Media and the Adolescent

Madeline Levine

Child psychologist Madeline Levine (1947– ) has taught graduate courses at the University of California Medical Center in San Francisco and serves as a consultant to a number of schools in the Bay Area. A private practitioner who has focused on parenting issues since 1980, Levine is also a frequent lecturer on media violence and childhood and adolescent development. In the following section from her book Viewing Violence: How Media Violence Affects Your Child’s and Adolescent’s Development (1999), Levine argues that while “no one movie or television program, no matter how violent, is likely to be damaging to reasonably healthy adolescents,” the fact that “violence is the rule rather than the exception” in many popular movies and on television does have a negative effect—especially on adolescent boys, who can come to see “intimidation and abuse of power as ways to navigate the world.”

“I wouldn’t mind thinking I was somebody.”
—Mike in Breaking Away

This simple statement, spoken by an adolescent who feels his future options are limited, illustrates the longing and hopelessness of all teenagers. If, at the end of adolescence, teenagers feel like they are “somebody,” then the developmental tasks of adolescence have been successfully resolved. These young people will carry into adulthood an enduring sense of self. Those adolescents who enter adulthood feeling like “nobody,” however, are at risk for leading lives that are nonproductive, unsatisfying, and frequently antisocial.

While this is not an essay about the sociology of adolescence, it is impossible to write about teenagers while ignoring the crisis that American youth are experiencing. The role of media and their effects on adolescents can be understood only if we realize that our teenagers are confronting unprecedented social problems. While the reasons for these problems are complex and not likely to be easily solved, the media’s contribution to the problems of teenage violence, pregnancy, drug and alcohol abuse, and hopelessness are well documented and substantial.

It would be preposterous to claim that all these social ills are caused by the media. But to ignore the role of the media in contributing to these dreadful statistics is to ignore one of the most potent influences in the lives of teenagers. Children who watch Sesame Street can increase their cognitive skills; those who watch Mister Rogers have been shown to exhibit more compassionate behavior. Adults have learned to buckle up, quit smoking, and begin exercising, largely from massive public health campaigns presented through the media. Advertisers
spend millions of dollars each year to “educate” us about the virtues of their various soaps, detergents, and deodorants, knowing that a successful ad campaign can change the way we think and what we buy. So certainly adolescents, with their thirst for information and taste for experimentation, are also likely to learn from the media. Don Roberts, chair of the Department of Communication at Stanford University, aptly summarized the hard reality of media influence on adolescents: “The issue is not whether mass media affect adolescent perceptions, beliefs, behaviors. Rather, it is one of society’s judging how many adolescents need to be put at risk, in what way, before various corrective actions are viewed as necessary and justified.”

Adolescents turn to the media for many different reasons. They are plagued by concerns about identity, are actively seeking information about the adult world they will soon enter, and need significant amounts of time to “do nothing” in order to work on their internal preoccupations. The media provide relief, information, and distraction. Are the media honestly meeting these needs or are they in large measure exploiting a vulnerable market?

The media have glamorized the portrayal of guns so completely that adolescents brought into emergency rooms with gunshot wounds are amazed to find that they are in pain. Guns have become as ubiquitous as the symbol of adult power as packs of cigarettes were in previous decades. It is the throwaway lines of casual violence like “Make my day” and “Are you feeling lucky, punk?” that have become part of the common lexicon. There is not a single studio head in this country who is not aware of the exploding homicide rate for adolescents. These captains of industry have all been shown the connection between media portrayals of violence and real-world violence. Their continued dismissal of these facts is criminal.

Teenagers, for the most part, do not need protection from the realities of life. On the contrary, they need as much information and education as possible. Dead Poets Society deals with suicide, Boyz N the Hood deals with homicide, Schindler’s List documents genocide. Responsible movies such as these do not hesitate to confront and explore the kinds of difficult topics that interest adolescents. But they provide a historical context, emphasize complexity, explore alternatives, and show teenagers the consequences of actions that may limit or even destroy future opportunities. They are important movies for teenagers to see.

Of course, one of the purposes of media is to provide distraction, a way of “kicking back” and forgetting about one’s problems. We all need “downtime.” Action movies are exciting and engrossing and as a result allow us to turn our attention away from our own difficulties. This is a perfectly reasonable function of entertainment. Horror movies can also serve a psychological function for adolescents. They are a rite of passage that allows teenagers, at a safe distance, to “dare” to be unafraid and willing to confront demons. They hold the same attraction that fairy tales hold for younger children. They are preparation for going out into a world that contains many frightening unknowns. They also help adolescent males, the major consumers of action and horror movies, to lessen the psychological grip of mother by proving that they are “man enough” to manage on their own.

Evil has its attractions—from fire-breathing dragons and evil stepmothers to serial killers; people at all ages are interested in the darker aspects of humanity. This is because we all carry within ourselves thoughts and fantasies that are cruel and violent. It is naive and dangerous to deny the duality of human nature. But it is the socializing agents of society—family, school, religious institutions, and mass media—that are charged with the responsibility of helping children and adolescents understand and control their aggressive impulses.

At the risk of being repetitious, I will say again that no one movie or television program, no matter how violent, is likely to be damaging to reasonably healthy adolescents. The problem lies in the fact that violence is the rule rather than the exception. While boys do benefit from the man-as-dragon-slayer story, it is only one of many stories they need to hear. They also need man-as-father, man-as-nurturer, man-as-healer, and man-as-peacekeeper stories if they are to enter adulthood truly equipped for the varied responsibilities they will find there. Unfortunately, outstanding television programs such as My So-Called Life, which dealt with serious and common adolescent problems, are often short-lived on network television. Teenagers have become so habituated to extreme violence that they lack the patience and insight needed to appreciate even marginally more demanding programs.

In spite of the industry’s claim that it is only giving the public what they want, research shows that it is action, not violence, that appeals to audiences. The surprise summer hit of 1994, Speed, with Keanu Reeves, while not an intellectually demanding movie, managed to be thrilling while maintaining a minimal body count. Apollo 13 was a gripping and fascinating history lesson, loudly applauded by the group of teenagers sitting next to me in the theater. Crimson Tide provided a good dose of action and suspense and still managed to pose questions particularly appealing to adolescents: Where does one’s greatest responsibility lie? What constitutes betrayal? How to decide between one’s conscience and the dictates of society? All of these movies were popular with adolescents, and they’re good examples of the fact that audiences can be entertained and even riveted without being soaked in blood. Entertainment executives might consider these types of action movies as absorbing, responsible and profitable alternatives to movies featuring gratuitous violence.
Attachment

... One of the extraordinary events taking place [during adolescence] is the teenager's discovery of love and sex. While emotional reliance on parents is diminishing, the adolescent is finding new support and nurturance in intimate relationships with peers. These relationships can be sexual or not, heterosexual or homosexual. They become part of the process by which the adolescent comes to define his or her identity. Erik Erikson\(^1\) describes this stage with great insight:

This initiates the stage of "falling in love," which is by no means entirely, or even primarily, a sexual matter—except where the mores demand it. To a considerable extent adolescent love is an attempt to arrive at a definition of one's identity by projecting one's diffused ego image on another and by seeing it thus reflected and gradually clarified. This is why so much of young love is conversation.

It is unfortunate that the media choose to ignore this reality of adolescent development. Conversation, discussion, and endless thinking are large components of adolescent life that are virtually ignored in favor of sexual adventure. While sexual issues are critical as never before, and will be discussed at length later in this essay, let's focus for a moment on the equally compelling emotional aspect of adolescent love. As parents, we know that it can be hard to remember parts of our adolescence, but we all remember our first broken heart. The emotional investment that teenagers make in each other is perhaps unparalleled. Although couples break up frequently and seem to treat each other with apparent indifference, the truth is that these foundered relationships can be excruciatingly painful to the adolescent.

One of the reasons My So-Called Life was so well liked by many adolescents was that it acknowledged the primacy of adolescent emotional connection, not just sexual activity. The producers of that program made a sound decision by having their fifteen-year-old central character, Angela, remain a virgin. This device allowed the show to circumvent many of the mandatory sexual escapades of television characters and instead focus on psychological development. While sex certainly came up as a subject, it was mainly talked about, not acted upon. Characters were given the opportunity to plumb some of the conflict and ambivalence characteristic of adolescents.

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1 American psychoanalyst (1902–1980) and important contributor to contemporary theories of human development. [Eds.]
television are between unmarried or uncommitted couples. The media are content to stick with the subject of “screwing around” rather than struggle with the far more complex issue of human intimacy. Watching television and movies, one would think that sex stops at the altar.

While preparing [my book Viewing Violence], I watched many dozens of the most popular teenage movies, and I never saw a reasoned and intelligent discussion of birth control. According to most stories told by the media, intercourse and pregnancy are unrelated. Can we measure the percentage of the million babies born to teenagers each year who in some measure owe their existence to such repeated irresponsible portrayals of teenage sex? Probably not. Like violence, teenage pregnancy is the endpoint of many individual and social factors. But there is absolutely no doubt that the media portrayals, on the whole, have been derelict in informing teenagers about the consequences of sexual activity.

Aggression as a style of dealing with conflict is something that is learned early in childhood and learned well. It is in fact quite difficult to modify aggression once it is the preferred way of handling problems. By adolescence, most children have a reasonably consistent way of handling interpersonal conflict. It is unlikely that media violence can turn a previously cooperative and peaceful child into a mid-adolescent criminal. That kind of damage is probably done earlier in life by any number of social and individual factors.

Although crimes are being committed by younger and younger individuals, it is still adolescence that contains a disproportionate number of both perpetrators and victims. With very few exceptions, seven-year-olds don’t rape and murder; seventeen-year-olds do. In her powerful book Boys Will Be Boys, Myriam Miedzian looks at the many factors in our society that contribute to boys developing a sense of self that relies heavily on aggressive posturing: “Many of the values of the masculine mystique, such as toughness, dominance, repression of empathy, extreme competitiveness, play a major role in criminal and domestic violence and underlie the thinking and policy decisions of many of our political leaders.” The book forces the realization that it is usually not “aggression” that is being studied, but male aggression. The vast majority of crimes are committed by men, and so we need to pay particular attention to the messages that both parents and the media send to boys.

The media have failed to provide teenage boys with role models that are worthy of imitation. Conversely, why is it that males seem particularly attracted to media messages that stress intimidation and the abuse of power as ways to navigate the world? Boys are far more affected by male role models than by female role models, while girls are equally affected by both. Women in the media are typically portrayed as being less aggressive and more socially conscious than men. Perhaps it is the acceptance of female role models that confers a protective factor on girls, making them less vulnerable to the aggressive, macho images that suffuse popular culture. Boys desperately need a wider range of male models, some of whom incorporate the more traditional female values of cooperation and sensitivity. It would be of great benefit for adolescent boys to see male characters who are attractive without being violent. Unfortunately male characters who are presented as gentle are frequently also portrayed as defective or crazy as in Edward Scissorhands or Don Juan Demarco.

It is a peculiarity of our culture that exposure to sexual material is considered more damaging to children than exposure to violence. The Puritan aversion to sex still evident in our culture results in some truly extraordinary contradictions. In 1995, NYPD Blue caused a stir by breaking the nudity code on television. For the first time a major television program allowed one of its stars to bare his buttocks. No matter that we had seen decades of shootings, knifings, rapes, and mutilations. Jimmy Smits was shown bare-assed. Personally, I would rather have my children see someone’s butt hanging out than his brains hanging out. Call me a romantic.

We have decided, against all scientific evidence, that it is sex, not violence, that we need to shield our youth from. Tom Cruise saying “fuck” twice in Risky Business is in no way the equivalent of John Travolta blowing someone’s brains out in Pulp Fiction (both R-rated movies). The effects of these two movies on children are considerably different, and that difference is not adequately acknowledged under the current rating system. While there is a value to ratings that reflect what the hypothetical “average American parent” would consider appropriate for his or her child, there is also value in considering what research has to tell us about what is damaging to children and teens. The rating system would be far more useful to parents if it acknowledged different developmental stages and gave additional information about why films received their particular rating.

Total Recall, Terminator, Die Hard, and Robocop all feature gratuitous violence and often combine sexual and aggressive messages. Is it true that the sexual content is what is most damaging? After all, adolescent boys, heavy consumers of media violence, are having their first sexual experiences and are formulating attitudes toward women that they will carry for a lifetime. Edward Donnerstein, one of this country’s leading authorities on pornography and a member of Surgeon General C. Everett Koop’s Task Force on Pornography, has spent decades studying the effects of pornography and violence. In 1987, Donnerstein and his colleagues published The Question of Pornography: Research Findings and Policy Implications. They write in their preface:
It is perhaps ironic, but we did not write this book because of our concern about the prevalence of sexually explicit materials in American society. Rather, we were concerned that so much attention was being paid to the possibly damaging consequences of exposure to pornography, that more pervasive and more troubling combinations of sex and aggression in the media were being ignored. We contend that the violence against women in some types of R-rated films shown in neighborhood theaters and on cable TV far exceeds that portrayed in even the most graphic pornography.

One of the chapters in the book, entitled "Is It the Sex or Is It the Violence?," attempts to bring decades of scientific research to bear on answering this question. Typical of many studies cited, a series of studies by Donnerstein and colleagues shows that it is violence, or a combination of sex and violence, but not sex alone, that tends to encourage callous attitudes toward women. For example, in one of the experiments, a group of college-age males were shown one of three edited versions of the same movie. In the sexually aggressive version, the woman was tied up, threatened with a gun, and raped. In the aggression-only version, the sex was deleted; and in the sex-only version, the aggression was deleted.

After viewing the movie, the men were asked to complete questionnaires measuring their attitudes toward rape, their willingness to use force against women, and their willingness to rape if not caught. In the sex-only group, only 11 percent of the men indicated some likelihood that they would commit rape. In the sex and violence group, 25 percent indicated some likelihood, and in the violence-only group, fully 50 percent of the men indicated some likelihood that they would rape a woman. The researchers conclude the chapter by saying, "We risk the possibility that many members of our society, particularly young viewers, will evolve into less sensitive and responsive individuals as a result, at least partly, of repeated exposure to violent media, particularly sexually violent media. Such a possibility should be alarming, if not to law makers, at least to policy makers responsible for rating motion pictures and thus to limiting young people's access to sexually violent depictions."

Knowing as much as we do about the effects of sexually violent entertainment, we must, as parents, respond. At the very least, we must work to ensure that our teenage boys understand that such attitudes and behavior are reprehensible. Mothers need to command respect from their sons, and fathers need to be involved in lessening the impact of degrading messages by discussing the realities of love, sex, and aggression with their sons. The high levels of sexual abuse in our society suggest that sexual violence is not committed by a few deviant men. Rather, it is a common and too frequently acceptable way of exercising control over women.

Responding to Reading
1. Consider these three statements by Levine:
   - "Evil has its attractions...; people at all ages are interested in the darker aspects of humanity" (8).
   - "It is a peculiarity of our culture that exposure to sexual material is considered more damaging to children than exposure to violence" (23).
   - "In spite of the industry's claim that it is only giving the public what they want, research shows that it is action, not violence, that appeals to audiences" (10).

   Whom (or what) does each statement seem to blame for media violence? Where do you think the greatest blame should be placed?

2. In paragraph 9, Levine states emphatically that "no one movie or television program, no matter how violent, is likely to be damaging to reasonably healthy adolescents." Does this statement contradict John Grisham's (p. 343) claim that Natural Born Killers was the direct cause of Ben and Sarah's shooting spree? Explain your reasoning.

3. In Levine's view, what is the real problem inherent in media violence and its effect on adolescents? What possible solutions does she see? Does your assessment of the situation differ from hers?

Widening the Focus
- Sharon Olds, "Rite of Passage" (p. 373)
- Stanton L. Wormley, Jr., "Fighting Back" (p. 381)
- Barbara Griziutti Harrison, "Getting Away with Murder" (p. 531)
- Barbara Ehrenreich, "The Myth of Man as Hunter" (p. 707)


The Media’s Message

1. Was there for you, as there was for McMillan, a movie that changed your life—opening a new world, introducing you to new ideas, or giving you new insight into your own life? Write a fan letter to the movie’s director. (Or write a letter of praise to a recording artist or a television producer).

2. Deborah Tannen comments, “If public discourse is a fight, . . . it’s crucial to show ‘the other side,’ even if one has to scour the margins of science or the fringes of lunacy to find it” (6). She warns, however, “The determination to find another side can spread disinformation rather than lead to truth” (8). Apply these ideas and others in Tannen’s essay to the situation Deborah Lipstadt describes in “Denying the Holocaust” in Chapter 10 (p. 811).

3. Does media violence hurt? If so, whom does it hurt most? Use the essays by Grisham, Leonard, and Levine as well as your own observations to support your conclusion.

4. What do you think the impact of various media (including the Internet) will be in the years to come? What trends do you see emerging that you believe will change the way you think or the way you live? What will the media’s message be in the twenty-first century? Write an essay in which you speculate about future trends and their impact. (If you like, you may consider information presented in the essays by Pico Iyer, Gregory J. E. Rawlins, or Ted Gup in Chapter 7.)

5. Reconsider the charges leveled at the media by one or more writers in this chapter—for example, Deloria or Grisham—but apply them to the commercial messages that make most magazines and television programs possible. Are magazine ads and television commercials more or less guilty of the sins with which this chapter’s writers charge the media? Read (or reread) Gloria Steinem’s “Sex, Lies, and Advertising” (p. 279) before you begin.

6. Keep a daily log of the programs you listen to on the radio and watch on television, the movies you see, and the newspapers and magazines you read. After one week, review what you chose to read, listen to, and watch, and consider why you chose what you did and how these different kinds of media informed, provoked, or entertained you. Chart your habits, including the time you spent and what you selected, and write a report evaluating the impact of various media on you.

7. Do the media present an accurate image of your gender, race, religion, or ethnic group? In what ways, if any, is the image unrealistic?

In what ways, if any, is it demeaning? You may refer to the selections in this chapter by Stark, Deloria, or Douglas, but you should focus on specific examples from your own observations. If possible, include recommendations for improving the image of the group you discuss. What can be done to challenge—or change—simplistic or negative images?

8. Should the government continue to support public television and radio? What, if anything, do public radio and television provide that commercial programming does not offer?

9. Steven Stark says, “Whether in the form of the media’s obsession with violence or its preoccupation with polls and popularity, the fantasy life of the adolescent male ends up defining much of our political reality” (9). Apply this statement to the observations made by Deborah Tannen about politicians, journalists, and academics. Does Stark’s theory help to explain the traits and behavior Tannen discusses?

10. What kind of “family values” are promoted on television? Would you say that these media are largely “profamily” or “antifamily”? Using the essays in this chapter by Winn, McGrath, and Kaminer for background, choose several films and television programs that support your position. Then, write an essay that takes a strong stand. (Consult the essays by Alice Hoffman and Joseph Adelson in Chapter 1 if necessary for an explanation of the concept of family values.)