

Teens and Media Violence

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As we reel in the aftermath of another school shooting (in Winnenden, Germany), it becomes clear that we need to actively address teens and violence. Since the 1950s, more than 1,000 studies have been done on the effects of violence in television and movies. The amount of time children spend watching some form of media is staggering: on average, children ages 8 to 18 spend more time (44.5 hours per week or 6 1/2 hours daily) in front of computer, television, and game screens than any other activity in their lives except sleeping (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2005). Studies by prominent researchers show that violent television and video games can cause more aggressive thoughts, feelings, values and behaviors, while decreasing empathetic, helpful behaviors with peers.

We know that kids are viewing much more media than ever before, and we know that the media is much more violent than ever before. We also know that it does indeed affect children's behavior negatively. What can you as a parent or family member do? Quiz yourself: Quick – name your teen's three favorite video games and movies. What is the rating on each of those? Honest assessment of how much violence your child is viewing through TV, video games and the computer is important. Does your teen play T or M-rated games? Are they watching TV shows like "24" that regularly include violent acts? Do you view the games and movies before you allow them to see/use it? Few of us have extra time to review everything our child sees. Make good use of all the tools available to you as a parent. Read the labels and ratings on all video games, movies, and music they use. Install a special program or password on your computer to limit what they can access online. Buy a timer to keep track of how long they are viewing/playing. Know what websites review media for you that align with your values.

Communicate the rules (and consequences) of viewing media CLEARLY to your teen. Viewing some violence is inevitable, but knowing that violence negatively affects our kids, means that limiting the amount of violence they see is crucial to their development. Staying involved with your teen and knowing how they are spending their time is paramount.

One way to reduce the impact of the violence that kids view is to talk to them about it. Here are some ways to dialogue about media violence teens have seen:

-What are the consequences for aggressive or violent behavior of the character? Is it rewarded or punished? What would happen in real life to the person acting out the violence? Aggressive behavior on-screen that lacks consequences, portrayed as justified, or is rewarded, will have a greater effect on children.

-Is it the "hero" or the "villain" who is committing the violence? What is the difference? When the violence is committed by an attractive or charismatic hero with whom the child identifies, the effect of that violence will be greater.

-How realistic was the scene? Do you think that's what a fight, a crash, etc. really looks and feels like? If the child sees the violence in the show as being realistic or reflecting real life, the impact will be greater.

Most of the information in this article was gathered from the following web sites:

CDC.org – Center for Disease Control and Prevention

mediafamily.org – National Institute on Media and the Family (see KidSource)

ESRB.org – Entertainment Software Rating Board

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