

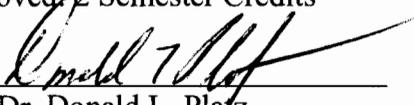
VIOLENCE IN MOVIES AND AGGRESSIVE PLAY IN CHILDREN:
IS THERE A CONNECTION?

by

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Abstract

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The purpose of this study was to determine if there is a possible relationship between movie-watching and aggressive play in children. This study attempted to answer two research questions. The first question is whether there is a relationship between watching movies that contain violence and aggressive play including the type of toys with which children choose to play. The second question is whether there is a relationship between watching movies that contain violence and aggressive play including children's imitation of movie characters or movie actions.

Thirty-six subjects, parents or caregivers of elementary school-aged children, completed an anonymous survey which looked at the movies that children watch and the type of play in which they participate. Students in the small, urban, public school in Western Wisconsin ranged in grade from kindergarten through third grade and included both boys and girls. The results of the study showed no significant correlation between the number of aggressive toys played with, and watching movies containing violence (.334). However, there was a relationship

between violent movies and imitating characters from movies as well as, a relationship between violent movies and children acting out what they've seen. Crosstabulated results showed that 63.2% of the children who "sometimes imitate characters from movies", have seen two or more violent movies. Those who "usually imitate characters from movies" (66.7%) have seen at least one violent movie. Similarly, 64.7% who "sometimes act out things seen in movies" have seen two or more violent movies. And those who "usually act out things seen in movies" (60%) have seen at least one violent movie. These results indicate that more studies are needed on the play behaviors and long-term affects of movie violence on our children as they grow.

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Table of Contents

	Page
.....	
Abstract.....	ii
List of Tables	vi
Chapter I: Introduction	1
<i>Statement of the Problem</i>	4
<i>Purpose of the Study</i>	4
<i>Research Questions</i>	4
<i>Definition of Terms</i>	5
<i>Assumptions</i>	6
<i>Limitations</i>	6
Chapter II: Literature Review	7
<i>Movies</i>	7
<i>Play</i>	10
<i>Destructive Behavior</i>	12
Chapter III: Methodology	14
<i>Sample Selection and Description</i>	14
<i>Instrumentation</i>	14
<i>Data Collection</i>	15
<i>Data Analysis</i>	16
<i>Limitations</i>	16
Chapter IV: Results.....	17

<i>Analysis</i>	17
<i>Research Question 1</i>	17
<i>Research Question 2</i>	19
Chapter V: Discussion	20
<i>Limitations</i>	21
<i>Conclusions</i>	22
<i>Recommendations</i>	24
References	27
Appendix A: Consent Form	29
Appendix B: Family Entertainment Survey	32

List of Tables

Table 1: Pearson Correlation Coefficient for Research Question 1.....	18
Table 2: Pearson Correlation Coefficient for Research Question 2.....	19

Chapter I: Introduction

From infancy throughout childhood, human beings from all cultures generally participate in a common pastime, play. Some consider it one of childhood's most important tasks. It is an activity that researchers in child psychology have looked at for years to help determine stages of development and origins of maladaptive behavior. In fact, the field of play therapy is made up entirely of play behavior observations.

Whether in a play therapy environment or just observing children at play, it's easy to wonder why they choose a particular game, or how they decide to play a specific character. Some of what children play may have to do with their mastery of a game, or the events in their day. Much of what we see children do at play is imitation. They imitate what they've seen or heard or may pretend to be a favorite movie or cartoon character such as Spiderman. On the surface, a good-guy character such as this is probably not likely to trouble parents or care-givers. To most children, it's preferable to play a movie or television character rather than a real-life person. Authors Grossman and DeGaetano point out that "children who pretend to be teachers rather than Power Rangers are just considered weird" (1999, p.52). For many parents, it may become more of a concern to see our children playing a bad-guy or a good-guy who uses violence in his quest to triumph over evil. Furthermore, it may cause one to think twice about what truly affects what a child plays, and perhaps more importantly, how they play.

Observation of both human beings and animals suggests that play is natural and often spontaneous. Human play usually "begins in early infancy, peaks during childhood, then declines during adolescence and all but disappears by adulthood" (Pellegrini & Smith, 1998, p.578).

Among the various types of play that children engage in it is fantasy play, usually referred to as pretending, which could be closely associated with imitation of what a child sees on television or in a movie.

Throughout the last several decades, perhaps due to watching our children imitate television and movies, more and more attention has been paid to the violence they see. Many have come to agree that the numbers are too high. In their book, *Stop Teaching Our Kids to Kill*, Grossman & DeGaetano note that “by the age of eighteen, a typical American child will have seen at least 200,000 dramatized acts of violence and forty thousand screen murders” (1999, p. 49). Breaking this down, the amount of violence seen on television alone averages “20-25 violent acts” per hour, in programs that are aimed at children (Browne and Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2005). This is occurring at a time when children are unable to make the distinction between what is real-life and what is fiction. To better understand this we need only consider the stories we tell our children about the Easter Bunny, Santa Claus, the Tooth Fairy and other fictional characters. Until they are old enough to understand the impossibilities of the aforementioned examples, they believe in them whole-heartedly. Consider also, the reports of children watching the fall of the World Trade Center buildings on September 11, 2001. After a few hours of the constant replay of the buildings’ collapse, the media issued warnings stating that caution should be taken when watching the news coverage around children. It was said that they would be unable to understand that they were viewing a replay of the event and in fact, would think that the collapse of the Twin Towers was happening over and over again.

The fact that children are witnesses to violence on a regular basis in the media is an issue that has not gone unnoticed. Discussing the problems with entertainment media in general, U.S.

Senator Sam Brownback declared, “There is a growing body of hard and verifiable evidence that suggests the violent and sexual content of entertainment media can be harmful to children’s development” (Lion & Lamb Project). Adding to this list of evidence, one study showed “childhood exposure to media violence was predictive of aggressive behavior in early adulthood in both men and women” (Browne and Hamilton-Giachritsis , 2004). Although one might conclude that aggression in some form or another is part of human nature, psychologists working with children “are seeing it acted out in increasingly more menacing and deadly ways” (Grossman & DeGaetano, 1999, p.18).

While it seems that television violence has been well-researched, there are few studies that have looked specifically at violence in movies and the effects movie violence has on children. Although movie-watching may not be the first form of 21st century entertainment that comes to mind when so many other forms of entertainment exist, it is still very popular. In its 2003 movie attendance study, the Motion Picture Association of America (M.P.A.A.) reports that 85% of the population attended movies either frequently (at least once per month) or occasionally (at least once in six months). But seeing a movie is not necessarily an evening out at the theater, since they are also viewed at home. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, adults spent 56 hours watching videos at home in 2001; that number is projected to increase to 126 by the year 2006. Although the M.P.A.A. and U.S. Census Bureau are counting the movies watched by adults, a natural assumption is that much of that viewing is shared with children. In fact, the proportion of families with children under twelve who are either frequent or occasional moviegoers is 68%.

It's a simple assumption then, that movies are a part of the lives of most children. Knowing how important play is throughout childhood, and how often children are seeing movies, it seems appropriate that the potential relationship between the two be explored further. Since most studies seem to focus more on television than on movies, this study will look specifically at movies.

Statement of the Problem

Whether it's on the big screen or on a video at home, watching movies is a favorite pastime of adults and children alike. Too often however, children are seeing violence in movies that were not necessarily meant for them to see. Even those movies that are made specifically with children in mind, can contain violence. Over the last several decades, concerns have slowly risen over how violence in the movies is affecting our children. One of the most reasonable methods of determining how our children are affected is to examine the levels of aggression in their play.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to determine if there is a possible relationship between movie-watching and aggressive play in children. The study looked at the answers to an anonymous survey completed in the fall of 2004, by parents of elementary school-aged children in Western Wisconsin. Students in the small, urban, public school ranged in grade from kindergarten through third grade and included both boys and girls.

Research Questions

1. Is there a relationship between watching movies that contain violence and aggressive play including the type of toys with which children choose to play?

2. Is there a relationship between watching movies that contain violence and aggressive play including children's imitation of movie characters or movie actions?

Definition of Terms

The following are key terms which should be recognized in order to properly understand the scope of this study.

Aggressive Play: a form of play that involves the use of toys which may symbolize aggression or rough-and-tumble play that includes deliberately unfriendly behavior that is directed toward friends or objects.

Fantasy Play: "involves a player taking a stance that is different from reality and using a mental representation of a situation as part of an enactment" (Pellegrini & Bjorklund, 2004, p.24).

Play: "a form of juvenile behavior resembling functional behavior but its form is typically exaggerated, seemingly less serious, and has individual components rearranged in unusual sequences... class of behaviors in which the means are more important than the ends" (Pellegrini & Bjorklund, 2004, p. 24).

Play Therapy: "an opportunity which is given to the child to 'play out' his feelings and problems just as, in certain types of adult therapy, an individual 'talks out' his difficulties" (Axline, 1947, p. 9).

Rough-and-Tumble Play: "gross motor activities [that] do not typically result in injury to participants or in the separation of playmates...examples of rough-and-tumble include play wrestling and play chasing" (Pellegrini & Perlmutter, 1986, p. 162-163).

Violence: “the exercise of physical force so as to injure or damage persons or property; otherwise to treat or use persons or property in a way that causes bodily injury and/or forcibly interferes with personal freedom” (Browne & Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2005, p.703).

Assumptions

There are several assumptions being made throughout this study. The first assumption is that parents are observant of how their children spend their leisure time, how they play and what they play with. The next assumption is that parents are knowledgeable of what movies their children are seeing at all times. The last assumption is that parents will answer the survey honestly and without reservations.

Limitations

There are several limitations in the study, some of which mirror the assumptions. The first limitation is that parents, especially those that work, are not able to pay close attention to how their children play, and aside from the toys they purchase or those that are received as gifts, they may not be cognizant of what toys are being played with. If aggressive play is reported by parents in the study, it may be difficult to determine if it was a movie or something else that led to this behavior. The second limitation is that when children are not in the direct care of a parent, they may be seeing movies that the parent is not aware of or otherwise would not approve of. Direct observation along with a control group might otherwise be the preferred way to collect data in a study like this, it was not a possibility here. The third limitation, sample size, is a limitation in this study as it is not large enough to generalize the findings to the population. The final limitation is that parents may not answer a survey honestly if they are fearful of looking like less-than-perfect parents.

Chapter II: Review of Literature

Introduction

In the following literature review, various articles will be examined to demonstrate the importance of how and what children play as well as, the possible effect the media (specifically movies) is having on their play. A list of the topics to be discussed is as follows: movies, play, behavior.

Movies

In the late 19th century, when devices such as the Zoopraxiscope, the Kinetoscope, the Mutoscope and the Lumiere Cinematographe were created as ways of viewing moving pictures, it is doubtful that the inventors (Muybridge, Edison, Dixon and August and Louis Lumiere, respectively) had any idea of the enormous impact their inventions would have on modern American entertainment. These inventions began as single-viewer machines or when several people were able to watch at once, they saw spinning pictures aided by lanterns. Seeing a movie became a formal event and was relatively uncommon to many. As time went by of course, movies became somewhat commonplace.

Although films began to be seen in American theaters in 1896, a movie rating system was not used until the late 1960's when it was created by the Motion Picture Association of America (M.P.A.A.). (Prior to this time, film content was monitored by a combination of the Hays' Production Code Administration and the Catholic Church's Legion of Decency). The M.P.A.A. rating system has undergone several changes since its original system: "G" for general audiences, including children; "M" for mature audiences; "R" meaning it was restricted to those over the age of 16 unless accompanied by an adult; and "X" where children under the age of 17

were not admitted. Beginning in 1970 with the introduction of the PG rating, the rating system slowly underwent changes to become our current rating system. “M” was replaced with “PG” for parental guidance suggested; “PG-13” which was meant to strongly caution parents as some material may be inappropriate for children under 13; and “NC-17” which replaced the “X” rating although its meaning did not change. The meaning behind the “G” rating also has not changed and seemingly, its intent remained the same as well. However, only 26 of the 315 highest grossing movies in America have been given a rating of “G” (The Movie Times). Potentially, this means that 289 of those high grossing movies could have been seen by children when they were not necessarily meant for children to see.

There are critics of our movie rating system however, and they are skeptical of the effects any changes may have had on movie ratings. The New York Times reported the results of a study from the Harvard School of Public Health which found that “more violent and sexually explicit content” has been slowly sneaking into movies (2004). One researcher notes that “today’s PG-13 movies are approaching what the R movies looked like in 1992” (Waxman, 2004). Even G-rated animated movies are not immune from violence. Researchers in the Harvard study found “significantly more violence in G-rated animated films compared with non-animated films and concluded that physicians should discuss media consumption with parents of young children” (Waxman, 2004).

What may be more disturbing than the rating system itself, is who exactly decides on movie ratings. According to concerned mother and executive director of the Lion & Lamb Project, Daphne White, the only criteria for admission to M.P.A.A.’s board of the Classification and Rating Administration, is that the individual be a parent (2000). Presumably, they are

looking for the 'average' parent. M.P.A.A. specifically does not want pediatricians or any other such child welfare professionals to participate in the ratings of the movies shown in America.

Since the movie industry is leaving the monitoring of violence in movies to the moviegoer, it seems worthwhile to look at who exactly is seeing movies. As previously stated, the proportion of families with children under twelve who are either frequent or occasional moviegoers is 68%. Contrary to the assumption that movie viewing is an unintelligent, languorous activity, movie goers and those who view movies in the home are actually an educated group. In fact, the U.S. Census Bureau (2003) shows that the groups with the highest movie attendance are in the college graduate and graduate school levels (77 percent and 78 percent respectively).

Although it's clear that moviegoers are typically educated, it seems that sometimes those same adults are making poor decisions with regard to what they allow children to see. Parents may feel that their children are mature enough or that the movie won't have any permanent effects. Or, more simply, it may be an inability to find a babysitter. Recalling my own childhood, my parents took me to see *Alien* at the age of ten. The newly released film did not seem to be something my parents felt I could not handle. They explained this to me 20 minutes into the movie, as I stood shaking and crying uncontrollably in the lobby of the theater; I finished watching the film with my hood pulled over my eyes. This not-so-uncommon action of taking children to horror movies is in-most cases, a contrast to our normal parenting efforts. According to Dr. Alvin Poussaint, professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, "we do not act to keep [children] from watching movies about things we would be horrified to have them see off the screen" (as cited in Grossman & DeGaetano, 1999, p.49).

Play

Children at play are seemingly unconcerned as to why they play when they do. In fact, many scientists agree that children are “concerned with means over ends, and that the activity appears to be ‘purposeless’” (Pellegrini & Smith, 1998, p. 577). Knowing how children view (or don’t view) their play activities, it seems almost comical that we adults would be concerned with it at all. But we are concerned with play because of its possible implications later in life as well as how our children’s play affects them now.

Many researchers have long believed that play is instrumental in the cognitive development of children. It has also been suggested that play serves a purpose of learning proficiencies that will be necessary in adulthood. And, contemporary researchers Pellegrini and Smith, believe that play should be considered as “serving minimal immediate functions during childhood, with benefits deferred until maturity” (1998, p. 578).

Just as there may be reasons for what or how children play, there may also be reasons for what they play with. The therapist who works with children in a play therapy setting is concerned with what children gravitate toward first, what they play with most and the symbolic meaning behind the toys that are played with. Some toys may seem obvious in their meaning (plastic knives or pretend guns). Others may have several meanings and should be taken into context with the rest of the child’s behaviors. A toy dog for example, can symbolize a companion, loyalty, or protection as well as aggression. Similarly, a toy car may represent safety and protection or it may represent conflict or escape. In a play therapy setting, all of this is taken into context with anything that a child may say during therapy.

To better understand play activities, numerous researchers have placed play into categories such as fantasy, exercise play and rough-and-tumble play. The categories most concerning to this study are pretend or fantasy play and rough-and-tumble play. As one may remember, these types of play may be independent of one another as in playing 'house'; or they may be combined, as in playing 'cops-and-robbers'. If playing 'cops-and-robbers' is done in a rough-and-tumble manner, it may be perceived as aggressive play. Parents and teachers may then find themselves wondering if aggressive play is something to be concerned with. Without a doubt, the level at which aggressive play becomes worrisome is a matter that some consider very controversial. Most researchers agree however, that playing aggressively (as may be the case in 'cops-and-robbers') is a normal part of development. It may in fact, be useful in helping a child find their comfort levels between passivity and aggression.

But aggressive play is not without concerns. Aggressive play may begin as only play but it can often elevate, "Words turn into pushing faster; pushing turns into punching; and punching turns into further acts of brutality more rapidly than seems natural, or at least than seemed natural a few decades ago" (Grossman & DeGaetano, 1999, p26). And, it becomes more worrisome when aggressive play involves the repeated acting out of violence which clearly comes from movie or television characters. Even more disturbing, is that "the more often children watch violent television and movies, the more likely it is that they will develop and sustain highly aggressive heroic fantasies for years to come" (Grossman & DeGaetano, 1999, p.55).

Destructive Behaviors

Since the middle of the 20th century, there have been over 3500 studies done in America to determine the effects of media violence on those who watch. A major observation by Grossman & DeGaetano: “due to overexposure to gratuitous violent imagery, our children undergo a systematic conditioning process that alters their cognitive, emotional and social development in such ways as to embed in them a desire and/or conditioned reflex to act out violently without remorse” (1999, p. 48). We may have seen the effects of this as we have witnessed an increase in maladaptive behaviors ranging from overly-aggressive play to school-shootings.

Undoubtedly, the increase in school shootings in recent years is but one of the news-making events that has caused many to reflect on where this type of violence begins. Since we have seen a slow but steady increase in the levels of graphic violence over the course of the past forty years, it makes sense that we look for at least a partial explanation in the movies.

What is unknown at this point is whether youth crime rates are any reflection of the effect of movie violence. Looking at statistics from the 2003 U.S. Census Bureau, it appears as though there is only a slight increase in the number of juvenile arrests for violent crimes between the years 1980 (77,220) and 2001 (78,443). However, there is a significant increase when those numbers are broken down for weapon law violations: 21,203 in 1980 versus 29,290 in 2001. Even more disturbing is the difference between juvenile arrests for aggravated assault in 1980 (33,548) and in 2001 (50,462). There is not sufficient data to correlate youth crimes with movie violence. Conversely, we can make some assumptions based on the increase in specific crimes

such as weapon law violations and aggravated assault considering that these are two areas which are heavily represented in the movies released each year.

Long before laws are broken however, there may be patterns of behavior which, in retrospect, can be seen at school and at home. Early on, we start interacting with babies making silly faces or nonsense noises in an effort to make him or her laugh, and we wait for the moment when they return our gestures. Eventually, babies do start to imitate what they see and hear us do and as early as 14 months old, they can even imitate what they see on television or in a movie.

Frequently, as children grow, they play or act out what they've seen in their favorite movies. Most adults today will surely remember finding anything long enough to be a 'light saber' and acting out specific scenes from Star Wars. Children can and will be fascinated enough by what they've seen on the screen that they will attempt to reenact it and this can include the aggressive and even dangerous behaviors we typically want them to avoid. "Young children have an instinctive desire to imitate the behavior of others, but they do not possess an instinct for gauging whether a behavior ought to be imitated" (Grossman & DeGaetano, 1999, p.54).

Many times, imitation in the form of play takes place on the playground. Occasionally, imitation and curiosity go further and become much too real. Teachers say they've heard "students as young as seven years old discussing the 'thrills' of stabbing a kitten to death or torturing a pet" (Grossman & DeGaetano, 1999, p. 18). Developmentally, it is often difficult for children to fully understand the consequences of their actions. Until the age of six, many children are unable to understand the irreversible, finality of death and therefore, it may be especially dangerous for them to witness movie violence. Characters that expire on the screen will live again when the DVD or VHS tape is rewound.

Chapter III: Methodology

Introduction

This chapter will discuss the selection and description of the sample used in the study. An explanation of the instrument being used for the study will be followed by data collection, data analysis and the limitations of the study.

Selection and Description of Sample

Sixty-eight voluntary surveys were sent home with students from a small, urban, public school in Western Wisconsin. The students in the school ranged from grades kindergarten through third grade during the fall of 2004. The sample is represented by the 36 completed surveys which were completed by one or more caregivers.

Instrumentation

The survey used in this study is a two-sided, pen or pencil, self-report survey, created by the researcher. Ideas for the design of the survey were arrived at by listing those items deemed to be important to the research: age of student, type of leisure activities engaged in, popular movies released from 2002-2004, and a list of toys that are most often played with and imitate-able movie-related behaviors.

The survey consists of a total of seven parts. The first part is multiple-choice and is used to determine which caregiver would be completing the survey. The role of the caregiver is for demographic purposes only and does not pertain directly to the study. Part two asks what grade the survey participant's children are in and is again for demographical purposes. Part three of the survey is a multiple-choice question of what type of activities the child enjoys. Part four is the last section on the first side and is a small multiple-choice grid which asks for the toys most

often played with by the child. The toys listed are those that have feelings of aggression associated with them in addition to other meanings. For the purpose of this study, these toys are hereafter referred to as 'aggressive toys'.

On the second side of the survey, part five is a grid listing some of the popular movies rated G, PG, PG-13 and R, were released during 2002, 2003 or 2004, and many of which contained violence or action-related violence. For the purpose of this study, movies containing violence are hereafter referred to as 'violent movies'. Part six follows the movie grid and contains two questions which ask whether the caregiver has seen the child imitate movie characters and which characters. Part seven contains the final questions of whether the caregiver has seen the child perform the actions from movies and what movie actions have been performed.

There are no measures of reliability or validity for the survey as it was designed specifically for this study and had not yet been used.

Data Collection

The survey was sent home in a school-to-home folder that is regularly used for communications from the school to the parents. Along with the survey was a consent form, letter of instruction and two postage-paid envelopes addressed to a post office box. Those completing the surveys were asked to sign the consent form and complete the survey but to send them in the two separate envelopes so as to ensure anonymity. The subjects were notified on the survey and in the consent letter, that it is voluntary and that any results will be confidential.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using descriptive statistics. The specific data analyses used were cross-tabulation and frequency tables in order to determine if a relationship existed between the selected variables. A 0.05 level of significance was used to determine relationship and variable significance for the research questions.

Limitations

The primary methodological limitation was that the survey had not been used prior to this study and therefore, there was no measure of validity available. Additionally, in order to determine reliability, the study would have to have been conducted at several similar schools at the same time this survey was being conducted. The primary reason for this is that the list of movies used on the survey which were chosen because of their recent (within the last two years) releases. Reliability would require the movies to be identical to the movies on this survey and over a short period of time, the likelihood of children seeing these specific movies begins to decrease. The final limitation is the inability to combine the survey with observation by the researcher. If observation on the playground could be combined with parent reporting, it is possible that additional data could have been obtained.

Chapter IV: Results

Introduction

This chapter will present the results of the data collected from the survey which examined whether there is a connection between children who watch movies which contain violence and aggressive play behavior. The descriptive statistics are reported through an analysis of the completed surveys.

Analysis

A total of 36 surveys were mailed back to the researcher, resulting in a 53% return rate of the survey. The sample in this study is represented by the 36 surveys. Of those who completed the surveys, 80.6% (n=29) were completed by the mother, 11.1% (n=4) were completed by the father, 5.5% (n=2) were completed by both parents and 2.8% (n=1) were completed by a grandparent. In the section of the survey which asks for the grade the child is in, 8.3% indicated the grade for more than one child and therefore it is unclear if the activities reported is for one or more than one child.

Research Question 1

Question 1: Is there a relationship between watching movies that contain violence and aggressive play including the type of toys with which children choose to play? Of the 42 movies listed in this study's survey, 28 were considered violent due to violence or action-related violence as categorized by the movie industry. According to the results, 16 of the 28 violent movies listed, have been seen by the children represented by the completed surveys. The violent movies listed in the survey that were seen most often were: Spiderman (41.7%), Pirates of the Caribbean (27.8%), Star Wars Episode II (27.8%), Ladder 49 (38.9%) and Spiderman II (22.2%).

Other movies that parents reported children saw that were also considered violent or action-related violent, and were not present on the survey, were the Star Wars series and Jackie Chan movies.

Using the Pearson r measurement of correlation, it was found that there was no significant correlation between the number of aggressive toys played with, and watching movies containing violence (.334). Specifically, only 16.7 % of the respondents said that their child/children saw at least one movie containing violence and played with at least one aggressive toy. See Table 1 for further information regarding the correlation significance of survey sections four and five.

Table 1

Pearson Correlation Coefficient for Research Question 1

Violent Movies Seen & Aggressive Toys Played With	Pearson Correlation	Sig. (2-tailed)
n=36	.166	.334

A closer examination of one of the surveys, noted that the child had seen the Star Wars series (in addition to Spiderman and The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers), and has played with a toy sword but noted no other significant aggressive toys. When the number of violent movies watched increased, the number of aggressive toys played with did not show any considerable changes. Only 25% said that their child/children saw two or more movies containing violence and played with two or more aggressive toys.

Several of the toys listed on the survey have the connotation of aggression in addition to other reasons children play with them. As previously noted, it is important to consider that toys may have multiple meanings and should be considered in context with a child's other behaviors. Although this may be the rule in play therapy sessions, for the purpose of the study, aggressive toys were considered in context with watching violent movies. The aggressive toys checked most often on the survey were the toy sword (25%), action figure (30.6%), pillow (30.6%), monster figure (11.1%), toy bear (19.4%), clay (25%), and toy gun (11.1%).

The options used to analyze research question one are located in sections four and five of the survey and pertained specifically to which of the aggressive toys were played with and the number of movies containing violence seen by children.

Research Question 2

Question 2: Is there a relationship between watching movies that contain violence and aggressive play including children's imitation of movie characters or movie actions? The Pearson r measurement of correlation found a .001 level of significance for acting out things seen in movies and imitating characters from movies. See Table 2 for further information regarding the correlation significance of survey sections six and seven.

Table 2

Pearson Correlation Coefficient for Research Question 2

Imitate Characters From Movies & Act Out Things Seen In Movies	Pearson Correlation	Sig. (2-tailed)
n=36	.601	.001

The crosstabulated results show that 63.2% of the children who “sometimes imitate characters from movies”, have seen two or more violent movies. Those who “usually imitate characters from movies” (66.7%) have seen at least one violent movie. Similarly, 64.7% who “sometimes act out things seen in movies” have seen two or more violent movies. And those who “usually act out things seen in movies” (60%) have seen at least one violent movie.

The characters parents reported having seen children imitate were characters from the violent movies listed on the survey including Spiderman, characters from the Lord of the Rings, the Hulk, OBI-Wan Kenobi, Anniken Skywalker and pirates. Other characters noted were from movies not listed on the survey including Power Rangers, Ninja Turtles, Batman, Jackie Chan, Harry Potter characters as well as several cartoon characters.

The options used to analyze research question two are located in sections five, six and seven of the survey and pertained specifically to the number of movies containing violence seen by children and the imitation of movie characters and the acting out of things seen in movies.

Chapter V: Discussion

Introduction

This chapter will present the conclusions that were reached based upon the data analysis of the completed surveys. Recommendations presented will also be based upon the data analysis of the completed surveys. The purpose of the study and limitations are reviewed.

The purpose of this study was to determine if there is a possible relationship between movie-watching and aggressive play in children. The primary objective was to determine if there was a relationship between watching violent movies and aggressive play including the toys with which children choose to play. The secondary objective was to determine if there was a relationship between watching violent movies and aggressive play including children's imitation of movie characters or movie actions.

This study's significance lies in determining if children who see movies that contain violence, will be more aggressive in their play. The presence of a strong correlation between violent movies and aggressive play provides evidence that there is a need for change in the levels of violence in movies and an increase in the monitoring of what children watch.

Limitations

There were several limitations in the study. The first limitation is that parents, especially those that work, are not able to pay close attention to how their children play, and aside from the toys they purchase or those that are received as gifts, they may not be cognizant of what toys are being played with. If aggressive play was reported by parents in the study, it may be difficult to determine if it was a movie or something else that led to this behavior. The second limitation was that when children are not in the direct care of a parent, they may have seen movies that the

parent was not aware of or otherwise would not approve of. Direct observation along with a control group might otherwise be the preferred way to collect data in a study like this; it was not a possibility here. The sample size in this study was the third limitation as it is not large enough to generalize the findings to the population. The final or fourth limitation was that parents may not have answered a survey honestly if they were fearful of looking like less-than-perfect parents.

Conclusions

An examination of the literature shows that violence in the media has long been a concern that has yet to be thoroughly addressed. Violence in the movies and a more active, conscientious role in the rating of movies are specific concerns that also have yet to be addressed. This study was conducted in order to explore how the violence children see in movies may affect them in their play.

Of the 42 movies listed in this study's survey, 28 were considered violent due to violence or action-related violence as categorized by the movie industry or by the researcher. According to the results of this study, many of the children had seen 16 of the 28 violent movies. The violent movies listed in the survey that were seen most often were, Spiderman, Pirates of the Caribbean, Star Wars Episode II, Ladder 49 and Spiderman II. Other movies that parents reported children saw that were also considered violent or action-related violent, and were not present on the survey, were the Star Wars series and Jackie Chan movies.

Due to some of the limitations of the study, it was difficult to draw any direct correlations between the viewing of violent movies and the aggressive play of children. Results did show however, correlations between the imitation of movie characters and the acting out of things seen

in movies. Additionally, there is a correlation between both of the aforementioned variables with the playing with aggressive toys. So, while there was not a direct correlation between movie violence and aggressive play per se, there is an indirect connection between watching violent movies and aggressive play via the aggressive characters portrayed and the mimicking of actions from violent movies. Overall, it appears that the movie storyline may leave an impression on our children but the characters and the actions of the characters from these and other movies definitely leave an impression.

Most of the violent movies listed on the survey contain a plot which includes good-guy/bad-guy scenarios. On the surface it would appear to be appropriate for our children to learn that being a criminal or a bad-guy does not pay; the police, the laws of nature or some other moral-enforcing influence will catch up with them if they do not comply with what is right, lawful or virtuous.

However, the lesson we expect our children to learn may not be what they remember. What is often more easily remembered, are the actions on the screen that are visually appealing and exciting and it is this “violent imagery [which] is so much more easily remembered and learned by children under 8 or 9 years old” (Grossman & DeGaetano, 1999, p. 53). While we believe that our children are imitating Spiderman because they want to achieve good over evil, many may just be recalling the excitement of the action, sans the important life-lesson.

Grossman & DeGaetano (1999) also called our attention to the fact that “young children have an instinctive desire to imitate the behavior of others, but they do not possess an instinct for gauging whether a behavior ought to be imitated” (p.54). If the children represented by this study

bear any resemblance to the larger population, it stands to reason that the imitation of violent movie characters may be more problematic than we think.

Undoubtedly, it is difficult for parents to decide on which movies children may watch and which should only be watched by the adults. Furthermore, it is undeniably challenging to decide where to draw the line on which movie behaviors are reasonable to imitate and which movie behaviors if imitated, will lead to more aggressive or dangerous behaviors. The parents who participated in the survey most certainly have opinions about how their children play and the unlikelihood that the aggressive play they've witnessed is anything but normal. It has in fact, been stated that most researchers agree that aggressive play is a normal part of development.

However, aggressive play that is based at least in part, by the violence that has been seen in a movie may include actions that are difficult, if not impossible to undo. Due to the violence that is either eliminated or glamorized in a movie, children very often will "take away overoptimistic impressions about the body's ability to withstand violent attacks" (McLellan, 2002, p. 502). One of the many examples of this type of distorted learning was seen in 1997 when an 8 year old was shot and killed by a playmate after watching the movie *Set It Off*. In 1993, two 11 year old children were convicted of killing a 2 year old; they reportedly had just watched *Child's Play 3*.

Recommendations

The results of this study indicated a correlation between the imitation of movie characters and the acting out of things seen in movies. Additionally, there is a correlation between both of the aforementioned variables with the playing with aggressive toys. Due to the small sample size however, this is not able to be generalized to the population. Therefore, it is recommended that

this study be done concurrently with numerous families across the nation in order for a substantial and reliable data set to be achieved.

It appears that the studies that have been completed which show a negative consequence to children being exposed to violence in the movies have been largely ignored by the movie industry. Another recommendation therefore, is that parents be made more aware of the findings of these studies that point to the harmful effects of children watching movies that contain violence. As the movie industry has not decreased but rather increased the levels of gratuitous violence in the movies, it is recommended that the movie-viewing public appeal to them to make changes. If 68% of either frequent or occasional moviegoers include families with children under twelve, it seems that the opinions and actions of this majority should carry some weight.

Another recommendation is that more research is done on the long-term affects of movie violence on our children as they grow. We have seen at least one school shooting by a teen that occurred based on the movie *The Basketball Diaries*. Many more, less-publicized (some less violent) crimes have certainly been traced to the viewing of violence in movies. One teen who robbed a bank admitted that he'd never have thought of the crime if he hadn't seen the movie *Point Break*.

As parents permit their growing children to watch movies, it is recommended to watch for mimicking of inappropriate behaviors that are clearly movie-related. The violence which is most often imitated comes from movies that "involve an attractive perpetrator, justified actions by a hero and depictions that are extensive or realistic or do not show the consequences of the violence" (McLellan, 2002, p. 502). Moreover, it behooves the concerned parent to watch the movies with their children instead of relying on the video-babysitter. Parents who watch with

their children are then available to answer questions and to explain unnecessary violence. In cases where the movie does not clearly show the outcome of a violent act, it is crucial that the parent be able to explain what is not being seen.

Through these recommendations, it is hoped that the movie industry will begin to assume more responsibility in making movies by eliminating unnecessary violence. With the release of less violent movies, and stricter parental monitoring of what our children watch, this researcher believes we will experience a downturn in aggressive play and eventually, this may result in less violence in our children.

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Appendix A: Consent Form

Consent to Participate in UW-Stout Approved Research

Title: Childhood Entertainment and Behavior

Researcher: Sharon Bessinger
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Research Sponsor: Dr. Donald Platz
 715-232-1224
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 Menomonie, WI 54751
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Description of Study: The study objective is to compare movie viewing and various forms of entertainment (see survey) with the play behavior of children. Research will be collected via confidential survey to be completed voluntarily by parent(s) of elementary school-aged children from an elementary school in Eau Claire, Wisconsin which will remain anonymous in the research findings. Questions in the survey pertain to the different types of entertainment the child or children engage in as well as questions regarding the typical play behaviors exhibited by the child or children as seen by the parent.

Time Commitment: Most participants should be able to complete the survey in 10 to no more than 30 minutes.

By signing below and by returning the Children's Movie and Entertainment Survey, I am giving my informed consent as a participating volunteer in the study called Children's Entertainment and Behavior. I understand and agree that any potential risk of completing this survey is small.

I am aware that the information gathered is anonymous and will be kept strictly confidential and that the survey contains no identifying information. (Consent forms are returned separately from the survey).

I am aware that I have the right to refuse to participate in the study and that my right to withdraw from participation at anytime will be respected without prejudice.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

This study has been reviewed and approved by The University of Wisconsin-Stout's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB has determined that this study meets the ethical obligations required by federal law and University policies. If you have questions or concerns regarding this study please contact the Researcher or Advisor. If you have any questions, concerns, or reports regarding your rights as a research subject, please contact IRB Administrator, Sue Foxwell at 715-232-2477, 152 Vocational Rehabilitation Building, UW-Stout, Menomonie, WI 54751 (email: foxwells@uwstout.edu).

A copy of the thesis may be obtained by contacting Sharon Bessinger after December 20th.

Appendix B: Children's Movie and Entertainment Survey

Children's Movie and Entertainment Survey

*All completed surveys will remain confidential and anonymous.
Only the researcher (Sharon Bessinger) will be receiving the surveys.*

*Please use the enclosed, stamped envelopes to send your
completed survey and consent form to:*

*Sharon Bessinger
P.O. Box 1804
Eau Claire, WI 54702-1804*

*Please use both envelopes; do not send the survey and the consent form
together in one envelope.*

The survey deadline is: Wednesday, November 3, 2004

Please complete the following questions:

Person completing this survey:

Mother Father Grandparent Other Legal Guardian

Please place a check next to the grade(s) your children are in.

Kindergarten: 1st grade: 2nd grade:
3rd grade: 4th grade:

In his/her free time, what types of activities do your children most enjoy? (Check all that apply).

<input type="checkbox"/> Watch television (network/cable/satellite) <input type="checkbox"/> Watch videos (movies or cartoons) <input type="checkbox"/> Play board games (Checkers, Monopoly [®] , etc.) <input type="checkbox"/> Draw or paint	<input type="checkbox"/> Play with brothers/sisters <input type="checkbox"/> Play video games <input type="checkbox"/> Play with friends <input type="checkbox"/> Other (List): _____
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Please place a check next to any toys that your children play with often (check any or all that apply):

<input type="checkbox"/> Action Figures	<input type="checkbox"/> Dinosaur	<input type="checkbox"/> Toy Dragon	<input type="checkbox"/> Toy Gun	<input type="checkbox"/> Pillows
<input type="checkbox"/> Monster Figure	<input type="checkbox"/> Toy Bull	<input type="checkbox"/> Airplane	<input type="checkbox"/> Dolls	<input type="checkbox"/> Toy Sword
<input type="checkbox"/> Toy Knife	<input type="checkbox"/> Toy Shark	<input type="checkbox"/> Clay	<input type="checkbox"/> Toy Dog	<input type="checkbox"/> Toy Alligator
<input type="checkbox"/> Soldiers	<input type="checkbox"/> Toy Monkey	<input type="checkbox"/> Toy Lion	<input type="checkbox"/> Toy Gorilla	<input type="checkbox"/> Toy Wolf
<input type="checkbox"/> Toy Tiger	<input type="checkbox"/> Toy Car	<input type="checkbox"/> Toy Bear	<input type="checkbox"/> Other (List): _____	<input type="checkbox"/> Other (List): _____

Consider movies seen at home, (via cable television, pay-per-view, video rental) and in the theater. Place a check next to all movies that your children have seen at any time during the last two years.

<input type="checkbox"/> Spider-Man	<input type="checkbox"/> Men in Black II	<input type="checkbox"/> The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers	<input type="checkbox"/> Lilo & Stitch
<input type="checkbox"/> Ice Age	<input type="checkbox"/> Star Wars: Episode II-Attack of the Clones	<input type="checkbox"/> XXX (Vin Diesel)	<input type="checkbox"/> Scooby Doo
<input type="checkbox"/> Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets	<input type="checkbox"/> Die Another Day	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bourne Identity	<input type="checkbox"/> Catch Me If You Can
<input type="checkbox"/> Minority Report	<input type="checkbox"/> The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King	<input type="checkbox"/> The Sum of All Fears	<input type="checkbox"/> Finding Nemo
<input type="checkbox"/> The Matrix: Reloaded	<input type="checkbox"/> Pirates of the Caribbean	<input type="checkbox"/> Bad Boys II	<input type="checkbox"/> The Hulk
<input type="checkbox"/> X2: X-Men United	<input type="checkbox"/> Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines	<input type="checkbox"/> 2 Fast 2 Furious	<input type="checkbox"/> The Last Samurai
<input type="checkbox"/> S.W.A.T.	<input type="checkbox"/> The Italian Job	<input type="checkbox"/> Shrek 2	<input type="checkbox"/> Spider-Man 2
<input type="checkbox"/> Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban	<input type="checkbox"/> Troy	<input type="checkbox"/> I, Robot	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bourne Supremacy
<input type="checkbox"/> The Day After Tomorrow	<input type="checkbox"/> Van Helsing	<input type="checkbox"/> Starsky & Hutch	<input type="checkbox"/> Scooby Doo 2: Monsters Unleashed
<input type="checkbox"/> Hidalgo	<input type="checkbox"/> Garfield: The Movie	<input type="checkbox"/> Ladder 49	<input type="checkbox"/> A Shark's Tale
<input type="checkbox"/> Sky Captain & World/Tomorrow	<input type="checkbox"/> Hero	<input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____	<input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____

When they play, do your children imitate characters from movies they have watched?

Never (*skip the next question*) Sometimes Usually Always

Which movie characters have you seen your children pretend to be?

When they play, do your children act out things they have seen in movies (martial arts actions, superhero flying, shooting at a bad guy, etc.)?

Never (*skip the next question*) Sometimes Usually Always

What movie actions have you seen your children perform when they play,?
