Key Terms Defined

**Media violence** – Any action witnessed by viewers, readers, or listeners or enacted by players that is intended to cause harm to other people or human-like characters

**Aggression** – Behavior that is carried out with the intention of harming another person (for example by causing physical harm or by damaging the person’s social relationships).

**Experimental evaluation of the intervention** – Following a baseline measure of media violence use and aggression, half the sample was assigned to a five-week intervention, and the other half was assigned to a control group. Both groups were compared at a seven-month post-intervention assessment and two follow-ups at 18 and 30 months post-intervention.

**Background**

A large body of research from different parts of the world has shown that exposure to presentations of violence in different media, such as films, TV, cartoons, music, and video games, may lead to an increase in aggressive behavior (Krahé et al., 2012). Longitudinal studies following the same participants over time show that children and adolescents who habitually use violent media tend to become more aggressive, as rated by themselves or reported by their parents, peers, and teachers (Krahé, 2014). These effects are likely due to several interlocking psychological processes that operate at the level of thoughts, feelings, and physiological arousal. Violence in the media is often performed by attractive role models and presented as successful and legitimate, triggering processes of observational learning. Through watching media characters being rewarded for their aggressive behavior, users come to see aggression as an appropriate and acceptable form of behavior. They develop aggressive scripts, which are mental representations of when and how aggression may be shown, and these scripts include normative beliefs that condone and justify aggression. Moreover, habitual use of violent media has been shown to lead to desensitization, that is a decrease in empathy with victims of real-life violence and decreased willingness to engage in helping behavior.

Given the negative effects of violent media use, researchers developed several intervention programs that aimed at reducing the impact of violent media on aggressive behavior. Most of these programs are directed at elementary school children. Little is known about how to reduce media violence use among adolescents despite the fact that violent media have a special appeal in this age group, particularly for boys. To fill this gap, we developed and tested an intervention program that is directed specifically at male and female adolescents. Our intervention, the Potsdam Media Competency Training Program, is based on the current state of theoretical knowledge about media violence effects and principles of behavior change and consists of two elements. The first element is directed at reducing the amount of time spent with violent media and strengthening media self-regulation skills (restricted consuming). The second element is designed to promote the understanding of how violence is presented in the media and how violent media work to affect users’ aggressive thoughts, feelings, and behavior (critical consuming). Our program consists of five weekly sessions, each lasting two school periods, accompanied by two parent evenings at the start and the end of the program. The contents of the intervention are described in more detail in Möller and Krahé (2009).

The intervention program is designed by teachers and other professionals working with adolescents to be implemented in the regular school curriculum or used in stand-alone mode as part of extra-curricular activities. It has been published as a book that contains a DVD with all materials (detailed plans for each session, student work sheets, background information for
parents etc.). So far, it is available in German only, but the authors are happy to provide further information on request.

**Study**

An experimental evaluation of the efficacy of the intervention was conducted in a study with almost 700 7th and 8th graders in Germany, of whom about half were randomly assigned to the intervention group. The other half served as the control group that did not receive the intervention. The two groups were compared in a pre-test measurement about five months prior to the intervention (T1), a post-test measurement about seven months after the intervention (T2; see Möller, Krahé, Busching, & Krause, 2012), and two follow-ups 18 and 30 months post-intervention (T3 and T4; see Krahé & Busching, in press). Thus, the whole study covered a period of three years. As noted earlier, the program was designed to reduce the amount of time spent with violent media content, challenge the presentation of violence as normatively acceptable, and promote the self-regulation of media violence use with the ultimate aim of reducing aggressive behavior. The intervention was embedded in a longitudinal study on the impact of exposure to media violence on aggressive behavior and focused on the display of physical violence in movies, TV programmes, and video games. Media violence use was measured by presenting participants with genre lists of films, TV series, and video games and asking them how frequently they used each genre. Media experts rated each genre for the amount of violent content (defined as physical harm and killing). At each measurement, an overall media violence score was calculated by multiplying participants’ frequency reports for each genre with its violence rating as indicated by the experts. Physically aggressive behavior in the previous six months was assessed through self-reports.

Figure 1 shows the effects of the intervention on the use of media violence at the follow-up measurement seven months after the intervention (T2). Youth in the intervention group reported significantly lower frequencies of violent media use after the intervention compared to their pre-intervention rates, whereas no decrease was found in the control group.

**Figure 1: Changes in Media Violence Use from Pre-Intervention (T1) to Post-Intervention (T2) Measurement**
The effect of the intervention on aggressive behavior at T2 was dependent on the level of aggressive behavior prior to the intervention at T1, as shown in Figure 2.

Participants with a low level of aggression at T1 before the intervention remained low at T2 regardless of whether they had been in the intervention or control group. However, participants who had been more aggressive to begin with scored lower at the follow-up measurement if they had been in the intervention group than if they had been in the control group. This means that the intervention was successful in curbing aggression among participants who started off with higher levels of aggression, arguably the group for whom there was a greater need for intervention. A more detailed presentation of the findings for the post-intervention measurement can be found in Möller et al. (2012).

The two follow-ups 18 and 30 months after the intervention revealed that the intervention was successful in achieving a sustained reduction of media violence use. The intervention lead to lower levels of media violence use at T2, which, in turn, was linked to lower violent media use at the two follow-ups (T3 and T4). In addition, the reduction in media violence use achieved through the intervention at T2 was linked to reduced aggression at T3.

**Figure 2: Effects of the Intervention on Aggressive Behavior at T2**

![Graph showing the effects of the intervention on aggressive behavior at T2](image)

**Implications for Violence Prevention**

This evaluation study shows that a short, five-week intervention can be successful in achieving a lasting reduction in adolescents’ use of violent media and aggressive behavior. Intervention effects on media violence use were still present after 30 months. Effects on aggressive behavior, mediated by reduced media violence use, could still be found 18 months after the intervention.

**Further information on this topic**


