

Statement of Joanne Cantor, Ph.D.
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before the
United States House Judiciary Committee
Subcommittee on Courts, the Internet, and Intellectual Property
Washington, D.C.
May 20, 2004

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to present my views on the media's impact on children. Since 1974, I have been a professor at the University of Wisconsin, focusing the greater part of my research on the impact of media violence on children's aggressive behaviors and their emotional health. My parenting book, "*Mommy I'm Scared": How TV and Movies Frighten Children and What We Can Do to Protect Them*" and my new children's book, *Teddy's TV Troubles*, help parents and children cope with the disturbing images that television and movies confront them with on a daily basis. Finally, and not the least important, I am the mother of a teenage son.

I am submitting for the record a paper I wrote on "The Psychological Effects of Media Violence on Children and Adolescents," which is also available on my web site (www.yourmindonmedia.com). Let me summarize the major points here: We now know a lot about the effects of media violence. Study after study has found that children often behave more violently after watching media violence. The violence they engage in ranges from trivial aggressive play to injurious behavior with serious medical consequences. Children also show higher levels of hostility after viewing violence, and the effects of this hostility range from being in a nasty mood to an increased tendency to interpret a neutral comment or action as an attack. In addition, children can be desensitized by media violence, becoming less distressed by real violence and less likely to sympathize with victims. Finally, media violence makes children fearful, and these effects range from a general sense that the world is dangerous, to full-blown anxieties, nightmares, sleep disturbances, and other trauma symptoms.

The evidence about these effects of media violence has accumulated over the last few decades. Meta-analyses, which statistically combine all the findings in a particular area, demonstrate that there is a consensus on the negative effects of media violence. They also show that the effects are strong – stronger than the well-known relationship between children's exposure to lead and low I.Q. scores, for example. These effects cannot be ignored as inconclusive or inconsequential.

Even more alarming, recent research confirms that these effects are long lasting. A study from the University of Michigan shows that TV viewing between the ages of 6 and 10 predicts antisocial behavior as a young adult. In this study, both males and females who were heavy TV-violence viewers as children were significantly more likely to engage in serious physical aggression and criminal behavior later in life; in addition, the heavy violence viewers were twice as likely as the others to engage in spousal abuse when they became adults. This analysis controlled for other potential contributors to antisocial behavior, including socioeconomic status and parenting practices.

The long-term effects of media on fears and anxieties are also striking. Research shows that intensely violent images often induce anxieties that linger, interfering with both sleeping and waking activities for years. Many young adults report that frightening movie images that

they saw as children have remained on their minds in spite of their repeated attempts to get rid of them. They also report feeling intense anxieties in nonthreatening situations as a result of having been scared by a movie or television program – even though they now know that there is nothing to fear. [For example, you might find it logical that many people who have seen the movie *Jaws* worry about encountering a shark whenever they swim in the ocean. But you would be surprised to learn how many of these people are still uncomfortable swimming in lakes or pools because of the enduring emotional memory of the terror they experienced viewing this movie as a child.] Findings are beginning to emerge from research teams mapping the areas of the brain that are influenced by violent images, and these studies promise to help us understand how media violence promotes aggression and to help explain why it has such enduring effects on emotional memory.

I have limited my comments here to the effects of media violence, but there are other areas of parental concern (including sex and profanity) that television and movies present to children, and I will be happy to comment on these areas as well during the question-and-answer period.

What can government do about the problem of media violence? Isn't this all the parents' responsibility? Of course parents are responsible for their children's upbringing. However, today's media environment has made parenting an overwhelming challenge. Not only are diverse and potentially unhealthy media available to children both inside and outside the home around the clock; the media actively market extremely violent and sexual products to children whose parents would never dream of bringing them to their children's attention. Several Congressional hearings regarding the Federal Trade Commission's studies have made this woefully apparent.

Parents need all the help they can get to perform their roles as arbiters of the activities their children engage in. And yet, when help is offered, the media typically resist and resist forcefully. The television industry agreed to implement the v-chip and TV ratings, but they then designed a device that is difficult to use and a rating system has been under-publicized and hard to understand. In fact, each mass medium – TV, movies, music, and video games – has its own rating system, and the industries resist pressure to get together on one system that would be easy to learn and readily understood.

Other good solutions are attacked head-on. Various municipalities have passed laws restricting the access of children to mature-rated video games without parental permission, but these have been attacked ferociously in the courts, and with success. And a tool like ClearPlay, which permits parents to filter out certain contents in movies, without altering the movie itself or infringing the rights of others, are being sued for copyright infringement. Small companies and nonprofit groups that are trying to provide helpful tools for parents live under the constant risk of lawsuits from powerful corporations.

Let's not lose sight of the stakes here. A great deal has changed in the past generation or two. Our children are spending much more time with media than we did, and what they are exposed to is more violent and more graphic than we ever imagined. Our children's heavy immersion in today's media culture is a large-scale societal experiment with potentially horrifying results (and with hardly a child left behind to serve in the control condition). That is one reason why I'm devoting so much of my time to writing books for parents and children and to getting the message out as best I can. And anything that Congress can do to help ease the way

for those who are trying to help families raise healthy children, without interfering with the rights of others, will provide great benefit to society.

Thank you very much. I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.

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