Sex and Violence on Television – A Christian Worldview Perspective

Kerby Anderson takes a reasoned look at the amount of sex and violence portrayed on television and comes away with a sobering understanding of the intensity of the problem. From a biblical perspective, this level of consumption of disturbing images will result in a deadening of even Christian hearts to the clear call of Scripture to a life of purity in mind and action.

The Extent of the Problem

Is there too much sex and violence on television? Most Americans seem to think so. One survey found that seventy-five percent of Americans felt that television had "too much sexually explicit material." Moreover, eighty-six percent believed that television had contributed to "a decline in values."[1] And no wonder. Channel surfing through the television reveals plots celebrating premarital sex, adultery, and even homosexuality. Sexual promiscuity in the media appears to be at an all-time high. A study of adolescents (ages twelve to seventeen) showed that watching sex on TV influences teens to have sex. Youths were more likely to initiate intercourse as well as other sexual activities.[2]

A study by the Parents Television Council found that prime time network television is more violent than ever before. In addition, they found that this increasing violence is also of a sexual nature. They found that portrayals of violence are up seventy-five percent since 1998.[3]

The study also provided expert commentary by Deborah Fisher, Ph.D. She states that children, on average, will be exposed to

a thousand murders, rapes, and assaults per year through television. She goes on to warn that early exposure to television violence has "consistently emerged as a significant predictor of later aggression."[4]

A previous study by the Parents Television Council compared the changes in sex, language, and violence between decades. The special report entitled *What a Difference a Decade Makes* found many shocking things.[5]

First, on a per-hour basis, sexual material more than tripled in the last decade. For example, while references to homosexuality were once rare, now they are mainstream. Second, the study found that foul language increased five-fold in just a decade. They also found that the intensity of violent incidents significantly increased.

These studies provide the best quantifiable measure of what has been taking place on television. No longer can defenders of television say that TV is "not that bad." The evidence is in, and television is more offensive than ever.

Christians should not be surprised by these findings. Sex and violence have always been part of the human condition because of our sin nature (Romans 3:23), but modern families are exposed to a level of sex and violence that is unprecedented. Obviously, this will have a detrimental effect. The Bible teaches that "as a man thinks in his heart, so is he" (Proverbs 23:7, KJV). What we see and hear affects our actions. And while this is true for adults, it is especially true for children.

Television's Impact on Behavior

What is the impact of watching television on subsequent behavior? There are abundant studies which document that what you see, hear, and read does affect your perception of the world and your behavior.

The American Academy of Pediatrics in 2000 issued a "Joint Statement on the Impact of Entertainment Violence on Children." They cited over one thousand studies, including reports from the Surgeon General's office and the National Institute of Mental Health. They say that these studies "point overwhelmingly to a causal connection between media violence and aggressive behavior in some children."{6}

In 1992, the American Psychological Association concluded that forty years of research on the link between TV violence and real-life violence has been ignored, stating that "the 'scientific debate is over' and calling for federal policy to protect society."{7}

A 1995 poll of children ten to sixteen years of age showed that children recognize that "what they see on television encourages them to take part in sexual activity too soon, to show disrespect for their parents, [and] to lie and to engage in aggressive behavior." More than two-thirds said they are influenced by television; seventy-seven percent said TV shows too much sex before marriage, and sixty-two percent said sex on television and in movies influences their peers to have sexual relations when they are too young. Two-thirds also cited certain programs featuring dysfunctional families as encouraging disrespect toward parents.

The report reminds us that television sets the baseline standard for the entire entertainment industry. Most homes (ninety-eight percent) have a television set. And according to recent statistics, that TV in the average household is on more than eight hours each day.{8}

By contrast, other forms of entertainment (such as movies, DVDs, CDs) must be sought out and purchased. Television is universally available, and thus has the most profound effect on our culture.

As Christians we need to be aware of the impact television has

on us and our families. The studies show us that sex and violence on TV can affect us in subtle yet profound ways. We can no longer ignore the growing body of data that suggests that televised imagery does affect our perceptions and behaviors. So we should be concerned about the impact television (as well as other forms of media) has on our neighbors and our society as a whole.

Sex on Television

Most Americans believe there is too much sex on television. A survey conducted in 1994 found that seventy-five percent of Americans felt that television had "too much sexually explicit material." Moreover, eighty-six percent believed that television had contributed to "a decline in values."{9} As we documented earlier, sexual promiscuity on television is at an all-time high.

I have previously written about the subject of pornography and talked about the dangerous effects of sex, especially when linked with violence.{10} Neil Malamuth and Edward Donnerstein document the volatile impact of sex and violence in the media. They say, "There can be relatively long-term, anti-social effects of movies that portray sexual violence as having positive consequences."{11}

In a message given by Donnerstein, he concluded with this warning and observation: "If you take normal males and expose them to graphic violence against women in R-rated films, the research doesn't show that they'll commit acts of violence against women. It doesn't say they will go out and commit rape. But it does demonstrate that they become less sensitized to violence against women, they have less sympathy for rape victims, and their perceptions and attitudes and values about violence change."{12}

It is important to remember that these studies are applicable

not just to hard-core pornography. Many of the studies used films that are readily shown on television (especially cable television) any night of the week. And many of the movies shown today in theaters are much more explicit than those shown just a few years ago.

Social commentator Irving Kristol asked this question in a *Wall Street Journal* column: "Can anyone really believe that soft porn in our Hollywood movies, hard porn in our cable movies and violent porn in our 'rap' music is without effect? Here the average, overall impact is quite discernible to the naked eye. And at the margin, the effects, in terms most notably of illegitimacy and rape, are shockingly visible."{13}

Christians must be careful that sexual images on television don't conform us to the world (Rom. 12:2). Instead we should use discernment. Philippians 4:8 says, "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable, if anything is excellent or praiseworthy, think about such things."

Sex on television is at an all-time high, so we should be even more careful to screen what we and our families see. Christians should be concerned about the images we see on television.

Violence on Television

Children's greatest exposure to violence comes from television. TV shows, movies edited for television, and video games expose young children to a level of violence unimaginable just a few years ago. The American Psychological Association says the average child watches eight thousand televised murders and one hundred thousand acts of violence before finishing elementary school.{14} That number more than doubles by the time he or she reaches age eighteen.

At a very young age, children are seeing a level of violence and mayhem that in the past may have been seen only by a few police officers and military personnel. TV brings hitting, kicking, stabbings, shootings, and dismemberment right into homes on a daily basis.

The impact on behavior is predictable. Two prominent Surgeon General reports in the last two decades link violence on television and aggressive behavior in children and teenagers. In addition, the National Institute of Mental Health issued a ninety-four page report, *Television and Behavior: Ten Years of Scientific Progress and Implications for the Eighties.* They found "overwhelming" scientific evidence that "excessive" violence on television spills over into the playground and the streets.{15} In one five-year study of 732 children, "several kinds of aggression, conflicts with parents, fighting and delinquency, were all positively correlated with the total amount of television viewing."{16}

Long-term studies are even more disturbing. University of Illinois psychologist Leonard Eron studied children at age eight and then again at eighteen. He found that television habits established at the age of eight influenced aggressive behavior throughout childhood and adolescent years. The more violent the programs preferred by boys in the third grade, the more aggressive their behavior, both at that time and ten years later. He therefore concluded that "the effect of television violence on aggression is cumulative."{17}

Twenty years later Eron and Rowell Huesmann found the pattern continued. He and his researchers found that children who watched significant amounts of TV violence at the age of eight were consistently more likely to commit violent crimes or engage in child or spouse abuse at thirty.{18} They concluded that "heavy exposure to televised violence is one of the causes of aggressive behavior, crime and violence in society. Television violence affects youngsters of all ages, of both genders, at all socioeconomic levels and all levels of

intelligence."[19]

Violent images on television affect children in adverse ways and Christians should be concerned about the impact.

Biblical Perspective

Television is such a part of our lives that we often are unaware of its subtle and insidious influence. Nearly every home has a television set, so we tend to take it for granted and are often oblivious to its influence.

I've had many people tell me that they watch television, and that it has no impact at all on their worldview or behavior. However the Bible teaches that "as a man thinks in his heart, so is he" (Proverbs 23:7). What we view and what we think about affects our actions. And there is abundant psychological evidence that television viewing affects our worldview.

George Gerbner and Larry Gross, working at the Annenberg School of Communications in the 1970s, found that heavy television viewers live in a scary world. "We have found that people who watch a lot of TV see the real world as more dangerous and frightening than those who watch very little. Heavy viewers are less trustful of their fellow citizens, and more fearful of the real world."[20] Heavy viewers also tended to overestimate their likelihood of being involved in a violent crime. They defined heavy viewers as those adults who watch an average of four or more hours of television a day. Approximately one-third of all American adults fit that category.

And if this is true of adults, imagine how television violence affects children's perceptions of the world. Gerbner and Gross say, "Imagine spending six hours a day at the local movie house when you were twelve years old. No parent would have permitted it. Yet, in our sample of children, nearly half of the twelve-year-olds watch an average of six or more hours of

television per day." This would mean that a large portion of young people fit into the category of heavy viewers. Their view of the world must be profoundly shaped by TV. Gerbner and Gross therefore conclude, "If adults can be so accepting of the reality of television, imagine its effect on children. By the time the average American child reaches public school, he has already spent several years in an electronic nursery school."{21}

Television viewing affects both adults and children in subtle ways. We must not ignore the growing body of data that suggests that televised imagery does affect our perceptions and behaviors. Our worldview and our subsequent actions are affected by what we see on television. Christians, therefore, must be careful not to let television conform us to the world (Romans 12:2), but instead should develop a Christian worldview.

Notes

1. National Family Values: A Survey of Adults conducted by Voter/Consumer Research (Bethesda, MD, 1994).
2. Rebecca Collins, et. al., "Watching Sex on Television Predicts Adolescent Initiation of Sexual Behavior," *Pediatrics*, Vol. 114 (3), September 2004.
3. Kristen Fyfe, "More Violence, More Sex, More Troubled Kids," *Culture and Media Institute*, 11 January 2007, www.cultureandmediainstitute.org.
4. Ibid.
5. Parents Television Council, Special Report: What a Difference a Decade Makes, 30 March 2000, www.parentstv.org.
6. Joint Statement on the Impact of Entertainment Violence on Children, *American Academy of Pediatrics*, 26 July 2000.
7. David Grossman, "What the Surgeon General Found; As Early as 1972, the Link Was Clear Between Violent TV and Movies and Violent Youths," *Los Angeles Times*, 21 October 1999, B-11.
"Average home has more TVs than people," *USA Today*, 21 September 2006,

www.usatoday.com/life/television/news/2006-09-21-homes-tv_x.htm

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10. Kerby Anderson, "The Pornography Plague," Probe Ministries, 1997, http://www.probe.org/content/view/821/169/ .

11. Neil Malamuth and Edward Donnerstein, *Pornography and Sexual Aggression* (New York: Academic, 1984).

12. Edward Donnerstein, "What the Experts Say," a forum at the Industry-wide Leadership Conference on Violence in Television Programming, 2 August 1993, in *National Council for Families and Television Report,* 9.

13. Irving Kristol, "Sex, Violence and Videotape," *Wall Street Journal,* 31 May 1994.

14. John Johnston, "Kids: Growing Up Scared," *Cincinnati Enquirer,* March 20, 1994, p. E01.

15. Cited in "Warning from Washington," *Time*, 17 May 1982, 77.

16. James Mann, "What Is TV Doing to America?" *U.S. News and World Report,* 2 August 1982, 27.

17. Leo Bogart, "Warning: The Surgeon General Has Determined that TV Violence Is Moderately Dangerous to Your Child's Mental Health," *Public Opinion* (Winter, 1972-73): 504.

18. Peter Plagen, "Violence in Our Culture," *Newsweek*, 1 April 1991, 51.

19. Ibid.

20. George Gerbner and Larry Gross, "The Scary World of TV's Heavy Viewer," *Psychology Today*, April 1976.

21. Ibid.