Anticipatory Guidance: Social Skills

Social behaviors are actions that relate to or affect others and can be either negative (anti-social) or positive (pro-social) in nature. Media can help or hurt depending on the kinds of social interactions they demonstrate (such as resolving conflict through conversation or through a fistfight) and, if they include violence, depending on how they portray it (such as whether it’s justified, damaging, funny, attractive, or normative). Subsequently, it is important to understand the relationship between media and social behavior, as this knowledge can help guide patients and families toward mindful media use.

What the Evidence Says

**Media can affect how children want to act and be perceived.** Media can inform children’s expectations of how people behave depending on their gender, age, race, and other identities by providing (often stereotyped) portrayals of characters and celebrities and how they look, talk, act, and relate to others. As children grow and develop, they often see media personas as role models and subsequently strive to emulate them (Tatangelo & Ricciardelli, 2013).

**Media can affect what children understand as normal and acceptable ways to deal with conflict.** When kids see heroes in cartoons and movies use violence to prevail and get rewarded for it, they learn that using force and aggression is an appropriate choice for “good guys”(Matos, Ferreira, & Haase, 2012). This can negatively affect how they play and interact with others. Alternatively, if children see characters processing their emotions and resolving conflict through conversation, they learn to manage their own conflicts in this manner.

**Media can desensitize or help encourage empathy towards others’ experiences/feelings.** Research has shown that exposure to video game violence increases anger and aggressive thoughts and behaviors, while decreasing helpful behaviors. The subsequent physiological desensitization to violence affects how they react to real-life violence and tragedy: They tend to be less affected by it (Carnagey, Anderson, & Bushman, 2007). Furthermore, enjoyment of violence on TV, in movies, or in video games correlates with increased verbal and physical aggression (Matos et al., 2012). Alternatively, educational television and other media with positive and prosocial messages can influence a child to be kind and cooperate.

During the Visit

If your patient screens “positive” on the Media Use History for behavioral problems at school or at home, discuss them with the patient and his/her family and touch on how media may play a role in addressing or exacerbating these issues.

Recommendations

- Advise parents to limit children’s exposure to media violence. Recommend that parents view the media ahead of time, read reviews, or watch trailers to help ensure that minimal violence is portrayed. Recommend that parents talk to their children about the media violence they see, hear, or interact with so that they can make sense of these messages and also understand what the real-world implications of similar actions might be. This can help quell the fears of young children and help older children distinguish between real life and fantasy and learn best practices when it comes to solving problems they encounter.
- Encourage use of pro-social media. Research has shown that exposure to more prosocial shows, movies, and video games can encourage the development of helpful behaviors and empathy (Hogan, 2012).
Future Directions

As media violence persists, we need to monitor how it is affecting our children’s social health in the long-term—both positively and negatively.

References


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