

Noting violent media's effect on kids

Book gathers years of study showing damage

By Cheryl Wetzstein
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

"The debate is over," asserts child psychologist Madeline Levine. "Violence on television and in the movies is damaging to children."

She bases her claim on 40 years of research that says children exposed to high levels of media violence become more aggressive, pessimistic and desensitized.

If this is true, why do children watch an average of four hours of TV a day? Why are there five acts of violence each hour during TV's "prime time"? Why is there violence in 90 percent of Saturday morning children's shows?

The answers are threefold, says Ms. Levine, author of a new book, "Viewing Violence: How Media Violence Affects Your Child's and Adolescent's Development."

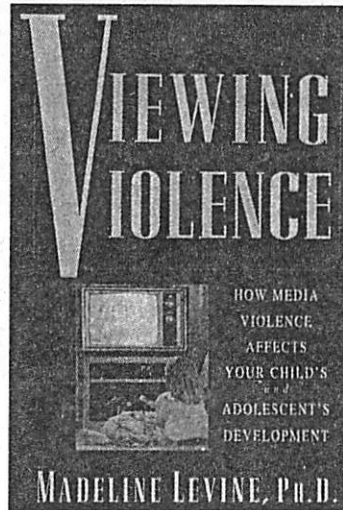
- Parents don't know about the research and don't realize they should protect their children from excessive exposure to violence.

- The media has tackled many disturbing problems but failed to focus on itself. Instead, the media, like tobacco firms, is more apt to argue there's no proof their "products" are harmful.

- Violence is one of the most reliable profit makers in show business: It is a universally understood language that exports well to other nations. And in children's programming, violence is easily substituted for "action," with entire shows created to showcase a line of "action" figures that are for sale at any number of stores.

"Violence among youngsters and teen-agers has skyrocketed," says Ms. Levine, who has a therapy practice in Kentfield, Calif., near San Francisco.

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Child psychologist Madeline Levine draws on 40 years of research in her book examining the effects of TV and movie violence on children.



Forty years of research says "with one voice" that one of the causes of this violence is the "incessant glamorization of violence in the media."

cessant glamorization of violence in the media," she says. "However, the entertainment industry's self-protective stance has resulted in these findings being ignored, denied, attacked or misrepresented."

Violence is part of life, adds Ms. Levine, who will be at the Borders Books at Bailey's Crossroads on Oct. 10. But the media plays a huge role in shaping public attitudes, and if American society is becoming increasingly impatient, callous and mean-spirited, the media has to accept some of the blame. "We want to know more about the human condition and how to deal with adversity," she says. "We are tired of being shellshocked."

Public outcry over violence in the media is growing. Two weeks ago, the American Medical Association issued guidelines to discourage indiscriminate TV viewing. Earlier this year, a study funded by the National Cable Television Association found that "psychologically harmful" violence was pervasive on TV. The Parents' Television Council in Los Angeles is calling on networks to revive "family hour" programming from 8 p.m. to 9 p.m. And lawmakers have mandated that a TV ratings system be established — and a V-

chip censorship device installed in every new TV set.

The more attention to the issue, the better, says Ms. Levine, who became involved in the issue in 1992 when she learned that her 12-year-old son was the only one of his friends who hadn't seen "The Silence of the Lambs," the Oscar-winning movie that contains cannibalism, mutilation and murder.

Astonished that her son's friends' well-educated parents had, in many cases, allowed their sons to see a violent, R-rated movie, Ms. Levine decided to give a talk on violence and children.

But when she went to bookstores and libraries, "I couldn't find a single book on the effects of media on kids and teen-agers," she said.

When she looked for clinical research, however, she found that her subject was "the most social-science-researched topic of the century, with 3,000 studies in general and 1,000 on media violence and kids alone."

She wrote her book to shed light on some of these studies, and also review, for parents and teachers, the way children develop in their perception of the world and their moral reasoning. What affects one

child won't trouble another, depending on their age and maturity.

Ms. Levine is most concerned about "good guys" who act violent because they are the ones the kids are likely to emulate and they are rarely punished for their violent actions. She is also worried that repeatedly seeing violence — especially in a humorous context — without consequences, leads to desensitization, she says.

"There are really disturbing studies that show that kids who watch a lot of TV are less likely to help other people.

"If you blow that up to a social level, you end up with less and less community and more and more withdrawal into individual entitlements and less concern about each other. It's a real dangerous road," she says.

Children are great imitators and will "model" the attitudes and behaviors they see. This can be beneficial, she adds: "Barney and Friends" has been shown to improve children's manners as well as their vocabulary, and as little of two weeks of exposure to "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood" has helped preschoolers become more cooperative, nurturing and better able to express their feelings.