MEDIA
STRESS

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In our media-saturated environment, every individual is bombarded by thousands of media messages each day with instant messaging, social networking and television perpetually jostling for attention and mind space. Often referred to as 'screenagers', adolescents today are the single largest consumers of the new media, spending about 6-8 hours on multimedia each day.

The Role of Media

Whether the media plays any role in spreading exacerbating aggression and violence has been an intensely-debated subject for decades now. Media and culture share a dynamic and reciprocal relationship. It would be naïve to believe that the media simply represents our reality; in truth, it goes a long way in shaping our reality too. In an environment where school shootings and copycat crimes are more common than ever, the possible contribution of the media can't be ignored. Analysis of television content has found that about 50-60 per cent television programmes contain violence. This aggression is not restricted to crime shows or horror films; it finds its way into seemingly harmless videogames and cartoons, catering almost singularly to the child and adolescent population. References to violent films and video games have surfaced time and again following every school shooting incident anywhere in the world. What is more worrying is that research has estimated that a pre-schooler, a child of about 3-5 years of age, who watches about 2 hours of cartoons each day would be exposed approximately to 10,000 violent incidents per year.

Children seldom misquote. In fact, they usually repeat word for word what you shouldn't have said. ~ Unknown

Portrayal of violence

Media portrayal of violence is grossly skewed; far removed and greatly dramatized in relation to real life violence. Not only is violence depicted more frequently in the media, a majority of aggressive acts are depicted to be committed by perpetrators who are attractive and idolized. It's not just the 'bad guys' who turn to violence; even the 'good guys' resort to violent means to resolve the problem at hand. As is seen in many cartoons and slapstick films, aggression is often juxtaposed with humour; and more often than not, the portrayal of the consequences of aggression is ominously absent.

To add to it, aggression in the media is not limited to obvious acts of physical violence. Other forms of aggression make their presence felt through the media in a more insidious manner. Dressed in the garb of harmless entertainment, thousands of aggressive media messages are absorbed unchecked and unfiltered. Aggressive acts are glamorized and viewed positively when carried out by idolized sportspersons. Healthy competition is replaced by outright hostility with reality television encourages youngsters to use abusive language to gain popularity and stardom, making it the norm. A careful attention to music lyrics and videos will reveal the extent to which the average adolescent, swayed by the popular music of the day, is exposed to violent, aggressive, and hateful messages.

Intent and interpretation

So what is it about the media that enthrals us and influences us the way it does? The concept of hyper-reality has been proposed as a hypothetical inability of our consciousness to differentiate reality from fantasy. The manner in which a single message is perceived, interpreted and assimilated varies from person to person, based on their social background, psychosocial experiences, cognitive abilities, and most importantly, their age. The ability to distinguish between fact and fiction is not a given feat; rather, it is a developmental feat, one that most pre-schoolers have not yet attained. Therefore, even while most media messages possess no intent of propagating or encouraging violence, they are often misinterpreted by naïve and impressionable children.

That humans learn through imitation and observation has been widely established over decades of research. Albert Bandura, a pioneer in the field of social psychological research found that children who view aggressive acts are more likely to behave aggressively themselves. Taking it a step further, it has been noted that this kind of observational learning is influenced by the consequences of the viewed aggression, i.e., if children observe negative consequences being meted out for an aggressive act, they would be less likely to imitate the same. What is unfortunate, then, is that most violence in the media is not followed up by a depiction of its consequences – the aftermath of violent situations depicts no remorse, guilt, or penalty for the perpetration of violence. Neither do they show non-violent alternatives to resolving the same problems.

Desensitization against negative effects of violence

The second aspect related to violence in media is the effect it has on children. Typically, viewing violent acts leads to some amount of psychological and physiological arousal, and this sense of arousal is usually undesirable and a source of discomfort. What has happened now, however, is that with the

repetitive viewing of violent acts, this arousal has weakened. Children have become increasingly habituated to violence, desensitizing them against its negative effects. The media has made violence usual and mundane. Very often, violent situations in the media present no harm to the victims and many depict no pain. Put these two together, and the situation that arises is a lack of empathy and relatedness for the victim of any kind of violence.

Our role as parents, educators and citizens

Today, the media has created a culture that normalizes aggression and glorifies violence. Violence and aggression in the youth is no longer a far-away, nebulous concept but a stark reality that begs our attention and a serious re-examination of our social and educational fabric. The media has made many positive contributions to society. The media is extremely powerful and is guided by principles of profitability. And the media is a reality that we can't escape. It's not just children who get swayed; look within and we realize that even as intelligent and responsible adults, we too get swayed by media messages – we all get taken in by what we otherwise know are unrealistic promises of fairness, good health and popularity. The media, we all know, is a powerful force. It is then up to us, as parents, as educators and as responsible citizens, to help children learn the skills necessary to navigate through today's media influence, to filter the good from the bad, and to grow up to be responsible adults themselves.

Media isn't all bad; there is a lot that students can learn from media exposure. However, the problem that has arisen is that while media and technology are bringing about societal changes at a pace that is difficult to keep up with, we have not equipped today's generation with the skills necessary to cope with the changes and challenges these developments bring forth. The need of the hour then is to make children and adolescents media literate. Media literacy is a relatively new concept that is increasingly gaining popularity. Central to the concept of media literacy is the ability to think critically. Media messages are tailored to appeal to our biases and our gaps in processing. Media literacy is the ability to reverse this natural and instinctive human thought process – to encourage children to stop and think about what is really being communicated – consciously or subconsciously. Rather than being passive receivers of unprocessed and unfiltered information, encourage children to take a step back and ask themselves some questions. Who produced the message? What is the purpose of this message? Who might benefit from this message? What might be the gain? Are all reports unbiased? Is it possible that different people might perceive this message differently than I might? What stereotypes does this kind of media promote? What kind of lifestyle does this media message encourage? Media literacy is not necessarily about having all the right answers, but instead, about asking the right questions.

Parents often complain that their children spend too much time in front of the television, playing too many videogames or spending too much time on the internet. As a potential solution, parents may impose a ban on watching certain kinds of television programmes, or maybe ban viewing television altogether. The problem that arises with this technique is that it isn't possible to monitor a child

24 hours a day. Added to that, banning one particular show is only going to add to the child's curiosity and desire to watch that programme. Instead of imposing restrictions, a better idea would be for parents to watch such programmes with their children and use otherwise objectionable scenes as learning moments. Be it in a cartoon or a film, it's important for parents to talk to their child about what they're watching. Encourage them to think about the consequences of aggression. Ask them to think about how they would feel if such a thing were done to them. Engaging the child in this manner can help the child appreciate the complexity of aggression, understand its adverse conflicts, both for the perpetrator and the victim, and eventually foster empathy and relatedness towards others.

Imparting appropriate skills

At the same time, it's essential for parents to impart skills of healthy conflict resolution. Through the modelling of appropriate behaviour in the home environment and by discussions around viewed experiences, children can be taught the difference between communicating and behaving assertively as opposed to aggressively. The ability to tolerate frustration, to navigate differences in opinion, to reconcile interpersonal conflicts and to express one's feelings and concerns without resorting to aggressive or violent behaviour are all skills that children can be taught through healthy media exposure.

At the same time, media literacy must be introduced as a part of school curriculum across the board. It would be a good idea for teachers to take some time out of their packed academic schedule to discuss what children watch on television and what they hear on the news. Children need to be given hands-on experiential training on how to critically analyse media messages, to weigh the pros and cons and to make active and informed decisions. This kind of training can only be effective if it's practical, application-based, grounded in the experienced reality of the youth.

We have been conducting workshops on media literacy as a part of our Peer Moderator workshops, and have seen adolescents been keen to learn this, and enjoy becoming more 'media literate'! I believe the media literacy work needs to be done with schools across all segments as we need to empower the youth with skills to be able to prevent the harmful effects of the media and at the same time, learn to pick up the beneficial aspects.

A need for change

To tackle the problem of growing aggression in children and adolescents, the change has to be brought about at every level. We need to introduce workshops and interactive discussions on the subject in schools, and in the community at large. A particularly effective strategy is for students themselves to be transformed into effective role models for their peers and juniors; to encourage pro social attitudes and behaviours. At the same time, change can only come about if parents and teachers come together to lobby against current social media practices. What we need is stronger censorship and what we deserve is more sensible content.

What is most important to remember is that aggression is a learnt response. Children do what children see being done around them. What children need are positive role models. If the media can't provide today's youth with such role models, social responsibility of being effective role models falls on each and every one of us.

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