

# A new way to say goodbye

## Effects of TV violence on play, behaviour, and interaction

It was an ordinary preschool day. A child was going home early with his dad, and the other children were sitting at the tables, having their lunches. As the leaving child approached the door to go home, there was much calling out of goodbyes and yahoos like 'bring us some chocolate cake' from the four-year-olds at the tables. Then one child called out a last reminder to his friend: 'Don't forget to kill yourself!'

There was an instant hush in the playroom. No child volunteered that he or she had uttered these words. I explained to the group that this was not a nice thing to call out to a friend. The usual lunchtime chatting then resumed. But the staff of Dorrigo Preschool, a one-unit centre on the North Coast of NSW, remained shocked. We were aware that youth suicides are on the increase in rural Australia, but would preschoolers know about these things? How early do thoughts about suicide begin? We decided to get to the bottom of the children's unusual 'goodbye'.

As staff we did much thinking and talking and concluded that a notion such as killing oneself could have originated in one of the violent TV shows the children may have been watching. I asked each child which was their favourite TV program, and what other programs they might be watching. We made a chart of favourite programs, and drew our favourite TV characters. We recorded an interview with a group of children who liked violent shows. They said they believed in *real* goodies and baddies. One of the boys said you could tell a baddie by

their black faces, and a girl thought that you could die only on TV and not in real life.

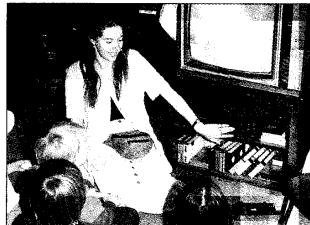
At this stage we decided to have a parent night on the issue of TV violence. During a staff meeting we designed a before and after questionnaire. We video-taped and condensed the violent scenes from two favourite shows (*Hercules* and *Xena*), and taped other children's shows—including the commercials which appeared during these shows. We researched some literature dealing with the issue of TV and violence, and put together a set of overheads. We also compiled a handout which parents could take home.

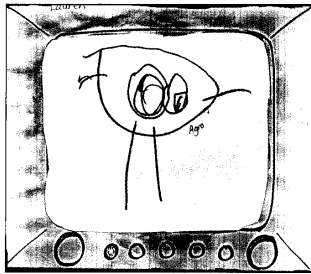
### *We video-taped and condensed the violent scenes from two favourite shows ... including the commercials*

On the night, I welcomed the parents and explained that we had no answers to TV violence and its effects. This issue was bigger than all of us: a cultural problem of an unfathomable magnitude. Parents then listened to our tape-recorded interview of their children's views on TV violence. They watched the condensed 15 minutes of punching, hitting, head-kicking and head-butting (neither parents nor staff could stomach much of this). Parents looked at a weekly TV program in order to work out how many hours their child watched in a day, a week, a month, and a year (very few parents actually completed this confronting activity). And they read factual overheads on TV violence.

Most parents welcomed the parent night although a few seemed to feel threatened by our presentation. These parents challenged some facts we had gathered, claiming that their children were not affected by violence. They believed that TV news was good viewing for children because it was *real* and would prepare them for life. They also thought that playing with guns was innocent fun. Their argument was that children knew it was just a game, and that everyone had always played fighting games such as cowboys and Indians. I agreed that these games had always been played, and asked these parents to consider the present state of peace on our planet in terms of those games.

At the end of the evening we discussed our impressions and experiences, and parents then filled in a questionnaire. What was apparent was the feeling of powerlessness parents felt in exercising restrictions over their children's television viewing. There appeared to be ongoing conflict in most families between parent and child about the amount of viewing and which programs should be viewed. The limits were constantly being tested, and children often quoted their friends as authorities: 'He's allowed to watch it. Why can't I?'





The questionnaire was a useful feedback. The answers showed that, although many parents felt they were aware of the issues we had dealt with, most of them had been surprised by something that had been revealed during the evening. Some of the surprises included the actual amount of TV their children watched and the graphic portrayal of violence on TV. Some parents expressed disillusionment: they had thought that, if a program was aired during children's TV time slots, it would be 'good for them'. As one parent stated: 'We are often "cheated" when so-called children's programs portray violence and are a complete opposite to all the values we try to instil in our children.' Some parents expressed amazement at the taped interview with the children. The mother of the child who thought that all baddies are black was shocked. She had always tried to instill tolerance towards others in her child. Some parents were shocked at the programs other parents allowed their children to watch, others again expressed dismay when they saw how cleverly TV commercials manipulated the minds of their children. I concluded the evening by asking the parents to go home and think about these revelations and bring back possible solutions.

Feedback was immediate. The next morning one parent offered to collate a list of those sponsors who advertised during violent children's programs and organise a letter of protest. Some parents acted that same morning by restricting their child's TV viewing before preschool. And one mum

wanted us to publish something in the local paper so that the whole community could participate in the debate. One child, who would normally watch three hours of television, was now only allowed to watch half an hour. The mother reported that he went to sleep at 8.30 p.m. now instead of the usual 10.30 p.m. As she talked, it did occur to me that perhaps some children are too frightened to go to sleep. Perhaps they expect that these things may really happen one day. I thought of the challenging children I had met, and wondered whether they saw the world as a hostile place, just like in Ninja Turtle land. And because TV is often used as a welcome babysitter, most of the time no one is there to remind the children that what they see is just 'pretend'.

Although the children who attended last year have since left for school, I spoke to one mum who had come to the parent night with her husband. Their child's behaviour had been quite aggressive, and few children liked him. After the parent night, they sat down to watch the morning cartoons with their son and immediately banned all morning cartoon viewing. They reported that his behaviour at home had settled considerably. The long-term effect on this family has been that this child is still not watching morning cartoons one year later. His behaviour is lovely, and he is now well-accepted by his peers.

What started off as a chance remark turned into a much-needed unearthing of a deep problem—television versus the family. Through our parent night, we empowered parents to regain control of their children's viewing habits. We also shared our responsibilities: the staff gathered facts, but asked the parents for help in solving the problem. And we have acted on one of their suggestions by publishing our story.

*Mimi Wellisch  
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**Further reading**  
Levin, D.E. (1994) *Teaching Children in Violent Times*. Cambridge, MA:ESR.

### Steven's story

Four-year old Steven's behaviour at preschool had been very challenging. He made no eye-contact with adults, defiantly refused to say 'sorry' when he hurt other children, retorted 'I don't care' when we explained why his behaviour was unacceptable, and threatened us with annihilation. His body language was defiant, eyes half-shut in a threatening manner, legs apart, crossed arms. At times he turned his back to us. When I had run out of 'methods', I approached his mother in order to find out how she handled him. She said that Steven had a great sense of humour and she would just jolly him out of his moods. But we continued to have problems at preschool. The children did not know about having to jolly him, and his mother and I talked about this several times. She did tell me that she also found his behaviour difficult at home. We discussed why he may be angry. I thought that he appeared to be suspicious, tense, and over-reactive—as if the world was a dangerous place, and as if he was always having to be ready to defend himself.

One day she mentioned something about television. I asked her about Steven's favourite programs. He apparently loved Ninja Turtles and other aggressive shows. We agreed that his behaviour seemed to be based on such characters, and she decided to watch the programs with him. As they watched together, she pointed out that people do not do those violent things to one another, and expressed her displeasure at his watching 'such rubbish'. They watched other favourite shows together, and Steven's mum continued to point out how people are not like those characters. Steven began to see this for himself and eventually he gave up watching these shows, and asked his mother which shows she thought he *should* watch.

Steven's behaviour at preschool improved almost immediately, and continued to do so for the remainder of the year. He no longer needed to attack or defend, and preschool was no longer a dangerous war zone. His grumpy face became open and communicative, his eye-contact improved, and he displayed his delightful sense of humour with clever use of words.

Steven's mother came to our TV parent night and shared her experiences with other parents. Her input was very powerful, impressing a number of parents who could relate to her story.