

# Ilm o Amal

A bi-annual education resource brought to you by TRC

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## ISSUE FOCUS

### Homework

What works, what doesn't - all you ever wanted to know about homework, and more ...



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Dear Reader,

The beginning of each New Year is an exciting time for students, parents and teachers. Each year brings the promise of new opportunities, new experiences and new growth for adults as well as children. This year, in response to the numerous requests of teachers and educators, the TRC newsletter is resuming its publication after a year's absence, with the brand new title of '*Ilm o Amal*'. The new name reflects the new format of the publication, which will incorporate the contributions of three school heads. Once again, TRC strives to involve the community, and let everyone's voices be heard.

This issue of *Ilm o Amal* contains several thought-provoking articles, including our feature piece entitled, 'The Homework Dilemma'. This article addresses the conflicting viewpoints on homework. Is it an essential part of a good education, or does it place excess pressure on pupils, creating anxiety and reducing motivation to learn? The article contains suggestions on how to make homework effective, which we hope, will not only interest teachers, but parents as well.

Homework is the primary focus of this edition, but other important issues are dealt with as well. 'Confronting Violence in Entertainment' discusses the portrayal of violence in television, video games and other entertainment products, and the effect these media have on children. This thorough examination presents strategies on how parents and communities can combat these negative effects on behaviour, and help children develop whole personalities.

We also present you with an educator's personal experience in effectively using cooperative learning techniques in her teaching. 'Cooperative Learning' is where students enjoyably work together, share knowledge, help and teach each other to achieve excellence. As most of our schools are structured to promote stringent competition, this article is a must read for all teachers.

TRC will publish the next issue of *Ilm o Amal* in June. We encourage teachers, parents and members of the community to be active participants and contribute to our biannual publication. We hope you enjoy reading this issue as much as we enjoyed putting it together.

Editor



# The Homework Dilemma

Maria Haque

**H**omework is a complex issue. How much to give, when to give it, what to do with it, why it's important ... the debate rages on about what role homework should, or should not, play in the education of today's students. Experts on all fronts present logical reasons why homework is damaging, why it's essential, or why it's relevant. Parents complain that teachers are not giving enough, or that they are loading their kids with too much homework. Students complain that the homework is too hard, too easy, too confusing, too boring ...

While we certainly can not resolve all the homework battles in one article, what we can do is discuss, reflect on, and possibly arrive at some consensus as a school community.

## **Does homework work?**

According to recent research, assigning homework on a regular basis increases student achievement and improves attitudes towards learning (Copper, et al; 1998). It was found that schools in which homework was regularly assigned and graded tended to have higher achieving students. The more homework students completed, especially from grades six to twelve, the better they did in school.

## Do homework effects vary with grade level?

More interesting, was that students in different grade levels, who were assigned homework daily, showed different levels of achievement. Studies conducted revealed that the average secondary school student in a class doing homework would outperform 69% of the students in a no-homework class. In middle school, i.e. fifth and sixth grade, homework's average effect on student achievement was considerably less, and in elementary school, homework showed very little effect on achievement gains at all. Even though this research claims that homework in the elementary level has little effect on student achievement, experts suggest that a reasonable amount of homework for younger students does have benefits. In the article "How Important Is Homework?" a summary of the U.S. Education Department's position on the issue provided by Kid Source Online, summarizes the benefits of homework:

*It serves as an intellectual discipline, establishes study habits, eases time constraints on the amount of curricular material that can be covered in class, and supplements and reinforces work done in school. In addition, it fosters student initiative, independence, and responsibility, and brings home and school closer together.*

Even though research has shown that there are many advantages of homework, there is a growing body of researchers, educators, parents, and teachers that have made an equally compelling case against homework. They believe that schools are giving too much homework, which interferes with family, leisure and community activities, all of which teach important life skills. They argue that too much homework, especially for younger children, leads to too much pressure and results in negative attitudes towards learning. And finally, they feel that homework can lead to undesirable character traits if it promotes cheating, whether it's through copying of assignments or receiving help with homework that goes beyond tutoring.

The table on the right summarises the suggested positive and negative effects of homework.

## Suggested Effects of Homework

### Positive Effects

#### *Increased achievement and learning*

- Better retention of material
- Increased understanding
- More rapid movement through the curriculum

#### *Long term academic effects*

- Improved attitudes towards school
- Better study habits

#### *Non-academic effects*

- Greater self discipline
- Better time management/organisational skills
- More independence
- Useful for teachers to monitor student progress and diagnose student learning problems
- Greater parental appreciation and involvement in schooling

### Negative Effects

#### *Overburdening*

- Loss of interest in learning
- Physical and emotional fatigue
- Pressure to complete and perform
- Takes time from family and community activities

#### *Cheating*

- Copying from other students
- Help beyond tutoring

The list of advantages and disadvantages of homework is long and researchers' views vary considerably on this issue. One factor that influences the effectiveness of homework, and is an important concern, is the optimum amount of homework.

## So, how much homework is too much?

The most critical question, and the one heard most often, is "how much homework should students do?" The amount of homework should depend on the age and the skills of the students. In a guide for parents, the National Parent Teacher Association and the US National Education Association (2000), recommends the following guidelines:

### Grades

**K to 2:** 10 to 20 minutes of homework each day

**3 to 6:** 30 to 60 minutes of homework each day

**7 to 9:** 60 to 75 minutes of homework each day

**9 to 12:** about 120 minutes of homework each day

Homework should have different purposes at different grades. For younger children, homework should foster positive attitudes, habits and character traits. Assignments for elementary students should be brief, should involve materials commonly found in the home, and should not be too demanding.

For older children, homework should facilitate the acquisition of subject matter. Teachers should attempt to ensure that homework assignments are of appropriate length for the developmental level of their students, since too much homework can lead to fatigue and loss of academic interest.



## What kinds of homework should be assigned?

Should homework provide practice and reinforcement of material covered in class? Or should homework extend and enrich learning in the classroom? The homework issue raises many recurring questions, a few of which have been carefully examined by educators. Here are some guidelines for assigning homework:

**Homework should be an opportunity to practice newly learnt skills** - which have been taught and practiced in class, under the teacher's guidance. This means that homework should only be given after a certain concept, skill or topic has been taught in school, and only after the teacher has discussed and conducted classroom practice of the types of problems that students will be assigned. Homework assigned as a form of practice, review, and reinforcement of lessons proves especially beneficial.



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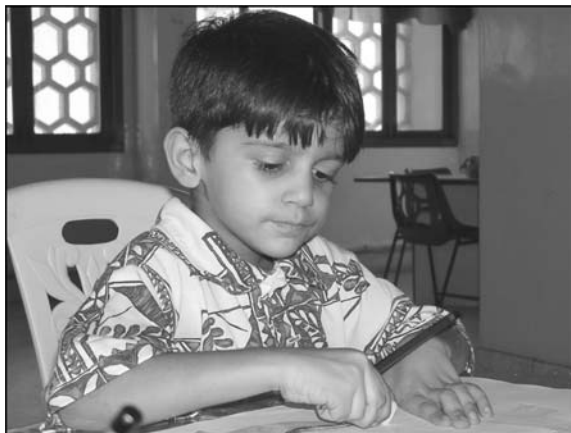
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**Homework should be an opportunity to prepare for upcoming lessons** - before a teacher begins a new lesson, she can assign homework which gives the student an opportunity to prepare for the upcoming lesson. These homework assignments can include readings from the class text, library research, collecting materials, and other activities requiring the gathering or organising of information before a lesson is started. This type of homework helps children tap into their prior knowledge on a specific topic, resulting in a better understanding of material.

**Homework assignments should be varied in length as well as in nature** - varying homework assignments keeps it refreshing and interesting for students. For example, teachers may choose to give short-term and long-term assignments, written or oral reports, research projects, enrichment exercises, and group, as well as individual assignments. Assignments that require students to integrate skills or apply concepts to other areas of the curriculum are also desirable.

Finally, homework works best if the material is varied and stimulating, and not just a simple repetition of class work. Teachers should plan brief homework assignments that are not too complex, keeping in mind students' levels, abilities and home situations.



## Summary

Homework can be an effective instructional tool. If homework experiences for students are properly planned and structured, students will be more likely to succeed. To ensure this outcome, schools and teachers need to take into account the needs, abilities and unique requirements of their students, so as to make homework meaningful and beneficial for all.

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# Parent Survey Results

May 2004

Below are the results of a survey conducted by two schools, in collaboration with TRC. The aim of the survey was to identify parents' views on homework. The survey used a sample of parents whose children study in two private schools located in Karachi. A total number of 244 parents participated in the survey. Findings of the survey results have been presented in the form of quantitative and qualitative data.

## Q 1. In which level is your child currently enrolled?

	Answers	Percentage
a) Pre-primary	41	17
b) Primary	176	72
c) Secondary	27	11

## Q 2. Do you think homework is an important part of your child's learning?

	Answers	Percentage
a) Yes	210	86
b) No	24	10
c) Unsure	10	4

Over 86% of the parents who responded thought that homework was an important part of their child's learning. The majority of parents believed the primary purpose of homework was to gain new information and expand their child's knowledge, as well as to develop study skills, time management and organization. Parents felt that the least important purpose of homework was to improve test scores.

## Q 3. Does your child receive homework on a regular basis?

	Answers	Percentage
a) Yes	180	74
b) No	42	17
c) Unsure	22	9

## Q 4. On average, how much time per day does your child spend doing homework?

	Answers	Percentage
a) 0-1 hour	126	52
b) 1-2 hours	65	27
c) 2-3 hours	46	19
d) More than 3 hours	7	3

**Q 5. For your child's age, do you think he/she gets:**

	Answers	Percentage
a) Too much homework	55	22
b) Not enough homework	55	22
c) Just the right amount	134	56

More than half the parents felt that their child was getting the right amount of homework for his/her age. 22% said that their child was receiving too little homework, and a remaining 22% felt that their child received too much homework. One parent pointed out:

*"At the primary level, homework should not overburden the child. It should be reasonable so that the child does not start to hate it. Too much homework should be avoided as it de-motivates the child."*

**Q 6. Do you think there is an appropriate balance between subjects?**

	Answers	Percentage
a) Yes	108	44
b) No	87	36
c) Not sure	49	20

**Q 7. What helps to organize your child's time during the week in order to complete assigned homework? (Participants can respond to one or more responses)**

	Answers	Percentage
a) Set routine	100	41
b) No TV until homework is complete	50	20
c) Tuitions	24	10
d) Parental supervision	70	29

Most parents of children from all age levels, felt that having a set routine was the most important factor to ensure that their child completed his/her homework, followed closely by parental supervision.

**Q 8. What role do you as a parent play, when it comes to your child's homework?**

	Answers	Percentage
a) Check the homework	92	38
b) Get involved in helping your child	94	39
c) Ask your child	20	8
d) Leave it up to your child	31	13

Parents stated that the role they play concerning their child's homework, mostly involves helping their child complete their homework, and checking the work to make sure that it is done correctly.



**Q 9. What do you believe should be the primary purpose of homework?**

	Answers	Percentage
a) Develop study skills, time management	83	34
b) Develop responsibility and discipline	40	16
c) Improve test scores	18	7
d) Practice skills learned	20	8
e) Learn new information/expand knowledge	16	7
f) Keep parents informed	67	27

**Q 10. What do you think makes good homework?**

	Answers	Percentage
a) Worksheets	118	51
b) Group projects	53	22
c) Long-term research	31	12
d) Textbook-based exercises	42	15

When asked what kind of homework makes good homework, most parents seemed to think that worksheets were the most appropriate kind of homework. Most parents felt that long-term research assignments were the least suitable form of homework. A number of parents also mentioned that a combination of worksheets, research assignments, group projects and textbook exercises was appropriate.

*"Homework should be more activity and revision based. Weekend homework, especially, should be a reinforcement of the work done during the week."*

**Q 11. Should homework assignments be graded?**

	Answers	Percentage
a) Yes	152	62
b) Not sure	48	20
c) No	44	18

Most parents who disagreed with grading homework assignments stated that the assignments are often not done by the students themselves, but rather by a parent, tutor, or sibling, making it unfair to grade homework.

**Q 12. Should your child get homework on the weekends or holidays?**

	Answers	Percentage
a) Agree	128	69
b) Not sure	24	10
c) Disagree	52	21

One parent who was in support of no homework commented:

*"Little homework should be given on weekdays. Weekends and holidays should be free for the children to relax and enjoy themselves. This way, children will not be overburdened."*

Whereas, another parent felt that:

*"Weekend homework should be mainly based on preparing and learning for tests or collecting and writing information for research assignments."*

### Q 13. What impact does homework have on your relationship with your child?

	Answers	Percentage
a) Positive	207	85
b) No impact	24	10
c) Negative	13	5

Only a few parents felt homework was an area of conflict between them and their child. One parent aptly stated:

*"Although parents realise the importance of homework, sometimes children don't. Homework is a daily cause of stress and conflict in the household. Children, these days, have a healthy interest in a variety of activities, including a dose of exercise and outdoor play. While assigning homework, care should be taken that study time does not encroach on leisure time."*

In summary, most parents felt that homework is a necessary part of a good education and helps children achieve higher standards. They believed that adequate amounts of homework promoted good study habits and fostered a positive relationship between the home and the school. A number of parents stated that when assigning homework, the child's abilities and age should be taken into consideration and that too much homework reduces the motivation to learn. As one parent stated:

*"A little homework is necessary to build a good relationship between the parent, the child and the teacher; but too much homework does not help the child. Thus, homework can be just as much a part of the problem as the solution."*



### Your Opinion Counts

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# Homework Guidelines for Parents

Azra Aqil

Throughout the years, many parents have wondered what exactly they should be doing in regards to the work their child brings home from school. Although there is no one simple answer to this question, we hope that the following tips may guide you in the right direction.

- **Talk to your child about school:**  
Take an active interest in your children's schooling. Ask specific questions about what happens at school each day and how your child feels about it. The more you know, the more prepared you will be to help your child if the need arises.
- **Make it a point to meet with your child's teacher and learn what your child is doing at school:**  
Talk with your child's teacher and communicate your willingness to cooperate. This shows the child that the school and the home are a team. Learn what, and how, your child is being taught at school.
- **Make sure your child has a quiet, well-lit place to do homework with adequate materials:**  
Deciding where your child should do homework is as important as deciding when it should be done. Good lighting and correct posture help with concentration. Avoid having your child do homework with the television on, or in places with other distractions, such as people coming and going. Make sure the material your child needs such as paper, pencils and a dictionary are readily available.
- **Set a designated study time:**  
Children respond well to structure and consistency. Therefore, a certain time everyday must be reserved for studying and doing homework. When setting a timetable for homework sessions, keep in mind that most children need some time to unwind after school. Neither should homework be scheduled so late that your child is too tired to complete it effectively. When scheduling a study time parents should include their child in making this decision.
- **Organise homework assignments:**  
Before beginning a homework session, encourage your child to start by looking over everything that needs to be done. Identify the parts that he/she can do on his/her own, as well as the parts which require help. Suggest that the longest and most difficult tasks be done first, before fatigue sets in.
- **Homework should never be done for the child:**  
When your child asks for help, provide guidance, not answers. Giving answers means that your child will not learn the material. Too much help can prevent children from developing positive skills such as independence and life long learning skills.
- **Take your child's struggles seriously:**  
If you notice your child is struggling with assignments in particular subjects, be sure that you discuss this with your child's teacher. Make an appointment with the teacher as soon as possible. Early intervention works, and will save your child the pain of falling behind in school. Also, make sure that there are no hidden physical causes. A visit to the pediatrician, ophthalmologist or audiologist can uncover any physical causes that might exist.
- **Give praise:**  
Applaud your child for successfully completing homework. Nothing builds self-esteem like praise from parents.

# Student Survey Results

May 2004

Below are the results of a survey conducted by two schools, in collaboration with TRC. The aim of the survey was to identify students' views on homework.

The survey used a sample of 178 students who study in two private schools located in Karachi. Findings of the survey results have been shown in the form of quantitative and qualitative data.

## Q 1. Do you think homework is important?

	Answers	Percentage
a) Yes	157	88
b) No	13	7
c) Not sure	8	5

The following statements were made by students in support of the importance of homework:

*"Homework is important because when we do something wrong, our teacher will know and will then explain it to us."*

*"Homework helps us to revise what we have done in class."*

*"Homework is important because in school there isn't much time and so we have to also study at home."*

## Q 2. How much time do you spend every day doing homework?

	Answers	Percentage
a) 0-1 hour	77	43
b) 1-2 hours	61	34
c) 2-3 hours	31	17
d) More than 3 hours	8	5

## Q 3. What do you think about the amount of homework you have?

	Answers	Percentage
a) Too much	31	17
b) Too little	28	16
c) Just right	119	67

One student stated that:

*"Homework should be fun, and not a burden on the children. Teachers should not give too much homework because life these days has its ups and downs and teachers do not excuse you for not doing your homework."*

#### Q 4. How often do you do your homework?

	Answers	Percentage
a) Always	147	83
b) Sometimes	26	15
c) Seldom	5	3
d) Never	0	0.0

#### Q 5. What kind of homework do you enjoy?

	Answers	Percentage
a) Worksheets	89	50
b) Research assignments	35	20
c) Group projects	31	17
d) Exercise from textbook	23	13

Out of the kind of homework most enjoyed by students, worksheets were the most popular, then research assignments, group projects, and finally, exercises from textbooks.

#### Q 6. If you need help completing your homework, who do you go to for help?

	Answers	Percentage
a) Parents	113	64
b) Tuition teacher	11	6
c) Sister/brother	37	21
d) Teacher	15	9

When completing homework, most students preferred to seek help from their parents or siblings. A smaller group sought help from their tutor and class teachers. Even fewer students asked for help from their friends.

In summary, most students appeared to be mainly concerned with the amount and kind of homework they received. Almost all students felt that homework was an important and necessary part of their learning. As one child succinctly stated:

*"Homework helps us to learn more and as you know, knowledge is the key to success."*

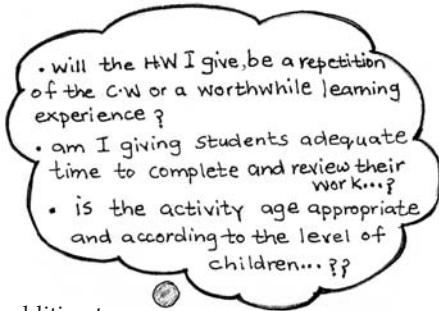
# Reinforcing Learning at Home

Zainab Mahmud

Homework involves learning, tasks set by teachers, to be completed outside of class, normally in the home. Teachers' partnerships with parents need to involve providing guidelines for parents on how to help their children with the set homework so as to turn it into a meaningful home learning experience.

For homework to be effective, the following factors must be kept in mind:

- Homework should be part of a planned programme. Teachers should maintain a balance between written work and activities, and have adequate time allocated to discuss homework with students prior to giving it.
- It should generate a variety of worthwhile learning experiences, in addition to those provided in school.
- Adequate time should be given to students to complete the homework & this develops their work habits and time management skills.
- Parents should be informed in advance of the kind of assistance they may be required to provide. This can be done at parent teacher meetings, or through a letter at the beginning of term, which can also describe the school's overall approach to homework. In addition, expectations and tips for parents can be shared on notice boards and notes can be sent in students' diaries for specific information.
- The focus of homework activities should be on revision and reinforcement of concepts already learned in class, so that children can do these independently.
- The time allocated to the activities should take into account the age and level of the child.
- Time needs to be allotted in class for sharing of learning and feedback on the homework, during which each student's efforts should be appreciated and encouraged.



Homework experiences can include students going outdoors or visiting different places; teachers' can give suggestions for these. However, these activities should not be compulsory as not all students may have access to the same resources. As an alternative, a variety of activities, covering the same concept and / or topic could be suggested.

As examples, a few suggestions for homework activities for children of varying age groups follow. These activities reflect some curriculum objectives and encourage the learning of important life skills.

## Science

Topic: **Senses (hearing & listening), sounds**

Concepts: **Identifying and discriminating between sounds in our environment**

Age Level: **3-6 years**

**For Parents:** This activity can be 'simulated' in the classroom, but children's experience of the 'real thing' will enrich their learning and expose them to many more sounds, hence building their appreciation or understanding of them. If you are at home, or in a car, or walking in the park, or wherever you may be with your child, encourage them to listen to all the different sounds in the environment and try to identify them. You will be amazed at the different kinds of sounds children can pick up, some that you have probably become 'immune' to. Encourage your child to think about 'loud' and 'soft', and depending on your child's level of understanding, talk with them about 'noise pollution' or 'too much noise', and the good things about 'quiet', or what they think they can do better when it's quiet. The same activity can be done with smells.

Topic: **Health**

Concepts: **Importance of hygiene and immunization for good health / Awareness of First Aid**

Age Level: **3-8years**

**For Parents:** Children of this age group do make regular visits to the doctor for different vaccinations. It is important that they understand why we need these vaccinations (especially those that are given in the form of an injection) so that they are aware of their importance. That knowledge may help diminish some of the fear they may have, and help make the experience easier. Rather than only saying, "You need your injection or you'll get sick!" provide children with a more detailed explanation. This could be something like, "Let's think of all the things we can do to stop us from being sick". Encourage your child to think of a variety of preventive measures such as washing hands (ask them when we need to do this) and wearing warmer clothes in winter. If there are posters on the walls at the doctor's clinic, you can talk about the messages with your child. Depending on your child's age and level of

understanding, introduce the very basic materials (band-aid, cotton wool and dettol) of a first aid box to them, if they are not already familiar with them. Talk with your child about how exactly they need to be handled.

## Maths

Topic: **Measurement**

Concepts: **Units of measurement: centimeters and/or inches**

Age Level: **8-12 years**

**For Parents:** Children make frequent trips to the hairdresser/barber to have their hair cut or trimmed and generally made 'neater' for school. You can make this experience enjoyable and educational for your children by encouraging them to measure their hair before and then after the cut. They can do this by holding a piece of string from one end of the hair to the other (it doesn't have to be exactly from scalp to root remember to keep this fun!) and then measuring the piece of string with a ruler. Remember to allow your child to do the measuring, you can assist where necessary.

*Note for teachers: Remember that the above activity is just an example, and should not be compulsory for students and parents. Instead, there should be a range of activities to choose from. For the above concept, students can also be encouraged to measure their own and other family members' height.*

## Social Studies

Topic: **Public utilities/services**

Concepts: **Function of various utilities and how they benefit the public**

Age Level: **6-12 and beyond**

**For Parents:** You might be in a profession that requires you to provide some kind of a service to the public. This could be anything from being a police officer or doctor to an interior designer, banker or real estate agent. Whatever your profession, talk with your child about it and on a school holiday, take them along to see what your work place is like. Remember to encourage them to ask questions



and try not to do all the talking yourself. Take them to any other service you may be going to as well. Depending on your child's age and level of understanding, talk with them about how that particular service/place could be improved so that it would be 'easier' or convenient for the public to use. This could be as simple as 'encouraging people to form queues' or 'having a nice painting up on the wall so that people have something to look at while they wait(hence lessening chances of 'pushing')'. Talk with your child about the system in each place, the way things work and what you have to say and do to access a particular service.

*Note for teachers: Parents who are comfortable with the idea can also be encouraged to come to the school and talk with the students about a particular service. (Sometimes the 'home work' can be brought to the school!)*

Topic: **Map reading**

Concepts: **Map work techniques, reading maps as well as giving directions, orally, in writing or through diagrams and pictures**

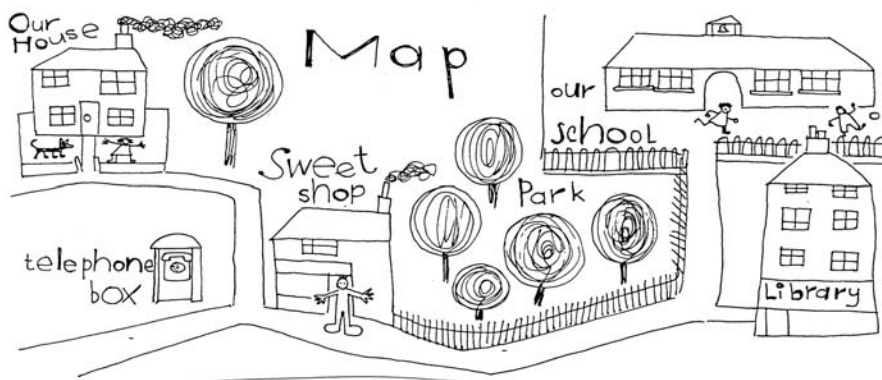
Age Level: **8-12 and beyond**

**For Parents:** No matter what form of transport your child uses, encourage them to notice the route from home to

school and back by asking them to 'give you directions'. Reinforce the 'rights' and 'lefts' and help them gain a sense of 'where they are' by talking with them about landmarks. Once your child seems familiar with one route, try another route and encourage them to figure it out. They can even draw a pictorial map.

Encourage them to think about distances and how these are reflected on the map in proportion. Depending on your child's age and level of understanding, talk about road signs on the route and how these can also be used as 'symbols' on the map. For older children, encourage them to 'direct' you to a new location if you have a diagrammatic map of the place (example, a wedding location or a new eating place, as these usually have diagrammatic maps). Talk with them about distances in relation to time, example, "15minutes to get to school and 10 minutes more to get to the shops". This will help them integrate their learning in different subjects such as math and incorporate that into daily life.

*Note for teachers: Ask students to draw a detailed map of the route from home to school, using symbols and diagrams and a 'North' arrow showing north.*



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Internet:

<http://ericit.org/digests/EDO>

<http://www.educationworld.com>

# Experience Cooperative Learning in the Classroom

Nasira Faiz

Like most teachers, I believed that I used cooperative learning in my classroom. During my twenty-year association with education, my passion for teaching has increased as the years have passed. Reading, learning, observing and applying teaching strategies to better myself, and to make my teaching effective, kept my romance with education alive.

Coming across the relatively new term of "Cooperative Learning" a couple of years ago, I ignored it, thinking that there was already a lot of group work and collaborative learning in my classroom. However, interesting names of cooperative learning strategies like 'Jigsaw', 'Numbered Heads Together', and 'Buddy Venn', caught my attention and convinced me to study and apply them in my class. Gradually, the methods' full effectiveness dawned on me as I went along.

Most teachers fear that sessions that involve children working in cooperative groups will disrupt the peaceful classroom setting, and waste a lot of precious time, which will seriously affect the academics. However, this is not necessarily the case, if the situation is managed properly. Applying cooperative learning strategies in the classroom brought about a shift in my old paradigms of teaching. My favourite strategies, which I use most often, are, 'The Jigsaw' and 'The Numbered Heads Together'.

While planning a study tour for class VII to the historical sites of Chawkandi and Bhambore, I opted for the Jigsaw method, which is extremely beneficial when working with vast amount of information. The class was divided into four groups. Each group was assigned a specific task with equal responsibilities for each member.

The first group, armed with clipboards, papers and pencils, took notes at the sites. The second with a tape recorder, recorded the guide's briefings. The third, with their sketch papers and drawing boards, made sketches at the two sites, and the fourth collected rock rubbings and artifacts.



Once the data was collected, each student came back to his or her jigsaw group at the school. They shared their information and other work collected from the site to prepare a well-organized report. The situation was specifically structured so that each student depended on each other's assignments. The four assignments were brought together as the four pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, in the form of a presentation for parents and other classes. The exercise proved to be remarkably effective, as it encouraged teamwork, accountability, listening and

interdependence to accomplish the end product. Another strategy, which I enjoy and find effective, is Numbered Heads Together. It is especially beneficial for a quick review, or for building up concepts based on previous knowledge in a fun way.

The strategy requires the students to be numbered off from 1 to 4 within their teams. The teacher poses a question and calls out a number. Only the students with that number from each team answer the question and earn points for that team.

I often use this method in my language class. For example, for a follow up exercise of a story read to the class, the students were divided in to teams of four (numbered one through four). Each student was assigned a responsibility. One read the story in a clear voice, one made a list of all the adjectives in the story as it was read, and the other made a list of all the verbs. The fourth student listened attentively to follow all the events as they came.

Next, they wrote the story in their own words as a team. Everyone was to help and contribute, listen carefully, accept and praise each other's contributions and check to see if all had the story right.

After each group rewrote the story, questions were asked. Students were given "think time" to discuss the answers. A number was called out randomly and that student in each team answered the question.

Besides these two structures, there are other strategies that are equally interesting and useful in the right situations. I strongly suggest that when incorporating these techniques teachers should go slowly, starting with one or two cooperative learning activities and gradually adding more according to the students' responses and needs.

Descriptions of some commonly used techniques as given by Lyman and Kagan are given below:

### **Think-Pair-Share**

This is a four-step discussion strategy that incorporates wait time and aspects of cooperative learning. Students (and teachers) learn to LISTEN while a question is posed, THINK (without raising hands) of a response, PAIR with a neighbor to discuss responses, and SHARE their responses with the whole class. Time limits and transition cues help discussion move smoothly. Students are able to rehearse responses mentally and verbally, and all students have an opportunity to talk. Both students and teachers have increased opportunities to think and become involved in-group discussion. (Lyman)

### **Three-Step Interview**

This involves structured group activity with students. Using interviews/listening techniques that have been modeled, one student interviews another about an announced topic. When time is up, students switch roles as interviewer and interviewee. Pairs then join to form groups of four. Students take turns introducing their pair partners and sharing what the pair partners had to say. This structure can be used as a team builder, and also for opinion questions, predicting, evaluation, sharing book reports, etc. (Kagan)

### **Roundtable**

Roundtable can be used for brainstorming, reviewing, or practicing while also serving as a team builder. Sequential form: Students sit in teams of 3 or more, with one piece of paper and one pencil. The teacher asks a question which has multiple answers. Students take turns writing one answer on the paper, then passing the paper and pencil clockwise to the next person. When time is called, teams with the most correct answers are recognized. Teams reflect on their strategies and consider ways they could improve. Simultaneous form: Each student starts a piece of paper,



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writes one answer, and passes it, so several papers are moving at once. (Kagan)

### Send a Problem

Each student on a team writes a review problem on a flash card. Teams reach consensus on answers and write them on the backs of the cards. Each group's stack of questions passes to another group, which attempts to answer them and checks to see if they agree with the sending group. If not, they write their answer as an alternative. Stacks of cards can be sent to a third and fourth group.

Stacks of cards are finally returned to the senders, who may discuss the alternative answers. (Kagan)

### Buddy Venn

Pair students up within their teams and have each pair draw a large Venn diagram. Have them each write their names at the top of one circle. They pass the paper back and forth as they tell about themselves (favourites, hobbies, family, etc.). When they discover they have something in common, the person holding the paper writes it in the middle. If a person names something that is unique for him or her, it is written in the circle under that person's name. After each pair is given 10 minutes or so to make their Buddy Venn, they share and compare with their teammates. This can be adopted and applied whenever a comparison is being done.

**Cooperative learning** is a successful teaching strategy in which small teams, each with students of different levels of ability, use a variety of learning activities to improve their understanding of a subject.

Each member of a team is responsible not only for learning what is taught, but also for helping teammates learn, thus creating an atmosphere of achievement. Students work through the assignment until all group members successfully understand and complete it.

### Why use Cooperative Learning?

Research has shown that cooperative learning techniques:

- promote student learning and academic achievement
- increase student retention
- enhance student satisfaction with their learning experience
- help students develop skills in Oral communication
- develop students' social skills
- promote student self-esteem
- help to promote positive race relations

<http://edtech.kennesaw.edu/intech/cooperativelarning>

# Confronting Violence in Entertainment

Jacques Brodeur

Over the last quarter-century, violence in television programs, video games and other entertainment products has gradually polluted our children's cultural environment as effectively as some industries have poisoned our air, water and food. Of course, not all TV and other entertainment programs are toxic to children; many informative and even inspiring programs provide positive stimulation and help children and teens to understand the world. The majority, however, do not. As a result, parents and teachers need ways to protect children against mental manipulation and emotional desensitization. Fortunately, much can be done to reduce the impact of this type of pollution on young citizens. This article discusses the use of violence in media, the high cost of that use to young people, and some strategies to combat it.

Studies since the landmark 1977 LaMarsh Commission Report<sup>1</sup> - where the analogy to environmental contamination was first drawn - routinely confirm that violent entertainment influences children. In 1995, University of Winnipeg researcher Wendy Josephson, author of *Television Violence: A Review of the Effects on Children of Different Ages*, found more than 650 studies linking real-life violence by children to violence that they have watched on TV.<sup>2</sup> The American Academy of Pediatrics reported in 2000 that "violence in entertainment and aggressive behavior in children have a closer correlation than second-hand smoke and lung cancer."<sup>3</sup> In a 2001 study, the Media Awareness Network found that "only 4% of violent programs have a strong anti-violence

theme [and] only 13% of reality programs that depict violence present any alternatives to violence or show how it can be avoided."<sup>4</sup> University of Washington epidemiologist Brandon Centerwall estimates that TV violence could account for 50 percent of real-life violence.<sup>5</sup>



Violence in entertainment seems to have three kinds of influence on children, depending on their age, whether they watch with adults or peers, and how much they watch. Research suggests that children mimic TV violence and that some perceive it as approval for hitting, bullying and humiliating their peers. It also encourages between five and ten percent of victims to accept the treatment they suffer without seeking help. Finally, it reduces empathy in the witnesses, who then prefer ganging with the aggressor instead of helping the victim.<sup>6</sup> With increasing exposure to violence in entertainment, children become mentally altered and physically inclined to commit, accept, or enjoy watching real-life violence.



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## Manipulating Children

In recent years, children have been increasingly exposed to violence through toy manufacturers' television programs and by video games. In the early 1980s, the toy industry began to use violence as a marketing ingredient. In addition to advertising through commercials, companies such as Hasbro began producing their own TV programs and paid to have them broadcast on weekdays and Saturday mornings. In 1984, it was estimated that Hasbro's "GI Joe" included, on average, 84 acts of violence per hour and "Transformers" contained 81.<sup>7</sup> This marketing strategy was so profitable that Hasbro reused it in 1989 with "Ninja Turtles," in 1993 with "Power Rangers," and in 1999 with "Pokemon." Their primary purpose was to persuade children to ask parents and Santa to give them Hasbro toys. Most of these programs, like many video games for children, include fantasies and stereotypes that support an aggressive culture of violence, sexism and war. Stereotypical "real" men are strong and insensitive, and solve conflicts by exterminating their opponents, while women are docile victims or decorative trophies incapable of solving problems. Gary Ruskin, executive director of Commercial Alert, explained at a 2002 World Health Organization conference:

*Advertisers use many techniques to sell to youth. Mostly these involve manipulating their needs during the stages of their growth into adulthood. Some of the more common needs that advertisers take advantage of to sell products include youth needs for peer acceptance, love, safety, desire to feel powerful or independent, aspirations to be and to act older than they actually are, and the need to have an identity. Much of the child-targeted advertising is painstakingly researched and prepared, at times by some of the most talented and creative minds on the planet. Ad agencies retain people with doctorates in marketing, psychology and even child psychology for the purposes of marketing to youth. Some advertisers even openly discuss "owning" children's minds ... In sum, corporations and their advertising agencies have succeeded in setting up their own authority structures to deliver commercial messages almost everywhere that children go.<sup>8</sup>*

Other aspects of this entertainment-induced social engineering project have also come under scrutiny. Apart from the tendency of video games to arouse aggression, researchers note that these games provide little mental

stimulation. Professor Ryuta Kawashima and his research team measured the brain activity of hundreds of teenagers while they played a Nintendo game and compared the results with those of another group who did a math exercise and read aloud. The researchers concluded that the thought processes required in playing computer games are too simple to stimulate crucial areas of the brain, leading to underdevelopment and such behavioural problems as violence.<sup>9</sup> In particular, the video game did not stimulate the brain's frontal lobe, an area that plays an important role in the repression of anti-social impulses and is associated with memory, learning and emotion. Researchers believe that a lack of stimulation in this area before the age of 20 prevents the neurons from thickening and connecting, thereby impairing the brain's ability to control such impulses as violence and aggression. According to Tonmoy Sharma of the Institute of Psychiatry in the UK, Kawashima's findings are supported by other studies: "Computer games do not lead to brain development because they require the repetition of simple actions and have more to do with developing quick reflexes than carrying out more mentally challenging activities."<sup>10</sup>

Growing public awareness of the dangers of media violence aimed at young people has put pressure on governments to regulate it. To try to prevent such intervention, Canadian broadcasters declared in 1994 that they would regulate the industry themselves. Five years after self-regulation was implemented, professors Jacques deGuise and Guy Paquette of Laval University noted not only that it had failed to reduce violence, but that violence carried by private broadcasters had increased by 432 percent.<sup>11</sup> Two developments during this period helped to ease public concern about the growth of television violence. First, many broadcasters provided funding for media literacy programs, on the assumption that, by studying media in class, students would discover that TV violence is not "real" violence. While such programs seem progressive and useful, many media educators worry that they have become a smokescreen to allow broadcasters to project an ethical image while continuing to intoxicate children and teenagers. A second development intended to ease parental concern about violent programming was the V-Chip. Many parents work full-time and cannot always monitor what their children are watching. Devices such as V-Chips allow them to block reception of certain programs. While better than nothing,

the V-Chip system depends on ratings that are made by the broadcasters themselves. As the amount of television violence has grown, the V-Chip has helped industry and government to shift responsibility for regulating TV violence onto parents. Those who believe that government regulation of media is an attack on freedom of expression, tend not to see that manipulating children with sophisticated marketing strategies is closer to being a form of child abuse than a constitutional right.

### The Youth Vote

The Youth Vote is an educational tool that was created to help young people learn to be critical of what they see on television and to recognize that, just as polluted water can carry dangerous bacteria, TV and other entertainment products can carry toxic messages. The exercise entails discussing specific TV programs, music videos and other entertainment products, and voting on which have the most influence, both positive and negative, on themselves and their peers.

As it is often easier for young people to observe the



influence of media violence on those younger than themselves, the first step in the Youth Vote is to ask students: Who has seen children imitating what they have seen on TV? Encourage students to provide examples of imitative behaviour, language and clothing they have observed in the schoolyard, the neighbourhood and at family gatherings. Some may give examples from their babysitting experience of nightmares or fears that reflect what children have seen on TV. Some may even testify about their own personal behaviour. As students give examples, you may need to help them to clarify what the

child was doing and which program, movie, or videogame inspired the behaviour in question. The point of this discussion is not to identify good or bad kids but, rather, to help students become more conscious that they imitate what they have been watching. Adults know this occurs but children need to bring their own experience into focus.

### Tracking the Toxins

The next step is to provide clues about the toxic "bacteria" inhabiting entertainment products. Just as a microscope helps us to see bacteria in water, critical viewing skills help us to notice the "bacteria" in TV and other forms of entertainment. Students will need some understanding of the four main toxic influences that they will be looking for: sexism, racism, violence and fear. Define each one and ask students to give a real-life example of each. Even grade one students can provide examples of fear and violence, and students in grade four and beyond can readily discuss examples of sexism and racism in their everyday lives.

Once students understand these toxic influences, explain that they will be looking for examples of two of these influences - violence and fear - in entertainment. Divide the class into groups of three or four students, and separate entertainment products into six categories: television programs for young children, television programs for teens, movies, music videos/DVDs, video games and commercials. Ask each group to brainstorm examples and, for each category, list the three that contain the highest frequency of aggressive actions, shootings, explosions, and deaths or, more generally, are the most violent or disturbing. (Note: ask students in grades one through three for examples of TV programs only.) Most groups will be able to complete this task with only about 30 seconds' discussion.

The third step is to select, from the groups' many suggestions, the class nominees for "Worst of ..." in each of the six categories. To keep the selection manageable, you may wish to have a first ballot to reduce the list to four or five nominees in each category. The names of nominees for each category should be written on the board. Then, ask the students to select their personal choice for each category. It is strongly recommended that, before they make a final decision, students discuss their selections and their reasons for them.

Bear in mind that some teens will say they enjoy violence



Bear in mind that some teens will say they enjoy violence and cruelty because they think that hiding their fears and appearing to be insensitive makes them look cool. Tough teenagers who are not used to expressing emotions may prefer to speak as if they have none. Rather than address such attitudes directly, teachers can instead focus on the influence of the media on very young children. When this discussion is handled sensitively by a teacher, even the most frequent viewers of toxic productions can become experts who look at the problem in a way that can be very useful for their peers. In their comments, they might reveal, for example, that they care about their younger brother or sister. The Youth Vote can become a powerful exercise in freedom of expression for these students. Before each student votes, therefore, teachers can mention that each student's personal choice in each of the six categories is not intended to - nor does it have to - meet the approval of parents, teachers or friends. Emphasize that students' own views, critical thinking, and free expression are of greater importance. Caution students that the vote is not a poll that seeks to determine what is the most popular program or entertainment, nor are you looking for the program with the most violence. Instead, you want them to state their evaluation of the influence that these productions have on young people. Point out that a program that is extremely violent but seen by only a few may not have as much influence as a less violent program seen by many.

Once all students have voted for their personal choices for "Worst of ..." in each category, you are ready to ask students the key question: Which program or video or game has the strongest influence on people around them, in their school, in their family, in their community?

### **Praising the Positives**

After the voting has been completed, the class should begin its search for the most positive entertainment products in the same six categories as above. Positive productions are those that emphasize any of the following:

- Cooperation instead of competition: programs that bring out the best in everyone rather than celebrating only a winner (i.e., the first, the strongest, the quickest) and dismissing others as losers.
- Non-violent conflict resolution: programs that show how

we can all be winners by solving problems and reaching agreements without hitting or insulting each other.

- Equality of men and women: programs in which no one dominates or is forced to serve another.
- International and multicultural understanding: programs that promote understanding and avoid stereotypes. Too often, the Caucasian is the hero with the last-minute solution for justice, while the aboriginal, Arab or Asian person is portrayed as the hypocrite, the criminal or the terrorist.
- Protecting the environment: programs that realistically reflect the need for a global effort to save our planet.

Ask students to list "Best of ..." examples in each of the six categories. Continue with the same process used to select toxic productions to arrive at four or five nominees, from which each student can make a final choice in each category.

### **Transforming Results into Power**

To enhance the experience of the Youth Vote, teams of two or three high school students could work with younger students at a nearby elementary or middle school to help them conduct their own Youth Vote. Older students usually enjoy this project, and teachers in the elementary or middle schools enjoy watching their former students in action as they develop leadership abilities. In some schools, students in grade 6 have been given the responsibility to help grades 5, 4 and 3 participate in their vote. Another option would be for a group or class of students to prepare its own video before conducting a school-wide vote. The video should include a student commentator, discussion of local arguments, and the nominees for whichever categories the students want to include.

In schools where many or all classes have participated in a Youth Vote, student volunteers can tabulate the results class by class. When students' choices are known for the entire school, leaders from several classes can be given the responsibility of reporting to the school population, perhaps inviting the media to attend, or holding a separate press conference at which they can inform the media of their assessment of entertainment products. Considering

the hundreds of hours that young people spend consuming entertainment products, it seems only fair that the media should take a few minutes to listen to young citizens' evaluations of those products. When properly conducted, Youth Votes represent the voice of youth and send a strong message to broadcasters, TV, movie, music video, and commercial producers as well as videogame designers. While their voices are largely ignored by producers, children and teenagers need to know that some adults helped them to develop some resistance to manipulation and mind control

### **The 10-Day TV-Free Challenge**

The 10-Day TV-Free Challenge is another educational tool for raising students' awareness of the influence of media on their lives. Most children living in affluent industrialized countries suffer social detachment very early in their lives. In North America, for example, it is estimated that children spend between 20 to 25 hours a week watching television programs or playing video games, while they spend only 37 minutes a week talking with their parents.<sup>12</sup> In order to develop emotionally and socially, what children really need is interaction with others, in activities such as sports, hobbies, or house and garden chores. The 10-Day TV-Free Challenge evolved from the 2001 research findings of Dr. Tom Robinson that, when young people watched less TV and played fewer video games, they were less aggressive at home and school.<sup>13</sup> While previous research had linked exposure to media violence with increased aggression, few potential solutions had been evaluated. Robinson and his research team set out to change that through a study that compared students in grades 3 and 4 at two elementary schools in California during the 1996-97 school year. One group received no instruction and served as a control. At the other school, specially trained teachers delivered 18 lessons over a six-month period on reducing the use of television, videos and video games. At the beginning of the study, students at the intervention school were asked to report the amount of time they spent each week watching TV and videos or playing video games. They were then challenged to abstain for ten days, and then to watch or play no more than seven hours a week afterward.

Prior to the challenge, the children in Robinson's study reported an average of 15.5 hours of weekly television viewing, 5 hours of viewing videos, and 3 hours of playing

video games. By the end of the course, these times fell 33 percent to an average of 9 hours of television viewing, 3.5. At each of the first two meetings, students should be given research homework to explore some of the themes associated with the 10-Day TV-Free Challenge: for example, they could be asked to survey their relatives, neighbours and community leaders about why verbal and physical violence is increasing in our culture. Or they could show their parents what they have learned in class about the links between violent entertainment and real violence. Teachers could also help students design a notice that can be posted at local stores and community gathering places to inform the public about the challenge - as the ultimate goal is to mobilise as much of the community as possible. In one Quebec community, almost every local organization organised one of a series of activities for students each day, such as Irish dancing, baking, indoor hockey, picnics, campfires, music, sing-alongs and bingo. Those ten days became a community celebration of togetherness. Even the local priest joined in by holding a special Sunday Mass in which participating students told the congregation about obstacles they had faced and how pleased they were to succeed in watching less TV or playing fewer video games. On that day, the whole congregation prayed for their success in the remaining days of the challenge.

Keeping track of results on a chart posted at a central location can help the entire school monitor progress during the challenge. Every morning during the challenge, students should write - anonymously, to reduce competition and peer pressure - how many hours they saved by not watching TV or playing video games the previous day. During this daily process, remind students that every hour "stolen" from watching TV or playing video games contributes to the success of the challenge, and that they should be proud of their efforts, whether large or small. Students can add up and share the total with their classmates. Each class total from that day can be added to the chart.

After the 10-Day TV-Free Challenge, teachers should meet again to record how many students in their classes managed to avoid TV and video games along a continuum from all ten days to no days. They can note which alternative activities were favoured by the students. Finally, they can discuss whether or how the challenge

they were with their peers in school, on buses or at recess. Teachers can also ask parents how they felt about their children's performance. If they participated with their children, did the experience make them feel closer to their participating son(s) or daughter(s)? Did the challenge affect their youngsters' behaviour, attitudes, language, or interests at home? Did it affect their relations with other family members? If more than one class or school participates in your 10-Day TV-Free Challenge, your community might consider awarding certificates to recognize the efforts of those who participated. School is the ideal place for children to critique the cultural environment in which they live and to develop and articulate a vision of a more tolerant, peaceful and just society. Exercises such as the Youth Vote and the 10-Day TV-Free Challenge can help in this process by building young people's capacity to express themselves and to resist the influence of corporate-controlled media on their attitudes and behaviour. Such exercises can also elicit support from parents and the community in helping children to discover their innate interests, to build relationships and to develop whole personalities. To paraphrase an African saying, "To raise a child, we need the whole village."

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The Report of the Ontario Royal Commission on Violence in the Communications Industry (LaMarsh Commission, 1977) brought forward a plethora of research on the potential harm to society of violence in the media. The prevalence of violence in the North American intellectual community is compared to chemical food additives and air or water pollutants such as lead, mercury and asbestos.

<sup>2</sup> Wendy Josephson, "Television Violence: A Review of the Effects on Children of Different Ages," Department of Canadian Heritage, 1995, available free of charge from National Clearinghouse on Family Violence, Health Canada, (800) 267-1291.

<sup>3</sup> Media Resource Team of American Association of Pediatrics, "Media Violence," Archives of Pediatric Adolescent Medicine

108:5 (2001), pp. 17-23; report online at time of publication: <http://www.aap.org/policy/re0109.html>

<sup>4</sup> Media Awareness Network, accessed online September 30, 2001, at <http://www.mediaawarenessnetwork.com> URL at time of publication: <http://www.media-awareness.ca>

<sup>5</sup> Brandon Centerwall, "Exposure to Television as a Risk Factor for Violence," *American Journal of Epidemiology*, 129:4 (1989), p. 645

<sup>6</sup> Fred Molitor, "The effect of Media Violence on Children's Toleration of Real-Life Aggression," Southampton Institute of Higher Education, UK, Presentation at the International Conference on Violence in the Media, New York City, October 3-4, 1994

<sup>7</sup> ICAVE, International Coalition Against Violent Entertainment, quoted in "Cessez-le-feu," *Fides*, 1987

<sup>8</sup> Gary Ruskin, at World Health Organization Conference on Health Marketing and Youth held April 2002 at Treviso, Italy; presentation online at time of publication: [http://www.commercialalert.org/index.php?category\\_id=5&subcategory\\_id=66&article\\_id=140](http://www.commercialalert.org/index.php?category_id=5&subcategory_id=66&article_id=140)

<sup>9</sup> "Computer Games Can Stunt Kids' Brains," *Daily Telegraph*, August 20, 2001

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*

<sup>11</sup> DeGuise, Jacques and Guy Paquette, Centre d'études sur les médias, Laval University, "Principaux indicateurs de la violence sur les réseaux de télévision au Canada," April 19, 2002, p. 35

<sup>12</sup> TV-Free America, quoted by Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, *CCPA Monitor*, October 1995

<sup>13</sup> CNN, "Less Media = Less Aggression" <http://www.cnn.com/2001/US/01/14/reducing.aggression.ap/index.html>

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