

Psychologists' study finds TV ratings for kids' shows don't reflect aggressive content

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Iowa State psychology professor Douglas Gentile has done past studies on the effects of violent media on youth. Photo by Dave Gieseke

(PhysOrg.com) -- A new study by psychologists from Iowa State University and Linfield College has found that TV ratings don't accurately reflect the aggressive content found in shows popular among children -- even cartoons.

Jennifer Linder, associate professor of psychology at Linfield; and Douglas Gentile, assistant professor of psychology at Iowa State, conducted the study of 95 fifth-grade girls from three Oregon elementary schools and their favorite TV shows. They found higher levels of physical aggression in designated children's programs (rated TV-Y and TV-Y7) than among programs for general audiences (rated TV-G, TV-PG, etc.).

"Parents assume that higher ratings indicate more aggression, but the TV ratings don't measure what parents expect that they measure," said Gentile, who is also director of research for the Minneapolis-based National Institute on Media and the Family.

The study, which is published online in the March/April issue of the Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, was the first to report a link between viewing TV verbal aggression and a child's resulting verbal aggression. The results also showed exposure to televised physical aggression was associated with a variety of negative behaviors in the fifth-grade girls, according to reports by their teachers.

"Another problem is that the ratings do not provide information about other types of aggression, such as verbal or indirect aggression," Gentile said. "This is a problem because we know from this study and others that these types of televised aggression also affect children."

The researchers had the fifth-grade girls nominate their favorite television programs and frequency of viewing. Each of the 76 nominated programs was then analyzed for content showing indirect, physical and verbal aggression. Behaviors in which harm was intended were coded as acts of aggression -- even if that aggression was indirect.

"Indirect aggression is identified as harmful behaviors that are non-physical," Linder said. "These include attempts to harm through techniques such as rumor-spreading, social exclusion and ignoring."

The content analyses of the programs were then compared with their respective industry ratings. TV-Y7 programs -- those designed for children seven years of age or older, including cartoons such as "Digimon," "Pokmon," and "Scooby Doo" -- were found to contain the highest level of physical violence, nearly three times as much as the next highest category (TV-14). Linder and Gentile conclude that the ratings'

"fantasy violence" (FV) label for animated violence is misleading and may actually serve to increase children's access to harmful violent content by reducing parental concern.

The researchers also compared the types of programs a child viewed with their teacher's report on their aggressive and prosocial behaviors. They found a strong link between the viewing of TV aggression and children's aggressive behavior.

"There's ample evidence that physical aggression on television is associated with increases in aggressive behavior," Linder said. "But there was little until this study that has shown a link between televised indirect aggression and resulting aggression among American children."

The authors argue that indirect aggression should be addressed in any future improvements to the ratings systems, and this would be a good time to do that -- particularly with the upcoming digital broadcast conversion of the television airwaves.

"This is one more piece of evidence suggesting that the next stage in the evolution of TV, movie and video game ratings is to have one universal rating system that could be applied across media," Gentile said. "With digital convergence, different media are all going to be on the same box pretty soon, so the idea that they needed to be rated separately is really not particularly valid -- especially when the things that parents care about are the same across all of those media."

The complete study is available online at:
www.DrDouglas.org/page_resources_papers.html .

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