

Does the Punishment fit the Crime? What happens when the death penalty is not enough?

As authorities clamor over who will argue the case for death for the alleged perpetrators of the District of Columbia area spree killers, we struggle to understand how we as a society came to this point. Our community has just experienced a horror that has shaken our collective soul, and as forensic professionals, it is our duty to make sense of this.

Beginning in the 1990's The United States declared violence a public health epidemic (Fingerhut, Ingram, & Feldman, 1992; Osofsky, 1995; Osofsky, Wewers, Hann, & Fick, 1993; Prothow-Stith, 1991; Rosenberg & Fenley, 1991; Rosenberg, O'Carroll, & Powell, 1992). We have accomplished very little to address the nationwide crisis that has paralyzed us. We must address deviant behavior in the way we address medical ailments like Cancer and Heart disease. We must research its etiology, we must treat its victims and most importantly, we must develop empirically validated prevention programs and intervene at a very early age. How do we heal from tragedy? Most want to make all of this angst disappear by killing the perpetrators, however, we can only kill them once. Thirteen people were directly affected by this violence. How many million were indirectly affected by these acts? Does the punishment fit the crime? Will their death deter others? We must prevent this from happening again.

We all have to take some responsibility for preventing these heinous crimes, and we accomplish this by analyzing the ingredients for disaster. Society has planted the seed for violent behavior by exposing young children at an extremely young age to violent television programming. Hours and hours of television viewing are filled with violent acts, deviant behaviors, warped reasoning and a criminal code of ethics. Children are encouraged by our society through television viewing to glorify violent behavior, identify with the aggressor and to think up clever ways of engaging in deviant behavior without getting caught. They are exposed to violent cartoons, violent videogames and a violent genre of action/ adventure films and horror that is marked by gruesome murders. They glimpse into the psyche of killers and revel in character development that is flawless down to the last detail.

Despite the countless studies introducing controversy into the role of television and aggression, Psychology has explained this phenomenon. According to Bandura's social learning theory and specifically, observational learning, children learn through the imitation and internalization of observing the behavior of others (Bandura, 1973). Through violent media, children learn to imitate and internalize the capacity to engage in violent acts (Widom, 1989). They practice these skills over and over by engaging in countless hours of violent videogames, and ruminate on aggressive thoughts and behaviors (Anderson & Dill, 2000). Action for Children's television was founded on the

belief that children have the capacity to learn from their television viewing (Charren, 1968). That visionary concept is the rubric for today's Public Television children's programming, Sesame Street, and other shows are designed to impart pro-social knowledge and model pro-social behavior. If we believe that these programs are effective, then we must believe that violent programming is being modeled for children in ways that they can imitate. Is it accidental that violent criminals are being born of this age of #1 shows focused on the criminal mind, realistic violent games that encourage fantasy and creativity focused on deviance, and adventure games such as Laser tag (Anderson & Dill, 2000). It seems like a logical conclusion.

How does a child make the leap from fantasy to reality? Developmental psychologists' would posit that at an early age the two are indistinguishable. Children grow to appreciate the difference between fantasy and reality as they mature and are assisted by adult explanation (Singer et.al., 1988). Early exposure to violence contributes to desensitization to criminal acts and normalizes violence in ways that are abnormal. Physiological theories of adaptation to stress suggest that an adrenaline rush is associated with viewing violent acts and at this critical stage of development pairs excitement with engaging in violence (Linz, Donnerstein & Adams, 1989). This excitement gained from an insatiable appetite to view, in a voyeuristic way, violent subject matter, coupled with a genre of violent video-games that encourages hours of practice of engaging in violent acts- however distanced-leads to further desensitization.

Again, how do some children leap from fantasy to reality? After many hours logged on violent videogames, many school-aged children have been excited by the advent of Laser tag and Paintball. This game brings children one-step closer to engaging in violent acts. Children have the opportunity to act out on a team or as individuals with a goal of neutralizing (killing) their opponents with toy weapons that mirror automatic weapons.

Since it is so exhaustive to cope with the aftermath of violent behavior, the toll it takes on our society and our collective emotional well-being; it is necessary to expend effort on prevention, character building, altruistic endeavors, mentoring, and empathy. We must develop programs that promote observational learning and model pro-social behavior to youngsters at early ages to combat the bombardment by violent television programming and violent videogames. We must target youngsters early and often with pro-social behavior, in the manner that deviant behavior has been demonstrated to them. Despite the many controversial studies about the relationship between television violence and aggressive behavior, logic dictates that we examine this area more vigorously. Even if a small percentage of children experience what is posited in this study, it is in society's' best interest to attempt to shield children from this dangerous and influential material.

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