

Sex and Violence

Is Exposure to Media Content Harmful to Children?

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The concept that people can be harmed by exposure to various kinds of content is traceable to Plato.¹ The specific category of person, the type of content, and the nature of the harm it may induce vary over intervening centuries and across cultures.²

In the United States, the identification of children as a distinct group particularly vulnerable to putative harmful effects of exposure to certain types of content began in the late nineteenth century.³ In 1968, the Supreme Court held in *Ginsberg v. New York* that material not deemed obscene for adults may nonetheless be considered “obscene with respect to minors.” This doctrine of variable obscenity promoted passage of federal, state, and local laws preventing children’s access to material that is constitutionally protected for adults but regarded as “harmful to minors.”⁴ Ironically, most of the terms describing this issue are ill-defined and variable, including even the definition of “harm.”

Sexually explicit content has been of concern as harmful to minors for more than a century. More recently, materials depicting or including violence, illegal drug use, and other topics have been proposed as harmful to youth. Sex and violence are two of the most frequently mentioned areas of concern, thus are the focus of this article.⁵

What We Know

The research reviewed here refers to the effects of media content, not on media as a vehicle of exposure to other sources of potential harm (for example, sexual predators on the Internet). Most research studies on potential harm to minors are on adolescents rather than younger children. It is noteworthy that a literature review reveals no research on the detrimental effects of book content on youth of any age; all studies were of other media.

Sexually Explicit Material

Although the assumption that children are harmed by exposure to sexually explicit material is well entrenched in the United States, there is very little research to support or refute it.⁶ Of particular concern is accidental exposure to sexual content, especially on the Internet. According to Mitchell, in 2005, 19 percent more ten- to twelve-year-olds and 35 percent more thirteen- to fifteen-year-olds reported encountering unwanted exposure to pornography on the Internet than in 2000.⁷ So we do know that incidents increased, but the authors made no assessment of whether these encounters caused any harm, and fewer than 10 percent of the youth reported these incidents as “distressing.”

Some studies demonstrate an association between amount of exposure to sexually explicit material in mainstream media and differences in adolescents’ attitudes toward sexual behavior.⁸ Adolescents with higher exposure levels have more permissive views of sexual activity before and outside of marriage, are more likely to regard sexual activity as recreational, and have more negative attitudes toward restrictions on sexually oriented materials. Jochen and Valkenburg found that the correla-

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tion between attitude and exposure is strongly influenced by male gender and perceived realism of the material.⁹ Collins reported a correlation between adolescents' exposure to television programs containing talk about or depictions of sexual activity and earlier initiation of sexual activity, but others have not discovered any effect on behavior.¹⁰

Violent Material

In children and adolescents, greater exposure to violence in media has been correlated repeatedly to increased aggressive attitudes and behaviors.¹¹ These correlations occur both for passive television and film viewing and for interactive engagement with video and computer games. Almost all studies are of short-term effects only. In the only longitudinal study on childhood exposure to violent content, Huesmann et al. found a correlation between six- to nine-year-olds' viewing of violence on television and aggressive behaviors, including criminal ones, of these same subjects in their early twenties.¹² The perceived realism of the content is a significant factor in promoting aggressive behavior.¹³

Harm of Not Having Access

Although many studies exist on the harmful effect of lack of access to books and reading, they are generally not related to specific content. Recent studies on Internet filtering demonstrate the potential harm of lack of access to specific content, rather than the harm of exposure.

Teachers and students interviewed by Simmons and Sutton, respectively, reported many legitimate educational sites were blocked by school filters, including sites linked to textbooks used in the schools. The inability of students to access assigned content and explore topics that are part of the curriculum was perceived as frustrating and demoralizing, as well as a serious impediment to learning.¹⁴

Richardson et al. found that an average of 24 percent of health information sites were blocked when six Internet filtering products commonly used in schools and libraries were tested at the most restric-

tive setting.¹⁵ They point out the significance of the Internet as a source of health information, especially for lower-income adolescents who are more dependent on libraries for access.

What We Don't Know

A particularly interesting topic about which we don't know is whether or how the content of material printed in books is harmful to minors, as there seems to be no research on it!

We also don't know whether exposure to sexual and violent content causes harm to minors because all the studies are correlational rather than experimental. Correlational research cannot control for the other factors known to be influential in the development of attitudes and behaviors.¹⁶ It cannot demonstrate chronological relationships; for example, we don't know whether violent content promotes violent behavior, or whether violent youth preferentially select violent content and are innately more susceptible to its effects.

What, Then, Can We As Librarians Do?

Through our commitment to children's information literacy, we are active in educating them in critical evaluation of all types of media resources. By providing this instruction, we can help prevent harm to minors through preventing their unquestioning acceptance of content. Thornburgh and Lin make the analogy that while fencing and alarms are useful, the best way to prevent children from drowning in a pool is to provide swimming lessons.¹⁷

We can do some critical evaluation ourselves. We should question claims about this issue and read the evidence for ourselves. Furthermore, we can educate parents, policy-makers, and others about the differences between causality and correlation.

Lastly, we can protect minors' first amendment rights as outlined in ALA Intellectual Freedom policies and take seriously the potential for harm posed by lack of access to information.¹⁸ ↺

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