

**THE IMPACT OF CARTOON VIOLENCE AND  
VULNERABILITY TO AGGRESSION IN CHILDREN: A  
COMPARATIVE STUDY BETWEEN ENTERTAINMENT  
CARTOONS AND VIOLENT/ACTION CARTOONS**

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**ABSTRACT**

This study seeks to address the impact of cartoon violence and vulnerability to aggression in children. In the light of reviewing the scientific literature it was hypothesized that watching violent/action cartoons will increase the vulnerability to aggression in children as compared to entertainment cartoons.

In order to assess the expression of aggression in children, after conducting pilot study a questionnaire and cartoon checklist were prepared. A total number of 240 children of both genders participated in this study. Their age range was from 8 to 12 years. They all were the students of class 3 to 5 who watch cartoons daily for 3 to 4 hours.

t- test and other descriptive statistics were computed for the analysis of data. The results were significant at  $p < .001$  level. The research findings provide the evidence that violent/action cartoons increase the vulnerability to aggression in children as compared to entertainment cartoons ( $t = 17.193$ ,  $df = 238$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

## INTRODUCTION

When children are born they have the capacity for motivation, experience and training, as their minds are very impressionable. Therefore, their brains' development is a dynamic mixture of nature and nurture, so it is important to choose a healthy environment for all children. This means electronic media with violence will be unhealthy for a child because in general, being interactive with any environment enhances the development of a brain. As a result, a tremendous amount of childhood involvement with electronic media can limit social interaction and may obstruct the development of a brain's social systems. On the other side, electronic media is presented as an educator, albeit an informal one that helps construct the social reality in which they live. Throughout the nineteenth century, moralists and critics warned that newspapers were the cause of juvenile crime. There was concern that the great flow of stories about crimes would lead people to imitate the vividly described immoral behavior.

The researchers argued that television could contribute to violent and delinquent behavior in some cases. This might result, for example, in the case of a child who confuses the rules of the fantasy world, as seen on television, with the rules of reality, or an already aggressive child whose aggression is increased by identifying with a successful "bad" character on television. However, the researchers cautioned that television was, at the most, a contributing factor in causing violent and delinquent behaviors, or any behaviors for that matter. Schramm and his associates (n.d.) summed up their conclusions with regard to the possible behavioral effects of television as follows: "For some children, under some conditions, television is harmful. For other children, under the same conditions, or for the same children under other conditions, it may be beneficial.

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For most children, under most conditions, television is probably neither harmful nor particularly beneficial." They also stressed that parents had little to fear from television if they provided their children with a warm, loving, interesting and secure family environment.

American children and adolescents are increasingly being exposed to violence through television, movies, music and video games. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics (2001), by the age of 18, the average young person would have viewed an estimated 200,000 acts of violence on television alone. While children's exposure to media varies considerably depending on the age, socioeconomic status, and parental viewing habits (Surgeon, 2000). It is undisputed that children are exposed to violence in various broadcast mediums. The question is whether this exposure alone manifests into actual violence because children have become much more interested in cartoons over many years and it has become a primary action to some lives. Typically, children begin watching cartoons on television at an early age of six months, and by the age two or three children become enthusiastic viewers. This is unfortunate because children watch the cartoons on the television and they see material that is not appropriate for their age group. The Children who watch too many cartoons on television are more likely to have mental and emotional problems, along with brain and eye injuries and unexpectedly the risk of a physical problem and level of aggression also increases (Hossler, 2004).

In the past, violence was determined simply by the destruction of objects, be they bricks, ghosts, or little mushroom men. By today's standards, however, some of these hardly seem violent. So what exactly violence is? This would require research of its own. With the constant changes in society, however, this is something that is always evolving. Desensitization due to movies, the news, and video games themselves have greatly changed the way we view media violence (Thomas, 2004). As far as definition of aggression is concerned, it is found that the term aggression

is very general and can refer to and influence a large number of personality traits and behaviors. Connor, Steingard, Cunningham, Anderson, and Meloni (2004) defined two specific types of aggression. Reactive aggression which is an angry, defensive response to a threat or frustration. An example of this would be getting revenge on someone that has done you wrong. Proactive aggression which is a deliberate behavior that is controlled by external reinforcements and is usually a means of reaching a desired goal.

The cartoon research studies examined the effects on over 4300 children who come from six different countries (U.S., England, Canada, Netherlands, Australia, and Lebanon). Some of the cartoons found harmful in various research studies include **Spiderman, Batman, Superman, Popeye, Bugs Bunny, Roadrunner, Tom & Jerry, Woody Woodpecker, and Mighty Mouse**. Behaviors increased by cartoon violence included hitting, kicking, choking, throwing, holding other children down, pushing, hurting animals, selfishness and anxiety. Sharing and school performance both decreased due to violent cartoons. There are fortunately many non – violent and pro social cartoon and children shows. Examples would be **Arthur, Magic School Bus, the Jetsons, Winnie the Pooh, the Get Along Gang, Peanuts, Madeleine, Mr. Roger's Neighborhood, The Flintstones, and Dragontales** (Huesmann & Eron, 1986).

It is observed that children's cartoons are packed with many controversial topics such as violence and sexuality. Cartoon makers are intentionally brainwashing children by secretly placing messages never to be deciphered by the conscious mind, but instead propagating the subconscious, into behaving a certain way (Choma, 2004). This practice is known as subliminal messaging and it is certainly nothing new to mass media. Ever since the advent of television and radio, subliminal messaging has had a place in both advertising and programming. But what is subliminal messaging? It is defined by the American Heritage Dictionary (n.d.) as, "Below the threshold of conscious perception; inadequate to produce conscious

awareness but able to evoke a response". What this means in the world of mass media is advertisers and programmers are slipping in messages that you act upon and don't even realize that you are practising it and they are doing the same thing to children.

According to the American psychological Association (2007) children who watch a lot of violent cartoons may:

- Become less sensitive to the pain and suffering of others.
- Be more fearful of the world around them.
- Behave in aggressive or harmful ways toward others.
- Be less likely to see anything wrong with violence.

Young children find it quite normal to mimic what they see since they are still in the process of learning to control their minds and bodies (Wilcox, 2004) It is certainly true that television violence does not account for all the causes of children's aggression, and it is also true that some children are more likely to be affected by television violence than others, and that it is these children who are likely to be potentially more aggressive anyway (Josephson, 1995). Additionally, studies indicate that humans begin imitating other individuals at a very young age and such social interaction shapes the behavior of children. Thus, observing violent images can lead itself to aggressive behavior in the later years of a child's life (Surgeon, 2000).

Pediatricians claim that media violence may: (1) facilitate aggressive and antisocial behavior; (2) desensitize viewers to future violence; or (3) increase viewers' perceptions that they are living in a mean and dangerous world (Federal Trade Commission, 2000). Many theories also described the same phenomena like **observational learning theory**, Bandura and Walter (1963) which deals with the imitation of an observed model. Some researchers attempted to link observational learning with how the brain learns and stores information (cognitive-processing psychology). They showed how certain aggressive behaviors may be learned and stored in the brain for future reference. For example, a young viewer watches a violent

cartoon episode. Later in life, when a situation arises similar to the one seen on cartoon, the young viewer may retrieve and perform the violent act previously viewed. Some of the research suggests that the more violent television a child watches, the more that child tends to have favorable attitudes toward aggressive behavior. This seems to occur largely because viewers who watch a lot of televised violence come to see violent behavior as normal.

For over a century, the issue of violence in the media has to be a prominent area of concern for government officials, academics and the general public around the world. Research has been conducted and conferences convened, but the issue remains as contentious as ever. Researcher hopes that this work presented here will serve as an important contribution to mitigating the problem of societal violence of Pakistani community.

From a comprehensive review of the effects-related research, the researcher concluded that television's portrayal of violence was "one major contributory factor which must be considered in attempt to explain the many forms of violent behavior that mark Pakistani society today." While looking at all sources of societal violence, the researcher devoted much attention to the mass media, especially television, particularly cartoons. In the light of reviewing the scientific literature it is hypothesized that watching violent/action cartoons will increase the vulnerability of aggression in children as compare to entertainment cartoons.

### **PILOT STUDY**

A questionnaire was prepared for identifying expression; of aggression in children Verbal, physical and emotional information about these expressions were collected from different sources. Extensive literature review was conducted and children belonging to different socio economic status were interviewed

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about their verbal, physical and emotional expression of aggression.

On the basis of above mentioned sources a questionnaire was prepared for identifying expression of verbal, physical and emotional aggression in children using a five point rating scale ranging from 'not at all' (1) to 'always' (5). The questionnaire was administered on 200 children of both genders belonging to eight schools of Karachi (4 private and 4 government schools). Schools were randomly selected. Their age range was eight to twelve years.

After analysing the collected data those questions were discarded which were not scored "frequently" or "not at all". Finally 12 questions were selected (four questions in each category that is verbal, physical and emotional aggression) which described expression of aggression in children of both genders (see appendix).

A cartoon checklist was also prepared. This checklist has two categories, one containing 11 types of violent/action cartoon and second category containing 9 types of entertainment cartoon. (See appendix).

## METHODOLOGY

### PILOT STUDY

**PARTICIPANTS:** The sample comprised 240 children of both genders and they all were the students of class 3 to 5. Their age ranges were from eight to twelve years with a mean age of 9.7 years. These students belonged to five private and five government schools of Karachi. These schools were randomly selected.

### MEASURE:

1. **Demographic information form** which focused on the subject's name, age, gender, class, number of siblings, major disease, parental education, parental

occupation, favorable TV channel, favorable cartoon and character and home address. (see appendix).

2. **Cartoon checklist** which focused on the list of violent/action and entertainment cartoons. (see appendix).

3. **Questionnaire of aggression** identified following information:

- Instructions
- 1 to 12 questions using a 5 point rating scale ranging from 'not at all' (1) to always (5), measuring expression of aggression in children.(see appendix ).

**PROCEDURE:**For identifying children who were habitual of watching violent/action or entertainment cartoons, a cartoon checklist and questionnaire of aggression were administered on a large number of children. On the basis of cartoon checklist two groups were selected. One group which was habitual of watching only violent/ action cartoons for 3 to 4 hours daily and 2<sup>nd</sup> group which was habitual of watching only entertainment cartoons for 3 to 4 hours daily. All participants belonged to class three to five. Their parental education was at least matric and were from middle class families. Their age range was 8 to 12 years. They all were physically healthy. They had two to five siblings. Following data were excluded from research:·

- Children who were habitual of watching both kinds of cartoons.
- Children who were habitual of watching cartoons less than 3 hours and more than 4 hours daily.

Equal number of participants were selected in the same class room situation belonging to both groups, in this way researcher tried to match the various



aspects related to the participants.

**PROCEDURE:** Formal permission for data collection was taken from the principal of school. The first few minutes were spent putting the students at ease and the purpose of the research was explained in a very general term so as not to influence subjects' responses (this explanation was kept constant in every class room setting). Demographic form, cartoon checklist and questionnaire of aggression were distributed in the classroom setting. They were told to fill demographic information first then researcher loudly read instructions and asked about any confusion that participant had. Then researcher loudly started explaining every question and their response options for the purpose of overcoming their hesitation and building trust and rapport. Participants were allowed to ask question if they had any difficulty in understanding the question (all explanations of the questions and procedure were kept constant in every classroom setting). At the end of the completion of the demographic form, cartoon checklist and questionnaire of aggression the students were thanked for their cooperation and time.

### **STATISTICAL ANALYSIS:**

For analyzing the data mean, standard deviation and t-test were computed.

### **OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS:**

- **Violent/action cartoons:** If cartoon character depicts variety of violent action like hitting, kicking, choking, throwing, holding other character down, pushing, punching, hurting etc so it will be considered violent/action cartoons (see appendix).
- **Entertainment cartoons:** If a cartoon character shows pro social behavior and also depicts cooperation, friendship, sharing, caring attitude towards other characters, communication for resolving conflict and also provides entertainment to the viewers etc then it will be considered entertainment cartoons (see appendix).
- **Aggression :** It assesses the uncontrollable temper outburst, shouting, getting into frequent arguments, using abusive language, feeling urge to harm others or to break

things and as far as emotional aspect is concerned, it includes angry feelings towards self and others.

## RESULTS

**Table 1**

**Table showing the Mean and SD of both groups**

<b>Group</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
<b>1</b>	120	34.941	8.01
<b>2</b>	120	19.725	5.4

**Groups:**

**1= Watching violent/action cartoon group**

**2= Watching entertainment cartoon group**

**Table 2**

**t-test showing the difference between two groups**

<b>Group Watching Cartoons</b>	<b>t-Value</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>Significant Level</b>
<b>• Violent/action • Entertainment</b>	17.193	238	.001

## DISCUSSION

This research including the literature review has succeeded in drawing attention to the issue of cartoon violence and vulnerability of aggression in children but it is a complex issue. In the light of literature review it was hypothesized that **watching violent/action cartoons would increase the vulnerability of aggression in children as compared to entertainment cartoons.**

This hypothesis is supported by the results and is significant at  $p < 0.001$ , It is clear from table 2 that there is a statistically significant difference in the expression of aggression in children in reference to watching violent/action or entertainment cartoon ( $t = 17.193$ ,  $df = 238$ ,  $p < .001$ ) where as the table 1 depicts the mean and standard deviation of both groups. It is concluded that watching violent/action cartoon increases the vulnerability of aggression in children as compared to watching entertainment cartoons.

Children of different ages watch and understand cartoon in different ways, depending on the length of their attention spans, the ways in which they process information, the amount of mental effort they invest, and their own life experiences. By age eight, children are more likely to be sensitive to important moderating influences of television content, and will not become more aggressive themselves if the violence they see is portrayed as evil, as causing human suffering, or as resulting in punishment or disapproval. However, they are especially likely to show increased aggression from watching violent television programs if they believe the violence reflects real life, if they identify with a violent hero (as boys often do), or if they engage in aggressive fantasies (Josephson, 1995). This idea is supported by "Identification with aggressor" (Freud, 1946) or "defensive identification" (Mowrer, 1950) whereby a person presumably transforms himself from object to agent of aggression by adopting the attributes of an aggressive threatening model so as to allay anxiety, is widely accepted as an explanation of the imitative learning of aggression.

Huston et al (1981) found that the most serious element maintaining aggressive behavior in children was the high violence level in the cartoons. Same idea is supported by Josephson (1987) that watching the violent TV program alone produced more aggression than did the nonviolent TV program. Although the effects are generally considered to be small and difficult to specify, psychologists and health professionals suggest the evidence that in some circumstances heavy viewers can become more aggressive because of their consumption of violent entertainment (Huston et. al. 1992).

This research indicates that the content and type of cartoons being watched by children should be monitored by Pakistani families. Aggressive cartoons have similar repercussions and hence these should be minimized. Futher research may be carried out to examine other associated features of this issue.

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**APPENDIX**

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## معلوماتی فارم (Demographic Form)

- ۱- نام
  - ۲- عمر
  - ۳- جنس
  - ۴- پتہ
  - ۵- کوئی بڑی بیماری
  - ۶- جماعت
  - ۷- اسکول کا نام
  - ۸- بہن بھائیوں کی تعداد
  - ۹- والد کا نام
  - ۱۰- والد کا پیشہ
  - ۱۱- والدین کی تعلیم
  - ۱۲- معاشرتی حیثیت
  - ۱۳- پسندیدہ چینل
  - ۱۴- پسندیدہ کارٹون
  - ۱۵- پسندیدہ کارٹون کردار
- والدہ-                      والد-



## Cartoon Checklist

A- Tick (✓) your favorite cartoons from the following list.

### Violent/action Cartoons:

- Beyblade Advance
- He Man and The Masters of the Universe
- Justice League
- Kids Next Door
- Megas XLR
- Popeye the Sailor Man
- Pokemon
- Spiderman
- Static Shock
- Superman
- Tom and Jerry

### Entertainment Cartoons:

- Andy Pandy
- Barbie Doll
- Bob the Builder

*Ali*

- Boo
- Dragon Tales
- Koala Brothers
- Looney Tunes
- Mickey Mouse
- Richie Rich

B- How much hours do you spend watching cartoons daily? Please tick (✓) appropriate time:

- 1 to 2 hours
- 2 to 3 hours
- 3 to 4 hours
- 4 to 5 hours
- 5 to 6 hours

سوال نامہ (Questionnaire)

ہدایات درج ذیل سوالات کو غور سے پڑھیں جو آپ کو صحیح لگے اس کے جواب کو (✓) صحیح کا نشان لگائیں۔

- ۱۔ میں اکثر غصے میں آجاتا ہوں / آجاتی ہوں۔
  - ۱۔ کبھی نہیں
  - ۲۔ کبھی کبھی
  - ۳۔ بعض اوقات
  - ۴۔ اکثر اوقات
  - ۵۔ ہمیشہ
- ۲۔ مجھے غصے میں کوئی اچھا نہیں لگتا۔
  - ۱۔ کبھی نہیں
  - ۲۔ کبھی کبھی
  - ۳۔ بعض اوقات
  - ۴۔ اکثر اوقات
  - ۵۔ ہمیشہ
- ۳۔ غصے میں میرا کوئی کام کرنے کا جی نہیں چاہتا ہے۔
  - ۱۔ کبھی نہیں
  - ۲۔ کبھی کبھی
  - ۳۔ بعض اوقات
  - ۴۔ اکثر اوقات
  - ۵۔ ہمیشہ
- ۴۔ جب کوئی غصہ کرتا ہے تو مجھے بھی غصہ آجاتا ہے۔
  - ۱۔ کبھی نہیں
  - ۲۔ کبھی کبھی
  - ۳۔ بعض اوقات
  - ۴۔ اکثر اوقات
  - ۵۔ ہمیشہ

۵۔ میں غصے میں بڑبڑانے لگتا کرتی ہوں۔

۱۔ کبھی نہیں

۲۔ کبھی کبھی

۳۔ بعض اوقات

۴۔ اکثر اوقات

۵۔ ہمیشہ

۶۔ لوگ جب بھی مجھے تنگ کرتے ہیں تو میں انہیں غصے میں خوب سناٹا ہوں۔

۱۔ کبھی نہیں

۲۔ کبھی کبھی

۳۔ بعض اوقات

۴۔ اکثر اوقات

۵۔ ہمیشہ

۷۔ میں غصے میں بہت زور سے چیخاڑتی ہوں۔

۱۔ کبھی نہیں

۲۔ کبھی کبھی

۳۔ بعض اوقات

۴۔ اکثر اوقات

۵۔ ہمیشہ

۸۔ میں غصے میں اکثر برے الفاظ استعمال کرتا ہوں۔

۱۔ کبھی نہیں

۲۔ کبھی کبھی

۳۔ بعض اوقات

۴۔ اکثر اوقات

۵۔ ہمیشہ

۹۔ اپنے آپ کو محفوظ رکھنے کے لئے علاوہ اگر کوئی چارہ نہ ہو تو لڑ لیتا رہتی ہوں۔

۱۔ کبھی نہیں

۲۔ کبھی کبھی

۳۔ بعض اوقات

۴۔ اکثر اوقات

۵۔ ہمیشہ

۱۰۔ غصے میں غصہ دلانے والے کو خوب مارتا مارتی ہوں۔

۱۔ کبھی نہیں

۲۔ کبھی کبھی

۳۔ بعض اوقات

۴۔ اکثر اوقات

۵۔ ہمیشہ

۱۱۔ غصے کی حالت میں لاتیں یا گھوسے یا کئے مارتا مارتی ہوں۔

۱۔ کبھی نہیں

۲۔ کبھی کبھی

۳۔ بعض اوقات

۴۔ اکثر اوقات

۵۔ ہمیشہ

۱۲۔ غصے کی حالت میں جو چیز میرے ہات میں ہوتی ہے میں مارتا مارتی ہوں۔

۱۔ کبھی نہیں

۲۔ کبھی کبھی

۳۔ بعض اوقات

۴۔ اکثر اوقات

۵۔ ہمیشہ