

What Do Children Learn About Prosocial Behavior from the Media?

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Abstract

The paper discusses the importance of prosocial behavior from the media and its effects on children. The paper reviews several research studies on prosocial and media on children. The paper also offers implications and limitations dealing with prosocial behavior and media on children.

What Do Children Learn About Prosocial Behavior from the Media?

In 1970, Lesser asserted that children spend more of their time watching television than sleeping. Over the years there has been an increasing awareness in the importance of children's television. Pearl, Bouthilet, and Lazar (1982) contended that children learn prosocial behaviors from television. Hence, the objective of this paper is to describe some of the research literature dealing with media, prosocial behavior, and its effects on children.

Rushton (1982) defined prosocial behavior as, "that which is socially desirable and in which some way benefits another person, or society at large" (p.2). Harris (1999) argued that media has an enormous amount of potential for producing prosocial behavior. Still and all, Rushton cited over 30 studies that have illustrated a direct relationship between television programs and children's prosocial behavior. Rushton argued that prosocial behavior is shown frequently on television and it, "is what will be learned by viewers as appropriate, normative behavior" (p.255). Therefore, because television has such a huge potential on influencing children and children watch large amounts of television, research in this domain provides useful and vital information for fostering and educating young influential minds.

In his book, Harris (1999) mentioned that many studies concerning children and prosocial behavior looked at Sesame Street. Harris summarized a few studies indicating that the show increases cultural awareness. Further, Harris cited studies that have illustrated how

the show has positive short term effects on children. Obviously, prosocial acts are present on television and can have an effect on children.

Potter and Ware (1989) analyzed prosocial acts on television. They found that 20.2 prosocial acts occur per hour on various hours of television programming. Yet, the researchers noticed that situational comedy programs did not display very many prosocial actions compared to the other types of programs, such as drama, and action/adventure. Furthermore, the researchers noted that the prosocial acts were often shown as rewarding and internally motivated. Likewise, heroes are usually presented with more prosocial behaviors than villains.

Even though Potter and Ware found that comedy programs did not contain many prosocial acts, Brown (1992) attested that entertainment television promotes prosocial behavior. In his paper, he evinced that many entertainment programs have illustrated ways in which individuals can cope and facilitate positive interactions. Brown noted that many countries around the world are integrating prosocial messages into entertainment television programs in order to promote prosocial development.

Accordingly, Rosenkoetter (1999) believed that television comedies were potential influencing agents on children's prosocial behavior. Using comedies such as, *The Cosby Show* and *Full House*, he discovered that children were able to identify prosocial themes. He also noticed that the children, who understood the prosocial themes, performed prosocial behaviors in their interactions.

Valkenburg and Janssen (1999) executed a cross-cultural investigation of children. They noticed that American and Dutch children rated entertainment programs similarly. Further, they found that males affiliated more value with violence and females affiliated more value with virtue. The authors observed that American children sought more value to realism and interestingness than Dutch children.

Sprakin, Liebert, and Poulos (1975) were interested in the relationship between prosocial exposure and prosocial behavior among children. Using a prosocial and neutral clip of Lassie, the researchers placed the children in an experimental situation, in which assistance from the child was needed. Children, who viewed the prosocial scenes of Lassie, were more inclined to help for a longer period of time than the other children, who viewed other scenes.

Potts, Huston, and Wright (1986) argued that most of the research literature on children has focused on perceptions more than behavior. Thus, the researchers found little evidence concerning television's affect on children's behavior. Nevertheless, the researchers believed that children's programming can influence behavior under certain arousal conditions.

One arousal condition that Sanson and Di Muccio (1993) employed was using toys. The researchers had sixty preschool children watch either a neutral, aggressive, or no cartoon.

At the same time, the researchers had each child play with a toy. They noticed that aggression was increased when children watched an aggressive cartoon and played with an aggressive toy. Interestingly, the researchers noted that prosocial behavior occurred fewer times in the aggressive cartoon and aggressive toy condition and in the no cartoon and no toy condition.

Because most children are attracted to cartoons than other genres, Forge and Phemister (1987) explored prosocial and neutral cartoons and children's programming. They discovered that prosocial cartoons resulted in more prosocial behavior than neutral programs. Moreover, the increase in prosocial behavior did not differ if the program was animated or non-animated.

Looking at a different genre, Schuetz and Sprafkin (1979) looked at children's TV commercials. Researchers found that more aggressive, antisocial acts were displayed than prosocial acts. The researchers also discovered that male characters were more visibly present and more likely to engage in aggression or altruism than female characters. They concluded that, "children were more likely than adults to perform both aggressive and altruistic acts" (p. 39). Equally important, they remarked that, "children attend to child characters on television and learn more from similar than dissimilar models suggests that the conditions are optimal for child viewers to be affected by the presentation of these behaviors." (p.39).

Stout, Jr., and Mouritsen (1988) also analyzed prosocial behavior in advertising. However, they found very different results. The researchers did an extensive content analysis and noticed many prosocial models in children's advertising. The researchers noted that the prosocial models tended to be kind, unselfish, and affectionate. They reasoned that children's prosocial advertising serves as a socialization influence on children.

Rather than looking at advertising or television, Silvern and Williamson (1987) decided to look at video games and children's behavior. The researchers discovered that violent video games arouse children in the same fashion as violent cartoons on television. Also, researchers observed that children, who watched more television before playing video games, exhibited more prosocial actions than children, who played video games immediately before watching television.

Bankart and Anderson (1979) found research that antisocial actions on television lead to antisocial behavior among children. Hence, the researchers hypothesized that prosocial actions on television would lead to prosocial behaviors among children. They found that children with exposure to prosocial behavior resulted in short-term prosocial behavior. From this cause, the authors urged that future research look at long-term effects of prosocial viewing.

Some have argued that parents play a major role in what programs children watch (Abelman, 1985). Abelman categorized parents into two types: inductive and sensitizing. He described that inductive parents were more communication oriented, while sensitizing

parents were physical-authority oriented. Abelman found that inductive parents concerning television watching are more likely than sensitizing parents to watch more prosocial than antisocial programs. In addition, inductive parents were more likely than sensitizing parents to utilize prosocial conflict solutions and to affect their children's prosocial behavior.

Yet, some have argued that another child may influence children's behavior after watching television (Drabman and Thomas, 1977). Because most children watch television with other peers or siblings, Drabman and Thomas examined children's imitation of behaviors when viewing alone and in pairs. Using only little boys, the researchers observed that boys, who watched the aggressive film, were less likely to use constructive behavior than boys, who watch the prosocial film. Moreover, children's behavior was increased when the viewing of films occurred with another person.

Nonetheless, some have argued that prosocial behavior depend on the child's self-esteem (Baran, 1974). Baran found that children with low self-esteem showed more prosocial modeling behavior than children with high self-esteem. Baran asserted that males and females with similar self-esteem ratings exhibited similar amounts of modeling prosocial behavior. Based on his findings, Baran determined that low self-esteem individuals are more likely to imitate prosocial behaviors than aggressive behaviors that are shown on television.

Despite the enormous amounts of research studies dealing with children, television, and prosocial behavior, many future studies are needed. First of all, past research studies have mainly focused on short-term effects. More research is needed looking at long-term effects of prosocial behaviors. This would be more insightful and more advantageous. Secondly, most of the research has employed American children for their sample. Future research should examine whether cultural differences exists between children. It would be interesting to see if children in other countries have the same attraction toward cartoons that American children have. Third, future studies should look at more variable involved with watching prosocial media. For instance, in this review, two different studies included parenting style and co-viewing. Future studies should look at variables such as co-viewing with different genders and co-viewing with different age groups.

All in all, mass media is a powerful influence on children. For that reason, more research studies should be conducted concerning mass media, children, and prosocial behavior. After all, Rushton declared that, "television does have the power to affect the social behavior of viewers in positive, prosocial direction. This suggests that television is an effective agent of socialization, that television entertainment is modifying the viewer's perceptions of the world and how to live in it" (p.255). To conclude, Liebert and Schwartzberg (1977) remarked, "All television is educational, the only question is: what is it teaching?" (p. 170).

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