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## Children Observing Violence and Public Health Outcomes

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## Mar 04, 2024 Children Observing Violence and Public Health Outcomes

By Andrew Rowan, DPhil and Kathleen Rowan CEO, WellBeing International

This year, 2024, is the centenary of the Geneva Declaration on the Rights of the Child by the League of Nations. That Declaration was drafted by Eglantyne Jebb, the founder of the Save the Children Fund, and states that all people owe children the right to the means for their development, special help in times of need, priority for relief, freedom from exploitation, and an upbringing that instills social consciousness and duty. Twenty-two years later, the UN General Assembly established the UN International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF). The UN General Assembly adopted the Declaration of the Rights of the Child in 1959. In 1978, the Commission on Human Rights drafted a Convention on the Rights of the Child, which every country except the United States has subsequently ratified. The United States continues to be concerned about national sovereignty and parental rights.

There is little question that the exposure of children to physical abuse, sexual exploitation, and war conflicts can have severe adverse impacts on child

development into healthy adults. A child's exposure to violence may occur in many different settings, including homes, schools, and communities, and frequently produces long-term harmful physical, mental, and emotional impacts. However, with the development of visual media, what can be concluded about the effects of children viewing scenes of violence on other humans or animals?

When the League of Nations was working on the Geneva Declaration on the Rights of Children, the movie industry was also exploding worldwide, leading to questions about its impact on society – and children. In the US, many states began discussing possible regulations on what could be shown on movie screens. To forestall the development of a hodge-podge of different state regulations, the industry introduced what was known as the Hays Code in 1924. Will Hays was a Presbyterian elder and former head of the Republican National Committee, and his code prohibited certain scenes involving lacy lingerie, inside-of-the-thigh images, and exposed breasts, as well as behaviors such as drinking, narcotic use, gambling, and pointing a gun. The Hays Code also prohibited plots in which law enforcement was defeated. The Hays Code was replaced in 1968 by a moving rating system involving letters (e.g., G, PG-13, X). Similar rating systems are also being applied to video games.

Unlike the consensus regarding the adverse effects of physical and psychological violence on children, there has been a lengthy debate over the possible negative consequences of children viewing violence on a screen. Nevertheless, according to a [review](#) in *Science*, sufficient evidence had accumulated by 1972 for the US Surgeon General to state that “...televised violence, indeed, does have an adverse effect on some members of society.” Major professional societies such as the American Psychological Association and the American Medical Association have also concluded that “the data point overwhelmingly to a causal connection between media violence and aggressive behavior in some children.”

The concerns about visual exposure to violence, including violence to animals, are now being raised by UN bodies. [Article 19](#) of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child identifies a right to protection of children from experiencing

all forms of violence. However, demonstrating the harmful effect of children observing violence has been challenging. For example, a [2023 study](#) examines why some research has concluded that simply viewing violence does not result in an increase in aggression and discusses why some research might (erroneously) report no negative impact of simply viewing violent scenes.

While the empirical research continues, the world is launching measures to prevent children from being exposed to views of violence, including violence against animals. In [General Comment 26](#) (Section G, paragraph 35), which primarily addresses protecting children from the harms of climate change, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child explicitly recommends preventing children from viewing scenes of violence to animals. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) is taking a justifiably broad view of what such violence might entail. Countries have been urged to prevent children from being spectators at bullfights, and recently, the CRC's [February 2024](#) letter to South Africa reviewing its progress in protecting children includes a specific reference (Paragraph 27e) to protecting children from the "vicarious effects of exposure to violence inflicted on animals such as during trophy hunting." The NSPCA, South Africa's national animal protection organization, is also concerned about the recent expansion of [dogfighting](#) in the country and its potential adverse effects on children.

A 2022 Norwegian [report](#) of a survey of 9,240 12-16-year-old adolescents is the first large-scale study investigating both animal and child abuse in families. The study found a strong link between exposure to animal abuse and psychological violence. It supported previous research indicating a co-occurrence of animal abuse and psychological abuse in family situations. Low socioeconomic status, parental substance abuse, psychiatric illness, and incarceration were all risk factors for animal abuse in the Norwegian sample.

The various links between animal abuse and other abuse behaviors raise questions about not only the influence of observing violence on animals but also the positive potential of employing such links to protect children. In the USA, the animal protection movement has been linked to child protection since its

founding in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century (early humane societies typically included both animal and child protection services, while early SPCAs focused exclusively on animal protection). The American Humane Association still has an animal and a child protection division. However, there are surprisingly few constructive and effective links between animal and child protection organizations today.

WellBeing International welcomes the increase in global awareness of the adverse impacts on children observing violence, whether to humans or animals. WBI urges continuing efforts to raise global awareness to assist parents in making informed choices affecting the long-term well-being of their children, introduce effective measures to protect children from observing violence, continue to support research into the detrimental impact of observing media or actual violence, and encourage greater cooperation between child and animal protection organizations to benefit both movements and the victims they seek to protect.

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