Could nursery rhymes cause violent behaviour?
A comparison with television viewing

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Aims: To assess the rates of violence in nursery rhymes compared to pre-watershed television viewing. Methods: Data regarding television viewing habits, and the amount of violence on British television, were obtained from Ofcom. A compilation of nursery rhymes was examined for episodes of violence by three of the researchers. Each nursery rhyme was analysed by number and type of episode. They were then recited to the fourth researcher whose reactions were scrutinised.

Results: There were 1045 violent scenes on pre-watershed television over two weeks, of which 61% showed the act and the result; 51% of programmes contained violence. The 25 nursery rhymes had 20 episodes of violence, with 41% of rhymes being violent in some way; 30% mentioned the act and the result, with 50% only the act. Episodes of law breaking and animal abuse were also identified. Television has 4.8 violent scenes per hour and nursery rhymes have 52.2 violent scenes per hour. Analysis of the reactions of the fourth researcher were inconclusive.

Conclusions: Although we do not advocate exposure for anyone to violent scenes or stimuli, childhood violence is not a new phenomenon. Whether visual violence and imagined violence have the same effect is likely to depend on the age of the child and the effectiveness of the storyteller. Re-interpretation of the ancient problem of childhood and youth violence through modern eyes is difficult, and laying the blame solely on television viewing is simplistic and may divert attention from vastly more complex societal problems.
The results from the three researchers were compared and where discrepancies arose, these were discussed and consensus was reached.

The nursery rhymes were then recited, in turn, to the fourth researcher, and his response to them was noted. Non-verbal communication was the subject’s preferred means of communication. A relatively limited repertoire of facial expressions allowed responses to be classified as positive (smiling, flapping arms, clapping hands), neutral (inattention, monotone babbling, nose picking, straining at stool), or negative (crawling away, crying). The time taken for the rhymes to be spoken was noted. Normal amounts of non-verbal embellishment of the rhymes to depict actions and scenes were used.

**RESULTS**

Ofcom’s report, Depiction of violence on terrestrial television looked at levels of violence depicted on the five terrestrial television channels in 2001. Television was monitored between 17:30 and 24:00. We only used data from the programmes before 21:00 (when children are more likely to be watching). A total of 1045 violent scenes were shown over two weeks. The 25 nursery rhymes took 23 minutes to recite.

Table 1 lists nursery rhyme associated violence episodes. Table 2 lists the types of violent scene on television and in nursery rhymes. Table 3 compares violence type with television viewing and table 4 compares frequency of violent scenes.

Furthermore, four episodes of emotional distress to humans were identified. An episode of emotional distress to an animal (Little Miss Muffet) was discounted. Five episodes of law breaking were also found.
Statistical analysis was not performed as we had no access to the core data from the television group.

Analysis of responses of the fourth researcher to rhyme recital strongly suggested a pattern of behaviour unrelated to the content of the rhymes. Episodes of violence were greeted equally with positive, negative, or neutral responses. The presence of other small children, biscuits, and musical purple dinosaurs all appeared to confound response by their external influences.

**DISCUSSION**

Our results show that a significant amount of violence permeates childhood, both with traditional and with newer methods of child entertainment. Similar numbers of television programmes and nursery rhymes contain violent episodes (51% versus 45%), but we have shown these to be different in type, in pattern, and in frequency per hour.

The effect of witnessing or imagining a violent episode on a child may be dependent on its type and graphical nature. Although nursery rhymes are a non-visual medium, artists and film makers have long been aware that the imagined can be more powerful than the graphic. A good example of this is the horror film *Night of the Living Dead Part 2*, whose over reliance on graphic scenes make it much less frightening than the disturbing implied horror of *The Wicker Man*.

Television is twice as likely to show or mention the result of the violence compared to the nursery rhymes. This allows the child, having heard a rhyme, to make their own image and conclusion of the effects and outcome of the episode. At times this may be more disturbing than having the outcome spelled out, as children often over interpret the results of such acts. That noises in the dark are caused by the resident monster under the bed is well known to any child, but adults are more likely to blame passing wind or other natural phenomena.

Emotional distress was not analysed in Ofcom’s report, but we identified four further rhymes which involved significant levels of distress to a character. We believe this could be just as damaging to certain children as the violence episodes.

Neither our study nor the Ofcom’s results was able to evaluate the severity of the episodes of violence. For instance, “Here comes the chap to chop off your head” (*Oranges and Lemons*), or a blackbird pecking off someone’s nose (*Sing a Song of Sixpence*) probably has a different impact level to someone falling out of a bed (*Six in a Bed*).

The effects of the violence of nursery rhymes may also be moderated by the person telling them, which is not possible with television. This may however work to augment the nature of the episode, where a seemingly innocuous event can be built in to a significant episode of violence. For instance, “The clock struck one” in *Hickory Dickory Dock* can be interpreted to signify the striking of a mouse instead of the time signal, and the imagery of death in *Ring a Ring of Roses* would be apparent to a child only after adult explanation.

Other episodes which caused concern, for instance placing a baby intentionally in harm’s way by placing his or her cot in a tree top, may also cause distress to a child’s perception of its safety. A social services referral would undoubtedly follow.

When analysed for episodes per hour, the frequency of violence with nursery rhymes is around 11 times that with television viewing. It could therefore be argued that placing a young child in front of a television before 9 pm could reduce their exposure to violence. Interpretation of the effects of this style of child rearing on other important social factors, for instance communication and play skills, is beyond the scope of this study.

Our study indicates that young children have been exposed to violent episodes long before the advent of television. Although we do not advocate exposure for anyone to violent scenes or stimuli, childhood violence is not a new phenomenon. The writings of Dickens and Shakespeare both make frequent references to childhood offenders. The development of the violent child and individual is multi-factorial, involving many socioeconomic and educational factors. Reinterpretation of an ancient problem through modern eyes is difficult, and laying the blame solely on television viewing is simplistic and may divert attention from vastly more complex societal problems. Socrates said in 425 BC: “If the whole world depends on today’s youth, I can’t see the world lasting another 100 years!”. Maybe whatever we do, the “youth of today” will grow up to be just like us!

**REFERENCES**


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Conflict of interest: AF is related to EF. EF is only allowed to watch half an hour of television per day (exclusively pre-watershed). PD and LL were due their first baby in November. They hope to bring him or her up appropriately.

Local ethics approval was granted by Mrs T Fox.

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