



## LESSON PLAN

**Level:** Grades 5 to 7  
**About the Author:** MediaSmarts

# Taking Charge of TV Violence

## Overview

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In this lesson, students become aware of the types and amounts of violence in children's programming, and how media violence influences young viewers. The lesson begins with a class discussion about different forms of violence and the types of violent acts that are regularly featured on TV. Students assess their own attitudes toward violence by determining what violent media content is suitable, and not suitable, for younger children. After reviewing existing rating codes, students create codes of their own. Based on a poll of younger children, students will then select, review, and rate favourite children's programs.

## Learning Outcomes

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Students demonstrate:

- an awareness of the different types of violence that appear in children's television programs.
- an understanding of the voluntary codes that regulate violence in children's television in Canada.
- an understanding of their own reactions to various types of violence.
- an understanding of the need to limit the amount of violence viewed by young children.

## Preparation and Materials

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- Read the background information on the Canadian Association of Broadcasters (CAB) Television Violence Code.
- Photocopy handouts:
  - How Old Should You Be To Watch Violent TV Shows?
  - The Rules
  - Physical Violence Worksheet
  - Emotional Violence Worksheet
- Arrange for classroom time in primary classes for students to interview younger children.



## Procedure

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### Guided discussion

Brainstorm with your students:

- What is violence? (*Make sure that students consider both physical and emotional acts of violence in their definitions.*)
- How many types of violent acts can you think of? (*Emotional: yelling, put-downs, name-calling, dumping [transferring unrelated anger to another person]. Physical: threatening/bullying, pushing/shoving, hitting/punching/kicking, shooting, stabbing, vandalism, dangerous behaviour.*)
- Is emotional violence just as bad as physical violence? (*We can be hurt emotionally, just as we can be hurt physically. Yelling, put-downs, name-calling and threats are what kids are most likely to experience in the school yard. Emotionally violent acts can begin a cycle that leads to physical violence: put-downs or name-calling, pushing or shoving, hitting or punching, attacking with a weapon.*)
- How do you think TV violence affects children? (*TV violence may make some kids think that the world is a scary and dangerous place; that violence is a normal part of life; that violence is a good solution to many kinds of problems; makes kids less sympathetic to victims of violence; makes kids more interested in violence, both as a form of entertainment and in their real lives; and encourages them to copy the acts that they see on TV. Another area of concern is the addiction factor - the more violent action kids consume, the more they need that level of action and excitement in their entertainment.*)

Our attitudes towards TV violence have changed over time. At one time or another, each of the following have been considered violent acts. Which ones do you think are violent, and which do you think are not violent?

- The Three Stooges poking each other in the eye.
- Scenes of war on the 6:00 news.
- A food fight.
- Someone being threatened with a gun.
- A nasty insult.
- A cartoon character shooting another character.

(Source: The TV Book, The Kid's Guide to Talking Back, by Shelagh Wallace. Annick Press, 1996.)

**Thinking about the issue:** Not only have our attitudes changed over time, but each of us has our own standards in judging what is acceptable.

- Distribute How Old Should You Be To Watch Violent TV Shows? handout.
- Review your students' responses to the questions. Is there a general consensus regarding the appropriate ages, or do responses differ?
- Remind students to think about these questions when they are looking at children's programs later in the unit.



Today, we have guidelines to control violence in kids' TV shows. Distribute The Rules handout and review with students. *The Rules* are adapted from the Canadian Association of Broadcasters Voluntary Code on Violence. Ask students:

- Are these are good rules?
- Are there other rules they would like to add?
- How well do children's shows follow these rules?

Discuss the concept of rating media productions according to violent content. In Canada, **C** is used to label programming for children under the age of 8; **C-8**, for children ages 8 and older; **G**, for a broad, general audience; **PG**, unsuitable for kids under age 8 and parents should supervise children between the ages of 8 - 14; **14+**, unsuitable for children under the age of 14; and **18+**, for adults only. In the United States, a television rating system has been created that features ratings such as **TV-G**, suitable for all ages; **TV-7**, unsuitable for kids under seven; **TV-PG**, parental guidance suggested; **TV-14**, unsuitable for kids under 14; and **TV-M**, for mature audiences only.

### Activity 1

#### Design a Rating System

Children's shows all fall under the **TV-7** or **C-8** categories, but there is still a wide range of violence appearing in these programs, especially in cartoons. Referring to the different types of violence that the class has brainstormed, and the rules for children's programs, ask your students to come up with their own rating system, based on violence in children's programs.

For example, they might decide to rate programs on a scale of 1 to 5, according to the amounts and types of violence shown. Programs with very little violent content (like *Sesame Street* or *Mr. Dress-up*) would be rated **TV-1**; programs that feature some name-calling or put-downs would be rated **TV-2**; programs that feature small amounts of milder physical violence such as pushing and shoving would be rated **TV-3**; programs that feature moderate amounts of physical and emotional violence (many cartoons fall into this category) would be rated **TV-4**; and programs featuring a great deal of physical and emotional violence (super-hero television shows such as *Power Rangers* and *Sailor Moon*) would be rated **TV-5**.

As a class, have students assess how many violent acts must appear in a program to determine each rating.

### Activity 2

#### Rate the Programs

- Once students have created their rating system, they will interview children in the primary grades to determine their favourite television shows.
- From these interviews, students will compile a master list of the most popular television shows watched by primary students in their school.
- Divide your students into groups and distribute the "favourite shows" among each group.



- Using their *Physical Violence Worksheet* and *Emotional Violence Worksheet* worksheets, each group member will watch these shows and track the types and amounts of violent acts in them.
- As a group, students will compile their statistics and rate their assigned programs according to violent content.
- For each of their assigned programs, students will create a summary that includes:
  1. The name of the program.
  2. The day of the week and time that the program is aired.
  3. The program's rating.
  4. A brief description of the types of violence that appear in the program
- Once all the groups have completed their summaries, they can be compiled into a *Guide For Parents* that could be distributed to the parents of children in the primary grades or be summarized in the principal's newsletter.



## Canadian Private Broadcasters' Voluntary Code Regarding Violence in Television Programming

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The first version of the Voluntary Code Regarding Violence in Television Programming was created by the Canadian Association of Broadcasters (CAB) in 1987, and approved by the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC).

However, in 1993, public concern about TV violence prompted the CRTC to announce a five-point agenda to address the issue. These five potential solutions were: industry codes; public education; the government's influence as a major advertiser; international collaboration; and recognition of quality children's programming.

In response to the CRTC's call for action, the Action Group on Violence on Television (AGVOT) was formed. The group's mandate included establishing stricter industry codes, and developing a television classification system. The CAB violence code was revised and strengthened, and came into effect January 1, 1994.

Of the code's 35 guidelines, key commitments include:

- An outright ban on the broadcast of programming containing gratuitous violence or violence that sanctions, promotes or glamorizes the use of physical force.
- The establishment of a "watershed hour" of 9 p.m., before which programs containing scenes of violence intended for adults will not be aired
- Sensitivity to the depiction of violence against vulnerable groups, such as women and minorities.
- The inclusion of viewer advisories before (and during) programs that are intended for adult audiences, and those with scenes of violence are not suitable for children.
- Strict guidelines on the depiction of violence in children's programming:
  - violence must not be shown as a preferred way of solving problems
  - the physical consequences of violence must be obvious
  - animated programming must not encourage dangerous imitation, and violence should not be the central theme

The Violence Code is administered by the Canadian Broadcast Standards Council (CBSC). To submit a complaint about broadcasting content that may contravene the Code, consumers can use the complaint forms on the CBSC and the CRTC websites.



## Canadian Television Classification System

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### Children

Programming intended for children with this designation must adhere to the provisions of the Children's Section of the Canadian Association of Broadcasters (CAB) Voluntary Code on Violence in Television Programming.

As this programming is intended for younger children under the age of 8 years, it will pay careful attention to themes that could threaten their sense of security and well-being. As programming for children requires particular caution in the depiction of violence, there will be no realistic scenes of violence. Depictions of aggressive behaviour will be infrequent and limited to portrayals that are clearly imaginary and unrealistic in nature.

Might contain occasional comedic, unrealistic depictions.

No offensive language. No sex or nudity.



### Children over 8 years

This classification is applied to children's programming that is generally considered acceptable for youngsters 8 years and over to view on their own. It is suggested that a parent/guardian co-view programming assigned this classification with younger children under the age of 8.

Programming with this designation adheres to the provisions of the Children's Section of the CAB Voluntary Code on Violence. These include not portraying violence as the preferred, acceptable, or only way to resolve conflict; or encouraging children to imitate dangerous acts that they may see on the screen. Programming within this classification might deal with themes which could be unsuitable for younger children. References to any such controversial themes shall be discreet and sensitive to the 8-12 year age range of this viewing group.

Any realistic depictions will be infrequent, discreet, of low intensity, and shall portray the consequences of violence.

Violence portrayed must be within the context of the storyline or character development. Might include mild physical violence, comedic violence, comic horror, special effects; fantasy, supernatural, or animated violence.

No profanity.

Might have infrequent use of language that may be considered by some to be socially offensive or discriminatory, and then only if employed within the context of storyline or character development.

No sex or nudity.





### General

This is programming intended for a broad, general audience. While not designed specifically for children, it is understood that younger viewers may be part of the audience. Therefore programming within this classification shall contain very little violence, either physical, verbal or emotional.

It will be sensitive to themes that could threaten a younger child's sense of security, and will depict no realistic scenes of violence, which minimize or gloss over the effects of violent acts.

Violence is minimal and infrequent.

May contain comedic, unrealistic depictions.

Contains no frightening special effects not required by the storyline.

May contain inoffensive slang.

No profanity.

No sex or nudity.



### Parental Guidance

This programming, while intended for a general audience, may not be suitable for younger children (under the age of 8). Parents/guardians should be aware that there might be content elements which some could consider inappropriate for unsupervised viewing by children in the 8-13 age range.

Programming within this classification might address controversial themes or issues. Cognizant that pre-teens and early teens could be part of this viewing group, particular care must be taken not to encourage imitative behaviour, and consequences of violent actions shall not be minimized.

Any depiction of conflict and/or aggression will be limited and moderate; it might include physical, fantasy, or supernatural violence.

Any such depictions should not be pervasive, and must be justified within the context of theme, storyline or character development.

Might contain infrequent and mild profanity.

Might contain mildly suggestive language.

Could possibly contain brief scenes of nudity.

Might have limited and discreet sexual references or content when appropriate to the storyline or theme.





### Over 14 Years

Programming with this classification contains themes or content elements which might not be suitable for viewers under the age of 14. Parents are strongly cautioned to exercise discretion in permitting viewing by pre-teens and early teens without parent/guardian supervision, as programming with this classification could deal with mature themes and societal issues in a realistic fashion.

While violence could be one of the dominant elements of the storyline, it must be integral to the development of plot or character.

Might contain intense scenes of violence.

Could possibly include strong or frequent use of profanity.

Might include scenes of nudity and/or sexual activity within the context of narrative or theme.



### Adults

Intended for adults 18 years and older. This classification applies to programming that could contain content elements that would make it unsuitable for viewers under the age of 18.

Might contain depictions of violence which, while integral to the development of plot, character or themes, are intended for adult viewing, and thus are not suitable for audiences under 18 years of age.

Might contain graphic language.

Might contain explicit portrayals of sex and/or nudity.





## How Old Should You Be To Watch Violent TV?

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The makers of TV shows follow guidelines that protect kids under twelve from too much TV violence. These guidelines are based on research gathered by experts who have studied children. According to the experts, a child can't tell the difference between real and make-believe until they're around five years old. By the time a kid is eight years old, however, they no longer believe everything they see and hear. If you were in charge of deciding what a kid could watch on TV, what would you do if:

- A newscast with pictures of a real person being shot was on TV?  
I would let the kid watch it if they were:
  - a) five years old
  - b) eight years old
  - c) twelve years old
  - d) any age
  
- A horror movie was on TV?  
I would let the kid watch it if they were:
  - a) five years old
  - b) eight years old
  - c) twelve years old
  - d) any age
  
- A show that features a group of high-kicking superheroes who fight evil monsters was on TV?  
I would let the kid watch it if they were:
  - a) five years old
  - b) eight years old
  - c) twelve years old
  - d) any age
  
- A cartoon, starring a character who tries to capture and eat another character, despite repeatedly blowing himself up and being injured, was on TV?  
I would let the kid watch it if they were:
  - a) five years old
  - b) eight years old
  - c) twelve years old

Source: *The TV Book, The Kid's Guide to Talking Back*, by Shelagh Wallace. Annick Press, 1996.



## The Rules For Violence on Kids' TV

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- Only a small amount of physical or emotional violence is allowed in kids' shows.
- Real-life characters can only use violence when it is needed to develop the story.
- Cartoons can contain *some* non-realistic violence, but not actions that kids might try to imitate.
- Television shows must not make kids feel threatened. They have to be sensitive when they are dealing with issues that kids might be experiencing themselves, like domestic conflict, the death of parents or close relatives, the death of a pet, street crime or the use of drugs.
- Producers of television shows must be careful about how they portray dangerous acts that kids might try to imitate, like using plastic bags as toys, using matches, playing with dangerous household products, or climbing apartment balconies or going on rooftops.
- Violence can't be shown as the only way to handle problems between people.
- Kids' television shows can only contain frightening special effects if they are necessary for the story.
- Adult shows and advertisements that contain scenes of violence, can't be shown before 9 p.m.
- Because older kids might still be watching TV after 9 p.m., broadcasters have to include a warning for parents at the beginning of programs that contain violence.

Source: Canadian Association of Broadcasters (CAB) *Voluntary Code Regarding Violence in Television, 1993*



## Physical Violence Worksheet

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Name:

Date:

Name of Program:

Length:

### Examples of Physical Violence

Hitting, punching, kicking:

Pushing, shoving:

Shooting, knifing:

Destroying Property:

Write your comments about the violent acts you observed:

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## Emotional Violence Worksheet

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Name:

Date:

Name of Program:

Length:

### Examples of Emotional Violence

Put-downs:

Name-calling:

Yelling:

Emotional Dumping:

Write your comments about the violent acts you observed:

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