Childhood "Contagion" Through Media

Where is the Epidemiologic Evidence?

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Abstract: There are recurring stories about children dying by accident after imitating an act or behavior they saw in the media. Reliable data to ascertain whether and to what extent this is a serious problem are largely absent. The potential for media to act as a vector for risky behaviors is a topic subject to epidemiologic inquiry.

(*Epidemiology* 2008;19: 280–281)

The execution of former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein was followed by reports in the mass media of children who died accidentally while imitating the execution. Such reports are not uncommon: there have been other stories about accidental deaths when children imitate behaviors they have seen in movies or on TV. One well-known example is a report of 31 children who died imitating the Russian Roulette scene from the movie "The Deer Hunter."¹ This phenomenon has been coined the "Evel Knievel Syndrome"^{2,3} by pediatricians who believe that media exemplars cause children to underestimate the real dangers of portrayed behaviors, or to overestimate their capabilities to deal with those dangers.

The terminology of infectious disease often is found in descriptions of behaviors influenced by media reports. As early as 1890, the French sociologist Gabriel Tarde⁴ described the apparent copycat murders that followed reports of the infamous Jack the Ripper as "epidemics of crime." Others have written about the "contagion" of violence⁵ or the "clustering" of suicides.⁶ Is the spread of reckless behavior or intentional violence via the media indeed a potential subject of epidemiologic investigation?

The extent of the problem is difficult to determine; relatively few cases have been reported either by the media or in the media-effects literature. However, if media are having any influence at all on behavior, the potential for such

influence is only growing. A recent review⁷ of European data has described the increasing number of hours that children spend viewing TV, playing computer games, and surfing the Internet. Similar patterns are found in other industrialized countries, and the rest of the world is working hard to catch up. The evolution of media influence is so rapid that data are outdated nearly as soon as they are published. If media messages provoke life-threatening behaviors in only a small proportion of all persons exposed, this could amount to considerable injury and death.

Remarkably little is actually known about the imitation of media examples. The literature on such media effects appears to rely largely on anecdotes reported by the news media themselves. Outbreak analyses in general require great care in deciding what counts as a case, or as a cluster of cases. Few analyses have been carried out on imitation effects (Phillips' research⁶ on the "contagion" of suicide is a notable exception). The fact that a child's death may be reported as having been due to imitation of something on TV does not make it so. Supervising adults may be eager to shift the blame, responding police officers may have overactive imaginations, rescue workers may be misquoted, or the connection may simply have been presumed by the media reporting the event. Conversely, there is no reason to assume that the number of real events is limited to those reported in the media.

To establish whether the phenomenon of media imitation has substance, some form of surveillance may be needed. If children in fact copy dangerous behavior that they see on TV, in movies, or in video games, surveillance could lead to a better understanding of the processes involved, and what makes particular children susceptible. Analysis may identify media exemplars that are particularly "contagious." This in turn may lead to effective interventions. For example, the literature on the "Evel Knievel Syndrome" suggests that children underestimate the risks involved. Information campaigns for parents or schools may therefore be protective.

With no more information than we have at the moment, we can say only that the cost is high: either the phenomenon is overstated, and parents and the public are being subjected to unnecessary worries, or the phenomenon is real and produces preventable deaths and injuries.

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