MEDIA violence and Youth:

Impact of a Child's Exposure to Media Violence

As early as the 1970s, the United States Surgeon General advised parents to limit the exposure of their children to violent television shows and films. This advice was based on studies which indicated that watching violent television shows and films was linked to increased aggression in children and adolescents (Steinfeld, 1972).

Since that time, the media landscape has changed. New technologies, in combination with Internet connections, have increased children's access to a variety of content that they may view anytime, and anyplace. Scientific studies have revealed that violent content in video games, and on the internet, is also related to increased aggression in children and adolescents. A recent review of over 130 studies, with over 130,000 participants, demonstrated that on average, playing violent video games increased the chances of aggressive behavior by 10-20% (Anderson, 2010).

The Media Violence Commission appointed by the International Society for Research on Aggression found that the studies reviewed showed that exposure to violence in the media causes people to: behave more aggressively; experience more anger and hostility; think about aggression and violence more often; and/or become desensitized or "numb" to images of violence. Exposure to violence in the media has also been shown to decrease the chances that children will behave kindly or in an acceptable manner, and/or show appropriate self-control. Effects have been shown regardless of the type of medium (television, movies, video games, music, cartoons, etc.), age, gender or where the person lives in the world. Therefore, parents should limit the amount of time that children are exposed to violent content in the media, and on electronic devices (Report of the Media Violence Commission, 2012).

Symptoms of Overexposure to Violence

In the Joint Statement on the Impact of Entertainment Violence on Children, multiple medical groups, including the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Psychological Association, recognize that viewing entertainment violence can lead to an increase in aggressive attitudes, values and behaviors in children and adolescents. Children who are regularly exposed to violence through television, films, music or video games, may exhibit some of the following signs or symptoms of overexposure to violence (Warning Signs, 2013):

- ☐ An increase in rule breaking or disobedience
- ☐ Difficulties in school and truancy
- ☐ An increase in aggression
- ☐ More frequent nightmares and sleep disturbances
- ☐ Appearing immune or numb to violence
- ☐ Pro-violence attitudes
- ☐ An increase in self-protective behavior
- ☐ An increase in feelings of anxiety
- ☐ Antisocial attitude
- ☐ Dishonesty
- ☐ Hostility towards police
- ☐ Substance abuse
- ☐ Loss of ability to empathize with a victim
- ☐ Feelings of hopelessness and depression

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Predictors of Violent Behavior in Youth

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's Study Group on Serious and Violent Juvenile Offenders analyzed current research on predictors of youth violence, and determined that exposure to the following factors may increase likelihood (risk factors) that a child will engage in violent behavior (Hawkins, 2000).

Individual Risk Factors:

- ☐ Nervousness, withdrawal, worrying and anxiety
- ☐ Hyperactivity, concentration problems, restlessness and risk taking
- ☐ Aggressiveness
- ☐ Substance abuse
- ☐ Favorable attitude toward violence
- ☐ Involvement in nonviolent criminal offenses
- ☐ Hostility toward police
- ☐ Early initiation of violent behavior
- ☐ Deviant behavior, and anti-social beliefs and attitudes

Family Risk Factors:

- ☐ Parental criminality and/or mental health issues
- ☐ Child maltreatment
- ☐ Poor family management practices
- ☐ Lack of parental involvement
- ☐ High levels of family conflict
- ☐ Parental attitudes favorable to substance use and violence
- ☐ Parent-child separation
- ☐ Domestic violence

School Risk Factors:

- ☐ Academic failure
- ☐ Low bonding to school
- ☐ Chronic absenteeism and dropping out of school
- ☐ Frequent school transitions

Peer-Related Risk Factors:

- ☐ Delinquent siblings
- ☐ Delinquent peers
- ☐ Gang membership

Community and Neighborhood Factors:

- ☐ Poor socioeconomic conditions
- ☐ Community disorganization
- ☐ Availability of drugs and firearms
- ☐ Neighborhood adults involved in crime
- ☐ Exposure to or involvement in violence and racial prejudice

What can parents do?

Movies, television shows, computer and video games are created for users of different ages and maturity levels. Parents can protect children from exposure to violence on television, movies and other electronic devices by knowing what their children are watching. Before purchasing or allowing children to view media, parents are encouraged to preview the media; read video game reviews; ask other parents their opinions of new and popular video games; and check the rating symbols and content descriptions. Talking to older children about what they are viewing is also important.

Some television shows have content that may not be suitable for children. Parents can manage what shows children have access to by utilizing parental control options, which allow customers to restrict access to specific programs based on ratings, titles or channels. Further information on parental controls can be obtained from the cable provider.

The rating symbols and content descriptions of video games and cell phone applications (apps) can help parents select age and content appropriate games. The Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) considers a number of factors when assigning ratings, and will provide age recommendations such as: Early Childhood, Everyone, Teen, Mature and Adults only. ESRB ratings also include information about violent content. More information may be found at www.esrb.org.

Tips for Parents

- Talk with your children and help them to learn how to separate fantasy from reality.
- Watch your own viewing around young children.
- Set up video games and computers in common areas (i.e. in the living room, kitchen).
- View shows with your children and help them to understand what they are watching.
- Increase your children's engagement and interest in other activities that expand their imagination and develop their ability to solve problems.
- Play video games with your children and ask them about the game.
- Set limits on how often, and how long, your children may play video games or view television or movies
  - o 1-2 hours per day for children between the ages of 2 and 18
  - o None for children under the age of 2
- Be cautious with "online-enabled" games. Many popular games can be played with friends (and strangers) over the internet and are not rated by the ESRB.
- Monitor your children's on-line activity, social media and use of apps.
- Use password protection features to limit your children's access to electronic devices.
- Talk with the parents of your children's friends regarding acceptable use of electronic devices.
- Visit websites, like Common Sense Media, that provide parents with age-appropriate recommendations and information on the content of video games, movies, apps and videos. More information may be found at www.commonsensemedia.org.

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Resources used in the development of this pamphlet may be found at
http://www.nj.gov/education/students/safety/behavior/media.shtml