretation. Critics have charged that such studies do not show a causal link between television violence and current or subsequent aggression (*SN*: 9/5/81, p. 151). Aggression is difficult to compare across cultures, adds Huesmann.

"Our view is that parents should be concerned about what their young children watch on television," he explains. "Media violence, however, is not the cause of aggressive behavior. With appropriate controls over television viewing and appropriate socialization experiences, the effects of media violence on a child could be virtually nil." —B. Bower

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