

CHILDREN'S PERCEPTIONS ON PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING

By

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ABSTRACT

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Professional wrestling has become the latest fad among children and adolescents. There is a concern among the public and school personnel, including teachers, school psychologists, and counselors, that it influences children's behavior in an aggressive manner. It is also thought that children perceive wrestling as reality instead of perceiving it as fantasy. With the majority of children and adolescents watching professional wrestling, it is important to understand how children actually perceive professional wrestling and if it promotes aggressive behavior. The present study first identified the lack of research that has been conducted on professional wrestling, and demonstrated that the majority of information on the impact of professional wrestling on children has come from articles or other forms of popular literature such as *Newsweek*. In these articles, professionals make negative statements about professional wrestling without research to back these statements up. Secondly, a sample of elementary

students were surveyed to assess their perceptions on televised professional wrestling and its impact on them. These results of the study show that there are differences in perceptions between males and females and frequent viewers versus non-viewers or light viewers.

Children's perceptions also differ from professionals in the field of psychology. Implications of the results are discussed and suggestions for future research are presented. The impact of this research on school psychologists and school counselors is also discussed.

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Introduction

Professional wrestling is becoming one of the most popular programs on television. Presently, an individual can watch wrestling four times a week if he or she would like. The World Wrestling Federation (WWF) has four weekly television programs: "RAW is WAR," "Thursday Night SmackDown," "Saturday Morning Jacked," and "Sunday Night Heat." Two of the programs are watched in over 5 million households (Bessman, 1999). "SmackDown" is the highest rated program on one cable television channel, and "Raw is War" competes with Monday night professional football. It is alleged that the television network ABC recently offered the WWF one million dollars to move "Raw is War" to another night so it would not take ratings away from Monday Night Football. They are afraid that the WWF is taking away too many of its viewers (Cooper, 1998).

Wrestling audiences include a wide range of individuals. Children from the ages of two-17 make up 25% of their audience (Gabler, 1999). Males over the age of 18, however, make up 80% of the audience. Men are not the only ones watching wrestling. Females make up almost 20 % of the population watching wrestling (Gabler, 1999).

There are several WWF wrestlers who have written autobiographies (Foley, 2000; Layden, 2000). In their first week, two of them hit number one on the *New York Times* best-seller list (Bessman, 1999). Professional wrestling home videos are frequently ranked number one in sports, and their action figures outsell many other toys. Wrestlers have also combined forces with top music artists, with a recently released compact disc that went Gold (sold 1,000,000 copies) in a matter of weeks (Bessman, 1999).

Professional wrestling's popularity has not come without much criticism.

Professional wrestling is a \$100 million a year entertainment industry that attracts 35 million people a week, a sizeable proportion of whom are children (Bird, 1999). In spite of the evidence that suggests television violence influences children to behave aggressively, broadcasters and scientists continue to debate the link between watching professional wrestling and the aggressive behavior of children (Bird, 1999). This is mainly due to the fact that there are limited studies on the impact of watching professional wrestling. The majority of these studies define professional wrestling as a "live action cartoon where revenge, betrayal, greed, sex, and pride are woven into staged plots featuring lewd, crude, violent, elaborately costumed, steroid-enhanced giants" (Bird, 1999, p. 689). The question is whether these statements can be justified by the minimal amounts of research done on professional wrestling.

A large number of studies have been conducted on television violence in general and its influences on children. Television violence is defined as any overt depiction of the use of physical force-or credible threat of physical force-intended to physically harm an animate being or group of beings (Aidman, 1997). Television violence also includes certain depictions of physically harmful consequences against an animate being or group that occur as a result of unseen violent means (Aidman, 1997). There are two terms with which one must be familiarized before reading this review of literature. The first is the term literature. Literature refers to journals, textbooks, and other books by professionals in fields related to psychology. The second term is articles, which refers to opinions by writers and professionals who have not conducted research to support their statements.

In the current literature, research has been conducted on television violence, which is the source for most of the information on professional wrestling and its relationship to children. There is limited literature specifically on the effects of watching professional wrestling, but numerous articles by professionals making connections between aggressive behaviors and watching professional wrestling. In a search by the present author of internet databases (e.g., Psychinfo) only three studies were found that actually included professional wrestling in their research on television violence. However, on other search engines, such as on EbscoHost and Wilson Web, 89 articles in popular literature were found that made connections between aggressive behavior and professional wrestling. Two areas will be addressed in this critical review of literature: literature on television violence and professional wrestling and, secondly, articles by psychologists and other child experts about the impact of watching professional wrestling on children.

This review of literature will draw from the field of psychology, especially child development. In the area of child development, the review focuses on potential influences on children's aggressive behavior, children's perceptions of violence on television, and at what ages they are most likely to be affected by television violence. A mixture of journal articles from the social sciences and articles from popular media magazines, such as *Newsweek*, are also included in this review. The authors of these articles include professionals such as psychologists and other child professionals. It is important to include these articles from popular literature because they contain the majority of information on the impact of professional wrestling on children's behavior.

Few articles have been found that investigate the impact of professional wrestling and only one where the authors actually included children in their research. In this study O' Sullivan (1999) found that children who view professional wrestling are more likely to engage in violent behaviors after viewing professional wrestling. In addition, this study indicated that children who are exposed to violent acts will tend to solve conflicts through the use of aggression (O'Sullivan, 1999). Finally, Sullivan stated that children do not realize that professional wrestling is acting. They do not understand that the wrestlers are using props to make themselves bleed (O'Sullivan, 1999).

John Murray, a professor of family studies and human services at Kansas State University, has hypothesized that preteens should not watch professional wrestling because they are struggling to establish their identities and can become fixated on hypermasculine role models (Kantrowitz & Contreras, 1999). He also stated that if children watch too much wrestling, they may become aggressive or even fearful because they might see the world as a mean or dangerous place (Kantrowitz & Contreras, 1999). Other psychologists suggest that wrestling promotes aggression in children and suggest that disputes should be settled by fighting rather than other methods (Kantrowitz & Contreras, 2000). Yet, as Rosellini (1999), author of "Lords of the Ring" and reporter for *U.S. News and World Report* stated, "The extent to which wrestling's violence and vulgarity affect society—and especially young people—is far from clear" (p. 54). Vince McMahon, owner of the WWF, stated, "You don't see guns, murder, knives." "We resolve our differences physically, in a wrestling ring. How bad is it compared to a Schwarzenegger or Stallone movie?" (Rosellini, 1999 p. 56).

Which side of this controversy is right? Do children perceive professional wrestling as reality or fantasy? Do their perception of professional wrestling influence their behavior? Does watching professional wrestling with a parent influence children the same way as not watching it with an adult figure? These are all questions that must be addressed so that psychologists, parents, and school personnel can have a better understanding of whether professional wrestling influences children in a negative way. It is important for school professionals working with children to know about the impact of professional wrestling on children, children's perceptions of wrestling and whether professional wrestling increases aggressive behavior. With this information, attention may be focused on preventative measures for children who watch professional wrestling and on other sources that may be influencing children in an aggressive manner.

Definitions

Literature refers to journals, textbooks, and other books by professionals in fields related to psychology. Actual research has been conducted.

Articles refer to opinions by writers and professionals who have not conducted research to support their statements.

Desensitization to violence refers to an increased tolerance for violence.

Heavy Viewer refers to a child who watches 5 or more hours of professional wrestling per week.

Light or Non-Viewer refers to a child who watches 4 or fewer hours of professional wrestling per week.

Affecting in a “*good way*” refers to children's perceptions that professional wrestling impacts their behavior in a positive manner.

Affecting in a “*bad way*” refers to children’s perceptions that professional wrestling impacts their behavior in a negative manner.

In the next chapter, a review of literature and articles relating to the impact of television violence and professional wrestling on children will be conducted. This literature review will focus on six areas of research: amount of television children watch; effects of television violence; desensitization to violence; identifying with fictional characters; reality versus fantasy; and parental influences. In each section, the author will first discuss the literature on television violence and then specifically describe the literature and articles on professional wrestling.

In the review of literature, studies on how violence on television is perceived by children and the influence of such violence on children’s behavior will be presented. Topics to be addressed include when and how much violence children are watching and the roles parents have while watching professional wrestling. The ages of groups that watch professional wrestling and at what ages children are able to differentiate between fantasy and reality on television will also be discussed.

Chapter II

Review of Literature

Introduction

The majority of Americans agree that entertainment television is far too violent, that it is harmful to society, and that we as a society have become desensitized to violence (Atkin, 1983). Holmstrom (1998) goes beyond Atkin's statement on society's desensitization to violence by adding that professional wrestling is a sign of changing times. Today's society is more confrontational and disrespectful than it has ever been. Children have different values; professional wrestling has become more violent; and society is turning its head to these changes. These changes provide three good reasons to conduct research especially with children on professional wrestling.

Amount of Television Children Watch

Americans have dramatically increased the amount of time spent watching television over the past 45 years. In 1949, a mere 2% of American homes had television sets. This increased to 64% by 1955, 93% by the mid-60s, and 98% today (Murray, 1995).

The American Psychological Association (APA) estimates that children and adolescents spend 22-28 hours per week watching television (Smith, 1993). They are engaged in watching television more than any other activity except sleeping. By the time our children reach the age of 70 years, they will have spent 7-10 years watching television. A Psychological Assessment task force found that by the time a child leaves elementary school, he or she will have witnessed about 8,000 murders and more than 10,000 other assorted acts of violence on television (Smith, 1993).

It is possible for a child to watch up to ten hours of professional wrestling per week if a child watched the two major wrestling organizations (WWF and WCW). There are other professional wrestling organizations that are becoming more popular and are making their way onto television as well. A child can find professional wrestling on numerous cable channels, such as, USA, TBS, TNT, TNN, and UPN. If this is not enough wrestling, a child can order up to three pay per view events per month. All he or she has to do is know how to enter the numbers for the program he or she is about to order, a task most children are able to do. Each pay per view event is around three hours in length.

Effects of Television Violence

The effects of television content on children's behavior have been extensively investigated in the last two decades (Huston et al. 1992). The majority of research has found that exposure to television violence correlates with aggression and antisocial behaviors in many children. Social science research conducted over the past 40 years supports the conclusion that viewing violent television programming has negative consequences for children (Primavera & Herron, 1996).

The majority of research conducted to study the effects of television violence has been carried out in laboratory settings. The first ever study on television violence was conducted by Albert Bandura in 1963. He found that children who were exposed to a film depicting aggressive behavior being rewarded, later demonstrated violent behavior towards a Bobo doll and more aggression in children than children who were shown films in which the aggressive behavior was punished or in which the behavior was nonaggressive (Primavera & Herron, 1996). The majority of research since Bandura's

first study has supported the premise that television violence and aggressive behavior in children are highly correlated (Huesmann, 1988).

The finding most commonly reported in the research literature is that media violence can encourage children to learn aggressive behavior and attitudes (Aidman, 1997). The imitation of aggressive behavior appears to increase when the perpetrator is attractive, the violence is justified, weapons are present, the violence is graphic or extensive, the violence is realistic, the violence is rewarded, or the violence is presented in a humorous fashion (Aidman, 1997). Studies assessing the impact of specific children's programs such as the "Mighty Morphin Power Rangers" have shown adverse impact on children. The most common concern expressed is the increased levels of violence and aggression among children (Levin & Carlsson-Paige, 1996). Conversely, the learning of aggression is inhibited by portrayals that show that violence is unjustified, show perpetrators of violence punished, or show the painful results of violence (Aidman, 1997).

In a study done at Pennsylvania State University (Gerber, 1999), about 100 preschool children were observed both before and after watching television; some watched cartoons that had many aggressive and violent acts; others watched shows that did not have any kind of violence. The researchers noticed significant differences between the children who watched the violent shows and those who watched nonviolent programs. Children who watched the violent shows, even cartoons that portrayed violence, were more likely to disobey class rules and argue with classmates.

The overall pattern of research findings indicates a positive association between television violence and aggressive behavior. Smith (1993) has stated that "the

preponderance of evidence from more than 3,000 research studies over two decades shows that the violence portrayed on television influences the attitudes and behavior of children who watch it" (p. 1). Signorielli (1991) also found that most of the scientific evidence reveals a relationship between television and aggressive behavior. While few would say that there is absolute proof that watching television causes aggressive behavior, the overall cumulative weight of all the studies gives credence to the position that they are related.

While there have been numerous studies about television violence and aggressive behavior in children, very little research exists on the effects of professional wrestling on children's behavior. One study conducted by O' Sullivan (1999) showed that children imitate aggressive behaviors seen on professional wrestling programs immediately after viewing them. The children in her study (N=16) felt physically stronger after viewing professional wrestling and felt like they wanted to wrestle someone. O'Sullivan (1999) argues that young children do not realize that what they view on television is acting. Children also do not understand that the actions are scripted and the actors are using props to make themselves bleed.

Desensitization to Violence

Desensitization to violence refers to an increased tolerance for violence. It is predicted from exposure to extensive, graphic or humorous portrayals of violence and is of particular concern as a long-term effect for heavy viewers of violent content (Aidman 1997). Some research has found that children may become immune to violence on television and gradually accept violence as a way to solve problems (Smith, 1993). Some of the most violent programs are those children's animated series in which violence is

routinely intended to be funny, and realistic consequences of violence are not shown (Krieg, 1995).

Television violence appears to have a significant influence on our children and, as a result, on our society as a whole through the desensitization of children to the realities of violence and the instilling of a belief that "might makes right" (Krieg, 1995).

Television violence is perceived by many children as an acceptable means of resolving conflict that influences them to behave aggressively (Krieg, 1995). Krieg (1995) also states that whenever a subject perceives as justified violent acts observed on television, the probability increases that the subject will act aggressively. An attitude of acceptance toward aggression and violence can increase the likelihood of aggression and violence being performed. Long term television exposure may also have a desensitizing effect, in which inhibitory fears of physically dangerous behaviors may be diminished with repeated exposure to fearless models (Potts, Doppler, & Hernandez, 1994).

According to a study by Gerber (1999), children may become desensitized to violent television programs because these programs present violence as "the cool thing to do" (p. 54). He argues that programs like professional wrestling do not give accurate messages about violent behaviors. Children identify with these characters because their actions are glorified. He further suggests that negative consequences of violent behaviors in real life situations are not portrayed on television. A child will think that he or she is immortal and imitate the behaviors he or she has seen on television. These findings imply that once they view enough violent behaviors, children will be more likely to strike out at playmates, argue, disobey authority, and be less willing to wait for things (Gerber, 1999).

Some child experts see wrestling's implicit values reflecting some of society's distorted values. Michael Brody, as quoted by Holmstrom (1998, p. 13) says, "Our culture has become one of confrontation and disrespect." Michael Brody is a child psychiatrist at the Media Committee of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry in Washington. He writes that professional wrestling fits with what has happened in our culture.

Current events only confuse the issue of the impact of professional wrestling on children. In the aftermath of the tragic shootings in Littleton, Colorado, many Americans are debating whether the United States has a special culture of violence in which the link between social ills and televised brutality like professional wrestling seems all too obvious. The fact that the two Columbine teens who instigated the tragic shooting watched professional wrestling does not give scientific data that there is a cause between professional wrestling and violence. In fact, there is surprisingly little scientific research to connect professional wrestling and incidents like the one at Columbine High School (Rosellini, 1999).

Identifying with Fictional Characters

Within the existing literature, the evidence is ambiguous on the role that identification plays in observational learning (Huesmann & Eron, 1986). Although the weight of evidence from the research indicates that viewers are more likely to imitate white male actors as heroic more than any other actors (Huesmann & Eron, 1986), according to Josephson (1995), children may also identify with certain characters or victims who are involved in violent behavior on television programs. They may identify with aggressive heroes and engage in aggressive fantasies more than they identify with

real people. Josephson (1995) found that children like these unrealistic characters because they are powerful, brave, and strong, despite the fact that these characters display their strength and power in violent ways.

Children who watch large doses of television violence may observe characters behaving aggressively in order to solve interpersonal problems. A study by Huesmann and Eron (1986) indicated that children may see these violent acts regularly and identify with the aggressive characters. They found that children may encode in memory the aggressive solutions they observe. Also, they note that if children engage in aggressive behaviors and are rewarded with positive outcomes, then these aggressive behaviors are more likely to occur in the future.

Although few researchers have zeroed in on televised wrestling, a 1994 Israeli study of third through sixth-graders showed a correlation between watching professional wrestling and aggressive behavior (Rosellini, 1999). Once professional wrestling started airing in Israel in the early 1990s, violent behavior in the form of mock wrestling matches that often escalated to fighting and injuries increased "to a degree never known before" (p. 23). When airtime was cut back, the violence among schoolchildren diminished sharply (Rosellini, 1999). The researchers attribute this rise in children's aggression to the identification with professional wrestlers. It is believed that these children identified with the professional wrestlers and became attached to them, making them their role models.

Reality versus Fantasy

Jaglom and Gardner (1981) found that younger children have difficulty understanding the difference between reality and fantasy, especially between the ages of

two and five years. Children aged two and three showed little understanding of the boundary between television and the immediate perceptual environment (Jaglom & Gardner, 1981). For example, when an egg broke on television, they tried to clean it up. When these children were asked whether a bowl of popcorn shown on television would spill if the television were turned upside down, many three-year-olds said yes. These children appeared to believe that televised objects are literally inside the television set (Wright, Huston, Reitz, & Piemyat, 1994).

In the study by Wright, et al. (1994), results indicated that children as young as four years have more refined concepts of television reality than most prior research in the field would lead one to believe. Children around the age of four appear not to understand the difference between television and the real world due to the fact that they do not have enough life experiences. Due to this fact children tend to over-generalize the notion that nothing on television is real (Wright et al., 1994). However, they may not have a true understanding of the differences. Their limited amount of life experiences does not provide them with enough knowledge about television. If they have not seen a character on a television program before or cannot touch an object, such as objects on television, they perceive it as being fake. Once children have a basic understanding of the representational nature of televised images, they begin to differentiate between fantasy and reality like an adult differentiates between the two (Wright, et al, 1994).

Wright and colleagues (1994), however, found that five-year-olds have a perception that television is fictional and begin to recognize some connections between reality and fantasy. Children realize that the local news actually happened around the community and that movies are make-believe. As noted by the authors, five-year-olds

clearly understood the unreality of cartoons. When children ages five-11 were asked how they know whether television programs are real or fictional, they typically named content features that were physically impossible, such as people flying or one man destroying a whole army by himself (Wright, et al, 1994). Most children in this age span were also aware that their favorite programs were not based on real life and could make clear distinctions between real and fictional stimuli.

Wright et al (1994), argued that young children have an over-generalized or default belief that television is fiction or that they learn cues for fiction earlier than those for factual content. They also found that children between the ages of five and seven years are more skilled at understanding the separation of fictional roles on television from real-life roles of the actors and more aware of the fact that television fiction is scripted and rehearsed than previously believed. However, one study found that these children appear less able to differentiate between reality and fantasy when characters on television actually exist in the real world, such as police officers. When a child views violent movies involving police officers shooting hundreds and hundreds of people, she or he may perceive the show as being real (Josephson, 1995).

Older children, between the ages of eight and 12 years watch larger amounts of television due to the fact they can stay up later at night. These additional hours result in more hours watching television when there is more violent programming. Children's long-term interests and behavior patterns emerge during this age span (Josephson, 1995). During this period, which lasts throughout adolescence, children are developing their identities and discovering who they are, which lasts throughout adolescence. It is hypothesized that at the age of eight children have the ability to distinguish reality from

fantasy, and it is at this age that television has its greatest impact (Eron & Huesmann, 1985). Children who are eight years old are more likely to become aggressive after viewing aggressive behavior if they believe the program is real. However, most eight-year-olds have the ability to understand that programs that display people having superhuman powers are fantasy. When viewing aggressive behavior with people who have superhuman powers, children at this age are not as negatively influenced as when programs display this aggressive behavior without people having superhuman powers. However, children at this age still do not appear to completely understand the concept of characters in movies portraying real life people (Huesmann & Eron, 1986).

Adolescents are much more likely than younger children to doubt the reality of television content and much less likely to identify with television characters (Josephson, 1995). Children who continue to believe in the reality of television and identify with its violent heroes as adolescents are likely to display aggression, especially if they continue to fantasize about aggressive-heroic themes such as strength and power (Josephson, 1995). These individuals are the ones that society needs to be concerned about. Adolescents that still believe in characters on television and make them their role models are likely to engage in copycat crimes or other acts of violence. Some of these adolescents may copy programs that demonstrate, in detail, how to commit a crime or aggressive behavior (Josephson, 1995).

Many psychologists who study the general effects of television violence on children relate their findings to professional wrestling and say that it is bad for children, especially children under the age of eight years (Kantrowitz & Contreras, 2000). They argue that children are too immature to differentiate between fantasy and reality. They

suggest that children will perceive professional wrestling as reality, which will result in an internalized belief that disputes should be settled by fighting rather than methods of compromising (Kantrowitz & Contreras, 2000). Professional wrestling is an extremely inappropriate model for children, says Howard Spivak, chairman of the American Academy of Pediatrics' task force on violence (Kantrowitz & Contreras, 2000). Children do not always differentiate fantasy from reality, says Spivak and other critics, who point to 30 years of scientific research linking television violence with increased fear and aggression in children. Finally, Holmstrom (1998) argues that young children who do not have the cognitive development to understand professional wrestling are confused because the wrestlers consider themselves skillful athlete-entertainers, not involved in "fakery," because injuries do occur.

Parental Influences

In some observational studies the relationship between viewing television violence and the development of aggressive behavior is small compared to the relationship with other salient environmental factors, such as the influence of peers and predisposition towards aggression (MacBeth, 1996). MacBeth states that factors such as parental practices and peer relationships influence children more strongly than television alone. According to MacBeth (1996), viewing aggressive acts on television alone will not influence a child to be aggressive. She argues that the most important component that determines aggressive acts among children is the family environment. Parents usually serve as the main socialization agents for young children (MacBeth, 1996).

Others would argue that whether a child's family environment is aggressive or authoritarian is more likely to influence children to imitate coercive approaches to

solving problems than watching violent television programs alone (Sears, MacCoby, & Levin, 1957). Whether a child's family environment provides opportunities to develop scripts for aggressive behaviors and whether the child watches aggressive acts on television determine whether the child commits aggressive behaviors to memory (Huesmann, 1988).

Another important aspect of the family environment is how much television viewing by a child occurs with a parent present. Parents only watch 25% of children's programs (Wright, St. Peters, & Houston, 1990). They are not always aware of what their children are watching. If they do not know what their children are watching, then they are missing the opportunity to moderate or teach their children what is real and what is imaginary on television. For example, whether a parent comments about the content and disapproves of the violent means used to solve problems makes a difference (MacBeth, 1996). Parents who approve of the displayed aggression may facilitate aggressive behavior in children, and parents who disapprove of the displayed aggression may inhibit aggressive behavior in children (Durand, Berkowitz, & Leyens, 1984).

On the other hand, Levin (1999) argues that when parents watch professional wrestling with their children, it promotes violence even further. When adults comment on the action during a television show, children may remember more and are more likely to imitate what they have seen (Levin, 1999). While he has no data to support this premise, Danish is quoted in an article by Kantrowitz and Contreras (2000) "if parents explain to children what is wrong with professional wrestling, instead of telling them to avoid it, it will be more logical" (p. 52). Danish also states "that by telling children not to

view something, it will make it a forbidden fruit and in this process make it more appealing and more influential” (Kantrowitz & Contreras, 2000, p. 52).

Summary

There are a few main themes across the literature on the impact of television violence on children. The majority of studies indicate that television violence correlates with aggressive behavior in children. Television violence may negatively affect children and may desensitize children toward aggression. Children may not have the cognitive ability to differentiate between reality and fantasy, and parental influences may affect how children perceive violence and how it influences their behavior. On the other hand, there is much literature arguing that children, especially those eight years and older, can differentiate between reality and fantasy and that television violence does not impact children as severely as previously believed. Other studies point to other variables that may play an important role in aggressive behavior in children, such as parental and peer influences and the ways that society is changing as a whole. It is not clear which of these views is correct, but what is clear is the need for further research in this area to clarify the findings of previous research.

The research on the effects of professional wrestling on children is also mixed. There is minimal literature on professional wrestling. The little research that has been done indicates that professional wrestling influences children to behave aggressively. On the other hand, there are many child professionals that suggest that professional wrestling may not negatively impact children. However, much new research is needed to back up their statements. In the final section of this paper, a critical analysis of the previously reviewed literature will be presented. Criticisms of the research connecting professional

wrestling and the negative outcomes in children will be discussed. Finally, implications for school psychologists and counselors will be provided.

Critical Analysis

This critical analysis will focus on three areas: (1) laboratory research on television violence; (2) research done on professional wrestling; and (3) psychologists and other child professionals' statements in popular literature about the impact of professional wrestling on children.

An argument will also be presented that additional research needs to make a distinction between television violence and professional wrestling. The majority of researchers have found a correlation between television violence and aggressive behavior in children. Social science research conducted over the past 40 years supports the conclusion that viewing violent television programming has negative consequences for children (Primavera & Herron, 1996). The fact most commonly found in the research literature is that media violence can encourage children to learn aggressive behavior and attitudes (Aidman, 1997).

Criticisms

The first criticism of the literature is on several reports related to the validity of making inferences about the impact of professional wrestling on children from research data gathered on television violence in general. These inferences by psychologists and other child professionals appear no more than educated guesses about the impact of professional wrestling. It is hard to argue the fact that television violence influences children to behave aggressively. However, to generalize these findings to professional wrestling is a mistake because professional wrestling and television violence are two different constructs. In professional wrestling there is no murder, no attempted murder,

no robbery, and no rape. Professional wrestlers resolve their differences physically, in a wrestling ring. For instance, when there is a conflict between two wrestlers, they wrestle in the ring. They do not engage in any of the previously mentioned acts of violence. The display of aggression lacks the killing and destruction of a Schwarzenegger or Stallone movie and other television programs that do have these components of aggression and violence.

In sum, there are over eighty articles alone that criticize professional wrestling, with references to psychologists and other professionals in this area. The majority of articles, books, and reports on professional wrestling have something negative to say about it. Few psychologists state that the connection between professional wrestling and aggressive behaviors is unclear. Yet there are only two studies that have actually been published with data establishing a relationship between professional wrestling and children's aggressive behavior.

One example of inappropriate inferences to professional wrestling is found in a study by Josephson (1995), which showed children may also identify with certain characters or victims who are involved in violent behavior on television programs. They may identify with aggressive heroes and engage in aggressive fantasies more than they identify with real people. Josephson (1995) found that children like these unrealistic characters because they are powerful, brave, and strong despite the fact that these characters display their strength and power in violent ways. Josephson found these results by doing research on television violence, not professional wrestling. Insufficient data exists to apply these results specifically to professional wrestling. Hence, Holmstrom (1998) and others who reviewed Josephson's research and other research and

make negative statements in popular literature about professional wrestling are making an unsupported inference, due to the paucity of research specific to the impact of professional wrestling on children.

Actual research on professional wrestling is too scarce to decide how it may be influencing children's aggressive behavior. Conclusions about the benefits or liabilities of professional wrestling must come from research, not opinion or current literature. Authors of current literature are making these conclusions when interpreting research. Therefore they are only making this issue more confusing. Authors of current literature are interpreting the literature the way they want to or making generalizations about professional wrestling. In reality, research has not demonstrated the connection between professional wrestling and children's aggression.

A second criticism made by this reviewer is that the strongest evidence for the relationship between television violence and aggressive behavior comes from laboratory research studies. There are limitations to these studies because we do not know if what occurs in the laboratory generalizes to what happens outside the laboratory. Kaplan and Singer (1976) concluded that laboratory studies may generate hypotheses, but they cannot determine cause. Yet in the area of television violence and children, psychologists and other professionals are reviewing the data and over-generalizing it in their reports. Besides the fact that professional wrestling and television violence are two different constructs, psychologists may be inferring results that do not occur in the real world, especially in regards to professional wrestling.

Research by Freedman (1986) supports the criticism that laboratory studies may not relate to real world experiences. He states that there is weak evidence that the same

effects actually occur in the real world, and there is weak evidence that cumulative exposure to television violence leads to aggressive behavior outside the laboratory (Freedman, 1986). Freedman also argues that studies measuring aggression in a laboratory setting have no possibility of punishment or retaliation, as would aggressive acts outside the laboratory. A second criticism by Freedman (1986) is that the child could be affected by a belief that the experimenter approved of the violent behavior in the film. A child may generalize this approval and think that the experimenter would also approve of his or her aggressive behavior. A third criticism by Freedman (1986) is that in a laboratory setting a child is exposed to violent behavior or is not. In many lab experiments, children see hours of violent behavior continuously. This type of exposure will have stronger effects on children since, in real life, there is a constant mixture of the two and other types of television programs (Primavera & Herron, 1996).

In sum, two good reasons exist to question the validity of the articles and literature on professional wrestling. One reason relates to the mixed results found in laboratory research of television violence and the impact on children. The other reason is that there is evidence that results from the laboratory may not apply to real world experiences.

The third criticism concerns the studies conducted on the impact of professional wrestling on children. Although O' Sullivan (1999) did differentiate between television violence and professional wrestling, there are flaws in her research. O'Sullivan's study only consisted of 16 boys who were in the first grade from the Bronx, New York. This sample size is not sufficient to provide generalizable results. Also, O' Sullivan's (1999) study concentrated on children's behavior immediately after viewing professional

wrestling. The effects of professional wrestling or any other entertaining program will be “fresh in the minds” of children, resulting in more extreme responses. She may have found the same results if she had surveyed children after watching a professional basketball game. Children may imitate Michael Jordan immediately after they watch him do spectacular moves on the basketball court. They may also feel invincible or stronger for a short time after watching a basketball game as well. However, the question remains whether these findings could have been replicated six hours, six days, or six months later. The small sample size and the failure to provide more than immediate data are significant weaknesses of this study. Another example of this is when a child watches professional football. Immediately after watching professional football a child may feel more aggressive as well. Once the immediate effects of the game, is over, they will not feel as invincible.

Another study on the impact of professional wrestling on children was conducted in Israel (Rosellini, 1999). Professional wrestling was first introduced in Israel in the 1990’s, and children started to mock wrestle. The people in Israel had never seen professional wrestling before, and they were not exposed to the amounts of violence to which children in the United States are exposed. Hence, the findings of this study cannot be generalized to children in the United States where the majority of professional wrestling is watched. This study may more accurately indicate that professional wrestling plays a role in aggressive behavior, but is not the cause of aggressive behavior.

Chapter III

Methodology

Introduction

This chapter will describe the research questions, the participants under study and how they were selected for inclusion in this study. In addition, the instruments being used to collect information will be discussed. Data collection and analysis procedures will then be presented.

Research Questions

This study had three research questions. They were:

1. What are the perceptions of children about how real professional wrestling is?
2. Do children think professional wrestling influences their behavior?
3. Do children perceive that professional wrestling should be watched with an adult?

Participants

The student participants in the sample were obtained by gaining permission from the University of Wisconsin-Stout Human Subjects Review Committee and a rural Midwestern elementary school to administer surveys to students at the school. Ninety-five students ranging from third to sixth grade had the opportunity to participate in this study and were asked to complete a fifteen-question survey on professional wrestling. A total of 63 surveys were completed, leading to a response rate of 66 percent. The participants included 33 females and 30 males. There were students who chose not to participate or did not bring back their parental consent form in order to complete the survey.

Instrumentation

One 15-item survey (Appendix A, p. 42); was specifically developed by the researcher for use in this study. The survey was designed for the purpose of obtaining information from elementary students regarding their perceptions of professional wrestling. The questions on the survey were presented to the children in multiple-choice format, ranging from two to five options depending on the question. Students were not asked to provide additional information other than their responses to the questions on the survey.

Procedure

Permission was gained from the Protection of Human Subjects Review Committee at the University of Wisconsin-Stout to proceed with this study using the survey along with a consent form. The elementary school also gave permission for the researcher to use the survey. The researcher then sent consent forms to the parents. Once all the permission forms were returned, the researcher went into the classrooms to conduct the survey. After introducing himself, the researcher provided a rationale for the study, and explained that participation was completely voluntary, and that all students' names would be kept confidential. Following this introduction, the researcher answered any further questions the students brought up. The researcher then distributed the surveys to specific classrooms one at a time. The grade levels that were used for this study were third through sixth grade. The researcher allowed fifteen minutes for the students to complete the survey. Once completed, the survey was then collected by the researcher.

Data Analysis

The responses were not separated by grade or ethnicity, but they were separated by gender and frequency of viewing. The responses were calculated and compared using SPSS for Windows©, version 10, into percentages for each question asked. The data addressing the research questions will be primarily presented comparing males to females and comparing heavy viewers to light or non-viewers of professional wrestling.

Limitations

There are several limitations, apparent in this research. They are:

1. The sample size is small and is not a true representation of the population.
The sample was taken from a rural Midwestern town which limits the population.
2. Students were asked to give a self-report of their perceptions on professional wrestling. Their responses may not reflect the true effects that professional wrestling is having on them.
3. There are no available measures of validity or reliability for the instrument used for this study. This risk has minimal impact, since the survey produces descriptive data of children's perceptions on professional wrestling.
4. The participants may have been trying to please the researcher, which may have resulted in biased responses. They may have been answering the questions on the survey how they thought they should answer them and not based on their true perceptions.

Chapter IV

Results

The purpose of this study was to determine children's perceptions on professional wrestling and to determine if watching professional wrestling with an adult figure influences children the same way as not watching professional wrestling with an adult figure. In this section, the results of the present study will be stated. Some general descriptive statistics that are important and interesting for the purposes of this study will be given first. The research questions for this study will then be restated, followed by the findings in regards to those specific questions.

The data from the research questions will be primarily presented comparing males to females and comparing heavy viewers to light or non-viewers of professional wrestling. A heavy viewer will be defined as a child who watches five or more hours of professional wrestling per week, and a light or non-viewer will be defined as a child who watches four or fewer hours per week. Reporting the data by these means will determine if males' and females' differ significantly in their perceptions, since males are assumed to be the targeted audience of professional wrestling. Comparing heavy viewers to light or non-viewers will also determine if this influences males and females perceptions differently.

When comparing males to females, significant differences were found in how the child felt after watching wrestling ($t = -2.06 (61), p < .05$), and whether or not they had tried a move on their friends ($t = 2.4 (61), p < .05$). Nonsignificant differences will also be discussed and displayed with figures throughout the chapter.

In comparing light viewers ($n = 50$) to heavy viewers ($n = 13$), several significant results were found. The groups differed in how real or fake they perceived wrestling to be ($t = 2.4$ (61), $p < .05$), in whether they felt wrestling should be viewed with an adult ($t = 3.3$ (61), $p < .01$), in how they felt after watching wrestling ($t = 2.8$ (61), $p < .01$), in how many wrestlers they knew by name ($t = -3.9$ (61), $p < .01$), in whether they had tried a move on another person ($t = -2.4$ (61), $p < .05$), in how often their friends watched wrestling ($t = -3.4$ (61), $p < .01$), and in whether they felt that their friends would say they watched wrestling ($t = 5.4$ (61), $p < .01$).

As previously mentioned, a total of 63 surveys were completed by students at a rural Midwestern elementary school. The response group included 33 females and 30 males. Table 1 presents the number of hours each gender watches professional wrestling per week, according to self-reports. The modal response to question 1 (Appendix A, p. 42) was “0 hours” for both male and female. Table 2 presents data on whether or not children ever tried a wrestling move on another person. Nine out of thirty-three females surveyed (27 %) have tried a wrestling move on another person, and seventeen out of thirty (56.7 %) males have tried a wrestling move on another person. Table 3 presents data on how real or fake each gender perceives professional wrestling to be. Twelve out of thirty-three females surveyed (36.4%) perceive professional wrestling as very fake, and twelve out of thirty (40%) males perceive professional wrestling as very fake.

Table 1.

Average number of hours spent watching professional wrestling per week:

	Hours	Females	Valid Percent	Males	Valid Percent
Valid	0 hours	19	57.6	12	40.0
	1 to 3 hrs	9	27.3	10	33.3
	4 to 7 hrs	3	9.1	5	16.7
	8 to 11 hrs	1	3.0	2	6.7
	11 or more	1	3.0	1	10.0
	Total	33	100.0	30	100.0

Table 2.

Have you ever tried a wrestling move on another person?

	Response	Females	Valid Percent	Males	Valid Percent
Valid	yes	24	72.7	13	43.3
	No	9	27.3	17	56.7
	Total	33	100.0	30	100.0

Table 3.

How real or fake do you think professional wrestling is:

	Response	Females	Valid Percent	Males	Valid Percent
Valid	Very Real	2	6.1	1	3.3
	Somewhat Real	4	12.1	5	16.7
	Neutral	1	3.0	2	6.7
	Somewhat Fake	14	42.4	10	33.3
	Very Fake	12	36.4	12	40.0
	Total	33	100.0	30	100.0

This study had three main research questions. They were:

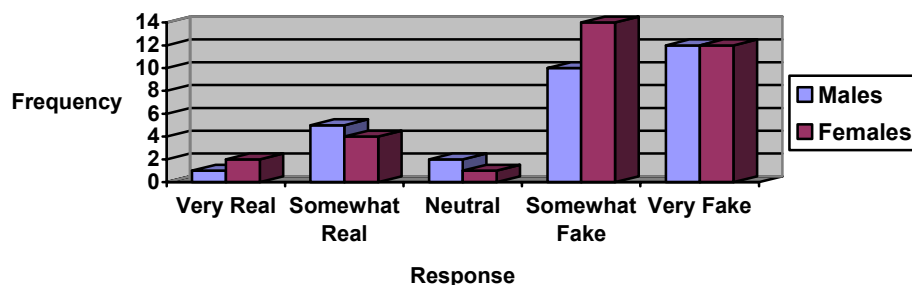
1. What are the perceptions of children about how real professional wrestling is?

Thirty-six percent of the females who completed this survey reported that professional wrestling is very fake. Forty-two percent reported that it was somewhat fake, and 12% reported that professional wrestling was somewhat real. Forty percent of males who completed this survey reported that professional wrestling is very fake. Thirty-three percent reported it as being somewhat fake, and 16.7% reported it as being somewhat real.

Of the children who watched professional wrestling more than eight hours per week, two of three males reported it was “somewhat” or “very real,” and one male reported “very fake.” The one female who watched professional wrestling more than eight hours per week reported it was “somewhat fake.”

Figure 1.

Males compared to females in their ratings of how real they perceive professional wrestling.

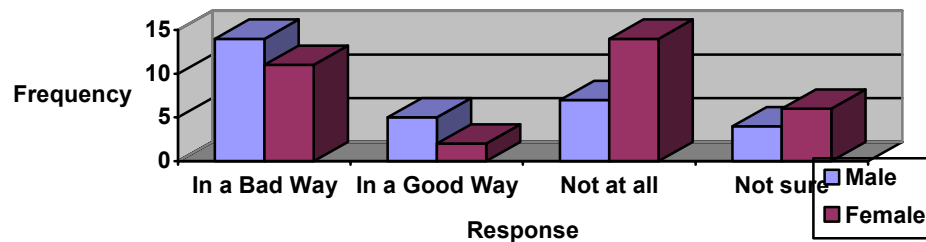


2. Do children think professional wrestling influences their behavior?

Forty-six percent of males who completed this survey reported that professional wrestling influences their behavior in a bad way. Twenty-three percent reported that it does not influence their behavior either positively or negatively. Forty-two percent of females who completed the survey reported that professional wrestling does not influence their behavior at all. Fifty percent of males reported that they feel the same after watching professional wrestling, and 20% reported feeling very aggressive after it. Seventy-five percent of females who completed this survey reported that they feel the same after watching professional wrestling. Fifteen percent reported that they feel a little bit more aggressive after watching professional wrestling.

Figure 2.

Males compared to females in their perception of how watching wrestling affects their behavior.

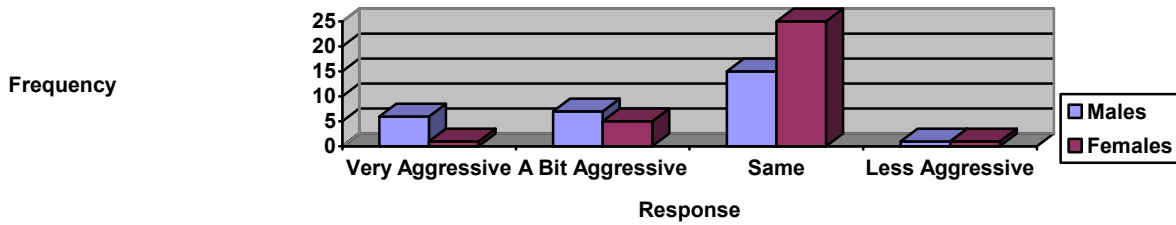


Of the children who watch at least four hours of professional wrestling, four out of six males stated professional wrestling either did not influence them, or it influenced them in a good way. One male who watched at least four hours of professional wrestling stated it affects him in a negative way. Five out of five females, who watch wrestling at least four hours stated professional wrestling either did not influence them or it influenced them in a good way. Males and females who watched zero hours of professional wrestling indicated professional wrestling influenced them in a bad way.

The two males who watched 11 or more hours a week stated they feel more aggressive afterwards.

Figure 3.

Children's reported feelings after watching professional wrestling .



3. Do children perceive that professional wrestling should be watched with an adult figure?

Sixty-three percent of males who completed this survey reported that professional wrestling does not need to be watched with an adult. Sixty-three percent of males reported that their parents do not care if they watch professional wrestling. Sixty-six percent of males reported that they watch professional wrestling 0% of the time with an adult figure. Fifty-one percent of females who completed this survey reported that professional wrestling should be watched with an adult figure. Fifty-seven percent of females who completed this survey reported that their parents do not care if they watch professional wrestling. Sixty-nine percent of females reported that they watch professional wrestling 0% of the time with an adult.

Of the children who watched at least four hours per week, only one out of 11 said it should be watched with an adult. Twenty out of 28 children who stated professional wrestling should be viewed with an adult watched zero hours of wrestling.

Figure 4.

Children's responses to, "Should professional wrestling be viewed with an adult?"

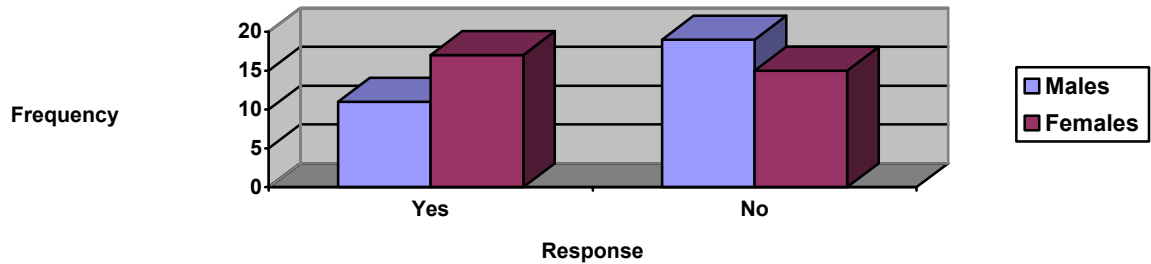
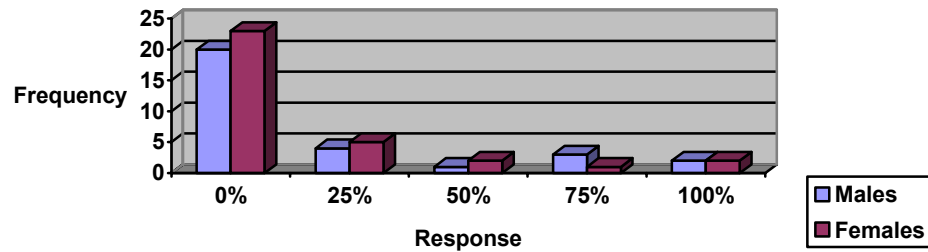


Figure 5.

Time children spend watching wrestling with an adult



Chapter V

Discussion

The results of the present study are valuable, since there is virtually no research that specifically relates children's aggression with professional wrestling rather than television violence in general. The results are also valuable in that they include children's actual perceptions on professional wrestling. A major strength of this study is that it accomplishes both tasks. The results of the present study show that the perceptions of children toward professional wrestling are quite different than what is reported in popular literature and inferences made by psychologists and other child professionals about the impact of professional wrestling on children from research data gathered on television violence in general.

A major finding of this study is the result of question number four of this survey, which asked, "How real or fake do you think professional wrestling is (see Appendix A, P. 42)?" Seventy-six percent of children responded that professional wrestling was somewhat fake or very fake. However, there seemed to be a different response pattern between males and females. Females who watched more wrestling, reported wrestling as fake. Males that watched large amounts of wrestling tended to perceive it as more real. This indicates that the majority of children can differentiate between reality and fantasy in regards to professional wrestling. However, the more females view wrestling, the more they tend to see it as more fake. It is interesting to note that the two girls who reported professional wrestling as very real also stated that they never watch professional wrestling.

Another major finding of this study is gained from question number seven of this survey, which asked, “In what way do you think professional wrestling influences your behavior (See Appendix A, p. 42)?” Both males and females who watched wrestling at least four hours per week stated that it did not influence them, or it influenced them in a “good way.” The more children watched wrestling, the more positive perception they had about the effects of wrestling. However, both males and females who watched zero hours of wrestling had a different perspective on professional wrestling. These children perceived wrestling as affecting them in a “bad way.” This may be due to the fact that children who are not watching wrestling are told it is bad by their parents or other influences such as media or peers. Children who do watch a significant amount of wrestling may not be told that it is bad for them. In fact, the majority of children who watch large amounts of wrestling reported watching it with their parents. Parental influences may play a major part in children’s perceptions rather than the amount of wrestling watched.

The last major finding of this study is gained from question number five, which asked whether professional wrestling should be viewed with an adult. (See appendix A). The majority of males reported that they do not think they need or should watch professional wrestling with an adult. Males also reported that their parents do not care if they watch professional wrestling. The majority of females reported that they think professional wrestling should be watched with an adult. Females were similar to males that they stated that their parents do not care if they watch it. The more wrestling watched per week by both males and females, the less they watched it with their parents. In fact, the more wrestling they watched, the less they even thought they needed to

watch it with their parents. Children who reported that their parents care if they watch professional wrestling tended to think wrestling influenced them in a bad way. It is interesting to note that these children tended not to watch professional wrestling at all. Males who watched 11 or more hours of wrestling per week reported that their parents do not care if they watch it or not. In fact, they did not watch it with them at all. They also reported that wrestling was very real and felt more aggressive after watching it.

Since they perceive professional wrestling as fake, most children will not become more aggressive after viewing it, according to current research previously mentioned. This finding also suggests that psychologists and other child professionals are indeed making inferences from previous research on television violence in general which are not supported by the responses of children regarding their perceptions about professional wrestling. Professional wrestling is a separate entity and should not be combined with television violence in general. There are children who perceive professional wrestling as real. For these select few, professional wrestling may influence their behavior in an aggressive manner, however, it is not the majority, and it should not be reported in the literature as such. Banning children from watching professional wrestling which has been the suggestion of many professionals is not the answer. This will only promote watching their parents' backs and teaching them to lie to adults about what they are doing. For these children who do perceive professional wrestling as real, other precautionary measures should be taken.

Implications for Further Research

As previously mentioned, much additional research is needed that differentiates professional wrestling from other television violence. There has to be a movement toward research actually conducted on professional wrestling rather than making educated guesses. Research on professional wrestling must actually include children as well. More specifically, the focus of research must be children in the United States, since this is where professional wrestling is extremely popular. There also needs to be studies on professional wrestling that include a larger number of participants, so results can be generalized to the general population and have more conclusive data. Another type of study that needs to be conducted is an observational study. Researchers should have children watch professional wrestling for a designated amount of time and then observe their behavior on the playground after viewing it. This will determine if their perceptions on how professional wrestling affects their behavior is congruent with their actual behavior.

Implications for School Psychologists and Counselors

School psychologists and counselors need to be aware of the increasing popularity of professional wrestling, especially with school violence becoming so prevalent. Violence in the high school and among younger age groups is a concern for everyone, not just psychologists and other mental health professionals. In fact, youth violence, especially male youth violence, has become a major concern in our society. School psychologists and other helping professions should realize that the information on professional wrestling is not conclusive data but rather educated guesses. The effects of professional wrestling on children's behavior and their perceptions of professional

wrestling are yet to be determined. However, they should be aware of the fact that professional wrestling may be influencing children when developing intervention strategies toward aggressive behavior. Due to the lack of much needed research, there is minimal evidence to support or disconfirm professional wrestling's influences on children.

Conclusion

There is a significant amount of literature on television violence and its influences on aggressive behavior toward children. The majority of the results indicate that there is a correlation between television violence and aggressive behavior in children. The research also states that children have difficulty differentiating reality and fantasy. The strongest evidence supporting this data are from laboratory research settings, which may or may not relate to the real world.

There are limited studies on the effects of professional wrestling on children's behavior. However, the results of this research support the notion of the majority of research on television violence in general. That is, television violence impacts children's behavior. It also supports the statements made by psychologists and other child professionals in articles about professional wrestling. However there are flaws in the limited research conducted on the impact of professional wrestling on children. The majority of information on professional wrestling comes from inferences made by psychologists and other individuals in the helping profession in popular literature. This information has not come directly from professional wrestling research. Instead, it has come from research conducted on television violence. Due to these factors, a greater number of and more in depth studies of professional wrestling need to be conducted to

determine its actual influences on children. Such research must be done to clarify the many opinions on professional wrestling, so professionals working with children can determine whether professional wrestling is causing aggression in children.

Appendix A

Professional Wrestling Survey:

1. What is your gender?
 - A. Male
 - B. Female
2. What is the average number of hours you spend watching professional wrestling per week?
 - A. 0 hours
 - B. 1-3 hours
 - C. 4-7 hours
 - D. 8-11 hours
 - E. 11 or more hours
3. What is the percentage of time you watch professional wrestling with an adult figure?
 - A. 0%
 - B. 25%
 - C. 50%
 - D. 75%
 - E. 100%
4. How real or fake do you think professional wrestling is?
 - A. Very Real
 - B. Somewhat Real
 - C. Neutral
 - D. Somewhat Fake
 - E. Very Fake
5. Do you feel professional wrestling should be viewed with an adult?
 - A. Yes
 - B. No
6. When you are in an argument, who do you most act like or what do you do?
 - A. Talk/Teacher
 - B. Fight/Wrestler
 - C. Ignore/Someone who walks away
7. In what way do you think professional wrestling influences your behavior?
 - A. In a Bad way
 - B. In a Good way
 - C. Not at all (does not influence)
 - D. Not sure/ Neutral

8. How do you feel after watching professional wrestling?
 - A. Very Aggressive
 - B. Little Bit Aggressive
 - C. The Same
 - D. Less Aggressive
9. Do your parents care if you watch professional wrestling?
 - A. Yes they care
 - B. No they do not care
 - C. Yes, but I watch it at a friends house
 - D. I can not watch professional wrestling at home
10. How many wrestlers do you know by name?
 - A. 0
 - B. 1-3
 - C. 4-7
 - D. 7 or more
11. Have you ever been to a live match?
 - A. Yes
 - B. No
12. Have you ever tried a wrestling move on another person?
 - A. Yes
 - B. No
13. Does your mom and dad like professional wrestling?
 - A. Yes
 - B. No
14. How often do your friends watch professional wrestling?
 - A. Much more than me
 - B. A little more than me
 - C. The same as me
 - D. A little less than me
 - E. Much less than me
15. Would your friends say you watch professional wrestling-?
 - A. Way too much
 - B. A little bit too much
 - C. Just Right
 - D. Not enough
 - E. Not at all

Appendix B

Subject/Parent Consent Form

Dear Parents or Guardian,

Your child's class has an opportunity to take part in a study about children's perceptions on professional wrestling. The school has fully approved the project. I am asking your permission for your child to be included in this study.

A fifteen-question survey will be conducted. The survey will include the following questions: What is your gender? What is the average number of hours you spend watching professional wrestling per week? What is the percentage of time you watch professional wrestling with an adult figure? How real or fake do you think professional wrestling is? Do you feel professional wrestling should be viewed with an adult? When you are in an argument, who do you most act like or what do you do? In what way do you think professional wrestling influences your behavior? How do you feel after watching professional wrestling? Do your parents care if you watch professional wrestling? How many wrestlers do you know by name? Have you ever been to a live match? Have you ever tried a wrestling move on another person? Does your mom and dad like professional wrestling? Does your mom and dad like professional wrestling? How often do your friends watch professional wrestling? Would your friends say you watch professional wrestling? For any child who is not permitted to participate or for any child who wishes not to take the survey, they do not need to return it to the school the following day. If you have any questions about this study, please call me at (715) 232-9216 or my advisor at (715) 232-2204 (Scott Orme). Please sign the attached form indicating whether or not you have agreed to have your child participate and return by May 18th 2001.

Questions or concerns about participation in the research or subsequent complaints should be addressed first to the researcher or the research advisor and second to Dr. Ted Knous, Chair, UW-Stout Institutional Review Board of the Protection of Human Subjects in Research, 11 HH, UW-Stout, Menomonie, WI, 54751, (715) 232-1126.

A report of the classes' responses will be sent to the school. You are welcome to read them. Each child's individual responses will be kept anonymous. Thank you very much for your time and support.

Sincerely,

I, _____, do ☐, do not ☐ (check one) agree to allow my child,
_____ to participate in this study about children's perceptions on
professional wrestling.

Signature _____

Date _____

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