

Headword: Morality, Television, and Moral Messages

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See Also:

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Electronic games, moral behavior

Morality, Television and, Identification with Characters

Prosocial content, effects

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Television, Prosocial Behavior

Television, violence

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Television is a medium with great potential to influence the lives of children and adolescents. However, the bulk of prior research regarding the impact of television viewing on children and adolescents has focused on possible negative influences of television. For example, there is ample research suggesting that watching violence on television contributes to aggressiveness in children and adolescents. Research has also reported links between television content and adolescents' sexual behaviors and attitudes. Like researchers, it seems that policy makers, educators, and the general public also tend to focus on the negative effects of television viewing. Yet, not all television content is negative; there is also much on television that might be considered "moral." But, what moral messages are children and adolescents exposed to on television? More importantly, what effects do these moral messages have on children and adolescents? Finally, what factors might influence how children and adolescents respond to such messages?

There are differing opinions on what might be considered "moral messages" on television. Social scientists tend to divide morality into justice morality, with its focus on issues of fairness and equality, and prosocial or care morality, which emphasizes kindness and helping. Thus, ideas or behaviors presented on television relevant to these issues might be considered moral messages. These messages might appear in the form of proscriptions or prohibitions. Proscriptions are "thou shalts" which encourage behaviors that should be engaged in (such as helping others), while prohibitions are "thou shalt nots" which discourage actions that should not be performed (such as causing harm to others).

Analyses of the content of television programming suggest that television might portray as many moral messages as it does immoral messages (i.e., messages that

promote or condone things such as violence and dishonesty). Ironically, some programs intended to convey moral messages, such as certain cartoons, also contain significant violent content. Programs targeted at preschoolers contain the highest proportion of moral messages, followed by those directed to children and adolescents, with adult programs having the lowest ratio of moral to immoral messages. Additionally, programs broadcast earlier in the day tend to have a higher moral to immoral messages ratio than those later in the day. Thus, programs most noted for incorporating moral messages are early morning shows for preschoolers such as *Barney*, *Mister Roger's Neighborhood*, and *Sesame Street*, which convey moral messages such as the importance of honesty, kindness, and fairness. Interestingly, some programs originally intended for adults that became popular with children (such as *The Cosby Show* and *7th Heaven*), also have a strong emphasis on moral messages.

There are several possible mechanisms by which exposure to moral messages on television might positively impact children and adolescents. First, moral messages might be conveyed through modeling of moral behaviors. Psychologist Albert Bandura originally provided evidence of modeling by showing that when children watch adults on a television acting violently against an inflatable doll, they (the children) also tend to act violently toward the same doll when given the opportunity. This mechanism of modeling may also facilitate the learning of moral behaviors. For example, children may learn the importance of sharing by observing people on a television program sharing. Research has found some support for this idea. For instance, in one experiment a group of children were shown a prosocial program where a boy risked his life to save a puppy, while another group of children were instead shown a neutral program with no modeling of

moral behavior. Then, both groups of children were asked to play a “game” where they could earn points by repeatedly pushing a button; the more times they pushed the button, the more points they earned. However, they were also told to listen to puppies in a distant kennel and push a help button when the puppies seemed distressed. Children shown the prosocial program were more likely to push the button to help the puppies than children who watched the neutral program. In short, it seems that characters on television may teach moral messages by example.

Another possible mechanism is that programs might actually verbally promote moral proscriptions and prohibitions. For example, parents in a television program might talk to their child about the importance of being honest and not cheating on a test in school. Also, in some programs for young children it is common for the characters to actually address the viewer when promoting a moral message. The few studies that have directly examined this mechanism have found some support for its effectiveness in conveying moral messages, although the results are less consistent than those for modeling. In line with this, research on parenting suggests that parental modeling of moral behaviors is more consistently and strongly linked to children’s learning and behaviors than verbalizations such as preaching moral values or prompting moral action.

Researchers have identified several factors that might mediate the effects of moral messages via television on children and adolescents. First, some individual characteristics of children affect the way they respond to moral messages. For instance, age seems to be a mediator in that younger children tend to be more strongly influenced by moral messages on television than older children and adolescents. However, gender and ethnicity are typically not mediators of the effects of moral messages. Second, the context

in which a given moral message is conveyed in a program seems to moderate the effect of that message. For instance, televised moral messages tend to have weaker effects in situations where they compete with immoral messages. As an example, the modeling of prosocial behavior on television seems to more strongly influence prosocial behaviors of children when it is presented in a positive context, rather than in a context intermixed with aggression. Lastly, the environment in which the child watches the television program can mediate the effects of televised moral messages. For example, when the watching of moral messages on television is accompanied by additional instruction by adults, such as teachers or parents, there tends to be a stronger positive effect on children.

In summary, while attention has been focused on the potential impact of negative television messages on children and adolescents, it seems television is also a source of moral messages which might have a positive influence. Although research regarding moral messages on television is limited, it does suggest that exposure to such messages tends to have a moderate effect on the attitudes and behaviors of children and adolescents. But, these associations are often mediated by other factors such as characteristics of the child, the context in which the message occurs in the television program, and factors in the environment in which the child views the program. Given these findings, more attention should be paid to possible positive effects of television programs on child development. However, an important caveat is that while it seems television has the capacity to influence children and adolescents in positive ways, television is only one of many factors involved in the socialization of the upcoming generation.

Further Readings

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