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Tim Dougherty

RESEARCHERS: CHILDREN PAY ATTENTION TO TV NEWS

Parents and media critics often assume that fictionalized violence---such as that in movies and video games---poses the only risk to children's emotional well-being. Yet new research suggests that TV news may also be cause for concern.

According to two new studies by researchers at UC Santa Barbara, television news broadcasts can increase fear in children. Barbara J. Wilson, a professor of communication at UCSB, says parents should take notice.

"These findings strongly suggest that parents need to closely monitor their children's viewing of television news. I think this is a wake-up call for parents," said Wilson, a project researcher.

Wilson and fellow UCSB researcher Stacy Smith surveyed 125 children age 6 to 12 and found that 51 percent of the respondents were able to describe a recent TV news story that frightened them. Younger children tended to be frightened by stories of natural disasters and accidents, such as earthquakes, fires or car accidents, while older children were typically frightened by accounts of violent crime.

In a related experiment, Smith and Wilson showed 158 elementary age children a TV news story about a gang stabbing, and found that the locale of a given report affected the youngsters' reaction to it. For instance, children who heard that the

crime had occurred locally remembered more details than did those who heard it had taken place in a distant city. And, older children exposed to the local story reported more fear of area gangs than did those exposed to a report about out-of-town crime.

The findings are significant in light of other research by Wilson and Smith showing that some 80 percent of children watch TV news in the course of a typical week.

"Taken together, the survey and study results offer compelling evidence that children pay attention to TV news and that exposure to TV news can affect children's fear of the real world. TV news producers should consider warning families about upcoming stories that might frighten children," said Wilson.

About UC Santa Barbara

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