

VIOLENCE AS ENTERTAINMENT

A Report From
The Crime Prevention Resource Center
July 26, 2000

Klebold and Harris were completely soaked in violence: in movies like Reservoir Dogs; in gory video games that they tailored to their imaginations. They fed the anger, fueled it, so the fury could take hold, because they knew they would need it to do what they had set out to do.

-Time Magazine, December 20, 1999

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Introduction

Within days after the Columbine High School tragedy on April 20, 1999, an intense national dialogue began in an attempt to explain why two young men would turn on their classmates in such a horrific manner. The ease of acquiring guns, the possible bullying from classmates, and probable inattentiveness by parents were obvious targets for blame.

However, as Columbine students began to share their stories about the tragic event, it became clear that both Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris were consumed with violent movies and video games.

Suddenly, the issue of violent entertainment in general, violent video games in particular, and their effect on young people emerged as possible facilitative factors in the Columbine shooting.

Can it be said that all young people who spend hours playing violent video games or watching violent movies will become shooters? Of course not.

For young people who are already struggling with feeling disconnected from their peers and their families, could it be that violent entertainment might serve as a vehicle to initiate the release of strong negative feelings? Quite possibly. And, as a community, well worth exploring.

Several weeks after the Columbine tragedy, the following Tarrant County organizations responded to a *Call to Action* and came together on May 28, 1999, to address the issue of *Violence In The Media*:

- Boy Scouts of America
- Camp Fire – First Texas Council
- City of Fort Worth
- Cook Children’s Health Care System
- Corporate Champions For Children
- Crime Prevention Resource Center
- Fort Worth Independent School District
- Girl Scouts, Inc.
- WFAA

It was decided that the **Crime Prevention Resource Center** would host a *Violence As Entertainment Committee* whose mission was:

*to examine the impact of violent media content on children and youth
and develop strategies to minimize the impact of those messages.*

The primary research focus for the *Violence As Entertainment (VAE) Committee* was on violent messages conveyed by television, movies, video games, and the internet. While there is considerable violent content in much of the music children and youth listen to, it was decided by the committee to focus on the visual media.

To examine the impact of those messages, the *VAE Committee* agreed to generate research data from both a comprehensive literature search and Youth Focus Groups composed of Tarrant County youth, males and females, between the ages of 10-16 years old.

Finally, the *VAE Committee* committed to create focused parent awareness and community action messages to be disseminated by both the Tarrant County Youth Collaboration and the Tarrant Area Community of Churches.

The *VAE Committee* met from September, 1999 through June, 2000 and generated the following report outlining seven core messages. These core messages represent a synthesis of the accumulated information from both a comprehensive scientific and popular literature review and the findings of the Youth Focus Groups. Each core message is followed by two content domains:

- **Facts:**
 - *information generated from review of scientific and popular literature*
- **Comments from Tarrant County Youth:**
 - *information generated from four Focus Groups of Tarrant County youth aged 10-16*

After a presentation of the facts and comments supporting the seven core messages, the *VAE Committee* offers suggestions for both parent and community action to address the issue of violence as entertainment:

- **What can Parents do:**
 - *clear and concrete suggestions for all parents*
- **What can the Community do:**
 - *proactive recommendations for an intense community response*

We are teaching young people [through point and shoot video games] to have the same disinhibition that modern soldiers have but without the prosocial structure and discipline that soldiers are taught.

- Dr. James Garbarino, Lost Boys: Why Our Sons Turn Violent and How We Can Save Them

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VIOLENCE AS ENTERTAINMENT

Core Messages

The following seven core messages were generated by the Violence As Entertainment Committee after a thorough review of both scientific and popular literature related to violence as entertainment and content from the four Youth Focus Groups.

1. All age groups of children and youth are experiencing increasing amounts of screen time.
2. There is a lot of violent entertainment available to children and youth.
3. Violent entertainment is as influential as parents and friends.
4. Violent Video Games, TV, and Movies have a negative psychological and physical effect on children and youth.
5. Children and youth are negatively impacted by general community violence.
6. Children and youth are becoming desensitized to violence.
7. Parents can have a major influence on children and youth.

VIOLENCE AS ENTERTAINMENT

Core Messages: In Depth

#1: All age groups of children and youth are experiencing increasing amounts of screen time.

Who killed him, asked the four-year-old girl when her parents told her of the death of her playmate's father. After explaining that her playmate's father had died of a disease, they asked why she thought that someone had killed him. Isn't that the way people die? the girl asked. That's the way people die on TV.

- Ronald Slaby, Combating Television Violence

Facts:

1. The typical American child spends an average of more than 38 hours a week consuming media outside of school.
2. That amount is even higher – nearly six and three-quarter hours a day – for kids eight and older.
3. 52 percent of Tarrant County middle and high school aged youth watch TV or videos 3 or more hours per school day.
4. 32 percent of the children in the 2-7 year old age range have a TV in their bedroom.
5. Among kids eight and older, 65 percent have a TV in their bedroom and say the TV is usually on during meals in their home.
6. 61 percent of Tarrant County residents have a computer in their home; of those, 80.3 percent have internet access.
7. 82 percent of the Tarrant County Youth surveyed in the VAE Focus Group process use the internet
8. 77.5 percent of teenagers own a video game console.
9. Almost 9,000 Tarrant County children ages 6-10 (8 percent) are home alone and unsupervised after school.
10. Nearly 34,000 Tarrant County youth ages 11-17 (26 percent) are home alone and unsupervised after school.
11. Parents often under-report the amount of time they believe their children are watching TV.
12. Parents watch TV with their kids, ages eight and older, just 5 percent of the time.
13. Media exerts a significant displacement effect – 2-3 hours a day watching TV or playing video games means less physical activity, reading, or interaction with friends.

Comments from Tarrant County Youth:

- *I see a movie just about every weekend - 15-year-old male.*
- *Mostly every day. ...Sometimes I can be on the Internet up to 3 hours – 12-year-old female.*
- *I usually just play Nintendo and see a movie. I watch TV and play Nintendo. Last week I had a friend over and we played Play Station – 13-year-old male responding to question: what do you do on weekends.*

#2: There is a lot of violent entertainment available to children and youth.

The danger of [violent entertainment] is not mere exposure to occasional violent or prurient images but the acceptance of a degraded environment that devalues everything – a shadow world in which our kids are breathing an awful lot of poison without knowing that there is clean air and sunshine elsewhere. They are shaped by the media as consumers before they've had a chance to develop their souls.

- David Denby, Annals of Popular Culture: Buried Alive

Facts:

1. Youth view an estimated 10,000 acts of violence each year.
2. By age 18, the average young person will have viewed an estimated 200,000 acts of violence on television alone.
3. The National Television Violence Study finds that 61 percent of TV programming contains violence, with children's programming being the most violent.
4. The average amount of time depicting acts of violence in G-rated movies has risen 58.33 percent from 1940 to 1999.
5. All male youth interviewed in the VAE Youth Focus Groups reported that television was violent, and the majority reported watching violent television programming.
6. Video games are a \$7 billion a year industry because of teens.
7. Never before have children been targeted as a lucrative market for entertainment violence. . . nor have marketing experts studied with such care the factors heightening the audience arousal that draws television viewers in and facilitates their acceptance of advertising messages. In previous generations, children had little money to spend; they now influence the flow of vast sums: in 1997, it was estimated that American children 14 and under would directly spend \$20 billion and would influence the spending of another \$200 billion.
8. As U.S. marketers have known for a long time, and as large numbers of them have begun recently to act on, children are a future market that can be cultivated now so that when children reach market age they can more easily be converted into customers – hopefully into loyal customers.

Comments from Tarrant County Youth:

- *If they take away violence in entertainment, it wouldn't be entertainment; it would be boring – 12-year-old male.*
- *I think [video games] are violent. I don't know if you've heard of a game called Duke Nukem on PlayStation and things will come out shooting at him. You can shoot them back and you can change what you have. You can get a gun, knife, or bazooka. Then there's another game that has zombies. When you shoot them and change your weapon they make a noise like a dead person – 13-year-old female.*
- *I like to play any video game with violence in it – 12-year-old male.*

- *My brother is 2 and he has almost every Power Ranger movie that's been made. I know he watches it when he is watching TV; he is always watching the Power Rangers. When he watches it he does stuff some of the Power Rangers do. We try to teach him right from wrong while he's 2 but he still doesn't understand what the Power Rangers do can hurt him or someone else* – 12-year-old female responding to the question: are movies violent.
- *Even the movies the little kids watch, the parents think just because it's not a real kid doing it, it doesn't hurt the little kids. The kids do pick up on it and go around like karate and stuff and that can hurt someone* – 13-year-old female.
- *I don't want my brother and sister watching [violent] stuff* – 13-year-old male.
- *TV programs give the little kids bad examples and they go off thinking it was right. The other day I was watching the Simpson's and they were cussing on it. My little sister was asking can I do that since [Bart] did. I said no you can't do that, just because another person does it's not right for you to do it. TV makes little kids think bad* – 11-year-old female responding to the question: do you feel that some of the TV programs kids watch are violent.
- *I think some of the internet [content] shows things that are totally inappropriate for little kids to be going to. Like things that they shouldn't know for their age. I think it's bad for those internet people to have access to little kids* – 11-year-old female responding to the question: do you think the internet is violent.
- *The critics know there's three things that make movies popular – cussing, violence and nudity. Without those three things there won't be movies* – 13-year-old male.
- *They've made cartoons more violent. Beavis and Butthead, the adult cartoons on HBO* – 12-year-old female responding to the same question.
- *Yes. The killing, the stabbing, the stuff like that* – 16-year-old female responding to the question: do you believe TV programs are violent.
- *The whole idea of the game. I like a game with a lot of fighting in it* – 13-year-old male responding to question: what makes a movie or video game exciting.

#3: Violent entertainment is as influential as parents and friends.

Boys who grow up without a stable male figure in their lives are desperately seeking a role model. Strong, powerful, high-status role models such as those offered in movies and on television fill the vacuum in their lives. We have taken away their fathers and replaced them with new role models whose successful response to every situation is violence. And then we wonder why our children have become ever more violent.

-Lt. Col. Dave Grossman, On Killing

Facts:

1. A 1993 Times Mirror survey concluded that there is a video violence generation gap: those under 30 are far more likely to be heavy consumers of violent programming and movies. [They] are far less bothered by violence on television, less likely to feel violence is harmful to society than are older Americans.
2. Even a few of [Harris and Klebold's] classmates. . . had to agree that Harris and Klebold were Doom [violent video game] personified. *What they did wasn't about anger or hate*, said Brooks Brown, a classmate of the two boys. *It was about them living in the moment, like they were inside a video game.*
3. As early as the 1960s Bandura's social learning theory experiments established that young children are liable to imitate what they see on TV, particularly if the behavior is performed by an attractive role model and is either rewarded or goes unpunished.
4. Attractive role models are the aggressors in more than 80 percent of violent music videos.
5. The only country in the world with nearly as much entertainment violence as the US is Japan. Yet Japanese society is far less violent than American society. If media violence contributes to real-life violence, why isn't Japanese society more affected? A 1981 study found that the nature of the portrayal of violence is different in Japan. . . In Japan the "bad guys" commit most of the violence, with the "good guys" suffering the consequences. . . In this context, violence is seen as wrong, a villainous activity with real and painful consequences, rather than as justifiable.
6. A recent analysis for the American Psychological Association highlights some important elements of exposure to television violence: "good" characters or heroes commit 40 percent of the violent acts, more than a third of the bad characters aren't punished, and more than 70 percent of the aggressors show no remorse and experience no criticism or penalty for their violent actions.
7. As early as WWII, only about 20 percent of soldiers would fire on the enemy. Lt. Colonel Grossman, a retired West Point professor and researcher about how the military trains soldiers to be more effective, believes it is because the fundamental human inhibition against violence toward other humans was operating even in soldiers. The military changed its training after WWII and by the Vietnam War, 90 percent of American soldiers were able to fire their weapon at the enemy. How did the military do this? They did it through desensitization, that is, by training soldiers to shoot at human figures and not at abstract targets. How is this relevant to understanding violent youth? Colonel Grossman states: With the advent of the interactive *first-person-shooter* arcade and video games there is a significant concern that society is aping military conditioning but without the vital safeguard of discipline. There is strong evidence to indicate that the indiscriminate civilian application of combat conditioning techniques as entertainment may be a key factor in the worldwide skyrocketing violent crime rates.

Comments from Tarrant County Youth:

- *TV, movies, their parents and their friends* –12-year-old female responding to the question: why do youth act violent.
- *TV, movies, role models* – 13-year-old male responding to the question: what do you think makes boys your age or older violent.
- *People that fight on TV and it makes kids want to fight when they go to school* – 12-year-old male responding to the previous question.
- *They were looking at violence, movies, and video games* – 12-year-old male responding to the question: what do you think caused the boys at Columbine to do what they did.
- I think what makes TV violent is some shows might have a kid that's going through something, and then the next thing the kid is joining a gang... Kids might watch that and be going through the same thing the kid was, and they might go out and do it themselves – *13-year-old female*.

#4: Violent Video Games, TV, and Movies have a negative psychological and physical effect on children and youth.

I've seen someone up close get shot in the head. I've seen just about any kind. I haven't seen anybody get shot in the eye. I've seen someone do this – *he puts a finger in his mouth and pretends to pull a trigger* – and you see blood come out the back of the head. I've seen people shot in the leg, shot in the back. And stabbings: in the back, in the stomach. Slice their neck. Scar their face. I don't think I've seen eyes gouged out. I've seen after, but I didn't see the process. I saw someone slit their wrists for a suicide. . . I like violence, *he says. He elaborates: I like seeing violence. And elaborates further: I just really like seeing violence.*

- David Finkel, The Choices of Aaron Wolf

Facts:

1. Over 1000 studies, including a Surgeon General's specific report in 1972 and a National Institute of Mental Health report 10 years later, attest to a causal connection between media violence and aggressive behavior in some children.
2. There is near-unanimity by now among investigators that exposure to media violence contributes to lowering barriers to aggression among some viewers. This lowering of barriers may be assisted by the failure of empathy that comes with growing desensitization, and intensified to the extent that viewers develop an appetite for violence.
3. Psychiatrist Brandon Centerwall has concluded from large-scale epidemiological studies of Caucasian homicide in the US, Canada, and South Africa in the period from 1945 to 1974, that it escalated in these societies within ten to fifteen years of the introduction of television, and that one can therefore deduce that television has brought a doubling of violent societal crime.
4. Of course, there are many factors other than television that influence the amount of violent crime. Every violent act is the result of a variety of forces coming together – poverty, crime, alcohol and drug abuse, stress – of which childhood TV exposure is just one. Nevertheless, the evidence indicates that if, hypothetically, television technology had never been developed, there would today be 10,000 fewer homicides each year in the US, 70,000 fewer rapes, and 700,000 fewer injurious assaults. Violent crime would be half of what it now is.
5. A panel of experts from the American Psychological Association reviewed numerous research studies and concluded that the evidence linking televised violence to real-life violence is about as strong as the research evidence linking smoking to cancer.
6. A longitudinal study of boys found a significant relation between exposure to television violence at 8 years of life and anti-social acts – including serious violent criminal offenses and spouse abuse – 22 years later.
7. The majority of research studies show that children do become more aggressive after either playing or watching a violent video game.
8. A review of 13 studies revealed that 7 of those studies found an association between violent video games and increased hostility or aggression.
9. There was a significant positive correlation between self-reported violent behaviors and exposure to violence, amount of time spend watching television, and preference for watching violent shows

10. Research data are persuasive that high levels of television viewing are causally related to aggressive behavior and the acceptance of aggressive attitudes.
11. Sitting too long in front of a screen proves both physically and psychologically debilitating, no matter how innocuous or even beneficial the programs may be. The most basic physical needs of children, such as those of developing healthy hearts and lungs, are directly endangered by too many hours spent in front of television or computer screens. The more time children spend in front of the TV set, the more likely they are to be overweight and in poor physical condition.
12. Children who play violent video games tend to become more aggressive and exhibit assertive fantasies. The physiologic responses to video games includes increased heart rate, blood pressure, and oxygen consumption.
13. The chronic over activation of neurochemical responses to threat in the central nervous system, particularly in the earliest years of life, can result in lifelong states of either dissociation or hyper arousal. In the case of hyper-arousal, over development of the stress response systems in the brainstem and mid-brain alters the development of the higher cortical functions, creating a predisposition to behave in aggressive, impulsive, and reactive ways.
14. The phenomenon known as habituation also operates when it comes to violence. The greater the level of detachment and numbing, the more of the stimulus is needed to bring about what marketing strategists call arousal and, in turn, to produce whatever pleasure the activity can bring. Neurological research is shedding new light on neural mechanisms by which stimulation affects viewers' appetites, and the processes leading from initial pleasure to attachment to reiteration and, finally to addiction.
15. In the short term, viewers of repeated violence can show a lack of arousal and emotional response through habituation to the stimuli.
16. Children and adults can become desensitized to violence upon multiple exposures through temporary habituation.
17. A team of British scientists, led by Dr. Paul Grasby, recently embarked on a study of the neurotransmitter dopamine. This naturally occurring chemical is used by the brain to transfer information. It is also a psychoactive drug and is believed to be one of the key elements in physiological addiction. Dr. Grasby's team injected eight subjects with a tracer chemical which can indicate the presence of dopamine. Some of the subjects were given a blank computer monitor to watch, while the other subjects were engaged in a computer-based combat game. The brains of all eight subjects were monitored during the experiment by Positron Emission Tomography (PET). The PET scans revealed that not only did dopamine levels increase dramatically during video gameplay, they nearly doubled. The brains of the non-gaming subjects showed no such increase.

Comments from Tarrant County Youth:

- *It makes me do bad things when I see violence. I don't like violent movies* – 13-year-old male.
- *If they had an incredibly bad day and didn't feel like talking or reading a book and wanted to play Doom for six hours, it wouldn't be healthy mentally. But anybody that would do that already isn't headed down the road of hearts and roses* – 15-year-old male responding to the question: do you think movies, videos, the internet, or TV has had an impact on kids.
- *When the little ones watch violent things they want to do violent things* – 12-year-old male responding to the question: are you concerned about your younger brothers or sisters being around violence.
- *It gives little kids bad examples and they go off thinking it was right...it makes little kids think bad.* – 12-year-old female responding to a question about children watching violent TV programs.

#5: Children and youth are negatively impacted by general community violence.

If we love and care for our children, destructiveness can be banished from the face of the earth. The urge to destruction slumbers only in the victims of childhood mistreatment, who as adults do not want to know what happened in their early life.

- Alice Miller, Breaking Down the Wall of Silence

Facts:

1. Children are exposed to severe and chronic violence at increasingly younger ages.
2. Exposure to violence is the most influential contributor in explaining children's violent behaviors in elementary and middle school children.
3. Exposure to violence is a significant contributor to violent behavior in high-school aged males and females.
4. Violence exposure is associated with depression, anger, anxiety, dissociation, and post-traumatic stress.
5. Children who witness violence can display an array of emotional and behavioral disturbances, including low self-esteem, withdrawal, nightmares, self-blame, and aggression against peer, family members, and property.
6. Self-reported exposure to community violence and sleep deprivation were positively related.
7. Parents consistently underestimate the frequency of their children's exposure to violence and are thereby believed to be less able to protect them from further exposure.
8. 26.2 percent of Tarrant County parents with children ages 6-10 listed harassment and bullying by other children as a major problem.
9. 21.6 percent of Tarrant County parents with children ages 6-10 listed expressing aggressive or angry behavior towards others as a major problem.
10. 43.3 percent of Tarrant County stakeholders viewed violent and aggressive behavior as the number one issue facing children and youth in Tarrant County.
11. 41 percent of Fort Worth residents stated they were victims of crime in the previous year; 28.4 percent of those reported they were victims of a crime that was violent in nature.
12. In the decade following the mid-1980's, the rate of murder committed by teenagers 14 to 17 more than doubled. The rates of injury suffered by small children are skyrocketing, with the number of seriously injured children nearly quadrupling from 1986 to 1993, and a proportion of these injuries are inflicted by children upon one another.

Comments from Tarrant County Youth:

- *One of our teachers uses words that are very strong and it can be harmful to a person and I think that's what starts to mess up somebody to get them thinking about violence is the words that other people use. I think [if] it comes from a teacher it can also hurt them because it's kind of out loud and not one-on-one, and everyone can hear—12-year-old female.*

- *There was one week where there was one [fight] a day. I saw one and it was two girls were kicking this girl on the ground and trying to roll away from them. A teacher comes in at top speed trying to break them up. That kind of got to me; I thought, 'Whoa, this is my school, you can't do that here. What's the matter?' – 15-year-old male.*
- *In my community there's this gang; there are many different kinds of gangs that go around. People my age are in the gang always walking around, being rude and cussing out everybody. They are trying to threaten them – 11-year-old female.*
- *...some kids bring guns to school – 13-year-old male.*

#6: Children and youth are becoming desensitized to violence.

Two generations ago only a few unfortunate children ever saw any one hit over the head with a brick, shot, rammed by a car, blown up, immolated, raped or tortured. Now all children, along with their elders, see such images every day of their lives and are expected to enjoy them. . . The seven-year old who hides his eyes in the family cops-and-robbers drama is desensitized four years later to a point where he crunches potato chips through the latest video nasty.

- Penelope Leach, Children First

Facts:

1. Television characters maim, torture, rape, and kill at a rate as much as a thousand times higher than people in real life.
2. Viewing violence increases fear of becoming a victim of violence, with a resultant increase in self-protective behaviors and increased mistrust of others.
3. Youth with the highest levels of community violence exposure had the lowest resting pulse rates, suggesting physiological adaptation and emotional desensitization to that violence.
4. 66 percent of Tarrant County middle and high school aged youth reported non-peaceful conflict resolution methods.
5. 45 percent of Tarrant County middle and high school aged youth reported hitting someone once or more in the last 12 months.
6. 39 percent of Tarrant County middle and high school aged youth reported behavior that shows a pattern of violence. This includes 3 or more acts of fighting, hitting, injuring a person, or carrying or using a weapon, or threatening physical harm in the past 12 months.
7. Our analysis has found that exposure to violence-laden television cultivates an exaggerated sense of insecurity and mistrust, and anxiety about the mean world seen on television.
8. Two of the four most common reported health problems within Fort Worth households are depression, 25.6 percent and anxiety, 16.5 percent.
9. Chronic boredom – compensated or uncompensated – constitutes one of the major psychopathological phenomena in contemporary society. . . Not the least dangerous result of insufficiently compensated boredom is violence and destructiveness. This outcome most frequently takes the passive form of being attracted to reports of crimes, fatal accidents, and other scenes of bloodshed and cruelty that are the staple diet fed to the public by press, radio, and television. People eagerly respond to such reports because they are the quickest way to produce excitement, and thus alleviate boredom without any inner activity. . . The bored person often is the organizer of a *mini-Coliseum* in which he produces his small-scale equivalents of the large-scale cruelty stated in the Coliseum. Such persons have no interest in anything, nor do they have any contact with anybody except of the most superficial kind. Everybody and everything leaves them cold. They are affectively frozen, feel no joy – but also no sorrow or pain. They feel nothing. The world is gray, the sky is not blue; they have no appetite for life and often would rather be dead than alive. This type of pathology offers problems of diagnosis.
10. In *virtual reality* offerings of experiences of gunplay and combat, the whole point is to erase the boundary between what is and is not experienced as real. Video technology offers the possibility of revisiting violent scenes at will. . . At times the only lack of reality in films for viewers comes from the fact that they have no personal responsibility for inflicting or enjoying whatever brutality they are witnessing. They can cross even that boundary vicariously in participatory computer games such as Mortal Kombat in which players are rewarded for slashing, gouging, or shooting

their opponents. In recent years, video games have become increasingly graphic in presenting elaborate death sequences in highly realistic detail. *First person shooter* games such as Doom, Quake, and Duke Nukem enable players to see with the eyes of the killer holding the gun.

11. Two contextual variables increase the likelihood of the desensitization effect: humor and graphicness. Humor contributes to the desensitization effect and graphicness of violence can lead to immediate desensitization.
12. The boundaries between reality and unreality are especially permeable for small children. They are unable, through at least the age of three or four, to distinguish fact from fantasy. Even older children rarely manage to keep *real life* and vicarious experience in watertight compartments.
13. Given that small children cannot fully distinguish between violence witnessed in real life and on the TV screen, it is important to consider the risk that children will be traumatized by what they witness on their home screens.

Comments from Tarrant County Youth:

- *Back in the 20's if we'd show what's on the news even we would be shunned. We've been desensitized. In the 40's the news films didn't show any of the fighting, shooting or killing. Just the soldiers saying we won* – 13-year-old male responding to the question: do you think movies, videos, the internet or TV has had an impact on kids.
- *I think people use [video games] as training. Like those Columbine kids, they weren't really affected [by them] but use them as training. That's how I think most messed up people use video games* – 13-year-old male responding to question: do you think video games might influence some kids.
- *There's violence everywhere you go. Nothing a parent can do* – 13-year-old male responding to the question: what can parents do to protect you.
- *Everywhere in the world there's violence* – 13-year-old male responding to the same question.
- *What else do we learn [but violence] – it's all around* – 13-year-old male responding to the same question.
- *Everyone in the world is violent* – 13-year-old male responding to the question: how many of you get violent every now and then.

#7: Parents can have a major influence on children and youth.

Two major concerns of all human societies are conflict and aggression. One of the prime functions of social organization is to provide the means of resolving conflict when it occurs or of avoiding it altogether. Childhood is the period for training in this area. . . They [children] are, or should be, learning how to cope with their own potential for aggression and violence.

- Colin Turnbull, The Human Cycle

Facts:

1. Only 27 percent of Tarrant County middle and high school aged youth reported positive family communication.
2. Only 32 percent of Tarrant County middle and high school aged youth reported parent involvement in their schooling.
3. The children most heavily exposed to violence are at greatest risk when they are deprived of adequate parental empathy, nurturance, and guidance. And to the extent that the suffering they witness on and off screen blurs, as is the case for young children living with abusive family members, the *bystander effect* is still more likely to spread from one realm to another.
4. Parents who use power-assertive discipline and even violence to solve problems are more likely to raise children who select aggressive friends from whom they learn violent behaviors.
5. Positive adult role models can set boundaries, structure and consequences for inappropriate behavior.
6. Children model behavior they observe in their parents. When parents strongly disapprove of violence, their children are less likely to use aggression to solve problems.
7. Parental monitoring directly affects the amount of time a child spends watching television and the type of programming that is viewed.
8. Parental influence and monitoring are significant in predicting violent behavior in elementary and middle school children; children who reported higher levels of parental monitoring reported lower levels of violent behavior.
9. Lebanese children in war-torn Beirut, whose mothers instructed them to go out, in the intervals between shellings, to bring food to an invalid relative, instead of hovering at home watching television, fared much better psychologically. These children benefited from having models of empathy for the distress of others and of courage under stress, as well as from being given opportunities to be of active help: *Maternal competence and altruism were strongly associated with children being relatively symptom-free under conditions of quite severe stress and danger.*

Comments from Tarrant County Youth:

- *I don't think their parents really cared for them and loved them or gave them the love they needed* – 11-year-old female responding to the question: do you think the parents of kids at Columbine knew what was going on.
- *I don't think they [the parents] understood what they [the shooters] were feeling inside* – 12-year-old female responding to the same question.

- *Parents. [Not] teaching them basic moral values. They don't care. The kid says I'm going to be gone for three days and they don't care or keep an eye out for their kids and protect them from the world – 13-year-old male* responding to question: how do kids get messed up.
- *I think it was the parents. . . Maybe the parents ignored them or didn't care too much for them – 13-year-old male* responding to the question: what do you think were some of the problems with the kids at Columbine.
- *They probably weren't close to their family – 13-year-old male* responding to the question: what do you think caused the boys at Columbine to do what they did.
- *They can't do nothing – 13-year-old male* responding to the question: what can your parents do to protect you.
- *Can't do nothing – 13-year-old male* responding to the same question.
- *Give you a bulletproof vest – 13-year-old male* responding to the same question.
- *There's nothing. A bulletproof vest won't help. Just pray they won't get hurt – 12-year-old male* responding to the same question.
- *I think my Dad and my brother's mom could take away all the guns and we wouldn't be allowed to have them or allowed to pick them up at the toy store. The day care center has one and my brother tells them he can't play with it. I think they should take all the guns – 12-year-old female* responding to the question: what do you think the adults can do to protect the kids today from violence.
- *I think it depends on how they were raised up. If they were raised up without their parents caring about what they did, then they are just wild and have a whole lot of anger – 14-year-old male* responding to the question: do you think video games might influence some kids.
- *If their parents were always fighting and stuff, then they would probably have problems with violence – 13-year-old male* responding to the same question.
- *Parents should know how to prevent violence before it starts to happen to their children – 11-year-old female.*
- *Parents [need to know] there is violence in our schools. Parents should know how to help kids understand what they do and the consequences if you do violence and that it's wrong – 10-year-old female.*
- *I would talk to them and tell them. Some parents kind of hesitate when they ask questions about life. They make up some kind of story. I just tell them the truth, so they can know what's out there, so they can know what to be aware of – 13-year-old female* response to the question: is there anything you can do to protect your brothers and sisters.
- *My dad didn't really approve of the 007 game and took it away. I have Mission Impossible and he doesn't have a problem with that – 13-year-old male.*
- *Being with your family – 12-year-old female* responding to question: what makes going to the movies fun.
- *For me it isn't what they [parents] say but how they act... They have to start early. Like about six years old; be involved, comforting them. When parents really get into your life it embarrasses you but they really care – 14-year-old male* responding to the question: what can parents say to you to make you feel comfortable coming to them about a serious problem.
- *I would try to cut out all violence in TV shows. Try to make changes – 14-year-old female* responding to the question: what do you think the adults can do to protect the kids today from violence.
- *My mom. I don't want to follow exactly in her steps because she really messed up in the past, but the way she's going now I want to be like her – 14-year-old female* responding to the question: do you have any role models you look up to.

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What Can Parents Do?

In general:

- Educate yourself about the various levels of violence in videos, movies, television and the internet.
- Discuss violence and entertainment with your children so you can understand how they perceive violence in their life.
- Turn off the television and/or internet during meals, study time, and at bedtime.
- Involve your children in physical activities: encourage cooperative play, participation in sports and playing with friends.
- Be observant for aggressive, fearful, or overly pessimistic attitudes and/or behaviors that could be related to video games, movies, television or the internet.
- Be aware of the content of entertainment media your children watch and/or play.
- Closely monitor the types of video games your child buys or rents.
- Restrict your children's use of *first-person-shooter* video games.
- Model appropriate behavior, and in a purposeful way help your child build the Developmental Assets defined by the Search Institute.

For children under ten years old:

- Limit entertainment screen time to no more than two (2) hours per day.
- Restrict children under ten years old from watching any type of violent entertainment, including R-rated movies.
- Children under ten, particularly under six, have a hard time separating fantasy from reality. Remember that your child learns how to behave by watching others, whether in real life or on the screen.

For children ten or older:

- Limit entertainment screen time to no more than three (3) hours per day.
- Carefully consider the violent content of a movie or television show before allowing children ten or older to attend or view R-rated entertainment.
- Help your children assess the level of violence in the shows they watch because you don't want their entertainment to be their primary source for teaching them what normal human behavior is.

VIOLENCE AS ENTERTAINMENT **What Can The Community Do?**

A community is composed of a wide variety of sub-communities. It is the belief of the ***Violence As Entertainment Committee*** that the following recommendations can most effectively be implemented through the targeted leadership of these various sub-communities who impact the lives of children and youth:

Business Community	Law Enforcement Community
Civic Community	Media Community
Education Community	Medical Community
Faith Community	Public Health Community
Government Community	Social Services Community

As a Community:

- the Public Health Community, in collaboration with local universities, can monitor ongoing research into the long-term physiological impacts of violent entertainment on children and youth, with a particular focus on research that evaluates the possible addictive nature of violent entertainment.
- the Medical Community, specifically pediatricians, can move in a united front to explore and perhaps adopt, on a community-wide basis, the 1995 Policy Statement recommendations from the American Academy of Pediatrics (www.aap.org/policy/00830.html).
- the Faith Community, with support from the Education Community, can actively support and promote *Turn-Off-The-TV* events that include video and internet usage as well.
- the Social Services Community, with support from the Law Enforcement Community, can actively support and promote a wide range of *Family Community Violence Prevention* events that focus on how violence, particularly violent entertainment, negatively impacts our children and our families.
- the Business and Civic Communities can work with businesses that sell, rent, or provide as violent entertainment on-site (such as video arcades) to develop a voluntary compliance process that restricts the sale, rental or interaction with violent entertainment to children and youth under the age of 17.
- the public policy makers of the Government Community, can, if both the Business and Media efforts do not succeed, generate and advocate for local ordinances that prohibit the sale or rental of *first-person-shooter* video games to children or youth under age 17.
- the Media Community, can design and implement a public awareness campaign to honor those businesses who not only enforce current regulations concerning the sale and rental of violent entertainment children and youth, but take voluntary action to discontinue the sale and rental of violent entertainment to children and youth.

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Conclusions

The State shall ensure the accessibility to children of information and material from a diversity of sources and it shall encourage the mass media to disseminate information which is of social and cultural benefit to the child, and take steps to protect him or her from harmful materials.

- United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989

The public debate surrounding the impact of violence as entertainment is consistently framed as a first amendment issue. First amendment advocates claim that any effort to protect children and youth from violent entertainment is tantamount to censorship and that parents bear the full responsibility for protecting their children from violent entertainment.

Judge Harry Edwards, a noted constitutional scholar, states:

Like many parents of my vintage, I believe, in my gut, that there is no doubt that the trash our children see as entertainment adversely affects their future, either because they mimic what they see or become the potential victims in a society littered with immorality and too much callous disregard for human life. . . If I could play God, I would give content to the notion of gratuitous violence, and then I would ban it from the earth. I am not God, however, so I do not know how to reach gratuitous violence without doing violence to our Constitution.

However, the members of the *Violence As Entertainment Committee* believe that the data captured within this report clearly calls for a redefinition of the framework of this debate. We believe the issue of violence as entertainment and how such entertainment impacts children and youth is not a first amendment issue; rather, we believe this to be an emerging public health issue.

Further, we do not believe that parents bear the sole responsibility for ensuring that their children are protected from violent entertainment.

In the first three core messages:

- *all age groups of children and youth are experiencing increasing amounts of screen time,*
- *there is a lot of violent entertainment available to children and youth,*
- *violent entertainment is as influential as parents and friends,*

it becomes clear that parents are up against a formidable force when it comes to combating the impact of violent entertainment on their children.

When you combine a dramatic increase in sedentary interaction with TV, video games and the internet with a surging increase in the violent content of such media targeted at younger and younger children how can the community not be alert to such a potentially volatile equation?

While we explore in the final core message and conclude in **What Can Parents Do?** that parents do bear tremendous responsibility for protecting their children from violent entertainment, the evidence is overwhelming that parents cannot win this battle alone.

In the next three core messages:

- *violent video games, TV, and movies have a negative psychological and physical effect on children and youth,*
- *children and youth are negatively impacted by general community violence,*
- *children and youth are becoming desensitized to violence,*

one can see why what has been framed as a first amendment issue has all the markings of a public health issue.

If numerous studies over the past thirty years conclude that children experience a host of negative behavioral, psychological, and quite probably physiological consequences as a direct result of their interaction with violent entertainment, how can we not begin to look at violent entertainment and its impact on children and youth as a public health issue?

By redefining this issue as a public health issue, will adults lose the right to have violent entertainment in their lives? Will businessmen lose the opportunity to create and market products geared for those adults who desire such entertainment? Of course not.

However, by redefining this issue as a public health issue, will we adults take a stand to ensure that our children are protected from a toxic influence that has the potential to do great damage to them? Absolutely.

As a society, we protect our children from smoking; we protect our children from drinking alcohol. We make our children wear seat belts and bicycle helmets. Given the data collected in this report, it is clear that we, as caring adults, should also protect our children from violent entertainment. We strongly believe the recommendations made in both the **What Can Parents Do?** and **What Can The Community Do?** sections provide focused opportunities for our parents and community to work as partners in this battle.

Before closing, it should be noted that the work of the *VAE Committee* in several ways begs for additional community research. Clearly, the issue of violence in music lyrics and their impact on children and youth should be explored. Additionally, since the vast majority of children, youth and adults interacting with violent entertainment are male, what, if any correlation is there between violent entertainment and violence against women?

The members of the *Violence As Entertainment Committee* respectfully request that the citizens of Tarrant County accept and move forward on the recommendations for both parents and the community.

John Ross, Chair
Violence As Entertainment Committee

Patsy Thomas, Executive Director
Crime Prevention Resource Center

date

date

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<i>Tarrant Area Community of Churches:</i>	Dr. Ken McIntosh, Executive Director
<i>Tarrant County Youth Collaboration:</i>	Kathleen Hicks, Developmental Assets Coordinator

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Youth Focus Groups

Focus group data was collected from 25 Tarrant County youth in a total of four focus group sessions. Youth aged 10 to 16 years old were recruited from youth programs at Camp Fire – First Texas Council, Girls, Inc., and the YMCA of Metropolitan Tarrant County. Andrea Thomas of National Service Research, a Fort Worth market research firm, conducted the focus group sessions. Each session lasted approximately one and a half hours and groups were separated by gender.

Participating youth demographic information was provided by the youth program coordinators of the three host organizations. The ethnic/racial makeup of participating youth included 64 percent African-American, 20 percent Caucasian and 16 percent Hispanic. Fifty-six percent of the youth were male; 44 percent female. The socioeconomic status of participants, as reported by program staff, was 52 percent working poor, 36 percent middle class and 12 percent upper middle class.

A brief survey was distributed to the parents of the participating youth. This parent survey elicited parental attitudes and beliefs about youth violence and the media. Only 56 percent of parents completed the survey (14 total). Of those responding however, **all** thought that children aged 2 to 12 years old were more violent today than when they, the parents, grew up. Also, the majority of parents responding quantified this level of violence as “a whole lot more violent.”

Although the sample size of parents responding to the survey was very small there were a few common themes among the responses. In response to the question, “In what ways do you see children expressing that violence,” 29 percent of parents indicated that *gangs* and *verbal abuse/foul language* were key factors. 43 percent of parents felt that a *lack of parental guidance or discipline* contributed to increased violence in children, and all parents responding felt that *movies, TV, video games and/or the Internet* played some role in the increased violence.

For a copy of the complete Focus Group report, contact the Crime Prevention Resource Center at 817-314-7400.

Comments from Tarrant County Parents:

- *The children of today are role-playing the things they are seeing and doing with video games. They do not have anyone explaining to them that it is inappropriate and how they should positively express things.*
- *These mediums [movies, TV, video games or the Internet] serve to make violence and violent behavior acceptable or the perception that they are acceptable.*
- *Violent TV, video games and Internet help promote violent acts. These games offer a false sense of death and dying. Some don't realize that you don't really get back up again.*
- *There's too much violence and not enough parent supervision.*
- *I think that even though the media play a big part in misguiding our youth and society, we still can't hold it totally to blame because the family is the biggest influence in young children's life.*

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Notes:

All age groups of children and youth are experiencing increasing amounts of screen time.

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2. Ibid.
3. From Developmental Assets: A Profile of Your Youth Participating Schools in Tarrant County © February 2000 by Search Institute, Minneapolis. MN. Data were gathered with the survey Search Institute Profiles of Student Life: Attitudes and Behaviors, copyright © 1996 by Search Institute.
4. Ibid.
5. "Kids and the Media".
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There is a lot of violent entertainment available to children and youth.

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Violent entertainment is as influential as parents and friends.

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Children and youth are impacted by general community violence.

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Websites

Name	Address	Description
American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry	www.aacap.org	Assists parents and families in understanding developmental, behavioral, emotional and mental disorders affecting children and adolescents. Includes current information on violence as a form of entertainment, as well as current legislative activities.
American Academy of Pediatrics	www.aap.org	Information on physical, mental, and social health of the infant, child, adolescent, and young adult. Includes current information on T.V./Movie Ratings.
American Psychological Association	www.apa.org	Information regarding topics in the field of mental health. Current articles/research on violence as entertainment may be found under several categories, including Books, News, and Press Releases.
An Appeal to Hollywood	www.media-appeal.org	Nonpartisan appeal to the entertainment world. Document is available for viewing and signing. Document calls for voluntary code of conduct from the media industry regarding violence and sexual content in the media.
Center for Media Education	www.cme.org	Goal is to ensure that the media system serves public interest through research and education. Contains information on children and the media, current press releases and research.
The Coalition for Quality Children's Media; affiliated with Kids First!	www.cqcm.org	CQCM's mission is to enhance children's viewing experiences by making quality children's media more visible and available. Kids First! Evaluates and rates CD-Rom's, videos, audio CD's, and websites for kids.
Entertainment Reviews for Parents	www.screenit.com	Free weekly newsletter available, detailing new movie and video releases. Web site also reviews music and DVD's.
Entertainment Software Rating Board	www.esrb.org	Provides a rating system for helping to choose interactive entertainment videos, computer software, and online games.
Family Education	www.familyeducation.com	Parenting and education tips. Includes current news, hot topics, research, and a newsletter; as well as movie, book, and television reviews.

Family Style Movie Guide	www.familystyle.com	A guide of movie and video reviews for families. Detailed reviews include traditional ratings, also ratings on profanity, nudity, sex, violence, drugs and alcohol.
Kids in Mind & Movie Ratings That Actually Work	www.kids-in-mind.com	Rates the level of sex, violence and profanity in current movies and videos, using a 0 to 10 scale for each category.
Mediascope	www.mediascope.org	“A national nonprofit research and policy organization working to promote issues of social relevance with the entertainment industry.” Studies include the effects of media violence on children. Provides a vast resource library as well as publishes books and reports on a wide variety of topics.
National Coalition Against Censorship	www.ncac.org	An alliance of non-profit organizations opposed to censorship. Publishes a newsletter, prepares articles, periodic reports, and background papers analyzing freedom of expression issues.
National Coalition on Television Violence	www.nctvv.org	Appeal to Hollywood to be more responsible for the content of entertainment. Site includes articles on the industry’s rating system, the v-chip, helping children understand what they are viewing.
National Institute on Media and the Family	www.mediafamily.org	Site offers multiple resources for research, education and information on the impact of the media on children and families.
National Parent Teacher Association	www.pta.org	Motto is “Children First”. Promotes education, health and safety of children. Site offers online catalog of archival materials, and information on current legislative activity.
Parenthood Web	www.parenthoodweb.com	Dedicated to parenthood and family, site offers research/publications/articles concerning all aspects of parenthood. Includes hot topics.
Parents Television Council	www.parentstv.org	Site offers a guide to prime time television, links to family sites, books, music, and movies. Editorials on current media issues are also available.
Partnerships Against Violence Censorship	www.pavnet.org	Provides a library of information about violence and you-at-risk. Information is gathered from several different Federal agencies.
People Against Violent Entertainment Media	www.pavem.org	A group working together to raise awareness about violence in today’s entertainment and media industry. Site offers research information, and

current news articles.

Prevention Institute	www.preventioninstitute.org	Focus is on prevention of violence. Some areas of specialization include child & adolescent health, injury & violence prevention, city & county initiatives. Provides articles, broadcasts.
Smarter Kids	www.smarterkids.com	Goal is to help parents help their children succeed in learning. Site includes reviews of toys, games, and books, as well as press releases on current hot topics, and a newsletter for members.
Sociology and Philosophy Essays: TV and Violence	www.magicdragon.com/EmeraldCity/Nonfiction/socphil.html	Publications on various topics made available on-line. Highlighted piece explores the relationship between television and violence in today's society.
Stop the Violence, Face the Music	www.stv.net	A volunteer based organization creative to counteract the negative influences affecting youth. Provides educational materials, free counseling services, research and articles on media violence.
TV-Free America	www.tvfa.org	Helped to organize National TV-Turnoff Week. Site provides information on the various effects of television on children, in such areas as obesity, violence, reading levels, etc.