

"Teaching Kids To Kill"

By Lt. Col. Dave Grossman

A Case Study: Paducah, Kentucky

Michael Carneal, the 14-year-old killer in the Paducah, Kentucky school shootings, had never fired a real pistol in his life. He stole a .22 pistol, fired a few practice shots, and took it to school. He fired eight shots at a high school prayer group, hitting eight kids, five of them head shots and the other three upper torso (Grossman & DeGaetana, 1999).

I train numerous elite military and law enforcement organizations around the world. When I tell them of this achievement they are stunned. Nowhere in the annals of military or law enforcement history can we find an equivalent "achievement."

Where does a 14-year-old boy who never fired a gun before get the skill and the will to kill? Video games and media violence.

A Virus of Violence

First we must understand the magnitude of the problem. The murder rate does not accurately represent our situation. Murder has been held down by the development of ever more sophisticated life saving skills and techniques. A better indicator of the problem is the aggravated assault rate -- the rate at which human beings are attempting to kill one another. And that has gone up from around 60 per 100,000 in 1957, to over 440 per 100,000 by the mid-1990's (Statistical Abstracts of the United States, 1957-1997).

Even with small downturns recently, the violent crime rate is still at a phenomenally high level, and this is true not just in America but worldwide. In Canada, per capita assaults increased almost fivefold between 1964 and 1993. According to Interpol, between 1977 and 1993 the per capita assault rate increased nearly fivefold in Norway and Greece, and in Australia and New Zealand it increased approximately fourfold. During the same period it tripled in Sweden, and approximately doubled in: Belgium, Denmark, England-Wales, France, Hungary, Netherlands, and Scotland. In India during this period the per capita murder rate doubled. In Mexico and Brazil violent crime is also skyrocketing, and in Japan juvenile violent crime went up 30 percent in 1997 alone.

This virus of violence is occurring worldwide, and the explanation for it has to be some *new* factor that is occurring in *all* of these countries (Grossman, 1999b). Like heart disease, there are many factors involved in the causation of violent crime, and we must never downplay any of them. But there is only one *new* variable that is present in each of these nations, bearing the same fruit in every case, and that is media violence being presented as "entertainment" for children.

Killing Unnaturally

I spent almost a quarter of a century as an Army infantry officer, a paratrooper, a Ranger, and a West Point Psychology Professor, learning and studying how we enable people to kill. Most soldiers have to be trained to kill.

Healthy members of most species have a powerful, natural resistance to killing their own kind. Animals with antlers and horns fight one another by butting heads. Against other species they go to the side to gut and gore. Piranha turn their fangs on everything, but they fight one another with flicks of the tail. Rattlesnakes bite anything, but they wrestle one another.

When we human beings are overwhelmed with anger and fear our thought processes become very primitive, and we slam head on into that hardwired resistance against killing. During World War II, we discovered that only 15-20 percent of the individual riflemen would fire at an exposed enemy soldier (Marshall, 1998). You can observe this in killing throughout history, as I have outlined in much greater detail in my book, *On Killing*, (Grossman, 1996), in my three peer-reviewed encyclopedia entries, (Grossman, 1999a, 1999b, and Murray, 1999) and in my entry in the *Oxford Companion to American Military History* (1999).

That's the reality of the battlefield. Only a small percentage of soldiers are willing and able to kill. When the military became aware of this, they systematically went about the process of "fixing" this "problem." And fix it they did. By Vietnam the firing rate rose to over 90 percent (Grossman, 1999a).

The Methods in this Madness: Brutalization

The training methods the military uses are brutalization, classical conditioning, operant conditioning, and role modeling. Let us explain these and then observe how the media does the same thing to our children, but without the safeguards.

Brutalization, or "values inculcation," is what happens at boot camp. Your head is shaved, you are herded together naked, and dressed alike, losing all vestiges of individuality. You are trained relentlessly in a total immersion environment. In the end you embrace violence and discipline and accept it as a normal and essential survival skill in your brutal new world.

Something very similar is happening to our children through violence in the media. It begins at the age of 18 months, when a child can begin to understand and mimic what is on television. But up until they're six or seven years old they are developmentally, psychologically, physically unable to discern the difference between fantasy and reality. Thus, when a young child sees somebody on TV being shot, stabbed, raped, brutalized, degraded, or murdered, to them it is real, and some of them embrace violence and accept it as a normal and essential survival skill in a brutal new world. (Grossman & DeGaetano, 1999).

On June 10th, 1992, the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)* published a definitive study on the impact of TV violence. In nations, regions, or cities where television appears there is an immediate explosion of violence on the playground, and within 15 years there is a doubling of the murder rate. Why 15 years? That's how long it takes for a brutalized toddler to reach the "prime crime" years. That's how long it takes before you begin to reap what you sow when you traumatize and desensitize children. (Centerwall, 1992).

The *JAMA* concluded that, "the introduction of television in the 1950's caused a subsequent doubling of the homicide rate, i.e., long-term childhood exposure to television is a causal factor behind approximately one half of the homicides committed in the United States, or approximately 10,000 homicides annually." The study went on to state that "...if, hypothetically, television technology had never been developed, there would today be 10,000 fewer homicides each year in the United States, 70,000 fewer rapes, and 700,000 fewer injurious assaults" (Centerwall, 1992).

Today the data linking violence in the media to violence in society is superior to that linking cancer and tobacco. The American Psychological Association (APA), the American Medical Association (AMA), the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), the Surgeon General, and the Attorney General have all made definitive statements about this. When I presented a paper to the American Psychiatric Association's (APA) annual convention in May, 2000 (Grossman, 2000), the statement was made that: "The data is irrefutable. We have reached the point where we need to treat those who try to deny it, like we would treat Holocaust deniers."

Classical Conditioning

Classical conditioning is like Pavlov's dog in Psych 101. Remember the ringing bell, the food, and the dog could not hear the bell without salivating?

In World War II, the Japanese would make some of their young, unblooded soldiers bayonet innocent prisoners to death. Their friends would cheer them on. Afterwards, all these soldiers were treated to the best meal they've had in months, sake, and to so-called "comfort girls." The result? They learned to associate violence with pleasure.

This technique is so morally reprehensible that there are very few examples of it in modern U.S. military training, but the media is doing it to our children. Kids watch vivid images of human death and suffering and they learn to associate it with: laughter, cheers, popcorn, soda, and their girlfriend's perfume (Grossman & DeGaetano, 1999).

After the Jonesboro shootings, one of the high school teachers told me about her students' reaction when she told them that someone had shot a bunch of their little brothers, sisters, and cousins in the middle school. "They laughed," she told me with dismay, "they laughed." We have raised a generation of barbarians who have learned to associate human death and suffering with pleasure (Grossman & DeGaetano, 1999).

Operant Conditioning

The third method the military uses is operant conditioning, a powerful procedure of stimulus-response training. We see this with pilots in flight simulators, or children in fire drills. When the fire alarm is set off, the children learn to file out in orderly fashion. One day there's a real fire and they're frightened out of their little wits, but they do exactly what they've been conditioned to do (Grossman & DeGaetano, 1999).

In World War II we taught our soldiers to fire at bullseye targets, but that training failed miserably because we have no known instances of any soldiers being attacked by bullseyes. Now soldiers learn to fire at realistic, man-shaped silhouettes that pop up in their field of view. That's the stimulus. The conditioned response is to shoot the target and then it drops. Stimulus-response, stimulus-response, repeated hundreds of times. Later, when they are in combat and somebody pops up with a gun, reflexively they will shoot and shoot to kill, 75 to 80 percent of the shooting on the modern battlefield is the result of this kind of training (Grossman & Siddle, 1999).

In his national Presidential radio address on April 24, 1999, shortly after the Littleton high school massacre, President Clinton stated that: "A former Lieutenant Colonel and Professor, David Grossman, has said that these games teach young people to kill with all the precision of a military training program, but none of the character training that goes along with it."

The result is ever more homemade pseudo-sociopaths who kill reflexively and show no remorse. Our kids are learning to kill and learning to like it. The most remarkable example is in Paducah, Kentucky the school killer fired eight shots, getting eight hits, on eight different milling, scrambling, screaming kids. Five of them were head shots (Grossman & DeGaetano, 1999).

Where did he get this phenomenal skill? Well, there is a \$130-million law suit against the video game manufacturers in that case, working itself through the appeals system, claiming that the violent video games, the murder simulators, gave that mass murderer the skill and the will to kill.

In July, 2000, at a bipartisan, bicameral Capital Hill conference in Washington, DC, the AMA, the APA, the AAP and the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP) issued a joint statement saying that "viewing entertainment violence can lead to increases in aggressive attitudes, values and behavior, particularly in children. Its effects are measurable and long-lasting. Moreover, prolonged viewing of media violence can lead to emotional desensitization toward violence in real life ...Although less research has been done on the impact of violent interactive entertainment [such as video games] on young people, preliminary studies indicate that the negative impact may be significantly more severe than that wrought by television, movies or music."

Role Models

In the military your role model is your drill sergeant. He personifies violence, aggression, and discipline. (The discipline, and doing it to adults, are the safeguard)(Grossman, 1996). The drill sergeant, and heroes such as John Wayne, Audie Murphy, Sergeant York and Chesty Puller, have always been used as role models to influence young, impressionable teenagers.

Today the media are providing our children with role models, not just in the lawless sociopaths in movies and in TV shows, but in the transformation of these schoolyard killers into media celebrities.

In the 1970's we learned about "cluster suicides," in which TV reporting of teen suicides was directly responsible for numerous copycat suicides of other teenagers. Because of this, television stations today generally do not cover teen suicides. But when the pictures of teenage killers appear on TV, the effect is tragically similar. If there are children willing to kill *themselves* to get on TV, are there children willing to kill *your* child to get on TV?

Thus we get the effect of copycat, cluster murders that work their way across America like a virus spread by the six o'clock local news. No matter what someone has done, if you put their picture on TV, you have made them a celebrity and someone, somewhere, may emulate them. This effect is magnified when the role model is a teenager, and the effect on other teens can be profound.

In Japan, Canada, and other democracies around the world it is a punishable, criminal act to place the names and images of juvenile criminals in the media, because they *know* that it will result in other tragic deaths. The media has every right and responsibility to tell the story, but do they have a "right" to turn the killers into celebrities?

Unlearning Violence

On the night of the Jonesboro shootings, clergy and counselors were working in small groups in the hospital waiting room, comforting the groups of relatives and friends of the 15 shooting victims. Then they noticed one woman who had been sitting alone.

A counselor went up to the woman and discovered that she was the mother of one of the girls who had been killed. She had no friends, no husband, no family with her as she sat in the hospital, alone. "I just came to find out how to get my little girl's body back," she said. But the body had been taken to the state capital, for an autopsy. Told this, she said, "I just don't know how we're going to pay for the funeral. I don't know how we can afford it."

That little girl was all she had in all the world, and all she wanted to do was wrap her little girl's body in a blanket and take her home. Some people's solution to the problem of media violence is, "If you don't like it, just turn it off." If that is your *only* solution to this problem, then come to Jonesboro, and tell her how this would have kept her little girl safe.

All of us can keep our kids safe from this toxic, addictive substance, and it won't be enough if the neighbors are not doing the same. Perhaps the time has come to consider regulating what the violence industry is selling to kids, controlling the sale of visual violent imagery to children, while *still* permitting free access to *adults*, just as we do with guns, pornography, alcohol, tobacco, sex and cars.

Fighting Back: Education, Legislation, Litigation

We must work against child abuse, racism, poverty and children's access to guns, and in rebuilding our families, but we must also take on the producers of media violence. The solution strategy that I submit for consideration is, "education, legislation, litigation."

Simply put, we need to work toward "legislation" which outlaws violent video games for children. In July, 2000, the city of Indianapolis passed just such an ordinance, and every other city, country or state in America has the right to do the same. There is no Constitutional "right" to teach children to blow people's heads off at the local video arcade. And we are very close to being able to do to the media, through "litigation," what is being done to the tobacco industry, hotting them in the only place they understand--their wallets.

Most of all, the American people need to be informed. Every parent must be warned of the impact of violent visual media on children, as we would warn them of some rampant carcinogen. Violence is not a game, it is not fun, it is not something that we let children do for entertainment. Violence kills.

CBS President Leslie Moonves was asked if he thought the school massacre in Littleton, Colorado, had anything to do with the media. His answer was: "Anyone who thinks the media has nothing to do with it, is an idiot." (Reuters. 2000, March 19). *That* is what the networks are selling, and we do not have to buy it. An educated and informed society can and must find its way home from the dark and lonely place to which it has traveled.

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Lt. Col. Dave Grossman, is a retired Army Ranger, West Point psychology professor, and an expert on the psychology of killing. He has testified before the U.S. House and Senate, and his research was cited by the President of the United States in the wake of the Littleton school shootings. He is director of the Warrior Science Group in Jonesboro, Arkansas, and has written *Stop Teaching Our Kids to Kill: A Call to Action Against TV, Movie, and Video Game Violence*, (Crown/Random, 1999) and *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (Little, Brown and Co., 1996).

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