

# The blurred-picture tube

By Cindy Liebhart  
NC News Service

Does violence on television beget violence in real life?

That is the question psychologists, social scientists, educators and parents have puzzled over ever since television entered the mainstream of American life.

In fact, many studies seem to confirm the suspicion that excessive viewing of TV violence may increase the likelihood of aggressive behavior.

But for many experts, the most disturbing consequences of TV violence — physical and psychological violence — are the subtle ways it can mar the human spirit. A steady diet of televised violence, they contend, can create distorted attitudes about the world and greater fear and distrust of others.

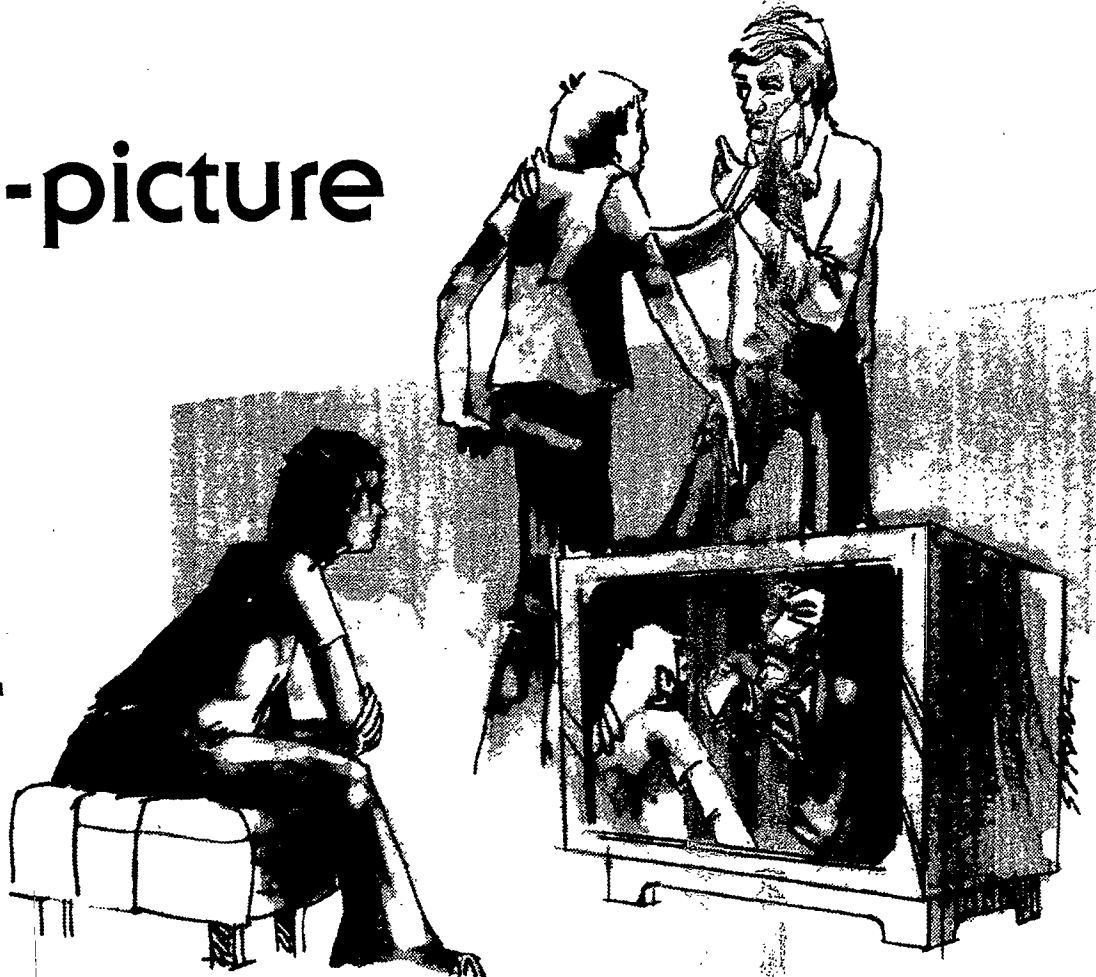
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Television stories "appear to take place against a backdrop of the real world," said Larry Gross, writing in "Television Awareness Training: A Viewer's Guide for Family and Community" (Abingdon Press, 1979). The viewer is offered "a continuous stream of 'facts' and impressions about the ways of the world" and of human nature.

Given the content of many programs, adults who are heavy viewers "are more likely to reflect interpersonal mistrust," believing that most people just look out for themselves and cannot be trusted.

Not only do such people "overestimate their chances of encountering violence," but also they tend to obtain "dogs, guns and locks for purposes of protection in greater proportions" than do people who rarely or never watch those programs, Gross said.

John Miller, media resources consultant for the office of evangelization and catechesis of the Diocese of Paterson, N.J., said television often conveys the



message that violence is "the easiest, quickest way to deal with problems." As a result, people who encounter problems in personal relationships sometimes turn to what they've seen on television, expecting to solve problems quickly and superficially.

Another effect, according to Miller, is "desensitization." People who witness countless examples of violence every day on television can become "more tolerant of pain and suffering, thinking 'that's the way it is and there's nothing I can do about it.'"

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Humility Sister Elizabeth Thoman, editor of the ecumenical journal *Media and Values*, believes violence on television can create "a suspicion that somebody's out to get me." This attitude, she said, "breaks down one's trust level toward strangers" and toward people who are different from oneself.

How, then, can a sense of hope and trust, a spirit of love for friend and stranger alike that is basic to the Christian message, be restored?

One way parishes can attempt to alleviate fear and distrust, Sister Thoman said, is to create support communities which bring people into contact with others in a safe environment. This can take the

form of recreational programs for the elderly, day care for neighborhood children, food pantries for the poor or participation in a refugee resettlement program.

"By providing these kinds of services, a parish builds a community of people who can trust one another, even when they come from different backgrounds," Sister Thoman said. "In this way, people will begin to feel much less threatened by the world in which they live and be better able to cope and reach out to others."

Similarly, Miller said, when fear, distrustfulness or lack of hope are encountered in others, "we are called to witness and respond in the way we can." Some are able to do it within a family, he said — becoming more sensitive to the ways people treat each other at home.

Finally, Sister Thoman suggests that parishes or groups of individuals can establish educational programs on the influences of television. When people come to television with some understanding of how violence is used to advance a show's action, they're more likely to say, "Oh, that's just the way the script is written" — not necessarily the way things really are.

(Ms. Liebhart is the NC News media reporter.)

By Katharine Bird  
NC News Service

Two years ago pastoral associate Laura Meagher took 40 CCD students from Holy Trinity Parish in Washington, D.C., on retreat.

There, during a discussion, a 15-year-old girl brought up her suicide attempt. She explained, haltingly, that she did it because the boy she cared for didn't return her feelings.

In helping the group respond to the girl, Ms. Meagher asked a question: "How many of you have seriously considered suicide or know someone who has?"

"I was stunned," she said. "They all raised their hands."

Soon the discussion turned to what might lead teen-agers to take such a potentially final step. They mentioned many reasons: lack of friends; feeling unable to live up to parental expectations; feeling torn between divorcing parents. Many teens said they felt worthless or that no one loved them.

By now, the girl who attempted suicide was in tears. An older boy then turned to her and said: "If you ever think of suicide again, please call me. I care what happens to you," Ms. Meagher reported.

That sort of "personal touch" is vital in showing teens there are alternatives to suicide, that so-

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By Father John Castelot  
NC News Service

Jesus sent messengers ahead of him when, in Luke's Gospel, he set out on his fateful journey to Jerusalem. Presumably they were to alert the villagers to his arrival and to secure accommodations for the night.

One town along the way was a Samaritan town. When the people learned that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem, they would not let him in.

There was bitterness between Jews and Samaritans. Jews on their way to Jerusalem stood for everything the Samaritans hated.

At any rate, stung by the rebuff, James and John asked Jesus: "Lord, would you not have us call down fire from heaven to destroy them?"

What was Jesus' reaction to this violent suggestion? "He turned to them only to reprimand them" (Luke 9:51-55).

If there is one time a man will fight, it is when his life is threatened. Yet when Jesus was about to be dragged off to death, he offered no resistance. He even