

# The Effects of Television on Children

By Ismail Adam Patel

RiyadulJannah online Volume: 2/Issue: 7

**Television is one of the most common electrical appliance in our homes and as such almost all individuals are exposed to it at some time or other. With regards to children, studies have shown that they are among the heaviest users of television. Young children spend between 3 and 4 hours watching television each day. On average a pre-school child spends more than half or in some cases equal to an adults working week sitting in front of the television set. To all concerned, this raises some alarming questions. What purpose does television serve? What consequences has the use of television? Can television influence the social, moral, ethical, racial, intellectual and personality development? Volumes have been written on the effects of television viewing. Researchers throughout the world have spent years to observe the long term consequences of television viewing. What follows is only glimpses into their works.**

The first striking results obtained by the studies is that television has more than thirty different functions for children. In the public debate television is often said to have two functions- to entertain and to inform. However these two narrow functions prove irrelevant to children. We can sub-group the functions for ease into:

## **Entertainment**

It serves the purpose of amusing and exciting.

## **Living Fantasy and Escapism**

Meets a need for escaping real life and entering a fantasy world. It allows one to enter an imaginary,whimsical world where one's macho and stud images are inacted for and re-inforced.

## **Non-Social**

It can be used to avoid social interaction by retreating to a place where it is possible to shut other people out or by requiring other people to be quiet so that the programme can be enjoyed.

## **Informative**

The informative needs that television satisfies for children can be described as reality orientation,in particular how to dress,behave, talk and play sport or as today's children might say to acquire street creid!.

## **Time Consuming Activity**

As already stated some children watch up to forty hours of television a week and sometimes more during school holidays. An absorbing distraction,instead of playing outside,doing homework household or religious duties children are glued to the box. Exciting and interesting hobbies which require time are ignored.It has been estimated that by the time a person reaches the age of 25 he will have given up 5 years of his fruitful life to watching television.

## **Social Utility**

Television's most important social function is that one can identify and obtain an almost real contact with people on television (Wohl 1965), and the programmes provide topics of conversations,it also allows watching in mixed company. J. Brown argues that television gives boys and girls an excuse to sit close together.

The scientific issue most fundamentally related to the particular question of the effects of television viewing revolves around the nature of observational learning (Brown) i.e. The way in which the behaviour of children and adults changes as a consequence of exposure to the behaviours of others. Numerous studies of children's reaction in play indicate that children

watching another person will subsequently act in the same or similar manner. All the investigators have acknowledged that a child's values, knowledge and behaviour may be developed and moulded at least in part by observational learning. Young children's observation of others on films has been shown to produce an impressive level of learning of unfamiliar behaviours (Coates 1969). Studies into social learning and imitation shows:

Children will imitate the behaviour of models from television programmes if they see the behaviours as being more rewarding. If the imitated behaviour is further acclaimed by peer groups than re-enforcement will occur and a 'permanent' manifestation of behaviour will take place. Howett 1971, with empirical support argued that children who lack older siblings or peers to supply salient models for their behaviour are more likely to adopt the behaviours modelled on television. Experiments have shown that children and adults, as a consequence of watching violent films, are inclined to display more aggressive behaviour.

Television appears to effect other activities because television leaves little time for an activity requiring prolonged concentration. Thus the child's life becomes busier around the television, and it is the implication of this value of television over and above other activities and people and the absence of ' free time ' which may be the greatest cause of concern.

As well as learning bad conduct children can learn and enrich their behaviour from television. An educational programme called Sesame Street was introduced to enrich the knowledge of children with poor family educational background. However, far from decreasing the gap between the child from impoverished environment and the educational advantaged family, the gap widened, (Filipson 1972). Children from the educationally advantaged class gained more from the programme as their parents encouraged them to watch the programme more than the educationally impoverished family. Rather than decreasing the gap in educational standards, it achieved to increase it. Irrespective of some good intentions by producers in screening educationally beneficial programmes, if the programmes are not being viewed by children and encouraged by the parents, as is the case, then television only plays a devastating role in the social structure.

We are all too familiar with incidents in which a child has attempted to replicate behaviour he has just observed on television - occasionally with tragic consequences. Given the fact that there is excessive violence and sex on television and our children are continually exposed to such material, one must be concerned of the impact of such violent and sexual content on our children.

Researchers have shown that children from kindergarten onward apparently do understand the behavioural content of television programmes. Experiments with four year-old demonstrated that depiction of highly salient, repeated consequences for aggressive behaviour will influence both play behaviour and verbal reports of behavioural solutions to fairly common situations involving interpersonal conflict.

A. Stein and L. Friedrich at the Pennsylvania University assessed the effect of exposing Pre-school children to a ' diet ' of either anti-social, pro-social, and neutral television programmes. The overall results indicated that children who were adjudged to be initially somewhat more aggressive became significantly more aggressive as a result of viewing anti-social programmes.

R.Liebert and R. Baron of university of New York assessed young children's willingness to hurt another child after viewing either aggressive or neutral television programmes. Children who viewed aggressive programmes exhibited a greater preference for playing with weapons and aggressive toys than did the children who had watched the neutral programme.

Stein and Friedrich concluded "Children who initially are high in aggression respond to aggressive television programmes with higher levels of aggression than they would under neutral conditions". To measure pro-social self control i.e. Obedience, tolerance of delay, and task

persistence, results showed clearly that children exposed to anti-social television programmes subsequently displayed very lower levels of self-control on each and every of these measures.

Under some circumstances, exposure to television aggression can lead children to accept what they have seen as a partial guide for their actions. As a result the present entertainment offering of the television medium contributes in some measure to the physical and verbal aggressive behaviour of many children and to the disrespect of societies and individuals. Such an effect has been shown in a wide variety of situations.

Many children (choose to watch) and are continually exposed to television violence and take them to be a reflection of the real world. This may lead to the belief that violence and crime are frequent occurrence in the society and to the approval of violent behaviour. This finding is as important as the finding of an association between television violence and aggressive behaviour itself. These youngsters may become inured to violence and later as citizens be indifferent to its occurrence- this implication is not trivial.

So far we have shown the short term effects of viewing televised violence but what are the long term cumulative impact of viewing violence?

Lefkowitz et al investigated the development of aggressive behaviour in children by studying the same boys and girls over a ten year period, at ages 8 and 18. He found for boys that the results indicated preference for violent programmes at age eight was significantly related to aggressive and delinquent behaviour at age eighteen. For girls this relationship was in the same direction but less strong. Thus we can conclude that preferring violent television programme at age eight is at least one cause of the aggressive and anti social behaviour displayed ten years later.

In summary;

- \* Extensive violence viewing precedes some long run manifestation of aggressive behaviour.
- \* Television programme contain excessive amount of violence and children can remember and learn from such programmes.
- \* There is a clear evidence that exposure to violent television programmes produce greater subsequent aggression than one would find without television.
- \* Television leads a person to be indifferent to violence in real life.
- \* Not only does television change the short term behaviour and beliefs but also the long term.

The theory of observational learning has been very quickly picked up by commercial companies who have poured millions of pounds in to advertising their products on television. Mothers report that television advertisement influences their children and thus the children attempt to influence purchases. Adults also acquire consumer attitude and skills from television advertisement. Existing research indicate young children are more likely to believe claims made in commercials. Thus the Federal Trade Committee of U.S.A. has argued that the television advertisement directed to " children too young to understand the selling purpose of or otherwise comprehend or evaluate the advertisement is inherently unfair and deceptive and should therefore be banned (FTC Staff report 1978). Brown states it is clear that children pay attention to television commercials, their level of attention seems to be on several factors, attention is greatest if the products are relevant to children, higher level of audio complexity or physical action e.g. lively music, singing, rhyming sound effects and animation. The " Which? way to health report of 1993 "states television advertisement is changing the habits of our food consumption. They have found heavily advertised food products make a large proportion of the average child's diet. The concern lies in the fact that most advertised food products for children and adults have excessive sugar and fatty components. In 1990 alone, food manufactures spent more than £ 460 million advertising their products. An interesting statistic showed that a child who only watches one hour of television a day and Saturday morning would see nearly one hundred ads for food and drinks. For Muslim parents this fact must raise alarming questions ! As stated, if television changes the diet habits, then how much is television influencing our children towards haram food and towards the consumption of alcohol? Pause and think to what we are teaching our children in our homes.

The effectiveness of television advertising is well documented and the Church of England has seized the opportunity. As from this year the Church will be screening ads promoting the church and the Christian faith. The ad is already being screened in the South of England and by the end of the year they will cover the whole country.

So far we have looked at how children's and adults aggressive behaviour changes after exposure to violent films. What then happens after years of exposure to sexual scenes, adultery and homosexuality? Maybe a couple of disturbing reports will suffice. In 1992, 16 year old school children in the South of England were asked a single question on whether they have had sexual intercourse. The results were shocking and showed 60 % of the 16 year olds questioned had experienced sex and were no longer virgins. Last year alone, more than eight thousand girls under the age of 16 were reported pregnant. This is almost two girls to every secondary school in the country. Do not, for a second, laze and think that these figures relate to the English community only. I am afraid this harrowing facts are also reflective of today's Muslim community in the United Kingdom. Not only are sexual relationship made trivial by television but sexual deviant behaviour such as homosexuality, sado-masochism, and adultery are portrayed as in vogue.

We have now evidence that children who watch a lot of television and particularly entertainment programmes are often emotionally insecure and have often unsatisfactory relationship with parents, peers, and other individuals in their immediate surroundings. Of the twenty to forty hours of television children watch each week, most of it is not designed with children's welfare in mind and most programmes, to say the least, are either aggressive, obscene, racist, pornographic, and / or blasphemous (Brown).

As television competes with other activities and experiences in a child's life, parents role in providing alternatives are crucial. Moreover their own attitudes and beliefs both about television and about life in general are important determinants of children's response to television. Television may be a socialising force but it interacts in complex ways with all of the other forces in a child's life to determine the patterns of socialisation for that child. Much of television's power and influence over adults and children lies in its capacity to strike deep emotional chords in viewers and to increase their identifications with characters to arouse emotional response and in general to deepen their involvement in the television experience. Moreover the ability to force viewers to see needs where they had none or to feel dissatisfaction when they had previously been content lies at the heart of successful television programmes and advertisements. As most children spend more time engaged in television viewing than in any other single activity besides school, television's impact on their learning social and affective development cannot be over emphasised. Nobody can deny that children, to an extent, learn about fashion, speech, obedience, social interactions, values, morality and a whole host of behavioural patterns from viewing television. Television further restricts an individual indulging in alternative activities such as reading, sports, religion, and active hobbies. Television's depiction of horror, crime and violence further anaesthetises an individual from the real life problem.

After having read the studies on the effects of television viewing, for most people their worst fears of television's impact will have been realised. I have, I hope conclusively shown that television does change peoples attitudes, beliefs, moral standing, values and inter-personal relationships. It also restricts one from indulging in other more fruitful activities and introduce a possibility of non-socialisation. The most disturbing question one must raise is; The changes television bring in an individual, are they in accordance with Islaamic teachings and way of life or is television's influence driving our children and us away from the right path???

When every other television programme promotes consumption of alcohol, aggressive behaviour, adultery, gambling and abandoning parents, then think my brothers and sisters what we are teaching our children in our own living rooms? Television is an extension of a child's or an adult's society and given the fact that the child spends more time with the television than the parents, is the child going to grow with the respect of the parents or the television? Not only are we

subverting our children in our own living rooms but imprisoning them from educational, physical and Islaamic activities. I finally turn to Hollinder who goes as far as to suggest that the " new parent " is the mass media and in particular the television. He was concerned with the source of knowledge and attitudes about events. He asked children some social questions. Having elicited their opinion, he then asked them to name the source of each of these opinions. By and large the major source was the television, the schools came second while parents were the least influential of all.

Taking into consideration the content of the majority of television programmes and the excessive use of television by us, I lean to those who have likened the television to a sewer running through the hearts of our living rooms, contaminating the very principles and infecting the values of Islaam.