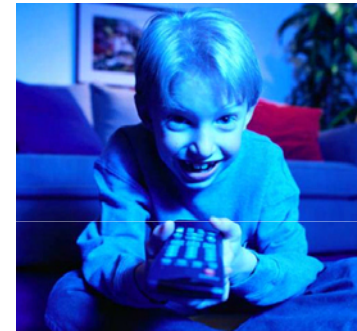


Will Adult Disapproval of Cartoon Violence Lower Children's Aggressive Play?

Priscilla Miranda, Bernadette P. Malqued, Nicholas McCluskey, Benjamin J. Silber, and Charlene K. Bainum



Abstract

Studies have shown that while children's exposure to violent media increases aggression, parental involvement suppresses aggression. We hypothesized that children's behavior would be less aggressive after viewing a violent cartoon with an aggression-disapproving adult (ADA) than a silent adult. Second and third graders were randomly assigned to an ADA or control group and watched a clip of an aggressive cartoon. During children's subsequent play, observers recorded the incidence of aggressive behaviors using a time-sampling method. Children displayed less aggression in the ADA group than the control.



Bandura, Ross & Ross (1961) first demonstrated that aggressive behavior modeled by authoritative adults would elicit this same behavior in observing children. In a subsequent study, O'Carroll, O'Neal, McDonald, & Hori (1977) found that children who observed an adult play with toys aggressively were more likely to act violently in the presence of the adult who modeled aggressive play than in the presence of a different adult, suggesting that the type of adult present contains cues for the children's behavior. More important than the type of adult present is what the adult models. Other studies examined whether the media or television would provide the same effect as a live model. In particular, Boyatzis (1995) found that children exposed to the Power Rangers television show committed more aggressive acts per interval than children in the control group. Numerous studies evaluating the effects of an aggressive model on the subsequent aggressive behavior of the observing child provide consistent evidence that exposure to violence increases violent behavior (Bushman & Anderson, 2001; Huesmann, 1986; Steur, Applefield, & Smith, 1971).

Despite these established findings, television continues to provide aggressive programming and parents continue to allow their children to view these programs. Although parents are often urged to sit down and watch television with their children in order to explain what is viewed, exactly how parents help to counteract the impact of media violence and whether this is effective is unclear. Who has a greater impact as a model? Will the child be more influenced by the aggressive action figure who obliterates the bad guy, or the parent who explains to the child that violence is not the best solution?

The present study seeks to determine how the modeling of aggression-disapproval by an adult watching a violent cartoon with a child influences the child's later behavior during separate play activity. It was hypothesized that children who viewed the violent cartoon in the presence of an actively aggression-disapproving adult would show less aggressive behaviors in subsequent play than those who viewed the same cartoon with a silent adult. Additionally, it was hypothesized that children in the aggression-disapproving adult condition would exhibit more prosocial play than those with the silent adult.



Method

Participants

The participants included sixteen 2nd and 3rd graders (6 males, 10 females) enrolled in a small private elementary school in the Napa Valley. Participation was contingent upon parental consent and the children's additional consent when asked if they would like to play with toys in another classroom.

Materials

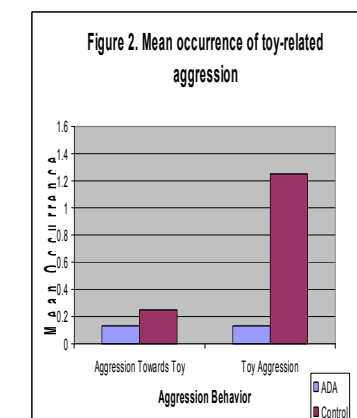
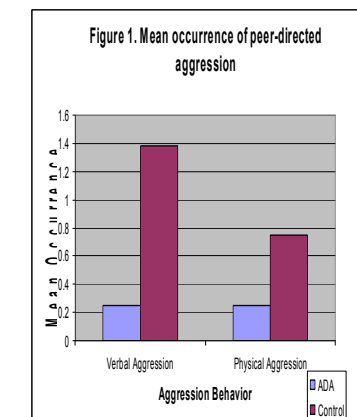
The video clip was taken from the Justice League of America episode entitled "For the Man Who Has Everything". The toys with which the children were allowed to play in the observation room included several stuffed animals, dolls, and a set of Justice League of America action figures: Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, Bizarro, and Amazo. A pre-recorded track providing audio cues for ten 30-second time increments was downloaded onto three iPods for the time-sampling observation. Observers utilized an aggression behavior data recording sheet to mark the occurrence of six categories of behavior: verbal aggression, physical aggression, toy aggression, aggression toward toy, neutral, and prosocial behavior.

Procedure

The children were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. The control group was exposed to a 5-minute video clip of the Justice League cartoon with a silent female adult present who watched without comment or judgment. In the experimental group, children were exposed to the identical clip in the presence of the same female adult. However, this time, the female experimenter made aggression-disapproving remarks while watching the cartoon with the children. Immediately following the video clip, the children were escorted to a nearby classroom for observation while they played with neutral toys and toys that were explicitly related to the recently viewed cartoon. Four male observers recorded the occurrence of four types of aggressive behavior, as well as neutral and prosocial play, for 5 minutes using a time sampling format. Inter-observer reliability was established on a selected sample of children before actual data collection.

Results

As seen in Figures 1 and 2, the ADA group showed fewer instances of aggressive behavior in all four aggression categories. Using an independent samples *t*-test, an



analysis of the data revealed significant differences between the ADA and control condition on two aggression categories. Specifically, the ADA condition ($M = .25$, $SD = .46$) demonstrated significantly fewer instances of verbal aggression than the control condition ($M = 1.38$, $SD = 1.30$), $t(14) = -2.30$, $p = .04$. Additionally, there was less toy aggression in the ADA condition ($M = .13$, $SD = .35$), than in the control condition ($M = 1.25$, $SD = 1.04$), $t(14) = 2.01$, $p < .01$. Contrary to our second hypothesis, there was no difference in prosocial play between children in the ADA and control conditions.

Discussion

As predicted, less aggressive behavior was exhibited in the ADA condition than the control group. In particular, verbal aggression and toy aggression occurred significantly less often. These findings are consistent with previous research by O'Carroll et. al (1977) which showed the effects of authoritative modeling of television violence on children's aggression. By introducing an aggression disapproving adult model into our study, we sought to create applications to the home environment. In this way, our adult model would be comparable to the parent or guardian who watches an aggressive television program along side the child. Adult attempts to counter the aggressive cartoon seemed successful. When the adult made aggression disapproving comments, several children audibly agreed, making such statements as "Oh wow, that IS terrible!" "He's not nice, is he?" The children's agreement could be seen as evidence that the children were aware that the adult did not approve of the cartoon violence. In contrast, the children did not say anything in the control group in which the adult was silent.

It is possible that an even larger effect would have been found had the observation room been a more sterile environment. Further flaws include the small sample size and uneven gender distribution. Future studies might incorporate the added variable of having the actively-disapproving adult present in the observation room during free play. In spite of the limitations, it is clear from this study that distracted or passive adult supervision is not sufficient to counteract exposure to aggressive media content. Instead, active parental disapproval of media violence while watching television together is one way that parents can affect their child's subsequent aggressive behavior.