



***Public Health Summit  
on Entertainment Violence***  
Washington, DC, July 26, 2000

Michael Rich, MD, MPH, FAAP  
American Academy of Pediatrics

PHOTO ABOVE: AAP Committee on Public Education Member Michael Rich, MD, MPH (left) makes a point about interactive games while Rep. Tim Roemer (D-Ind) and Sen. Sam Brownback (R-Kansas) listen during a July 26 entertainment violence summit in Washington DC.

### **Part 1 – Television and Movies**

Good afternoon. I want to thank Senators Brownback, Byrd and Conrad, and Congressmen Coburn and Roemer for having the concern and the vision to convene this summit.

As pediatricians, my colleagues and I are fortunate in that the great majority of our work is with healthy young bodies and minds. For the most part, our job as physicians is not to heal disease, but to maintain health and offer anticipatory guidance about risks. For children and adolescents in the year 2000, violence is the most prevalent health risk. Homicide, suicide and accidents are the top three causes of death for those 15 - 24 years old. Each year over 150,000 adolescents are arrested for violent crimes, more than 300,000 are seriously assaulted, and 3,500 are murdered.

Research has shown that the strongest factor contributing to violent behavior is previous exposure to violence. Violence seen as a hero's means of resolving conflicts and portrayed without realistic pain and suffering is the most likely to be emulated. The National Television Violence Survey over the years 1995-97 showed that interpersonal violence was portrayed in 61% of all broadcast TV, with children's TV being the most violent. In my own research, more than 80% of the violence in broadcast music videos was perpetrated by attractive protagonists against disproportionate numbers of women and African-Americans. Even a G rating is not safe. Recent research revealed that fully 100% of all animated feature films produced in the U.S. since 1937 portray violence.

Of more than 3,500 research studies conducted over the past forty years, all but 18 have shown a positive correlation between media exposure and violent behavior. Some findings:

- Epidemiologists studying factors associated with violence, including poverty, racial discrimination, substance abuse, inadequate schools, joblessness and family dissolution, found that exposure to violent media was a factor in half of the 10,000 homicides committed each year.

- 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> graders were observed before and after television was introduced to their remote town. Their aggression levels increased 160% after two years of TV exposure.
- A study begun in the early 1960s found that boys who watched more television had higher levels of aggression at age 8, a history of aggressive behavior at age 19, and were more violent with their children and had been convicted of more violent crime by age 30.

The findings of hundreds of studies, analyzed as a whole, showed the strength of the relationship between television exposure and aggressive behavior to be greater than that of calcium intake and bone mass, condom non-use and sexually transmitted HIV, lead exposure and lower I.Q., or passive tobacco smoke and lung cancer, associations upon which we routinely base public health interventions.

Children learn the ways of the world by observing and imitating -- they cannot help but be influenced by media. Exposure to media violence results in an increased acceptance of violence as an appropriate means of conflict resolution. Media exaggerate the prevalence of violence in the world, strong motivation to protect oneself by carrying a weapon and being more aggressive. The most insidious and potent effect of media violence is to desensitize viewers to “real life” violence and to the harm caused its victims. A 1999 study found that the average child between 3 and 18 years old spent 6 hours and 43 minutes each day with TV, video or computer games, more time than they spent in school, with parents, or engaged in any other activity than sleep. In the global village of the Information Age, the media have become a “superpeer.” With greater access and time to shape young people’s attitudes and actions, television, movies and video games have replaced parents and teachers as educators, role models, and sources of information about the world and how one behaves in it. I will close with some examples of popular films that our children and teenagers are watching.

*“Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom” James Bond “The World is Not Enough”  
“Scream 3” “Fight Club” “Payback” “American History X”*

## **Part 2 – Interactive Media**

On April 20, 1999, two heavily armed adolescent boys walked into Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado and shot to death 12 of their schoolmates and a teacher before killing themselves. When authorities investigated, they discovered that the boys had used weapons similar to those issued in their favorite “first person shooter” video game. Their own versions of the game had been modified to occur in a layout identical to that of their high school with the yearbook photographs of their schoolmates electronically pasted onto the game’s imaginary victims. Michael Carneal, a 14-year-old who never held a real gun in his life but who was an expert video gamer, stole a pistol, walked into his Paducah, Kentucky middle school and shot eight of his schoolmates with deadly accuracy. In this brief excerpt from *60 Minutes*, a former West Point professor of the psychology of killing explains the connection between video games and real-life violence.

*Video games clip*

Some facts about interactive media:

- Video game revenues are \$10 billion a year, larger than that of television and movies, and they are increasing.
- Fantasy or human violence is the most popular type of video game among children, 50% of 4<sup>th</sup> graders choose “first person shooter” video games as their favorites.
- Research to date indicates that interactive media have an even more potent and lasting effect on violent behavior than passive media forms like television and movies. After playing violent video games, children become desensitized to violence and act hostile toward others.
- Desensitization increases with greater realism of media violence – newer generations of video games are using better graphics capabilities to increase the gore, showing blood and body parts, or to add digital images such as recognizable faces on victims.

What can we do about media violence? In a free society, censorship is unthinkable, unconstitutional, and ultimately unsuccessful. However, as House Speaker Dennis Hastert stated, “Free expression does not necessarily have to lead to moral chaos. Let us join together in finding ways to help parents raise their children to be good, productive citizens.” When this country was founded, it was determined that all Americans should be educated to read and write, because only through literacy could we be good citizens and keep our country free. Today, we receive over 95% of our information from non-print media. To protect ourselves and our children from undue influence, we must become media literate. With a few simple lessons, even the youngest child can understand how media work on us. Media literacy allows us to view critically and avoid being manipulated. Understanding the influence that certain media content can have on us, we can choose our media thoughtfully, avoiding content that has negative effects and bringing market forces to bear on this public health threat. The young people of this country drink in media, all day, every day. What would we do if we discovered that the water our children drank was full of factors toxic to their physical and mental health? The question for consumers and producers of media is simple: in what kind of environment do we want our children to grow up?

In 1964, the Surgeon General of the United States issued a statement which, for the first time, linked lung cancer, emphysema, and heart disease with tobacco use. In 1972, the Surgeon General published a similar statement, calling for research and intervention on media exposure as a serious public health problem. Over the past four decades, America’s response to the Surgeon General’s tobacco statement, by health care providers, by educators, by legislators, and by society at large, has been profound. The attitudes and behaviors of our society have changed and millions of unnecessary deaths have been prevented. Until recently, the response to the Surgeon General’s media statement has not generated a similar response. As one prominent media researcher has stated, there is no need for further research on media and violence -- the evidence is overwhelming. The time has come to act, to learn from the public health success of tobacco intervention and to combat the public health threats of the Information Age. Thank you.