

Protecting Children

November 2014

A nation's children are its most precious resource, yet in our country this resource is in danger. The danger is not so much physical danger, but mental and emotional danger. If the danger was physical, I have no doubt that we as caring adults would be beyond concerned and would be demanding that the danger to our children be eliminated as quickly as possible.

However, the danger to our children is perhaps worse than if it was physical. I don't think there has ever been a time when our children have been so carelessly exposed to so much violence, sex, and other things that young children should not even know about, much less see acted out in front of them. Television and the Internet bring the world into our homes and our electronic devices. It seems there is nothing that we cannot see or hear if we watch and listen long enough. Over the past few weeks alone, we could scan across TV channels or visit Internet sites and see children being sexually abused, domestic violence displayed, men being beheaded, the vilest of violent crimes being committed, and the filthiest of language being spoken. As an educator for more than a quarter of a century, I have seen the slow but harmful effect this exposure has had, and continues to have, on our children.

Practically since the television was invented, parents, teachers, and mental health professionals have studied the impact of exposing children to this type of media. As early as 1970, Albert Bandura, a renowned psychologist, developed his Social Learning Theory. He demonstrated through his punch doll experiments that children learn through observing others' behaviors and attitudes. Children note the consequences of their behaviors, especially when they see negative behaviors going unpunished. Later studies have remained consistent with Bandura's research. In fact, hundreds of studies report strong correlation between viewing violence and performing violent acts. Mental health experts tell us children who are frequently exposed to violence may become less sensitive to the pain of others, more fearful of things happening in the world, and are more likely to be aggressive toward others. It can become difficult for a young child to determine what is real and what is imagined. He may see violence as a solution to problems rather than behavior to avoid.

Video games take the potential impact of media violence to another level by encouraging children to leap from observer to participant. Combining the exposure to violence with other risk factors such as poor mental health or the lack of strong parental support increases the possibility of negative effects.

The typical child today spends hours of time each day watching television or playing video games. According to the National Institute on Media and the Family, "children, ages 8 to 18, spend more time in front of a computer, television and game screen than any other activity in their lives except sleeping (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2005).

Parents should pay close attention to what children are watching and the video games they are playing. Do not allow children to watch shows that are violent or have inappropriate content, and limit the amount of time spent in front of a screen. Watch with your child. When violent acts are portrayed, point out that it isn't real or acceptable. Instead of spending time in front of a screen, suggest other activities that provide physical exercise and family time. Take advantage of parental settings to block unacceptable content.

Television and video games can be valuable educational tools to the child's learning when properly selected and supervised. Parents only get one opportunity to raise their children. No parent will do everything right, but this is one way to take charge and make a positive difference in children's lives.