



Impact of TV Violence on Children in India

KEYWORDS

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Television is one of the most prevalent media that influences kids lives. While television can be a powerful tool for educating children about the responsibilities and risks of sexual behavior, such issues are seldom mentioned or dealt with. AN EIGHT-year-old girl was engrossed in watching a television Programme. She didn't notice the little boy, just a year elder to her and from the same neighborhood, sidling up to her. "There's a nice place behind the fairground. Come with me." The unsuspecting child went along. An hour later, the girl was seen wandering about naked and bleeding.

The nine-year-old boy had coaxed her to accompany him to a secluded spot, forced her to strip and watched as two slightly older boys aged 12 and 14 raped her. He watched the entire incident like they do it in the movies where the main villain is trying to outrage modesty of the heroine and his accomplices are silently watching for enjoyment. In another incident, a thirteen-year-old girl was walking on a deserted road in Raidighi, near Calcutta, when four boys (three of them class X students) accosted her. The boys dragged her to a nearby paddy field and raped her. Two of them were later arrested. In Kanpur, a seven-year-old child killed a three-old-girl by drowning her in a pond. In both the cases, the children admitted being influenced by watching television programmers. Violence among school children is also growing in India. These incidents have once again brought the debate to the centre stage. An eighth grader student stabbed another student in the shoulder and chest at Central School No1, a government school in New Delhi. In December, a 14-year-old boy was fatally shot by two other boys in a hallway of the upscale Euro International School in Gurgaon, Haryana. In a replay of that crime, a 15-year-old student at a government school in the state of Madhya Pradesh was shot dead by a 17-year-old classmate in January. What is happening to India's children? A string of gruesome shockers in the last few years point to a dangerous trend of killer children, young mischief-makers moving away from previously petty crimes to more serious offences like dacoity, rape and murder. This stark fact has prompted a long overdue focus upon what conditions in our society could precipitate such an unthinkable action. The need to ask 'why' is central to the human conditions. The eight-year-old girl's case is a warning bell for us to evaluate the situation more carefully – rape by children after viewing a video. Many have asked despairingly, how we can even come to terms with it. We can only begin to do so by facing it squarely and considering what might be done to ensure that she is not just the first of many such victims. It is of course, more comforting that the four boys who rape the eight-year-old girl are 'evil freaks', as some section of the press described them. Similarly, one might describe these children who lacked any sense of pity or moral control as the equivalent of an adult psychopath: but does it not defy belief that four children 'just found each other'? The police investigations showed that the act was long drawn out and merciless. These details are to be remembered, much as one would like to forget them, because of what they imply: that is this crime there was both the expectation and the attainment of satisfaction of some sort through doing deliberate and sustained violence to a small girl whose distress was unremit-

ting. It would be quite unlikely that any single cause for these children's behavior could be identified, although possible contributing factors might be offered; for instance, experts suggested the effects of physical abuse, severe emotional neglect resulting in lack of self worth, deprivation, poverty, negligence and exposure to sadistic movie videos and television watching. However, child negligence and poverty have been a part of many children's experience over the years in India. What then can be seen as the 'different' factor that has entered the lives of countless children and adolescents in recent years? This has to be recognized as the easy availability to children of gross images of violence on video. Over the past few years, considerable anxiety has been expressed by those professionally concerned with children about the effects of 'horror', 'sex and violence', 'soft porn' and similar scenes experienced by children via videos seen in their own or their friends home. Justice J S Verma, former Chief Justice of India, identified children's access to sadistic videos as cause for concern following the eight-year-old girl's case.

Where formerly children were said to see them 'by accident' or in defiance of parental edicts, it is now clear that many children watch adult videos on a regular basis with or without their parents knowledge and that many parents make less than strenuous efforts to restrict their children's viewing. Research studies over the year the world over have brought out various types of negative impact of intense viewing of television by children. The direct influence of TV viewing on the extent of violence and deviant behaviour pattern of children has been reiterated – even in India. In fact, there are couple of confessions by adolescents, even a biography, as to how they picked up ideas about a rape or robbery or revenge or killing or suicide or kidnap, etc from one or other TV programme. Even some court judgments have commented on such effect of TV programmers. That TV has a double-edged effect and that it is the negative character, which impacts more than positive potential often is known. But what is not realized is that there are no serious efforts to explore positive virtues of TV and that parents who should be more concerned about such a phenomena hardly do anything about it. A study carried out by Dr Rao of Centre for Media Studies pointed out that in Punjab and Uttar Pradesh; parents enjoy the same fare of TV along with their children and as keenly; whereas in Tamilnadu and West Bengal, parents try to restrain their children in favor of some discriminative viewing. Teachers and social activists in a couple of places have been occasionally demonstrating about the influence of television contents. Political parties too do not seem to be concerned to do something about. Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), however, had referred to this adverse trend in its election manifesto a few years ago. But did nothing after coming to power. Besides Doordarshan, Zee TV independent station broadcasting from Bombay since 1992--uses satellite transmissions. Other networks that have joined the fray are: Cable News Network (CNN--starting in 1990); Asia Television Network (1991); Hong Kong-based Star TV (1991); EL TV, a spin-off of Zee TV in Bombay (1994); HTV, an affiliate of the Hindustan Times in New Delhi (1994); and Sun TV, a Tamil-language service in Chennai (1994). Of late many new players have entered the arena. Television is one of the

most prevalent media that influences kids' lives. According to some estimates, watching TV is a daily pastime for 85 per cent of Indian children, both boys and girls from grade three to grade 10. India has nearly 220 million children between the age group of five to 16 years and nearly 77 million of them are out of school. And their favourite pass time is to watch videos. How much impact TV has on children depends on many factors: how much they watch, their age and personality, whether they watch alone or with adults, and whether their parents discuss with them about what they see on TV.

Kids today are bombarded with sexual messages and images in all media—television, magazines, advertisements, music, movies and the Internet. Parents are rarely concerned about whether these messages are healthy or not. While television can be a powerful tool for educating young people about the responsibilities and risks of sexual behaviour, such issues are seldom mentioned or dealt within a meaningful way in programmes containing sexual content. More than half of television viewers in India today are children below 15 years. And yet there is hardly any sensitivity about the relevance and impact of what is dished out by various television channels. All of them are operating in a competitive mode for television rating points (TRPs). In this way, channels are concerned more about 'what interests or attracts' rather than what is 'in the interest' of the children. Neither the government nor the parents or the teachers seem to be concerned about this situation. For the generation next and the civil society of the country is shaped and molded by what they are exposed to today on the 'idiot-box' days in and days out. Dr N Bhaskar Rao, Centre for Media Studies, pointed out that, "It is unfortunate that the government has neither taken pro-active or re-active initiatives in this regard. While we have a Children's Film Society to promote films for children and a Children's Book Trust, we have none for television despite the number of children who see television is several times more and, even more critically, the frequency of their viewing television is more than a couple of hours a day."

There must be special concern when children (or adults, for that matter) are repeatedly exposed to images of vicious cruelty in the context of entertainment and amusement. The situation calls for systematic research in order to keep pace with both the growth of violence in children and the growth of violent visual material available to them. The two polarized views on the powers of television are indicative of the intensity of the discussion that the issue has generated. In general, the effects of mass media, especially portrayals of violence in them, have been the subjects of worldwide public and academic discussion for several decades now. But at the centre of this discussion, almost invariably, is television as it has taken a significant place in our lives more than any other mass medium. Indian children watch an average of three to four hours of television daily. Television can be a powerful influence in developing value systems. But are our policy makers listening?