

TELEVISION'S EFFECTS ON AGGRESSION AND VIOLENCE

Anthropologist Richard Leakey says, "Humans are not innately disposed powerfully either to aggression or to peace. It is culture that largely weaves the pattern in human societies."

Television plays a very important role in our culture. It has altered the organization of our daily habits more than any other discovery in recent times. The average Canadian family has the TV set on for six hours a day, 45 per cent of the households have two sets and by the time a child graduates from high school, he or she will have spent 15,000 hours watching television compared to only 11,000 hours in school. The average 18-year-old has seen "18,000 murders, countless highly detailed incidents of robbery, arson, bombing, smuggling, beating and torture." Even at midnight, surveys show that more than 750,000 American children under 11 are glued to the tube.

The burning question is "What affect does this have on children?"

There are three conflicting theories:

- 1) Entertainment theory - TV has no significant effect on aggressive behavior, it is entertainment, nothing more.
- 2) Catharsis theory - watching TV actually reduces aggressive behaviour because it allows people to get rid of their pent-up emotions by watching violence on TV. People cannot act out their aggressions in everyday life, but they are able to live out their fantasies through TV.
- 3) Learning theory - children who watch violent television tend to behave more aggressively than those who do not watch violent TV.

The accompanying article describes an incident that occurred after two children watched a violent program on TV. Read the article and answer the following questions.

Do you feel the program is responsible for the incident?

How much influence do you feel violent programming can have on people?

As a parent, how much television would you want your five-year-old child to watch? Would you allow your child to watch TV unsupervised?

The story behind the "Dirty Harry Killing"

Social psychologists have primarily studied the long-term effects of violent television. But sometimes a violent television program can have an immediate effect. In the early fall of 1977, NBC presented the movie "Dirty Harry". Newspaper columnist Bob Greene tells what happened.

Saturday night, Dolphus and Micros had watched "Dirty Harry". The movie, originally released in 1971, is a violence-soaked police drama in which [Clint] Eastwood portrays Harry Callahan, a San Francisco cop who doesn't mind taking the law into his own hands. Thus his nickname — Dirty Harry. The movie was such a box office success that it spawned several sequels.

Near the beginning of the movie, Dirty Harry approaches a criminal sprawled on the street. The criminal's gun has fallen out of his hand, but is within reaching distance. Dirty Harry pulls out his own gun and aims it at the criminal. There has been a shootout; it is not known whether Dirty Harry has any more bullets left in his gun. The question is, should the criminal reach for his gun?

Dirty Harry says approximately the following:

"Listen, punk, this here is a .44 caliber magnum revolver, the most powerful handgun ever made. Now you're probably thinking, 'Did he fire six shots or just five?' Well, to tell you the truth, in all the excitement I kinda lost count myself. It just depends. Do you feel lucky today?"

The criminal's hand trembles.

"Well, do you, punk?" Dirty Harry says.

The criminal looks up the barrel of Dirty Harry's magnum. He trembles and decides to give up and be arrested by uniformed officers. Dirty Harry walks away.

"Hey mister," the criminal calls.

Dirty Harry turns around.

The criminal gestures towards Dirty Harry's gun.

"I gots to know," the criminal says.

Dirty Harry carefully takes aim at the criminal's head and squints his eyes. The man shrinks back in fear. Dirty Harry pulls the trigger. The gun clicks on an empty shell. Dirty Harry laughs.

Later in the movie the same scene is repeated, this time featuring a different criminal. This time the criminal feels lucky. He reaches for his own gun. This time dirty Harry fires again. This time Dirty Harry's gun has a bullet in it. And this time the criminal is shot to death.

That is what Dolphus and Micros Thompson saw on television Saturday night.

According to Columbus Police Dept. homicide Sgt. Tom Aurentz, this is what happened Sunday morning:

Dolphus and Micros decided to play "Dirty Harry".

Dolphus got a .22 caliber two-shot derringer from his father's nightstand.

The two boys went to Dolphus' bedroom, where a toy "Star Trek" ray gun was lying on a table near Micros.

Dolphus said:

"In all the confusion, I bet you don't know if this gun is loaded." He then ordered his younger brother to reach for the toy gun. Micros Thompson did.

Dolphus Thompson shot him once in the chest. Micros took a few steps into the hallway, collapsed and died.

When Columbus police arrived at the scene, Dolphus told them, "We were just playing 'Dirty Harry'."