

THE PLUG-IN DRUG: Television, Children, and the Family
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CHAPTER 6: Television and Violence: a New Approach

Searching for a Link

The subject of television violence and its potential effect on children has long been a source of controversy. Congressional studies were carried out in 1954, 1961, 1964, and 1970. When the Surgeon General's Report on Television and Social Behaviour was published in 1972, four of the five volumes were devoted to studies dealing with the effects of viewing violent television programs. Indeed, most seminars, articles, and studies considering the effects of television on children focus on this single issue.

The intense interest in the effects of television violence upon children is understandable: the number of juveniles arrested for serious and violent crimes increased 1600 percent between the years 1952 and 1972, according to FBI figures.¹ Since this is the very period in which television became ascendant in the lives of American children, and since the programs children watch are saturated with crime and destruction, it has long seemed reasonable to search for a link between the two.

And yet this link continues to elude social scientists and researchers, in spite of their great efforts to demonstrate its existence. The truly repugnant, sadistic, amazingly various violence appearing on home screens must surely have subtle effects upon children's behaviour, but it clearly does not cause them to behave in seriously antisocial ways. After all, the majority of American children are regularly exposed to those violent programs that have been proposed as a causative factor in the increase of juvenile violence, and yet the children involved in the FBI statistics are but a small proportion of the viewing population. And while a number of research studies do indicate a relationship between viewing violence on television and subsequent aggressive behaviour, that behaviour as seen in the research laboratory obviously does not involve rape or murder, the serious crimes included in the FBI report, but rather ordinary childish aggression—pushing, shoving, hitting, and so on.

Common sense balks at the idea that television violence will lead normal children to become juvenile delinquents. Indeed, it is the intuitive certainty that watching violent programs will not turn their children into rapists and murderers that permits parents to be lax about their children's indulgence in their favourite, invariably violent, programs in spite of the earnest advice of psychologists and educators.

It is particularly hard for parents to buy the idea that television instigates aggressive behaviour when its function in the home is so different. There, television keeps children quiet and passive, cuts down on loud and boisterous play, prevents outbursts between brothers and sisters, and eliminates a number of potentially destructive household "experiments" children might be indulging in were they not occupied by "Kung Fu" or "Batman."

Selma Fraiberg gives a sensible reason for rejecting a direct connection between normal children's viewing of violent programs and an epidemic of violence:

I do not mean...that the vulgar fiction of television is capable of turning our children into delinquents. The influence of such fiction on children's attitudes and conduct is really more subtle. We need to remember that it is the parents who are the progenitors of conscience and that a child who has strong ties to his parents will not overthrow their teachings more easily than he could abandon his parents themselves. I do not think that any of us here needs to fear this kind of corruption of our children.²

A further flaw in the argument that violence on television might cause children to behave more violently has been stated by a television critic who points out that if this were true, there would be a concomitant effect produced by the inevitable moralistic and "good" aspects of those same violent programs:

If indeed the cumulative watching is turning us all, gradually, into depraved beings, then the cumulative watching of good must be turning us all, gradually, into saints! You cannot have one without the other. That is, unless you are prepared to demonstrate that evil is something like cholesterol-something that slowly accumulates and clogs the system, while good is something like spinach, easily digested and quickly excreted.³

But if it is not the violent content of television programs that leads to violent behavior, is it merely a coincidence that the entry of television into the American home brought in its wake one of the worst epidemics of juvenile violence in the nation's history? As a professor of law and sociology stated in response to the suggestion that television is a contributing factor to juvenile violence: "I'm not suggesting a direct connection [with television] but it's inconceivable that there is no effect."⁴

There are indeed reasons to believe that television is deeply implicated in the new upsurge of juvenile aggression, particularly in the development of a new and frightening breed of juvenile offender, but those searching for a direct link between violent programs and violent actions are on a wrong tack. The experience of television itself (regardless of content) and its effects upon a child's perception of reality may be a more profitable line of inquiry.

Why So Much Violence?

In trying to understand the relationship between television viewing and violent behavior, one must first confront the curious fact that television today is dominated by violent programs. This was not always the case. It is noteworthy that between 1951 and 1953 there was a 15 percent increase in violent incidents on the television screen. And between 1954 and 1961 the percentage of prime-time programming devoted to action adventures featuring violence went from an average of 17 percent to about 60 percent of all programs. By 1964, according to the National Association for Better Radio and Television, almost 200 hours a week were devoted to crime scenes, with over 500 killings committed on the home screen! This reflects a 20 percent increase of violence on television over 1958 programming, and a 90 percent increase since 1952.⁵

Why did television, relatively nonviolent at its start, gradually become the hotbed of crime and mayhem it now is? Are people more fond of violence today than they were in 1950?

The answer to the first question is simple: people want violence on television. The rating system that effectively controls what appears on national television indicates that the public regularly chooses violent programs over more peaceful alternatives. Clearly there exists no evil conspiracy of wicked advertisers and network executives to destroy American morals and values by feeding citizens a steady diet of death and destruction. To the contrary, the advertisers meekly protest they would gladly give the public 'Pollyanna' round the clock if that's what people would watch. But the rating system shows that people won't watch "Pollyanna" when they can watch "Dragnet." Advertisers want to make sure that the greatest number of people will watch their program, and they have learned that their chances are better if their program is action-packed.

The answer to why people choose to view violence on television, and why there has been an increase in violent programming in spite of periodic outcries from government investigating commissions, educators, and parents' coalitions, lies, as do all the answers to basic questions about television viewing, in the very nature of the television experience - in its essential passivity.

In viewing television the grown-up, as well as the child, is taking advantage of an easily available opportunity to withdraw from the world of activity into the realm of nondoing, nonthinking, indeed, temporary nonexisting. But the viewer does not choose to watch soothing, relaxing programs on his television set, though his main purpose in watching is often to be soothed and relaxed. Instead he opts for frantic programs filled with the most violent activities imaginable - deaths, tortures, car crashes, all to the accompaniment of frenzied music. The screen is a madhouse of activity as the viewer sits back in a paradoxical state of perfect repose.

By choosing the most active programs possible, the viewer is able to approximate a feeling of activity, with all the sensations of involvement, while enjoying the safety and security of total passivity. He is enjoying a simulation of activity in the hope that it will compensate for the actuality that he is involved in a passive, one-way experience.

Once the attraction of television violence is recognized as a compensation for the viewer's enforced passivity, the gradual increase of violence on television within the last two decades becomes understandable. For during that period not only did television ownership increase enormously, but people began to spend more of their time watching television. Between 1950 and 1975, for instance, television household use increased from 4 hours and 15 minutes per day to 6 hours and 8 minutes per day.⁶ Apparently, as television viewing increases in proportion to more active experiences in people's lives, their need for the pseudo-satisfactions of simulated activity on their television screens increases as well. A quiet, contemplative, slow-paced program might only underscore the uncomfortable fact that they are not really having any experiences at all while they are watching television.

Reality and Unreality

The idea that television experiences can lead to a feeling of activity, that a person can somehow be deceived into feeling that he is actually experiencing those television happenings, raises a most important question about the television experience: what effect does the constant intake of simulated reality have upon the viewer's perceptions of actual reality?

Two professors at the Annenberg School of Communications at the University of Pennsylvania, Larry Gross and George Gerbner, have studied some of the effects of television "reality" upon people's ideas and beliefs pertaining to the real world. The results of their investigations suggest that the television experience impinges significantly upon viewers' perceptions of reality.

Gerbner and Gross asked heavy television viewers and light television viewers certain questions about the real world. The multiple-choice quiz offered accurate answers together with answers that reflected a bias characteristic of the television world. The researchers discovered that heavy viewers of television chose the television-biased answers far more often than they chose the accurate answers, while light viewers were more likely to choose the correct answers.

For example, the subjects were asked to guess their own chances of encountering violence in any given week. They were given the possible answers of 50-50, 10-1, and 100-1. The statistical chances that the average person will encounter personal violence in the course of a week are about 100-1, but heavy television viewers consistently chose the answers 50-50 or 10-1, reflecting the "reality" of television programs where violence prevails. The light viewers chose the right answer far more consistently.

The heavy viewers answered many other questions in a way revealing that what they saw on television had altered their perceptions of the world and society. They were more likely than light viewers to overestimate the U.S. proportion of the world population, for instance. They also overestimated the percentages of people employed as professionals, as athletes, and as entertainers in the "real world," just as television overemphasizes the importance of these groups.

Education played no significant role in ameliorating the distortions of reality produced by heavy television watching. In most cases college-educated subjects were just as likely as those with only a grade-school education to choose the television-biased answers.⁷

The viewers' incorrect notions about the real world do not come from misleading newscasts or factual programs. The mistaken notions arise from repeated viewing of fictional programs performed in a realistic style within a realistic framework. These programs, it appears, begin to take on a confusing reality for the viewer, just as a very powerful dream may sometimes create confusion about whether a subsequent event was a dream or whether it actually happened. After seeing violence dealt out day after day on television programs, the viewer incorporates it into his reality, in spite of the fact that while he watches he knows that the programs are fictional. The violent television world distorts the viewer's perceptions of the real world, and his expectations of violence in life reflect his exposure to violence on television.

But once television fantasy becomes incorporated into the viewer's reality, the real world takes on a tinge of fantasy-or dullness because it fails to confirm the expectations created by televised "life." The separation between the real and the unreal becomes blurred; all of life becomes more dreamlike as the boundaries between the real and the unreal merge. The consequences of this merger appear in our daily papers and on the news:

People attending a real parade find it dull and say, "We should have stayed home and watched it on television. It would have been more exciting."⁸

A woman passes a burning building and says to her friend, "Don't worry, they're probably making a TV movie."⁹

Members of a real California family live out their lives in weekly instalments as part of a television series, with infidelity, discovered homosexuality, and divorce happening before the viewers' very eyes, happening "for real" on TV.¹⁰

Thirty-seven people see a young woman murdered in their courtyard and look on passively without coming to her aid as if it were a television drama.¹¹

A seventeen-year-old boy who lived through a devastating tornado says, "Man, it was just like something on TV."¹²

Dulling Sensitivity

A disturbing possibility exists that the television experience has not merely blurred the distinctions between the real and the unreal for steady viewers, but that by doing so it has dulled their sensitivities to real events. For when the reality of a situation is diminished, people are able to react to it less emotionally, more as spectators.

An experiment devised by Dr. Victor Cline at the University of Utah Laboratories compared the emotional responses of two groups of boys between the ages of 5 and 14 to a graphically violent television program.¹³ One group had seen little or no television in the previous two years. The other group had watched a great deal of television, an average of 42 hours a week for at least two years.

As the two groups of boys watched an eight-minute sequence from the Kirk Douglas movie about boxing, *Champion*, their emotional responses were recorded on a physiograph, an instrument not unlike an elaborate lie detector that measures heart action, respiration, perspiration, and other body responses.

According to their reactions as measured on the physiograph, the boys with a history of heavy television viewing were significantly less aroused by what they saw. They had, the researchers concluded, become so habituated to emotion-arousing events on television that their sensitivities had become blunted. Since they had inevitably watched many violent television programs in the course of their 42 hours of viewing a week, the researchers assumed their desensitization was an effect of constant exposure to violent content. The brunt of the author's subsequent writings has been against violence on television. In an article entitled "Television Violence: How It Damages Your Children," Cline concludes his warnings about the dangers of television violence with a plea for better programming, and even includes a few words of praise for programs like "The Waltons."¹⁴

And yet the children upon whose diminished emotional reactions he based his conclusions watched 42 hours of television a week or more, while the children whose reactions were undulled watched almost no television at all. Common sense suggests that 42 hours a week of any television program might tip the balance from reality to unreality in a child's life sufficiently to lower his arousal level. Six hours daily of "The Waltons" seems just as likely to affect a child's ability to respond normally to human realities as an equal amount of "Mod Squad" or "Adam-12" or any of the other programs that Cline and others are exercised about.

A New Kind of Criminal

Dr. Cline's experiment requires a sensitive instrument to measure the emotional responses, or lack of them, in his young subjects. The effects of television viewing upon normal children's perceptions of and responses to real-life situations are surely subtle and measurable only with a finely calibrated machine, if at all. A different situation obtains with disturbed children, or children from pathological backgrounds. Watching television may affect such children far more profoundly.

A child therapist notes:

"I find that watching television is most destructive for psychotic children. The very thing I want to help them to understand is the real world, to increase their awareness of reality, of cause and effect. This is very much shattered by the illogic of cartoon characters being able to fly through the air, for instance, or the other fantastic things that seem so real on television. Some of these children have omnipotent fantasies. They think they can fly, too. They see someone going zap with his hand and making another person disappear and their omnipotent fantasy is only reinforced. Of course, the concept of one person making another disappear is also terrifying to a psychotic child, because that's what he deeply believes anyhow."

The observation that television distorts reality far more for a disturbed child than for a normal child may bear a relation to the epidemic of juvenile crime in the last two decades. For there is no doubt that the children involved in serious crimes today are not normal. Their histories reveal without exception a background of poverty, degradation, neglect, scholastic failure, frustration, family pathology ...and heavy television viewing. But while poverty and family pathology did not appear for the first time in American society in the decades between 1952 and 1972, a frightening new breed of juvenile offender did. "It is as though our society had bred a new genetic strain," writes a reporter in *The New York Times*, "the child-murderer who feels no remorse and is scarcely conscious of his acts."¹⁵

Almost daily the newspapers report juvenile crimes that fill the hearts of normal readers with horror and disbelief: ten- and twelve-year-old muggers preying on the elderly, casually torturing and murdering their helpless victims, often for small gains; youths assailing a bicyclist in the park and beating him to death with a chain before escaping with his bike; kids breaking into an apartment and stomping an elderly man or drowning a woman in her bathtub.¹⁶

Law officers and authorities frequently blame lenient laws for the incidence of these crimes. Since in most states lawbreakers under the age of 16 are handled by a family court whose guiding philosophy is rehabilitation rather than punishment or detention for the protection of society, these young criminals need not be deterred by the fear of severe punishment: the harshest action facing a youth under 16 who commits murder in many states is confinement for up to 18 months in a public or private institution. But there is something new about these children, something that cannot be explained away as an arrogant belief that the law will be lenient toward them, that they can literally get away with murder.

"The law says a child should be treated differently, because he can be rehabilitated," says a Brooklyn police officer, "but kids weren't committing the types of crimes you see now...kids have changed."¹⁷

The common factor characterizing these "changed" kids who kill, torture, and rape seems to be a form of emotional detachment that allows them to commit unspeakable crimes with a complete absence of normal feelings such as guilt or remorse. It is as if they were dealing with inanimate objects, not with human beings at all'. It's almost as though they looked at the person who got killed as a window they were going to jimmy, as an obstacle, something that got in their way," says Charles King, director in charge of rehabilitation of New York State's Division for Youth.¹⁸

Today certain courts are even beginning to place juveniles in secure facilities in response to 'the new type of child who is coming into the system.' A psychiatrist connected with the Brooklyn Family Court describes these children as showing "a total lack of guilt and lack of respect for life. To them another person is a thing-they are wild organisms who cannot allow anyone to stand in their way."¹⁹

If, indeed, a new breed of juvenile offender has appeared in the last two decades, can this be accounted for by the great new element that has been introduced into children's lives within that time span-television? Poverty, family pathology, leading to severe personality disorders, neglect, inadequate schools, all these, alas, are old and familiar afflictions for certain portions of American society.

But the five, six, seven hours a day that troubled children spend watching television, more hours than they spend at any other real-life activity, is a distinctly new phenomenon. Is it possible that all these hours disturbed children spend involved in an experience that dulls the boundaries between the real and the unreal, that projects human images and the illusion of human feelings, while requiring no human responses from the viewer, encourages them to detach themselves from their antisocial acts in a new and horrible way?

If it is, then the total banishment of violence from the television screen will not mitigate the dehumanizing effects of long periods of television viewing upon emotionally disturbed children. For the problem is not that they learn how to commit violence from watching violence on television (although perhaps they sometimes do), but that television conditions them to deal with real people as if they were on a television screen. Thus they are able to "turn them off," quite simply, with a knife or a gun or a chain, with as little remorse as if they were turning off a television set.

NOTES

1. "Skyrocketing Juvenile Crime," The New York Times, February 21, 1975.
2. Quoted from address to Child Study Association of America, 1961.
3. Edith Efron, "Does Television Violence Really Affect TV Viewers?" TV Guide, June 14, 1975.
4. Enid Nemy, "Violent Crime .by Young People: No Easy Answers," The New York Times, March 17, 1975.

5. Crime on Television: A Survey Report (Los Angeles: National Association for Better Radio and Television, 1964).
6. Nielsen Television Index (A. C. Nielsen Co., Hackensack, N.J.).
7. Larry Gross, "The 'Real' World of Television," *Today's Education*, January-February, 1974.
8. Kurt Lang and Gladys Engel Lang, "The Unique Perspective of Television and Its Effects-A Pilot Study," *American Sociological Review*, February, 1953.
9. *Mainliner Magazine*, July, 1974.
10. See Roger Rosenblatt's "Residuals on an American Family," *New Republic*, November 23, 1974; for a discussion of the Loud family and their appearance on "An American Family."
11. See *The New York Times*, April 12, 1964, for an account of the Kitty Genovese murder.
12. Quoted by Edmund Carpenter in *Oh What a Blow That Phantom Gave Me* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1972).
13. Victor Cline, *The Desensitization of Children to Television Violence* (Bethesda, Md.: National Institute of Health, 1972).
14. Victor Cline, "Television Violence-How it Damages Your Children," *Ladies' Home Journal*, February, 1975.
15. Ted Morgan, "They Think I Can Kill Because I'm 14," *The New York Times Magazine*, January 19, 1975.
16. See "Youthful Violence Grows," *The New York Times*, November 4, 1974; and "Tale of a Young Mugger," *The New York Times*, April 11, 1976.
17. Quoted by Morgan, *op. cit.*
18. Quoted in "Youthful Violence Grows," *The New York Times*, November 4, 1974.
19. Dr. Denise Shine, head of the Rapid Intervention psychiatrists' office in Brooklyn Family Court, quoted in Morgan, *op. cit.*