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## Research Report: Violence in Children's Films

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# Research Report: Violence in Children's Films

Ann Wheeler and Kristyn Birkeland

## Abstract

The goal of this research is to find out if violence in children's films has increased within the past five decades. In order to achieve this goal, 22 children's films were given multiple reviews by college students, who carefully analyzed them using the same questionnaire. Using a simple random sampling method of research, films were chosen within clusters of decades and were analyzed using variables that depict violence. After collectively studying the results of the twenty-two children's films, we discovered that violence in children's films has increased over the past five decades.

## Statement of Problem

The goal of this research is to find out if the violence in children's films has increased within the past five decades. Through discussion of a variety of children's media, the researchers hypothesized that children's movies have become more violent as the years have gone by. The goal of this research is not to find all the possible sociological reasons for this phenomena but to simply understand if the violence has indeed increased. Only five decades were chosen to research because they are the most progressive decades for children's media.

## Literature Review

G-rated films are said to be suitable for all audiences while PG films may require minimal parental supervision (Motion Picture Association, 2005). However, in today's society, this rarely seems to be the case. Research has been conducted to not only analyze this unfortunate pattern of violence in children's films, but to also study the negative effects it has on adolescents.

Fumie Yokota and Kimberly Thompson conducted a study in which they analyzed 74 G-rated films released between 1937 and 1999 (Yokota & Thompson, 2004). An examination of their study shows that in half of the films violence was rewarded, while only a third of the movies illustrated a character who voiced a non-violent resolution. Brutality was frequently used to solve problems; 99% of the films used weapons during violent scenes (Yokota & Thompson, 2004). The researchers agree that the frequency, duration, and manner in which violence is used may contribute to a child's misconception of this behavior. Society's acceptance of violence has inevitably led to the increased illustration of brutality in films and has undoubtedly led to detrimental effects on today's youth (Yokota & Thompson, 2004). Yokota and Thompson concluded that the violence in children's media has increased throughout the decades.

Violence in entertainment media adversely affects children. It has increased and continues to increase throughout the decades. Barbara Wilson and her colleagues concluded that violent occurrences are most prevalent in children's programming. Wilson also discovered that perpetrators are illustrated as good-looking and brave versus villainous. Violence is committed for personal satisfaction or out of frustration; therefore, it is justifiable. There are no repercussions for this behavior, i.e. minimal "pain and suffering" is experienced by victims or survivors. The presentation of violent acts in humorous settings is another extremely disturbing fact. In a Canadian-based study conducted by Leslie Joy, Ann Kimbal, and Merle Zabrack, researchers concluded that children exposed to violent media were prone to behave aggressively. Even scientists report that adolescents learn aggressive attitudes and behavior from violent media content. There are solutions to this problem however. According to a recent study, lowering the amount of television that children watch and time spent playing videogames decreases the level of aggressive behavior (Clark).

"Horror Movies: Not Okay for Young Children," discusses two studies that examine the effects of violence in the media on children. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) and a professor of communications from the University of Wisconsin concluded that violent films are not suitable for children. The AAP reports, "Repeated exposure to violence can increase hostility, aggression, and the chances of responding violently to others" and "the link between violence in the media and aggressive behavior is as well documented as the link between smoking and lung cancer" (UAB Health System, 2006). The media plays a major role in a child's socialization and development. Therefore, if a young child is exposed to entertainment that contains aggressive behavior this may negatively influence the manner in which that child deals with actual situations (UAB Health System, 2006).

The above articles are relevant to our study and help to support our hypothesis. Many outline the increase in violence in children's films, while others describe the negative effects these movies have on today's youth. It is an unfortunate pattern that has plagued the media. For more information on similar studies, please refer to our list of suggested readings.

## Research Design

We gathered information for this study through the use of a questionnaire. During construction of the questionnaire, we found that there were many different variables to our research and many different avenues in the study of violence in children's films. Different variables that were studied include decade of film; characteristics of characters; number of, when and where the violence occurred; items used to cause harm and other such variables. The race of the villains, the gender of the protagonist, and where the violence took place were all interesting aspects of our research. However, in order to simplify our findings we concentrated on the increase or decrease of the amount of violence in children's films throughout the past five decades. Another strength in our research was the multiple reviews that followed similar guidelines in order to prevent bias. With different people reviewing the same movie, we were able to get a clearer view of the violence within that particular film. We provided a clear definition of what we felt constituted violence within our questionnaire. We defined four types of violence (sexual, action, strong and threat) and measured how often each one of them occurred. A weakness of our research is the number of films reviewed. Another study reviewed 74 films, whereas ours only reviewed 22. If we had more time to review at least 80 more movies, our research would be even more in-depth.

## Results

After collectively analyzing the results of 22 children's films, it was found that the violence in children's films has increased over the past five decades. The peak of this increase occurred in the 1990s. Shockingly, although the brutality in children's films has increased, the ratings have seemingly remained the same. In fact, fifteen of the children's movies were rated G, while only seven were rated PG. A number of these G-rated films contained subject matter unsuitable for children. Interestingly, in the thirteen movies that contained one to five violent scenes, only four were rated PG. The two films that contained the highest number of violent scenes were rated G or PG. Threatening language, weapons, and extremely violent behavior are illustrated in most of these films. The research also found the movies to have a high level of realism from a child's viewpoint. Furthermore, violence is comically illustrated and few characters speak out against violent behavior. In fact, nearly half of the films' characters laugh or joke about someone's violent behavior. The truth of the matter is that not all cartoons are appropriate for children. In fact, a number of them are not and should be given higher ratings. The media's depictions may be negatively affecting today's youth. This is an issue that needs to be resolved. Perhaps the community should band together and rethink the standards for what is suitable for young children.

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## Suggested Readings

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### **Biographical Sketches**

**Ann Wheeler** graduated with honors in May 2009 from Old Dominion University with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Criminal Justice and Sociology (double-major).

**Kristyn Birkeland** is also an alumnus of Old Dominion University with a Bachelor of Science dual-degree in both Criminal Justice and Sociology. Both of the authors plan to continue their education through graduate studies. The following research report summarizes the results of a project conducted in a capstone class completed for their Criminal Justice degrees.