

Child Warriors: Are We Priming Our Children's Brains for Violence?

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By Susan Gingras Fitzell ©1997

Are we, by allowing our children to be exposed to violence on TV, setting up an environment that physically changes the brain by making it 'good at' thinking violently? In doing so, are we also increasing the possibility that the next generation of children will inherit a brain adapted physically to warlike thinking?

Carlson-Paige and Levin write that "at no other time in history have children daily exposure to so many images removed from direct experience, many of which focus on violence." How might this exposure to violence affect the physical structure of the brain?

According to Jane Healy (1990), neuroscientists understand that "...what children do every day, the ways in which they think and respond to the world, what they learn, and the stimuli to which they pay attention...shape their brains. Not only does it change the ways in which the brain is used (functional change), but it also causes physical alterations (structural change) in neural wiring systems."

Healy refers to the work of E. James Potchen, who has studied 18,000 brains: "Dr. Potchen tells of both animal and human brains that have restructured themselves significantly on the basis of learning experiences." If the average child spends 24 hours a week watching TV and Power Ranger-type videos, it would follow that this type of activity becomes part of his/her learning experience.

Says Marian Diamond, professor of neuroanatomy at the University of California, Berkeley: "There is absolutely no doubt in my mind that children's brains are changing. Whatever they're learning, as those nerve cells are getting input, they are sending out dendritic branches. As long as stimuli come in to a certain area, you get more branching; if you lose the stimuli, they stop branching," (Healy).

This contention is backed up by Michael D. Chafetz in his book *Smart for Life*: "Whenever brain cells are activated by seeing, speaking, or solving problems, they begin to change. They take in more chemical energy and remodel nerve endings and receptors. They form new connections."

New scientific studies and advanced technology have taken our understanding of how the environment affects us beyond the psychological foundations of conditioning: "People, including children, tend to develop a taste for what they are conditioned to. There is no indication that in the 1950's boys enjoyed TV less because it was less violent...It is an acquired taste that the media have played an important role in developing."

The National Institute of Mental Health published a report in 1982 which confirms that "children who watch a lot of violence on television may come to accept violence as normal behavior" (Miedzian, 1991).

If one takes these concepts to a logical conclusion, one might deduce that not only are children who have violent media input as part of their experience being psychologically conditioned to think in violent ways, but their brains are developing the neural connections and dendritic branching for violent thinking. Psychological conditioning physically changes the brain. Violence in the media is creating a psychological and physical predisposition for violence in our children.

As parents or educators, what can we do? According to Terrence Webster-Doyle (1989), "being conscious of the influence of advertising and of programming that is unhealthy is of utmost importance since media has a tremendous effect on the brain." We need to stop denying the impact the media are having on our children and to be aware of the effects.

Scientific evidence indicates that television viewing creates passive learners unable to think: "If our society wants citizens who can reflect as well as respond, who can come up with solutions to the problems of a complex world, it must teach its children to stop, listen, and think as well as react" (Healy). Violence is a pervasive problem in our complex world! In order for our children to be able to deal effectively with conflict and violence, they need to be able to stop, think, talk through problems, plan ahead, and act rather than react impulsively.

Some suggestions for parents and teachers:

- Place firm limits on television and video viewing. Address what children should watch and how long they should watch.
- Participate with children whenever possible. Talk with them about television content, methods of audience manipulation, point of view, etc.
- Give substitute caregivers strict guidelines regarding TV and video use.

Violence in the media is a problem with devastating consequences. Not only are our children being conditioned to think in terms of combat, to think of it as entertainment, and to accept it as normal, but there is also strong evidence indicating that it physically alters the brain. However, we are not without hope. As parents and educators, we must take action. It's up to us to make a difference.

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