

New study shows exposure to violent media can beget violent behavior

WASHINGTON - A new study, to be published in February, shows that exposure to violent media makes adolescents more likely to be violent or aggressive themselves.

Even when other factors that can contribute to violent behavior are present, according to the study, the tendency for young people to become violent or aggressive as the result of watching violent media still exists.

Research for the study, funded by the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, started in 2004. The study, titled "The Role of Violent Media Preference in Cumulative Developmental Risk for Violence and General Aggression," is just the first such study to be generated from the CDC grant.

"Even in conjunction with other factors, our research shows that media violence does enhance violent behavior," said Rutgers University assistant psychology professor Paul Boxer, one of five researchers who contributed to the study and the study's lead author. "On average, adolescents who were not exposed to violent media are not as prone to violent behavior."

What's the difference between violent behavior and aggressive behavior? Pushing and shoving, stealing or not obeying the teacher is classified as aggressive behavior, according to Mr. Boxer. Punching someone in the face or threatening them with a knife or a gun would be recorded as violent behavior, he added.

The research team interviewed 820 Michigan adolescents - 430 of them were high school students from rural, suburban and urban communities, and 390 were juvenile delinquents in county and state facilities. The number of male adolescents and female adolescents were about even; the split between minority and nonminority youths also was about even. Parents or guardians of 720 of the youths also were interviewed, as were teachers or school staff for 717 of them.

Each subject was asked to name his or her favorite TV shows, movies and video/computer games – as a child and as a teen – and each was questioned about whether he or she had engaged in specific anti-social behaviors, such as throwing rocks or using a weapon. The interviewers also looked at other factors that exposed them to violent or aggressive behavior.

“With 800 kids, there’s a lot of variation about what their preferences are” as far as programs and games, Mr. Boxer told Catholic News Service in a telephone interview from his office in Newark, N.J. “There were over a thousand different television shows, 500 to 800 video games and roughly the same number of movies” named by the young respondents.

“We take all the titles and have our team code them,” Mr. Boxer added. There were two dozen coders on the team. For their coding of the movies, TV shows and games they depended on assessments made by the National Institute on Media and the Family, Kids Corps and Web sites with panels of experts.

A zero “meant no violence – something like ‘The Cosby Show,’ for example,” Boxer said. “A ‘4’ is a visually violent show – ‘24,’ for example.”

Even the young people detained by law enforcement – who, one would think, would have ample motive and opportunity to lie – were truthful when answering questions posed by the researchers, according to Boxer.

“Kids are pretty generally honest in those settings,” he said. “Here they can feel comfortable being honest. We make sure the kids are putting their names on anything that they’re working with,” including self-guided interviews conducted on laptop computers.

Mr. Boxer had a message for parents. He would really like them to understand, “not just from my study but from the many studies that have been done out there (and) literature on violent media exposure, (that) kids do not need to be exposed to any violent media. And as a parent myself, I take this very seriously,” he said.

“At a young age, there’s no reason why kids younger than 7 or 8 need to be exposed to any kind of violent media. Parents need to explain to their kids that this (violence)

isn't real, this is fake," he continued. "This is what happens in real life: If you have a problem in real life, blowing up a house is not the solution."

The full 12-page study will be published in the Journal of Youth and Adolescence.