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Now children can see real violence

By **GEORGE GERBNER**

How do televised images of war and violence affect our children? Worried parents and inquiring reporters ask me that question. They want to know if research on television violence can help deal with this predicament.

Well, research won't tell you what to do, but it can form a basis for judgment. First, the facts.

Most of our children grow up in homes where television is on about seven hours a day. They see an average of six to eight violent acts per prime-time hour, including war scenes. They see four times as many in presumably humorous children's programs. They see two "entertaining" murders a night.

So images of war and violence have been with them since infancy. That is the context in which we now confront images of a real war.

Televised images of the war in the Persian Gulf seem to fit that general pattern of mayhem and madness — which is in itself anxiety provoking. But two things are different. First, they are not explicit and gory but rather antiseptic and technological, which provides some distancing from the horrors of war. The military will not allow pictures of soldiers being blown to bits.

But, on the other hand, they are *real*. Although we have found that children — in fact, most of us — derive many of our ideas about reality from what we see on the screen, this is real in a different way. The Persian Gulf story is not the contained and happy violence to which we are accustomed.

Screen violence and victimization presents a mean world that arouses anxiety but also contains

Certainly TV violence is nothing new. But the daily doses of war don't allow for happy endings.

it. Steady exposure to it makes some more aggressive, others less sensitive and most relatively insecure, mistrustful and dependent on harsh measures and often violent defenses. But that tension is mostly resolved by the time the final commercial appears.

After all, television must deliver an audience in the mood to buy. Most screen violence is a stereotypical ritual calculated to arouse but not to upset. It assures us that although dark and deadly forces lurk around every corner, strong, swift, macho solutions are available to solve every problem.

The war in the gulf fits that pattern — up to a point. This story, however, does not stop with the final commercial. It interrupts and even pre-empts favorite programs — a clear sign of dire emergency. It kills real and innocent people. Win or lose (whatever these words may mean), there is no clearly predictable happy ending. That casts its shadow over family time and talk. And there is no escape. You can't turn it off. That comes as a shock. On top of the regular anxiety and insecurity cultivated by normal viewing, this can trigger a traumatic reaction. What can we do?

Altering our viewing habits or lifestyles to avoid news about the war, or forbidding our children to

watch what their peers and we ourselves watch, can be futile and self-defeating. Nor should we succumb to round-the-clock viewing. These things may only confirm fears of things hidden from view or careening out of control.

However, viewing and discussing the Persian Gulf news coverage with our children confers a measure of immunity from the most harmful consequences. Placing the events in a broader perspective, appropriate to their level of understanding, and sharing thoughts and feelings, may offer some immediate assurance and balance.

Finally, we can seize this opportunity to act as the long-range guardians and protectors of our children. We play that role not only as parents and teachers, but also as citizens. Whatever our position on the war may be, discussing it, and what each of us in our own ways can do about it, provides a positive model of active citizenship.

Yes the televised war may be frightening but we can help our children overcome this potentially traumatic experience. But only to the extent that we ourselves can develop a positive attitude toward what we are witnessing on television.

Knowing that we are not entirely at the mercy of blind fate rampant in the world; or of mindless "market forces" driving culture at home, is the best protection against drift and despair. It is also the best contribution we can make to prepare our children to grow up as fighters for sanity and peace in their time, if not in ours.

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