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Dear Colleague:

For years, we have talked about the need to look at each individual child or adolescent, in part because their developmental trajectory can be so different. But child and adolescent behavior never occurs in a vacuum. It is contextual, so we need to examine the unique environment surrounding that child. In this month's newsletter, we discuss the impact on parents who watch movies with explicit violence and sex. The research found that: 1) the more these parents watch, the more they become desensitized to violence and sex in the movies and 2) after such desensitization, these parents are more willing to allow their children to view such content at younger and younger ages. Therefore, we need to work with parents on their viewing decisions and that can be as important as working with the children and youth in your care.

As always, if you have any other questions or suggestions for future newsletter topics, please don't hesitate to contact us.

Sincerely, Joan Tabachnick and Steven Bengis

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## **Parental Decision Making: The Impact of Watching Sexual and Violent Movies**

by Steven Bengis, David S. Prescott, and Joan Tabachnick

### **The Question**

Does parents' desensitization to violence and sex in the movies affect their decisions to allow their children to watch movies with violent and sexual content?

### **The Research**

Romer, Jamieson, Bushman, Bleakley, Wang, Langleben, and Jamieson, worked with 1,000 parents, asking them to view three pairs of short film clips depicting sexual or violent scenes with a PG-13 or R rating. Parents then reported the minimum age they would consider appropriate to view that footage. The results showed that as parents were exposed to progressively more violent film clips, they reported increasingly younger ages of appropriate viewing of these films. Before viewing the films, the average age of viewing was 16.8 years for violence and 17.2 years for sexual content. After the parents viewed a variety of film clips, the age for viewing dropped dramatically to 13.9 years for violence and 14.0 years for sexual content. In other words, the more movie clips the parents watched, the younger they felt the viewership could be. Furthermore, the researchers found that older parents and those who started out being more restrictive seemed to stay sensitized to the sex and violence in movies.

The results support the notion that there is a basic reduction in emotional responses when viewing

larger quantities of films with depictions of sex and violence. This desensitization appears to transfer from fictional media to real-life violence. The researchers also found that the desensitization to violence and sex can accrue over time so that parents can become less disturbed by violent and sexual content in film and thereby allow younger and younger children to view those films. As parents become less likely to shield their children from violence and sex, these children also become desensitized to these depictions at younger and younger ages. The researchers also suggest that as children become desensitized, it could reduce their empathy and concern for the suffering of others, encourage more aggressive responses to conflict, and also lead to early sexual initiation.

#### **BOTTOM LINE:**

The more parents watch movies with explicit violence and sex, the more these parents become desensitized to movie violence and sex. What is the impact? After desensitization, these parents are more willing to allow their children to view such content at younger and younger ages.

#### **Implications for Professionals**

While the impact of visual media on young people's behavior remains controversial, this research moves us forward to explore early exposure to sexual and violent imagery with both parents and our clients. While that exploration is taking place retrospectively, it is also important as part of future risk management. While this is an area a professional might explore with their client and the client's family, asking about parental viewing habits might not be as commonplace. Furthermore, the research suggests that part of creating a safe space for sexually aggressive adolescents is educating parents about the impact of viewing violent and/or sexual content may have on their own decision-making process. Setting conscious guidelines in treatment may also be an essential component of safety planning.

#### **Implications for the Field**

Understanding the etiology of sexual abuse in an individual client is complex. However, early exposure to sexual and violent imagery, in the absence of strong mitigating protective factors, certainly may contribute to the attitudes and behaviors of the clients and families with whom we work. This research offers a very important directional guideline for our field, suggesting that the viewing habits of parents should: 1) become a standard line of inquiry for risk assessment protocols, particularly with younger children who exhibit problematic sexual behavior; and, 2) become a component of our overall strategy for sexual abuse and violence prevention.

#### **Abstract**

**OBJECTIVES:** To assess desensitization in parents' repeated exposure to violence and sex in movies.

**METHODS:** A national US sample of 1000 parents living with at least 1 target child in 1 of 3 age groups (6 to 17 years old) viewed a random sequence of 3 pairs of short scenes with either violent or sexual content from popular movies that were unrestricted to youth audiences (rated PG-13 or unrated) or restricted to those under age 17 years without adult supervision (rated R). Parents indicated the minimum age they would consider appropriate to view each film. Predictors included order of presentation, parent and child characteristics, and parent movie viewing history.

**RESULTS:** As exposure to successive clips progressed, parents supported younger ages of appropriate exposure, starting at age 16.9 years (95% confidence interval [CI], 16.8 to 17.0) for violence and age 17.2 years (95% CI, 17.0 to 17.4) for sex, and declining to age 13.9 years (95% CI, 13.7 to 14.1) for violence and 14.0 years (95% CI, 13.7 to 14.3) for sex. Parents also reported increasing willingness to allow their target child to view the movies as exposures progressed. Desensitization was observed across parent and child characteristics, violence toward both human and non-human victims, and movie rating. Those who frequently watched movies were more readily

desensitized to violence.

CONCLUSIONS: Parents become desensitized to both violence and sex in movies, which may contribute to the increasing acceptance of both types of content by both parents and the raters employed by the film industry.

#### Citation

Romer, D., Jamieson, P.E., Bushman, B.J., Bleakley, A., Wang, A., Langleben, D., and Jamieson, K.H. (2014). Parental Desensitization to Violence and Sex in Movies. *Pediatrics*. DOI: 10.1542/peds.2014-1167.

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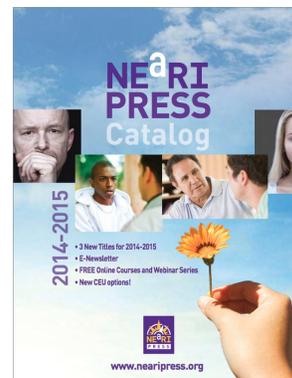
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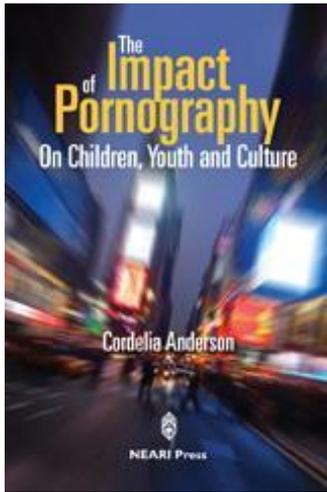
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December 16, 2014

3:00 PM EDT

With Joan Tabachnick

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