



AMERICAN  
PSYCHOLOGICAL  
ASSOCIATION

**Testimony of Jeff J. McIntyre**

**On behalf of the  
American Psychological Association**

**Before the  
United States Senate  
Committee on the Commerce, Science, and  
Transportation**

**The Honorable Ted Stevens, Chairman  
January 19, 2006**

Good morning. I am Jeff McIntyre, and I am honored to be here today to represent the American Psychological Association. The American Psychological Association is the largest organization representing psychology and has over 150,000 members and affiliates working to advance psychology as a science, a profession, and as a means of promoting health, education, and human welfare.

My years of policy experience related to children and the media include serving as a negotiator for the development of a television ratings system, as an advisor to the Federal Communications Commission's V-Chip Task Force, and as a current member of the Oversight Monitoring Board for the television ratings system. I also co-chair the Children's Media Policy Coalition, a national coalition of public health, child advocacy, and education groups, including the American Academy of Pediatrics, Children Now, and the National PTA.

In the late 1990's, tragic acts of violence in our schools directed our nation's attention to the serious problem of youth violence. School shootings in Paducah, Kentucky; Jonesboro, Arkansas; Edinboro, Pennsylvania; Springfield, Oregon; and Littleton, Colorado, brought about a national conversation on the roots of youth violence and what we – as parents, psychologists, and public policymakers – could do to prevent more incidents of youth violence.

Psychological research on violence prevention and child development informs, and continues to address, this need. While the foundations of acts of violence are complex and variable, certain risk factors have been established in the psychological literature. Among the factors that place youth at risk for committing an act of violence are exposure to acts of violence, including those in the media.

Foremost, the conclusions drawn on the basis of over 30 years of research contributed by American Psychological Association members – as highlighted in the U.S. Surgeon General's report in 1972, the National Institute of Mental Health's report in 1982, and the three-year National Television Violence Study in the 1990's – shows that repeated exposure to violence in the mass media places children at risk for:

- increases in aggression;
- desensitization to acts of violence;
- And unrealistic increases in fear of becoming a victim of violence, which results in the development of other negative characteristics, such as mistrust of others.

This research provided the foundation upon which representatives of the public health community – comprised of the American Psychological Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, and the American Medical Association - issued a consensus statement in 2000 regarding the state-of-the-science on the effects of media violence on children.

Certain psychological facts are well established in this debate. As APA member Dr. Rowell Huesmann of the University of Michigan stated before the Senate Commerce Committee - just as every cigarette you smoke increases the chances that, someday, you will get cancer, every exposure to violence increases the chances that, some day, a child will behave more violently than he or she otherwise would.

Hundreds of studies have confirmed that exposing our children to a steady diet of violence in the media makes them more violence prone. The psychological processes here are not mysterious. Children learn by observing others. Mass media and the advertising world provide a very attractive window for these observations.

Excellent children's pro-social programming (such as Sesame Street) and pro-social marketing (such as that around helmets for skateboarding) is to be commended and supported. Psychological research shows that what is responsible for the effectiveness of good children's programming and pro-social marketing is that children learn from their media environment. If children can learn positive behaviors via this medium, they can learn harmful ones as well.

Our experience with the ratings system merits attention in this discussion. There continues to be concern arising from the ambiguity in the implementation of the current ratings system. The ratings system can be undermined by the marketing efforts of the very

groups responsible for its implementation and effectiveness (e.g., marketing adult-rated programs to children). This displays a significant lack of accountability and should be considered when proposals for industry self-regulation are discussed. At the very least, the industry fails to actively promote its rating system.

Also undermined here are the interests of parents. As the industry has shown a lack of accountability in the implementation of the existing ratings system, parents have struggled to manage their family's media diet in the midst of misleading and contradictory information. More information regarding ratings and program content should be made available. As with nutritional information, content labeling should be available on the product and not hidden on websites or in the occasional public education pamphlet. Any move by the industry to fix the current ratings system by implementing a system with less content-based information should be seriously questioned. A Federal Trade Commission report on "The Marketing of Violence to Children" heightens these concerns.

The "Children's On-Line Privacy Protection Act," enacted in 1998, established that parents have a right to protect their children's privacy from the unwanted solicitation of personal information. I would argue that, based on the years of psychological research on violence prevention and clinical practice with children, parents also have the right to protect their children from material that puts them at risk of harm. With the considerations in place for children's privacy, the precedent for protecting the safety and welfare of children in a media environment is well established.

This is 'a la carte' in reverse. A detailed, content-based ratings system is a vital step towards giving parents the information they need to make choices about their children's media habits. Decades of psychological research bear witness to the potential harmful effects for our children and our nation if these practices continue.

Chairman Stevens and members of the Committee, thank you for your time. Please regard me and the American Psychological Association as a resource to the committee in your deliberations on this important matter.