

'Town Forum confirms media violence adversely affects children'

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by Valerie Harper-Murdoch

Are children being harmed by television? "Yes," said Joanne Cantor, Ph.D., lead researcher for the National Television Violence Study at the University of Wisconsin and author of "Mommy I'm Scared." Small children are the most vulnerable to the violence they are exposed to on television and the media. They are unable to distinguish reality from portrayals; become fearful; and some evidence suggests they are being effected psychologically. There are incidents of older children who imitate the violent behavior they see on television as a result of becoming desensitized to it.

At the Northwest Regional Alliance for Responsible Television and Media Town Forum, March 20, at the Spokane Convention Center, participants reflected on the complicated issue of responsible TV watching. Cantor gave some startling statistics: By the time children finish elementary school, they have witnessed 8,000 murders on television.

Cantor, who has spent 24 years studying this subject said that children as well as adults are becoming desensitized to violence; that children are fearful of becoming a victim; and that children can't distinguish fantasy from reality. Media violence is often acted out by the "good guys" and the consequences show little visible harm and no pain or punishment in the process. "Watching violence has caused an overwhelming number of people to be affected by the images they saw resulting in sleep disturbances," remarked Cantor.

"What are the implications of this study? How is television and the media shaping the view of the world in which our children grow up? What are the implications for our culture for future generations?" asked Don Higgins, Executive Director at West Central Community Center and Chairman of the Northwest Regional Alliance for Responsible Television/Media.

Moderator, John Caputo, Communications Arts Chair at Gonzaga University, reflected on this issue to ask, "What steps must we take to ensure their (children) wellbeing?"

Speaker, Ron Hutchcraft, a nationally known Christian Minister and host of three radio programs syndicated throughout the United States, urged parents to create a haven in their homes to discourage negative messages bombarding our culture. He gave some recommendations to parents to tell children: "1. Not to become a cultural slave. 2. You don't have to dance to everyone's tune. 3. Stop the viruses (cultural). 4. Stand for your treasures; life is valuable, sex is special, your mind matters and stay in mint condition."

Christopher Olson, MD., Doctor of Pediatrics, said, that the public should be able to have more control about what comes into their home via the air waves. "There are laws that protect us from infectious disease. So we need to have laws to protect us from "media virus" which are causing health problems," he said. One of the suggestions made, from the panel, was to have V-chips installed by the manufacturers in all sets, so that parents can block programs they don't want aired in their homes.