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## **Media influence on children and adolescents**

### **Abstract**

In the work a discussions focused on negative influences of the media on children and adolescents. The following domains of influence have been described: violence and its three effects: copycat violence, desensitization and catharsis; aggressive behaviour, sexual content, body image and self-esteem as well as physical health and school performance. The media change the system of humanistic values and attitudes of children and adolescents. In order to prevent the dangerous influence of the media parents and educators should advocate a safer media environment for children and adolescents through media literacy.

*Key words: media influence, media literacy, violence, aggression, sexual content, body image, physical health, children's free time.*

### **Introduction**

Free time can be used by children and adolescents in different ways: they can play games in the open, walk, practice a sport in order to develop their fitness and do different experiments. They can also talk in a face-to-face manner, play games in their rooms, do exercises, learn and in result they improve their cognitive, perceptive and mental structures. But at present we can observe such a phenomenon that children, similarly as their parents, communicate with each other not only directly in a face-to-face manner but again and again they participate in the intermediate communication with the media and with the help of the media they communicate with other people. It means that face-to-face interactions, which have value as a result of their immediacy and

energy, at present change into intermediate communication (in which mobile and stationary phones, autonomic computers, computer networks, television, radio, newspapers and magazines are used), which dominates in our every day interactions. Intermediate communication begins to dominate in every day life of children, adolescents and elderly people. Changes in the process of communication, domination of the use of the media in free time over games in the open cause essential changes in the budget of free time, and they influence in a significant manner the behaviour of children and adolescents, who create a system of values and attitudes, often asocial, assimilated from the media and fixed in the group of the same age.

In the article the main attention will be focused on negative influences of the media, which have been more widely researched in many countries.

### **Short history of the media**

The media are generally defined as the means by which information is conveyed from one place to another. They can be defined also as the means in the process of interpersonal communication taking part in the processes of structuring, codification, sending and receiving of information and construction by learners of the knowledge about the world and shaping of many universal skills. The media, as the basic instruments of media education, allow for a wide analysis of correlation: information vs. knowledge. Nowadays the electronic media play a particular role in the process of social communication, and they became not only basic tools of learning and intellectual work of man, but they consume people's free time. They have different and important functions, allowing man to access valuable educational and scientific information, stimulating the development of man, and they promote both the systems of humanistic values as well as antivalues, they shape attitudes that manifest in peoples behaviour. Shaping of the antivalues system could cause negative educational results.

For the above-mentioned reasons the media education is treated as part of general education of children and adolescents, as well as teachers, and the whole society. It influences also the functioning of a child in its family and peer environment (cf. J. Izdebska, 2003).

Mass communication is a process in which professional senders use the media to disseminate information widely, very quickly and permanently in order to stimulate assumed mental processes in a great and differentiated group of recipients, which can make different influences easy (M.L. DeFleur, E.E. Dennis, 1988, p. 12). Mass communication is a continuous process in which

five separate stages can be distinguished. At the first stage professional senders create different types of messages that will be presented to different individuals for different purposes. At the second stage mechanical media (television, film) disseminate messages quickly and permanently. At the third stage the messages reach the great and differentiated (mass) public. At the next stage the public interpret these messages and give them meaning. The reaction of the public creates communication because it assumes some form of correlation between the sender and the receiver (R.J. Harris, 1989). At the last stage we observe an influence on the receivers that changes them in different spheres, e.g. the system of humanistic values and attitudes. An attitude can be defined as a persistent estimation (positive or negative) of people, objects and ideas. There are effectively, cognitively and behaviourally based attitudes. The attitudes towards attractive objects or goals, such as: freedom, truth, beauty or family are usually called values (W. Szewczuk, 1998, p. 425). The effects of the mass media are the subject of different theoretical as well as empirical studies, in which researchers investigate the cognition processes and excitement that determine the interpretation of messages and give them meaning (D.F. Roberts, N. Macoby, 1985, pp. 539-589).

The last century was a time of phenomenological growth and development of new kinds of media (M.I. De Fleur, E.E. Dennis, 1988; R.J. Harris, 1989; H.M. McLuhan, 1964; D.F. Roberts, N. Macoby, 1985, pp. 539-589). In the early twentieth century, film, radio, and newspapers were the media forms to which children had access, although limited. Beginning in the early 1940s and continuing until the end of the century, children's media experience expanded to include television, recorded music, videotapes, electronic games, interactive computer software, and in the end - the Internet. Printed media, such as comic books and children's magazines, very popular in the United States of America, also expanded during this period, though not at the same accelerated rate as the visual electronic media.

Commercial television made its debut in the USA in 1941 (in Poland in the 1950s), initiating a new era of media influence. In the mid 1950s, families owned more than two-thirds of television sets in the USA with children less than twelve years of age (C.A. Huston et al., 1992).

During many years, media content in different countries underwent a transformation that was characterized by increased use of sexual themes and violent behaviour. This change was evident in movies, television programming, lyrics, video games, cartoons, and magazines. There was an outcry from parents and concerned adults who objected to children's exposure to content that was age inappropriate and who were troubled by the probable negative effects of such exposure. In an attempt to inform adults who were monitoring children's

media exposure, ratings systems in different countries were developed that identified content categories and frequency or intensity of specific incidents (U.S. Department of Education - TV viewing and parental guidance, 1994). Rating codes were used to label movies, television programmes, and lyrics. In Poland the level of negative effects served by programmes is denoted by three types of signs: a green circle - a programme denoted for children with a small amount of negative effects, a yellow triangle - a programme that contains a considerable amount of negative effects and a red circle - a programme that contains many pictures of violence (and often spice sex) and thus is very dangerous for children. Although rating systems served their purpose of informing the public, it is questionable to what extent children were actually affected by their implementation.

### **Media determinism**

Many philosophers define determinism as follows: It is often taken as a very general thesis about the world that all events without exception are effects - events necessitated by earlier events. Hence, any event of any kind is an effect of a prior series of effects, a causal chain with very solid link. In such a case, if such a thesis is true, future events are as fixed and unalterable as the past is fixed and unalterable. It can be said that determinism is a big issue and it relates to many things (M. Hunnax, 1964). There is biological, physical, environmental, geographical, psychological, technological, and media determinism, to mention only a few important types. All determinisms share some things and argue over other things. They all would argue for a mechanistic worldview, one that says that we can know the world by looking at cause and effect relations, and so on.

Media determinism might be seen as an offshoot of technological determinism and we see in it the forces that could only be at work in the media. Media determinism is a theoretical view, as a result of the language determinism and technological one (J. B o b r y k, 2001, p. 117). According to the language determinism, a language used by people determines the manner of view of the world and thinking about it. The second theory talks about determination of social relationships and the mentality of an individual by technology. Among technologies that influence people, information technology can be listed as the first one. The mass media determine thinking and social relations. Also the material properties of the media and the ways of their use determine what people think and do in the spheres not connected exactly with the mass communication.

In the case of television, quickly changing pictures do not allow viewers to consciously integrate obtained information and to analyse it critically.

Psychologists and neurophysiologists mention the effect "of a missing half-second" (J. Bobryk, 2001, p. 125), because a half-second is needed for conscious and full integration of what comes to us with the help of a TV screen. What results from the empirical research is that pictures and other information received by unconscious and not wholly conscious sphere of mentality fall into memory and unexpectedly influence the behaviour of an individual. An action viewed on a TV programme causes subconscious muscular imitation (D. de Kerckhove, 1996, p. 28). This is one of the examples of determinism of mental processes by the pure nature of a medium, without a content of information.

It can be assumed that one of the greatest thinkers on the subject was Marshall McLuhan, who stated, "The medium is the message". Neil Postman, in *Technopoly*, gave a good example of how it works, how every tool, especially the tools of the media such as television or the Internet, has embedded within it an ideological bias.

D. Chandler listed the basic ideas in media determinism that are (D. Chandler, 2000):

1. Media destroy time and space. ~
2. The medium is the message (it has sub-messages embedded within).
3. To create a new medium, the old one has to go. This is a common idea in the work of Nietzsche that in order to create one must destroy. This can be seen in the current dilemma: we cannot go back to the days of typewriters and mechanical cash registers, they have been thrown out, discarded. The infrastructure for the information society, based on knowledge (S. Juszczak, 2004), is different, in all aspects the old ways are gone.
4. Whatever media are predominant, then that is what people will be. As McLuhan and others have said:
  - In the days of oral culture, Homer was the paradigm case for his culture.
  - In the days of typesetting, John Marshall was the best-case scenario.
  - In today's world of television, Dave Anderson (in my opinion Mel Gibson or Bruce Willis) is the typical man, disjointed and full of sound bites.
  - In the computerized world of tomorrow, McDonaldized man will be the common case. > - . . . . ; ?
5. There exists a drive toward efficiency and speed (see 1. presented above).
6. Childhood is going, going, gone. For this sentence one can refer the reader to both Postman's *"Disappearance of Childhood"*, and McLuhan's, *"The Medium is the Message"*. r ; ? ;-

New media do an even better job of destroying time and space constraints, we enter into new futures at a lightning-fast pace, far faster than our ethical systems are designed to handle, and probably far too fast for our minds to successfully cope.

Analyzing the media influence on individuals we can think of it as a process that consists of: programme's conception, production, transmission and reception by an audience. Researchers are mostly interested in the latter part of this chain: the effects of the influence of the mass media. Harris distinguishes four categories of influence: behavioural, connected with the attitudes and system of values, cognitive and physiological (R.J. Harris, 1989). The most visible are behavioural signs of the media influence, manifested in the behaviour of recipients. In the empirical research a change or improvement of the existing attitudes is well visible, e.g. against violence. Stimulation of the cognitive processes among recipients is a very complicated problem, in comparison with the described earlier attitudes and behaviour. The analysis of the cognitive processes is made within the framework of different psychological theories. The last category of influence creates an emotional reaction existing often together with some psychological reactions. Crying while viewing sad scenes or an increase of blood pressure while watching violent pictures are often inaccessible to the recipient at the level of consciousness. Viewing of erotic scenes, a recipient can be in a state of excitement connected with physiological incitement (D. Zillmann, 1984). In order to understand the media influence, researchers take into account one of the above-mentioned four reactions, a few of them or all of them.

The media can shape new attitudes, convictions and behaviour and improve or change the existing ones. But we must take into account that the media do not act in isolation, but their influences are the effect of interaction with other agendas of socialization such family, school and people of the same age. In the first studies there dominated a theory of a "magic pressing", which assumed an existence of a powerful and direct effect of influence of the mass media. With an increase of empirical studies there developed a theory of a "limited" influence of the mass media. Today we treat the media as a source of a powerful but immediate interaction of particular individuals in specific conditions (B. Dobek-Ostrowska, 1999; T. Goban-Klas, 1999; B.Kordasiewicz, 1991).

### **influence of the media on children and adolescents**

The influence of the mass media on an individual is very complicated and denotes a long process exhibited in many, difficult to observe, changes in different spheres of a human personality. The changes take place in convictions and behaviour of a recipient, in shaping of the norms, the moral as well as esthetic values, in acceptance of chosen values and rejection of others, in creation of one's own picture of the world and people. Some psychologists

ascribe the meaning of the word "influence" to a direct, immediate result that appears in the mentality of a recipient as a result of contact with a medium, for example after seeing a film or TV programme. In this sense "influence" denotes a "direct reaction to a stimulus" (J. Koblewska, 1967, p. 87). J. Koblewska also characterizes the cumulative and subconscious influence.

The influence of the media on children has been a subject of increased attention among parents, educators, and health care professionals in different countries (L.B. Clark, 2002, pp. 1579-1583; A.C. Huston, J.C. Wright, 1989; W.J. McGuire, 1986, pp. 175-250). The significance of this issue becomes obvious when one notes the diversity of Polish people who share this concern. Included in this group of concerned citizens are teachers, parents, pedagogues, sociologists, psychologists and politicians.

Media influence on children has steadily increased as new and more sophisticated types of the media have been developed and made available to the Polish public. Availability, as well as greater affordability for Polish families, have provided easier access to the media for children. Beneficial effects include early readiness for learning, educational enrichment, opportunities to view or participate in discussions of social issues, exposure to the arts through music and performance, and entertainment. Harmful effects may result from sensationalisation of violent behaviour, exposure to subtle or explicit sexual content, promotion of unrealistic body images, presentation of poor health habits as desirable practices, and exposure to persuasive advertising targeting children.

There are two important factors that must be included in the discussion of media influence on children. Renee Hobbs (2001) described one factor, called media literacy. He said that, "The students should critically analyze and evaluate the messages they receive. Therefore they need a set of skills to ask important questions about what they watch, see listen to and read. The skills, called media literacy, include the ability to critically analyze media messages and the ability to use different kinds of communication technologies for self-expression and communication". A child who is media illiterate is more vulnerable to being influenced by messages in all kinds of media.

The second factor that can affect how children are influenced by the media is the amount of parental involvement in supervising media exposure of children. In the article the main attention is focused on the negative media influences that are the subject of empirical as well theoretical research carried out in different countries.



### **Negative influence of the media on children and adolescents - -**

Research studies have identified the following domains of influence in which media content has been shown to have negative effects on children: violence and aggressive behaviour, sexual content, body image and self-esteem, and physical health and school performance. In this place we should explain the difference or similarity between violence and aggression. Some kinds of aggression manifest in behaviour of people who use their wits, their social contacts, and their economic power, and so on against others count as a form of aggression. Terrorists use violence in their dangerous activity. A rock video presents also violence. In many interpersonal interactions we can also find verbal violence. Therefore we can define the violence on television or in film as a number of violent incidents of asocial incidents in such a programme or film. .

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Children may learn negative behaviour patterns and values from many TV programmes, video films, computer games and dangerous Web sites. Researchers have tended to focus on three possible effects:

- Copycat violence, .
- Desensitization and
- Catharsis.

Media violence and its effects on children and adolescents was the first area in which extensive scientific research was done in different countries (cf. American Academy of Pediatrics, 2001,2002; Surgeon General, 2002; American Psychological Association, 2002; American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 2002; A. Fra.czek, 1995; B. Holyst, 1996; M.E. Wolfgang, F. D e r r a c u t i , 1967; E. Aronson, 1995; Ph.G. Zimbardo, 1994, and many others). In the fifties and sixties, for example, there was major concern about the possible links between the portrayal of violence and juvenile delinquency and that concern has continued to the present day. According to the theory of media influence described by McGuire (1986, pp. 175-250) the mass media exhibit intentional and non-intentional effects, the latter comprising, e.g., the assassination of J.F. Kennedy, President of the USA or Martin Luther King, and natural disasters, for example an earthquake or a flood. McGuire shows six areas on which the interest of the researchers of the non-intentional media influences is concentrated. The first concerns television violence and aggression (D. Linz, E. Donnerstein, 1989,pp. 263-292),the second concerns the insufficient representation and absence of social problems in the media (for example the problems of small ethnic groups - off T.M. Williams, 1986). The third area results from a false representation of stereotypes (for example, a stereotype of old village women). The fourth area consists of the influence of sex and pornography on the erotic thinking, feelings and behaviour. In the

fifth area research is carried out into media styles influencing mental processes. The media styles denote different representations of a television picture as a result of its transformation. McLuhan writes that the medium changes the information and its interpretation (H.M. McLuhan, 1964) and the fundamental questions concerning these problems are described by Huston and Wright in their empirical research (1989, pp. 103-159). In the last area there is the influence of the new media on thinking processes. Williams and his coworkers carried out the studies of the influence of television programmes on a chosen group of people that lived in some region of Canada and had not had any previous contact with this medium. The researchers observed that TV changed the behaviour, cognitive development and free time of the investigated community.

In Poland the first scientist who was concerned to develop theories of learning beyond the simple stimulus-response theories of behaviourism was A. Bandura (1978, pp. 12-29). As part of his development of observational or social learning theory, Bandura was concerned to demonstrate that children, in addition to learning by response to reward or punishment as the behaviourists had demonstrated, also learnt by imitation, without the presence of reward or punishment. His investigation into the effects of violence involved the use of a film of a plastic doll, which was punched, kicked and generally maltreated. In the presence of the actual plastic doll, the young children who had seen the film displayed much greater aggression towards it than those who had not seen the film.

Upon A. Bandura's work L. Berkowitz built his theory from the empirical studies. One of his best-known experiments involved splitting a group of students into groups (L. Berkowitz, 1984, pp. 410-427; 1989, pp. 59-73). One group was "angered" by being insulted; another was not. One group was shown a film clip of a fight; another group was shown a film of boating. One group was shown a clip of violent action and given an explanation which justified it; another group was shown the same clip and told it was unjustified. From the study of these groups, Berkowitz concluded that media representation of aggression as justified was most likely to lead to real aggression.

Eysenck and Nias concluded from their research that both adult and child groups who are exposed to TV violence consistently display more aggressive behaviour than control groups. They went to call for greater censorship of TV output (this experiment has been described on the website <http://www.cultstock.ndirect.co.uk/MUHome/cshtml/media/violab.html>).

The laboratory as well as natural pedagogical experiments exhibited that the observation of another people's aggression in the mass media leads to an increase of aggression in the behaviour of recipients (L. Fridrich-Cofer,

A.C. Huston, 1986, pp. 364-371; R.G. Green, S.L. Thomas, 1986, pp. 7-27). A degree of this correlation depends on different variables. It is stronger when the recipients are sure about a realistic character of the observed aggression; when they identify with an aggressor; the aggression is presented as a revenge and not as an instrument of realization of another goals; aggression is presented as justified in a concrete context (R.G. Geen, 1990; R.G. Geen, S.L. Thomas, 1986, pp. 7-27).

Methodologists criticize this kind of experiments for different reasons (they are described on the above-mentioned website). For example, they say that the laboratory environment is not real life, since children may behave differently in such environment. Some studies appear to have shown that the kind of behaviour imitated in the laboratory is in fact subjected to controls outside the laboratory. One of the reasons why field studies generally show less effect than laboratory studies is almost certainly that the normal constraints and controls as to what is acceptable behaviour are suspended in the artificial laboratory environment. Another is the relative absence of experimenter demand. And in the end, one can say, that the children who had not seen the film also knocked the doll around. Further criticism concerns the methods of selection of the experimental group and the control group. In effect, it becomes impossible to draw any firm conclusions because we do not know how representative they were. On the other hand, it is important to know that there exists a large number of variables that will be involved in any such research - we do not receive media messages in a social vacuum - people's perception of the legitimacy of violence could differ markedly depending on their position in society. Since we do not come to media messages without certain values and beliefs about efficacy, legitimacy, morality of violence, and those values and beliefs may themselves have been shaped partly by the media in the first place.

A criticism of L. Berkowitz's work is that subjects may well have acted the way they did because they thought that was what the experimenter expected of them - experimenter demand.

Such types of experiments were done in different academic centres worldwide. In the best-known experiments, described in literature, we can include experiments carried out by: Eysenck and Mas (described on the cult stock website), D. Gauntlet (1995, p. 13), Mueller, Donnerstein and Hallam (described in the work of Gauntlet, 1995, pp. 19-20), T.M. Williams (1986). In Poland there are well-known empirical studies made, among others, by: J. Izdebska (1996), J. Gajda (1983), U. Kusio (1997), Z. Gas (1980), J. Trempala (1997), J. Koblewska (1998), L. Kirwil (1995, 1996, 1998), M. Braun-Galkowska (1995), Kordasiewicz (1991), M. Mrozowicki (1991) and S. Juszczyk (2001). The conclusions of empirical research by different scientists were that some children

under some circumstances might be adversely affected by media violence. However, the roots of such anti-social behaviour went much deeper than mere exposure to media violence, the most likely cause being some lack in the child's life, such as a broken home or feelings of rejection. The violence usually was portrayed as a means of resolving problems and achieving goals. Entertainment television did not emphasize alternative methods of conflict resolution, such as debate, compromise and co-operation and, the researchers conclude, children could very well learn from TV that violence was an acceptable means towards conflict-resolution. Today we know that there is a link between media violence and violence in the real world; the researchers found:

- A correlation between frequency of viewing violent television, aggressive behaviour and aggressive attitudes,
- Correlation between a preference for violent television output, delinquency, defiance of parents and political activism,
- Less violence was admitted by those who watched less television and those who claimed to have seen a lot of violence on TV.

The influence of the media on children can be explained in the framework of the theory of social learning, which mixes many approaches from different schools of psychology like Skinner and other behaviourists. They assume that we learn to do what we do because of the reinforcement of our responses to stimuli. Bandura adds that we learn also by observing the consequences of other people's actions. We can then imitate the behaviour that results in rewards and avoid one that is punished. It is sometimes also referred to as imitative learning because we imitate what others do if we conclude from our observation that their behaviour will be rewarding. In such a case Bandura took into account the mental processes intervening between perception of a stimulus and the decision to respond.

As a result of his observations, A. Bandura was convinced that learning does not take place solely through direct reinforcement. The type of learning is referred to as observational learning or vicarious learning because we learn by observing what happens to others. Bandura (1968) is also quite sure that this kind of learning can be done symbolically through language. That, for example, is the way in which parents pass their attitudes to their children.

Other effects on children include desensitization to other people's pain and suffering and the tendency to be fearful of the world around them, viewing it as a dangerous place. Research has also shown that news reports of violent crimes can traumatize young children. Along the theory of catharsis the media violence fulfills the prophylactic function by reduction of the aggressive behaviour. Viewing violent scenes in the media people engage in them and in such a case they reject their own active aggression.

Increased attention has been given to the second domain, sexual content in the media (M. Polce-Lynch et al, 2001, pp. 225-244; website: [www.childrennow.org](http://www.childrennow.org)). The sexualization of the media in different countries, also in Poland, has become the focus of widespread discussion and criticism by parents, lawyers and politicians. The Kaiser Family Foundation in the USA in the collective Work entitled "*Sex, Kids and the Family Hour*" has shown that there was a 400 percent increase from 1976 to 1996 in sexual references during the evening television viewing time commonly referred to as "family hour" (see [www.childrennow.org](http://www.childrennow.org)). J. Bryant and S. Rockwell (1996) found that exposure to sexual content on television affected adolescents' moral judgment. But parental discussion and clear expression of personal values mitigated the effects on adolescents. In the literature we can find the results of empirical research that have shown a strict connection between sex and aggression (D. Zillmann, 1984). Viewing pornography by men without the elements of violence does not increase aggression towards women in comparison to films with neutral contents; contrarily, viewing scenes of rape has a correlation with a strong intensification of aggression. This feeling is reinforced by viewing pornography by men (N. Malamuth, F. Donnerstein, 1984).

The third domain, body image and self-esteem, is widely affected by advertising in the media. Researchers have suggested that the media may influence the development of self-esteem in adolescents through messages about body image (M. Polce-Lynch et al., 2001, pp. 225-244; American Academy of Pediatrics, 2001; A.E. Field et al., 2001, pp. 54-60). Television, films, magazines, and advertisements present images that promote unrealistic expectations of beauty, body weight, and acceptable physical appearance. Efforts to sell an image that adheres to certain standards of body weight and size may be a catalyst for eating disorders suffered by some adolescents. And, when adolescents fall short of their own expectations based on media images, self-esteem can suffer. Media theorists and researchers have determined that the effects of this trend are seen in both boys and girls, with negative psychological effects. Advertisement of appealing, but often financially unaffordable, clothing and promotion of negative gender stereotypes are other areas of concern.

From year to year children spend larger and larger amount of time engaged with new media activities: video, television, computer games and the Internet. Computers have traditionally been trusted by both children and adults as reliable and accurate sources of information. The rapid growth of online services and Internet access has added a new dimension to modern computing. Through a computer modem and phone line children have access to an almost endless supply of information and opportunity for interaction. However, there can be real risks and dangers for an unsupervised child. Most

parents teach their children not to talk with strangers, not to open the door if they are home alone, and not to give out information on the telephone to unknown callers. But parents cannot assume that their child will be protected by the supervision or regulation provided by the online services. Most "chat rooms" or "news groups" are completely unsupervised. Because of the anonymous nature of the "screen name", children who communicate with others in these areas will not know if they are "talking" with another child or a child predator pretending to be a child or teen. Unlike the mail and visitors that a parent sees a child receive at home - parents do not see e-mail or a "chat room" activity. Unfortunately, there can be serious consequences to children who have been persuaded to give personal information (e.g. name, password, phone number, address) or have agreed to meet someone in person. Because of these problems in many countries there appeared the website denoted for parents in which they can find information about risks for children surfing in the web - in Poland this website has the address: [www.dzieckowsieci.pl](http://www.dzieckowsieci.pl). According to The American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry children surfing in the web can encounter the following problems that influence their behaviour ([www.aacap.org](http://www.aacap.org)):

- Children accessing areas that are inappropriate or overwhelming;
- Online information that promotes hate, violence, and pornography;
- Children being misled and bombarded with intense advertising;
- Children being invited to register for prizes or to join a club when they are providing personal or household information to an unknown source; and
- Hours spent online are time lost from developing real social skills.

The empirical research carried out in Poland shows that children or adolescents spend more than twenty hours per week viewing television, especially at the autumn or winter weekends. Additional time is very often spent watching films, listening to music, watching music videos (video clips), playing video or computer games or spending computer time in the Internet. This increase in time spent by children using the media causes a significant decrease in physical activity outside home. In the total use of free time from year to year we observe a decrease of the amount of time that children or adolescents spend doing physical activities: sport games, tourist journeys or recreation. Also school achievements may be affected as a result of decreased time spent on homework or social assignments. Parents often contribute to this negative influence by using television as a way to occupy their children's attention - television plays the role of mother and/or father (R.M. L i e b e r t, J.N. S p r e f k i n, 1988). Viewing television decreases the interactions between the family members and loosens the family bonds. Educators often emphasize that the passive nature of media exposure undermines the ability of students to

be active learners. On the other hand, the over-stimulation due to the excessive media use might be related to attention deficit disorder or hyperactivity.

We observe that tobacco, alcohol, and illicit drugs are increasingly glamorized in the media. Different television programmes and films often show the lead character or likeable characters using and enjoying tobacco and alcohol products. On the other hand, the media also provide factual information and venues for discussion, typically through public service announcements or through public programming, informing children and warning them of the dangers of addiction to these substances. These contradicting educational messages, in comparison with those presented in films, are on much smaller scale and are much less appealing in their presentation.

## **Conclusions**

From the above short presentation of the negative influences of the media on children and adolescents one can conclude that parents should monitor what children hear and see, discussing issues that emerge and sharing media time with their children. Parents should watch at least one episode of the programmes their children watch on television. In this way they will know what their children watch and will be able to talk about it with them. When they see a violent incident, parents should discuss with their child what caused the character to act in a violent way. They should also point out that this kind of behaviour is not characteristic, not the way adults usually solve their problems. They can ask their children to talk about other ways the character could have reacted, or other nonviolent solutions to the character's problem.

Parents should moderate the negative influence as well as increase the positive effects of the media in the lives of their children (C. Hoffner, 1996, pp. 389-402). An important media literacy skill, which can be developed through parental guidance, is a child's ability to distinguish between reality and fantasy in media messages. Children may not be capable of making this distinction without an adult's help, resulting in a child's confused perception of fantasy as reality. But with proper adult guidance, they can learn to critically evaluate what they view and become more discriminating consumers of the media (R. Hobbs, 2001). Parental guidance is needed to help children sort out the negative influences and develop their ability to make sound decisions on their own. Parents can limit the amount of time children spend watching television, and encourage children to spend their free time on sports, hobbies, or with friends; parents and children can even draw up a list of other enjoyable activities to do instead of watching television.

Because the interaction with the web for children and adolescents is more dangerous than watching television, on the website of The American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry one can find indications what parents should do (see [www.aacap.org](http://www.aacap.org)); Polish parents should be familiar with information presented on the website [www.dzieckowsieci.pl](http://www.dzieckowsieci.pl).

In the summary it can be said that parents should remember that communicating online does not prepare children for real interpersonal relationships. Spending time with a child initially exploring an online service and periodically participating with a child in the online experience gives parents an opportunity to monitor and supervise the activity. It is also an opportunity to learn together.

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