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# Challenging the Proliferation of Media Violence:

## A Call to Action for Educators, Parents, Students and Our Communities

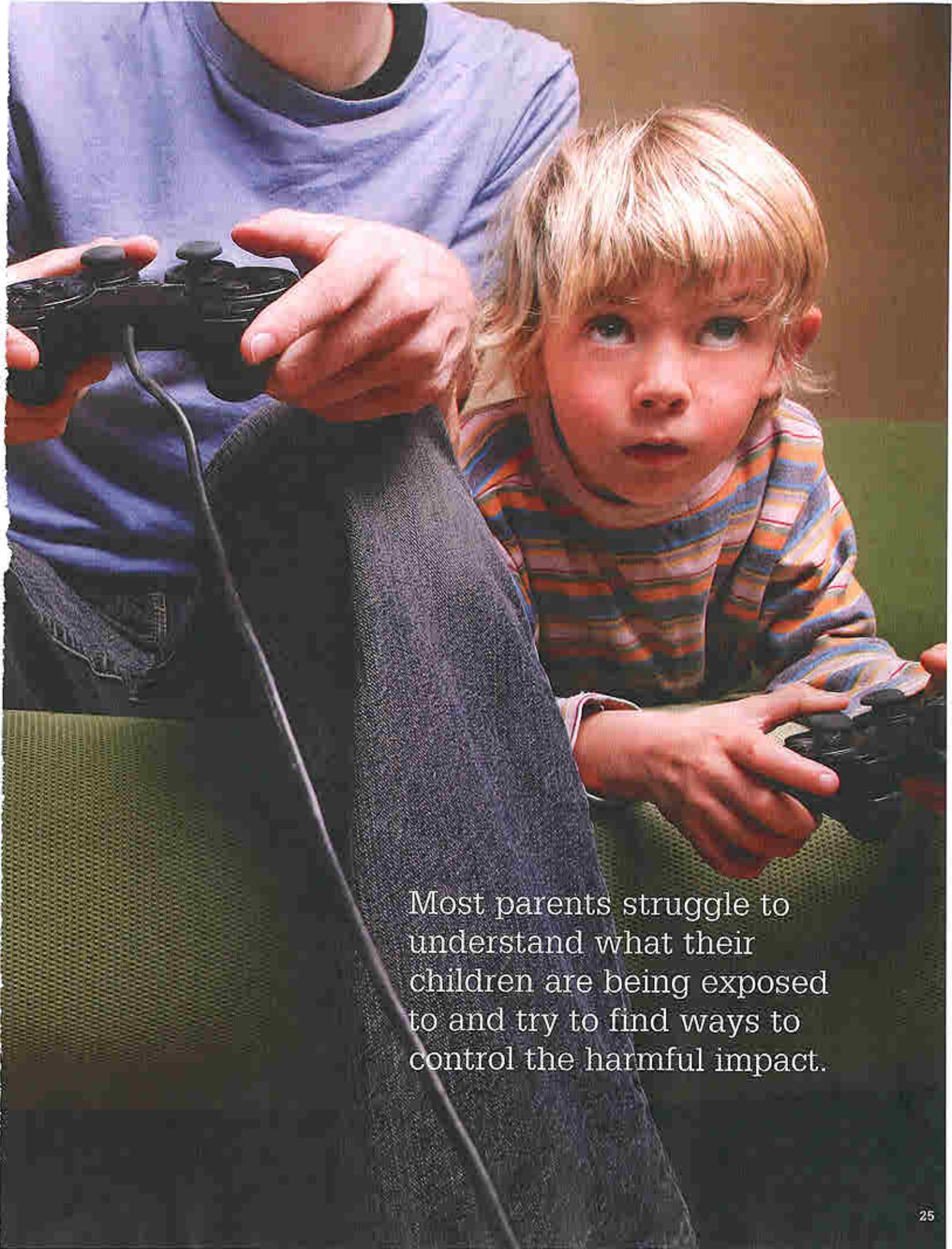
By Peter Jaffe

**"Life's a video game and then you die."**

These were the words of the Dawson College shooter on his Internet blog before he decided to enter that facility in Montreal in September 2006, on a rampage that killed 18-year-old Anastasia DeSousa and injured 19 other innocent students. Even as most of us wondered how an event like this one could happen in Canada, we quickly began to ask why. Why would a young man engage in such senseless violence? There is no simple answer. Perhaps it involves a combination of factors. The explanation may be a youth who was dealing with increasing alienation, depression and joblessness, who had access to unlimited weapons and who was spending all his time in his room playing violent video games. Media violence played a role.

Some argue that media violence doesn't kill people, only people kill people. However, common sense suggests that if you spend hours playing violent video games, such as "Columbine," where you can recreate the horrors of the student killings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, you may be affected. You might be practising for a real act of violence, or you may become increasingly desensitized to the impact of real violence in other people's lives. Life could be seen as just a video game – and then you die.





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Although most parents and professionals who work with children and adolescents are concerned about the potential harmful effects of media violence, there has been little societal intervention other than the classification of material that may be inappropriate for young children to watch. Recent publications such as *Action Agenda: A Strategic Blueprint for Reducing Exposure to Media Violence in Canada*, published by the Ontario Ministry of the Attorney General in 2004, have offered a compelling review of the literature. This review points out the extensive nature of media violence in the lives of children, who can access violent material through multiple sources including the Internet, video games, television, movies, sports and music.

The impact of media violence is beyond debate. The media industry will try to convince the public that the problem lies with inadequate parents and there is no scientific evidence to support the concern. The industry forgets to mention that sponsors spend millions of dollars on advertising during the World Series or Grey Cup playoff games, intending to shape our purchasing impulses with the 30 seconds of a commercial. Obviously, the media can shape us as adults and can hamper positive child development. The majority of medical and mental health experts agree there is a serious problem. A joint statement by national associations of pediatricians, psychologists, psychiatrists and family physicians summarized this concern at a U.S. Congressional Public Health Summit in July 2000, stating, "At this time, well over 1,000 studies – including reports from the Surgeon General's Office, the National Institute of Mental Health and numerous studies conducted by leading figures within our medical and public health organizations point overwhelmingly to a causal connection between media violence and aggressive behavior in *some* children. The conclusion of the public health community, based on over 30 years of research, is that viewing entertainment violence can lead to increases in aggressive attitudes, values and behavior – particularly in children. Its effects are measurable and long-lasting."

Not every child who is exposed to media violence has the same reaction. Some children have more limited exposure to this material and may have other compensating, protective factors such as parents who are good role models and who supervise media consumption. Other children may be exposed to violence in their homes and have these images reinforced by hockey violence, video games, movies and the music they hear. Professor Leonard Eron, a distinguished University of Michigan researcher in this field, has stated that the association between media violence and violent attitudes and behaviour is as high as the correlation between smoking and lung cancer. Some people smoke and have few health problems or die of other causes. Yet cigarettes have large warnings on the package that could be a model for warnings on many forms of media, instead of the small ratings stickers.

Media violence is growing worse every year. This generation of school-age children spends approximately six and a half hours a day consuming various forms of media, compared with an hour for homework, chores and/or physical activities. A recent survey suggests that children aged 6 and under spend two hours a day watching television. One-third of these children have televisions in their own bedrooms so parents are free to watch adult shows.

The most popular entertainment for boys is video games. Many of these games are dedicated to violence; for example, over 90 percent of video games involve themes where the object of the game is to kill or maim human beings – police officers, women and people of diverse ethno-cultural backgrounds. The best-selling games show the most graphic violence and have recently moved to a first-person shooter perspective where players take the killer's view. Many researchers have suggested that the repetition of these acts is comparable to the training available to police and the military. The outcome is accurate shooters who practise their skills and can become desensitized to the impact of real violence. A study published in 2006 by Iowa State University found that exposure to violent video games

increases aggressive thoughts, angry feelings, physiological arousal and aggressive behaviours, and decreases helpful behaviours.

There is no quick fix to this enormous problem. The issues have to be faced in individual homes and schools and in the broader community through public awareness campaigns, enhanced media literacy programs and new legislation and standards for the industry. Schools are an ideal venue for change, because many educators and parents are concerned about this issue. Most parents struggle to understand what their children are being exposed to and try to find ways to control the harmful impact. We can organize parent nights on media violence and invite local experts from health and social services to talk about the problems and effective strategies. Creative teachers can find ways to integrate this topic in various courses or curriculum material. For example, in the London area, we have integrated 21 lessons on violence prevention into the grade 9 health and physical education curriculum through the Fourth R program. Some groups are working together at the provincial level to develop more teacher-friendly lesson plans that can be integrated in elementary and secondary schools. Many student leaders have organized programs to address school bullying and violence – these often feature media as one of the contributing problems. In our Faculty of Education at the University of Western Ontario, my colleague Ray Hughes and I have developed the first "safe school" course that is preparing future teachers to be leaders in handling bullying and the harmful impact of the media. Bullying includes cyber-bullying, harassment and the aftermath of violence in the family.

The Ontario Public School Boards' Association has made media violence a priority. For the past year, the association has hosted the Violence in the Media Committee, a group of concerned representatives from trustee, parent, teacher federation and student organizations from both the public and Catholic school systems, as well as police and community services. Among other issues, this committee has been investigating the connection between



media violence and maintaining safe school environments. We are looking at educating parents on the multiple forms of media violence and finding helpful strategies to confront the problem. We are helping educators develop media violence awareness programs and integrated curriculum approaches and are making students more aware of the negative influences of media violence on their own attitudes and behaviours – and those of their peers. We are also exploring potential provincial and federal legislative changes to protect children from media violence.

The committee recently received a grant from the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat in support of the Critical Media Literacy project. Through this project, we plan to develop curriculum material for kindergarten to grade 12 that will focus on literacy and lesson plans for media violence awareness. Materials will be developed by teachers for teachers, and will meet mandated expectations for learning in Ontario. The final products will be provided to every school in the province on CD; updates will be posted on the Web sites of all the committee partners (see sidebar). Parallel initiatives are planned for teacher professional development, parent education and student engagement. The material should be available by September 2007.

As a parent of four sons, an educator and a psychologist, I have to face this issue every day. It is hard to be an expert in your own house. I struggle to do my best in the face of heavy advertising and peer pressure that accepts violent entertainment as normal or inevitable. As a man, I have to think about the impact of this violence on my sons' views of masculinity and how we treat one another. Hockey is my favourite sport, but I refuse to stand and cheer at the fights. I write letters to television stations asking why fights have to be part of the highlight package, along with the goals. Change happens slowly. The National Hockey League has banned fighting from the last five minutes of the game – but not from the first 55 minutes. These violent images provide a narrow definition of manhood. Many of the media portrayals are also an insult to women and undermine gender equality. Everyone has to look in a mirror and question if they are doing what they can to challenge this onslaught. I want every parent, educator and other community professional to ask themselves what they can do to make a difference. There is no time to wait. **ET**

**Peter Jaffe, Ph.D.**, is a professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Western Ontario, academic director of the Centre for Research and Education on Violence Against Women and Children, and a trustee with the Thames Valley District School Board.

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## Recommended Reading

*Action Agenda: A Strategic Blueprint for Reducing Exposure to Media Violence in Canada.*  
Valerie Smith, Office for Victims of Crime,  
Ontario Ministry of the Attorney General,  
Toronto, 2004.  
Free download from [www.fradical.com](http://www.fradical.com)

## Web Links

- Media Awareness Network  
› [www.media-awareness.com](http://www.media-awareness.com)
- Free Radical  
› [www.fradical.com](http://www.fradical.com)
- Web English Teacher  
› [www.webenglishteacher.com/media](http://www.webenglishteacher.com/media)
- Centre for Media Literacy  
› [www.medialit.org](http://www.medialit.org)
- Think Literacy  
[www.curriculum.org/thinkliteracy](http://www.curriculum.org/thinkliteracy)
- The Fourth R Violence Prevention Curriculum  
› [www.thefourthr.ca](http://www.thefourthr.ca)
- The Centre for Research and Education on Violence Against Women and Children  
› [www.crvawc.ca](http://www.crvawc.ca)
- ## Violence in the Media Committee Members
- Ontario Public School Boards' Association  
› [www.opsba.org](http://www.opsba.org)
- Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association  
› [www.ocsta.on.ca](http://www.ocsta.on.ca)
- Ontario Student Trustees' Association  
› [www.osta-aeco.org](http://www.osta-aeco.org)
- Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario  
› [www.etfo.ca](http://www.etfo.ca)
- Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation  
› [www.osstf.on.ca](http://www.osstf.on.ca)
- Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association  
› [www.oecta.on.ca](http://www.oecta.on.ca)
- Ontario Federation of Home & School Associations  
› [www.ofhsa.on.ca](http://www.ofhsa.on.ca)
- Ontario Provincial Police, Crime Prevention Section  
› [www.opp.ca](http://www.opp.ca)
- Canadian Centre for Abuse Awareness  
› [www.ccfaa.com](http://www.ccfaa.com)