

The Courier-Journal

LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 18, 1997 • 50 CENTS

Flashing cartoon video gives Japanese children seizures

Network cancels animation after hundreds afflicted

By BRAVEN SMILLIE
Associated Press

TOKYO — A cartoon show's brilliantly flashing scenes have been blamed for causing convulsions, spasms or nausea in hundreds of children. A TV network canceled broadcasts of the popular action-packed show yesterday, and a rental chain yanked video versions from shelves.

Nearly 600 children were rushed to hospitals Tuesday night after watching "Pokemon." By yesterday evening, the number of afflicted children climbed to more than 700 after others watched videotaped versions.

"Kids don't watch this program the

way most people watch TV," said Toshio Okada, a writer specializing in animation and comic books. "You can't take your eyes off it without missing crucial visual clues about the meaning of the action."

Japanese cartoons have developed unforgiving packages of fast-paced action that require intense concentration to be understood, he said. And children watch it on large screens from less than a yard away.

TV Tokyo canceled "Pokemon" — which means "pocket monsters" — on 30 stations yesterday.

Dr. Philip Sheridan, chief of the epilepsy branch of the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke in Bethesda, Md., said the children's reactions could have two quite different causes.

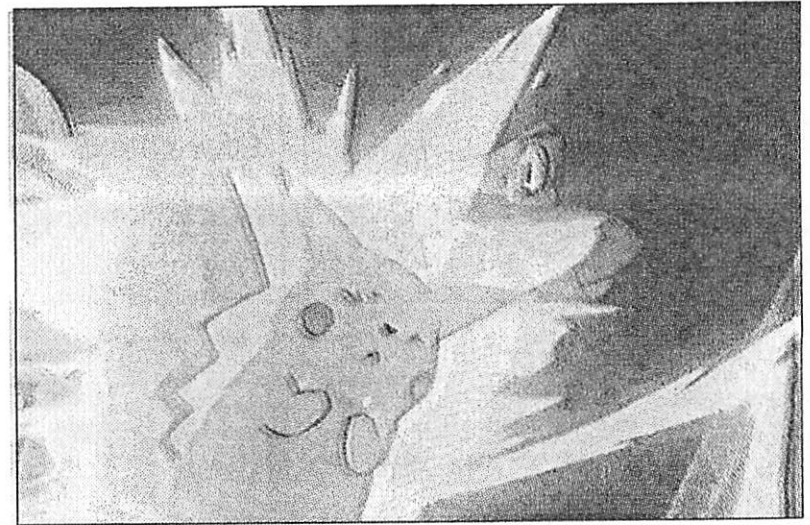
Some children may have started to hyperventilate from the excitement and the flashing lights, he said. That can cause dizziness, nausea and fainting. The problem often spreads

in groups of children as they see each other having trouble, Sheridan said.

In other children, the flashing lights might have acted directly on the brain to cause seizures, he said. An affected child would momentarily stare and not respond even to shouting, or have a stiffening of the body with jerking arms and legs for up to a minute. That would happen if the flashing disrupted the natural pacemakers that regulate patterns of activity in the brain's circuits, he said.

Such brief seizures do not damage the brain and do not mean a child has epilepsy, Sheridan said. Epilepsy involves repeated seizures without provocation, rather than a reaction to something like flashing lights or a high fever, he said.

The illness has been linked to a scene featuring a vividly colored explosion mixed with a few seconds of rhythmic strobe-like light flashing bursts of blue, red and white.



ASSOCIATED PRESS

This is a scene from a cartoon show that caused seizures in hundreds of Japanese children. Japanese cartoons have developed fast-paced action that require intense concentration to be understood.