Submission No. 31
(Youth Violence)
A.O.C. Date: 27/10/2009

23 October 2009

The Secretariat
House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family, Community, Housing and Youth
Inquiry into the impact of violence on young Australians

Please find attached a submission from the Australian Council on Children and the Media.

This submission addresses, in the main, the last 2 dot points of the Terms of reference, viz:

- The social and economic factors that contribute to violence by young Australians

- Strategies to reduce violence and its impact among young Australians

We are happy to provide further information, and/or to discuss these issues in person.

Yours sincerely

Barbara Biggins, OAM
Hon. CEO

Attch: Submission on Impact of violence on young Australians

Promoting healthy choices and stronger voices in children's media since 1957

Australian Council on Children and the Media (incorporating Young Media Australia)
Patrons: *Steve Biddulph*   *Baroness Susan Greenfield*
Pres: Jane Roberts; Vice-Pres. Elizabeth Handsley; Hon CEO: Barbara Biggins, OAM

1. INTRODUCTION

This submission has been prepared on behalf of the Australian Council on Children and the Media (ACCM) by Prof Elizabeth Handsley (Vice-President); Dr C Glenn Cupit (ACCM Board member and Senior Lecturer in human development,), Dr Wayne Warburton, ACCM member and psychologist specialising in impacts of media violence) and Barbara Biggins OAM (Hon CEO).

The ACCM is a not-for-profit national organization, with a membership which includes other national and state organizations and individuals with expertise, experience and/or interest in the area of media and children and young people.

The mission of the ACCM is to support families, industry and decision makers in building and maintaining a media environment that fosters the health, safety and wellbeing of Australian children.

ACCM's core activities include the collection of research and information about the impact of media on children's development, and advocacy for the needs and interests of children in relation to the media. For further information about the ACCM see Appendix 1.

2. THE BASIS FOR THIS SUBMISSION
2.1 This submission reflects the following principles

2.1.1 The International Convention on the Rights of the Child Article 17, viz

"Parties recognise the important function performed by the mass media and shall ensure that the child has access to information and material from a diversity of national and international sources, especially those aimed at the promotion of his or her social, spiritual and moral well-being and physical and mental health. To this end, States Parties shall:

(a) Encourage the mass media to disseminate information and material of social and cultural benefit to the child and in accordance with the spirit of article 29;

(b) Encourage international co-operation in the production of, exchange and dissemination of such information and material from a diversity of cultural, national and international sources;

(c) Encourage the production and dissemination of children's books;

(d) Encourage the mass media to have particular regard to the linguistic needs of the child who belongs to a minority groups or who is indigenous;

 (e) Encourage the development of appropriate guidelines for the protection of the child from information and material injurious to his or her well-being, bearing in mind the provisions of Article 13 and 18."

2.1.2 Objectives f), h) i) and j) of the *Broadcasting Services Act* at s 3.of The Act.

(f) to promote the provision of high quality and innovative programming by providers of broadcasting services; and

(h) to encourage providers of broadcasting services to respect community standards in the provision of program material; and

(i) to encourage the provision of means for addressing complaints about broadcasting services; and

(j) to ensure that providers of broadcasting services place a high priority on the protection of children from exposure to program material which may be harmful to them;

2.2. In the preparation of this submission, ACCM has relied on its expertise in the field of the impacts of media violence on the young, developed through long term collection and review of the evidence, individual research and professional expertise, and active involvement in issues related to the regulation of media in Australia since 1980. ACCM constantly reviews the research literature as it relates to the impact of media on children and young people.

3. Summary Comment

The evidence from the reliable body of research on the impact of media violence on the young is compelling. [Ref: Anderson et al., 2003; Bushman & Huesmann, 2006; Gentile, 2003).

Media violence is a contributor to the incidence of violence in real life, and the size of the effect of that contribution has been estimated at around 10% across a range of study methodologies and populations [ref Anderson & Bushman, 2002b; Anderson et al., 2003]

Short term exposure to media violence increases the predisposition to aggress for both children and adults regardless. Repeated exposure to media violence is likely to have further deleterious effects, including greater fear, a hostile bias whereby others are seen as threatening and dangerous, greater hostility, desensitisation to further depictions of violence, beliefs normalising aggression and detailed and generalised scripts for aggressive behaviour (Anderson & Bushman, 2002a; Anderson & Gentile, 2008; Bushman & Huesmann, 2006; Donnerstein, Slaby & Eron, 1994; Strasburger & Wilson, 2003).

Remedies include:

- Early intervention with parents of young children to reduce exposure of those children to media depictions of violence, including violent video games.
- Reducing the exposure of children and youth to problematic forms of media violence
- Reducing the direct marketing of violent entertainment to the young
- Implementing school curricula known to be effective in encouraging children to reduce their own exposure to media violence
- Review and revise Australia's classification systems so that they reflect well established research about problematic content and depictions
- Encourage media producers to justify and modify the inclusion of violent solutions to conflict
- Retain MA15+ as the upper level of classification for computer games.

4. Detailed comment

4.1. The social and economic factors that contribute to violence by young Australians

One social factor that contributes to youth violence is media violence. *This is not the only cause of youth violence but it is one about which we can do something.*

4.1.1 The evidence:

a) We can learn much about the way in which media violence will impact on the young from the solid base of child development research and theory developed over 50 years.

b) Findings from social science research on specific topics can be used to supplement this knowledge.

c) Some researchers dispute that media violence has a detrimental impact on the young, but there are now over 200 original research studies and many more research reviews which combine to give a reliable picture of the likely impact of violent media on children.

d) The evidence from the reliable body of research on the impact of media violence on the young is compelling. [Ref: Anderson et al., 2003; Bushman & Huesmann, 2006; Gentile, 2003).

e) US researcher Craig Anderson (who has conducted both original research on media violence (especially computer games) and carried out meta-analyses of the mass of research studies) sums up the situation in regard to the research evidence in this way:

"The effect of media violence on aggression in general is bigger than the effect of smoking on lung cancer; it's bigger than the effect of calcium intake on bone mass; it's bigger than the effect of homework on academic achievement, or the effect of asbestos exposure on lung cancer. These are all effects that people generally understand to be true, real effects that are large enough to be important and large enough to worry about". (ABC Background briefing July 22 2001).

Anderson et al (2003) go on to say that:

"By the early 1990s, most researchers in the field had arrived at a consensus that the effect of media violence on aggressive and violent behavior was real, causal, and significant." (p. 82)

f) Media violence is a contributor to the incidence of violence in real life, and the size of the effect of that contribution has been estimated at around 10% across a range of study methodologies and populations [ref Anderson & Bushman, 2002b; Anderson et al., 2003],

g) Short term exposure to media violence increases the predisposition to aggress for both children and adults regardless. Repeated exposure to media violence is likely to have further deleterious effects, including greater fear, a hostile bias whereby others are seen as threatening and dangerous, greater hostility, desensitisation to further depictions of violence, beliefs normalising aggression and detailed and generalised scripts for aggressive behaviour (Anderson & Bushman, 2002a; Anderson & Gentile, 2008; Bushman & Huesmann, 2006; Donnerstein, Slaby & Eron, 1994; Strasburger & Wilson, 2003).

4.1.2 Many professional bodies worldwide express concern about the impacts of media violence.

a) the American Academy of Pediatrics (2009)
Their Council on Communications and Media summarised their position as :

"Exposure to violence in media, including television, movies, music, and video games, represents a significant risk to the health of children and adolescents. Extensive research evidence indicates that media violence can contribute to aggressive behavior, desensitization to violence, nightmares, and fear of being harmed. Pediatricians should assess their patients' level of media exposure and intervene on media-related health risks. Pediatricians and other child health care providers can advocate for a safer media environment for children by encouraging media literacy, more thoughtful and proactive use of media by children and their parents, more responsible portrayal of violence by media producers, and more useful and effective media ratings. Office counseling has been shown to be effective."

b) Melbourne's Royal Children's Hospital Centre for Community Child health and the Murdoch Children's Research Institute have reviewed the research related to the impact of media in early childhood and its long term effects. On the topic of violence they concluded that

"Viewing violence is associated with a range of problems including: desensitisation to the emotional effects of violence, a lack of empathy with victims of violence, an increased tendency to aggression, and the perception of the world as scary (RACP, 2004). It may also suggest to children that violence is inevitable, and a normal and acceptable way to resolve conflict.

Television programs provide models and 'scripts' for social behaviour and interactions – including play. Exposure to violent content increases the risk that children will develop a violent mental script that is likely also to be gendered as heroes/perpetrators are typically male, while victims are female. Some children are more vulnerable than others to these effects. Vulnerable children are typically male, younger than seven or eight, living in violent homes, and, heavy consumers of media (i.e. risk increases with exposure) (Young Media Australia, 2007).
As this profile suggests, exposure to violent television content also needs to be considered in the context of other social variables." (Royal Melbourne Children's Hospital, 2009)

c) The Australian Psychological Society has this to say about media violence in a July 2000 Position Paper:

"For at least 20 years there has been a consensus amongst most of the psychological research community actively involved in media research that violence on television contributes to aggressive behaviour, to anxiety about becoming a victim and to callousness with respect to the impact of violence on others (Pearl, Bourhilet & Lazar, 1982). Studies have predominantly, but not exclusively, focused on children. The evidence for these links is as strong as that for the contribution of any other studied contributor to community violence."

d) Six major US medical groups (incl the American Academy of Pediatrics, American Psychological Association, American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and American Medical Association) issued a joint statement in 2000 entitled ***Joint Statement on the Impact of Entertainment Violence on Children: Congressional Public Health Summit***. They summarised their position as follows:

- Children who see a lot of violence are more likely to view violence as an effective way of settling conflicts. Children exposed to violence are more likely to assume that acts of violence are acceptable behaviour
- Viewing violence can lead to emotional desensitization towards violence in real life. It can decrease the likelihood that one will take action on behalf of a victim when violence occurs.
- Entertainment violence feeds a perception that the world is a violent and mean place. Viewing violence increases fear of becoming a victim of violence, with a resultant increase in self-protective behaviours and a mistrust of others.
- Viewing violence may lead to real life violence. Children exposed to violent programming at a young age have a higher tendency for violent and aggressive behaviour later in life than children who are not so exposed.

e) The Royal Australasian College of Physicians: Division of Paediatrics and Child Health released a Policy Paper on Children and the Media in 2004 .Among the areas of potential harm identified were:

i) Violence

In the US, it has been calculated that by the time children reach age 18 they will have seen 16,000 simulated murders and 200,000 acts of violence on television alone. It is likely that Australian and New Zealand statistics are similar.

The body of evidence linking exposure to violent content to violence-related outcomes for children is now compelling, drawing from over 1000 studies. These include studies of cross-sectional associations, naturalistic observations, longitudinal studies, meta-analyses and direct cause-effect relationship studies.

In July 2000, a group of six major health professional organisations: the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, the American Psychological Association, the American Medical Association, the American Academy of Family Physicians and the American Psychiatric Association, released a joint statement on the consequences for children of exposure to media violence (see www.aap.org/advocacy/releases/jstmtevc.htm). These groups concluded that children who watched more violence on the media were more likely to:

- Become emotionally desensitised to violence;
- Avoid taking action on behalf of a victim when violence occurs;
- Believe that violence is inevitable;
- Believe that violence is an acceptable way of solving conflict;
- Believe that world is a violent place, leading to greater anxiety, self-protective behaviours and mistrust of others;
- Use violence themselves.

The original work on this subject examined violent TV and films; however, a body of more recent work has linked violent outcomes to video games. The violent consequences are not limited to hurting others. Children who see risk-taking behaviour in the media are likely to copy these behaviours, and this can lead to personal injury.

The effects of exposure to violent content in childhood have recently been linked to increased aggressive behaviour even 15 years later. This study followed up 329 adults whose media behaviour was documented when they were children, and demonstrated increased risk of domestic violence and criminal behaviour for the children in the top 20 percent for amount of violent material consumed. This effect was found for females as well as males.

It is important to note that viewing violent material does not make all children violent. The actual violence resulting from media exposure may be limited to children who are, for various reasons, more vulnerable to this material. For the majority of children there may be subtle shifts in beliefs (more desensitised, more likely to believe violence is inevitable) but not enough to cause harm. Even without actual violent behaviour, however, these changes in belief may collectively change the nature of our society.

Almost all work on the effects of media violence has focused on physical interpersonal violence. The impact of psychological violence (bullying) in all its forms, and how this relates to psychological violence perpetrated by children to each other, is an important area where research is required.

ii) Child Mental Health

Television violence may influence children in four ways: making them want to imitate what they see, reducing learnt inhibitions against violent behaviour, desensitising them to violence through repetition, and increasing arousal. Exposure to graphic violence may increase children's symptoms of stress.

Television news, terrorism, violent crime and natural disasters can traumatise children, leading to nightmares. In one US survey, 37 percent of parent s who had preschool children reported that their child had been frightened or upset by a TV story in the previous year.

More generally, increased television viewing is associated with higher levels of depression and anxiety, although it may be that these mental health problems led children to watch more TV.
The Internet is being used as a source of information for teenagers about their mental health issues. Almost 20 percent of teenagers in a recent US study had used the Internet to find help for the emotional problems they were experiencing. In some cases children may spend more time with the media as a consequence of other problems such as stress or fighting within the family. It is obvious that the more time family members watch television, the fewer opportunities exist for communication within the family and solving any problems." (RACP 2004)

4.2 Strategies to reduce violence and its impact

There is a reliable body of research evidence showing that reducing the exposure of children and youth to problematic forms of media violence, is likely to reduce the risks of children and youth choosing to use violence; of being desensitised; of developing a fear of the world they live in.

A range of strategies is suggested here to reduce this exposure.

- *early intervention with parents of young children to reduce exposure of those children to media depictions of violence.*

Research indicates that the earlier children are exposed to screen media, the more likely they are to become dependent on it for entertainment . While some media for children can be beneficial, too many programs aimed at children (eg cartoons) feature violent heroes whose violence is shown as justified, is applauded, rewarded and is often in a comic context. Such context increases the risks to children of developing a mental script for the best ways to solve conflict. ("Violence works and violence wins").

ACCM is unique in Australia in developing early intervention programs designed to encourage parents of children under the age of 7 years to minimise their exposure to media violence, and to support them with lists of non-violent media. (see Young Media Australia *Choosing Fright-free, fight-free media).*

Much more research could be done to explore the best ways to motivate parents to be active in mediating their children's exposure to problematic content, and to determine the most effective strategies for which ages of children. But see work of Nathanson (2004); Cantor and Wilson (2003).

* Reducing the direct marketing of violent entertainment to the young

Violent M classified movies and games are promoted to children well under the age of 15 years, and as young as 3 or 4.

This occurs via marketing and advertising of the movies on clothing, colouring-in books, bedding, via fast food restaurant giveaways, cereal packets. Little awareness seems to be shown by marketers that the linking of such merchandise with film heroes is likely to encourage young children to want to see the movies, and for unsuspecting parents to take them.

In addition, M movies are promoted to children on TV in the early evening hours, due to clauses within the Free TV Code of Practice that allow this.

Further, Free TV Australia is proposing in the present Code Review that MA15+ movies and programs are similarly freed up for early evening promotion. (Free TV Australia (2009)   .

- *Implementing school curricula known to be effective in encouraging children to reduce their own exposure to media violence.*

Stephen Kline et al (2003) have developed curricula shown to be effective in encouraging Canadian primary school aged children to take steps to protect themselves from the impacts of violent media and of food advertising.

- *Review and revise Australia's classification systems so that they reflect well established research about problematic content and depictions*

Australia's classification systems are presently based more on concepts of offence than on issues of harm.

The criteria for the assessment of violence are deficient in that:

a) they focus on whether a depiction has a degree of "impact" (fear/ anxiety/ etc) rather than on whether depictions will be likely to increase the risks that viewers will be more likely to choose to use violence to solve conflict, or to be desensitised, or to develop a "mean and scary view of the world'. . Ample research exists which identifies the more problematic forms of media violence.

ACCM urges this inquiry to consider the findings of the US National Television Violence Survey Vol 3 Executive Summary pages 7-10. 1998, which identifies the types of contexts most likely to increase the risk of young people using aggression to solve conflict. This study, and many others, clearly identify "glamorised violence" as the most problematic context. "Glamorised violence" is violence done by a hero, who is justified, rewarded and applauded for being best at the violence, and has few real life consequences, and often in a comic context.   This type of violence abounds in many M films, but it is not reflected in present classification criteria.

b) they do not reflect the ages and stages of development at which some media content becomes more or less problematic. Research identifies the types of content likely to cause the development of unnecessary fears and anxieties in which age groups of children.

Australia's classification system is based around the age of 15 years- which bears no real relationship to the key ages and stages of child development.   A system based on G (OK for all), G8+(suit those 8 and up), G13+(suit those 13 and up)

and then legally restricted categories of MA15+ and R18+ would be more effective in signalling problematic content and types of violence.

c) they reflect the myth that unrealistic or fantasy-based depictions are less impactful.
Unrealistic depictions of violence and aggressive behaviour can have a similar effect to realistic depictions. For this reason, any depictions of violence, to minimise harm, should be very infrequent, fully justified within the plot, and should preferably be carried out by non-admired characters or characters the viewer will not identify with (e.g., see Huesmann & Kirwil, 2007).

d) they reflect a view that violence which is "justified by the story line is acceptable"
The use of the words "strictly justified by the storyline", allows the use of high levels of violence if the storyline calls for it. A better test is whether the story cannot be told without the use of violence at that level.

- *Encourage media producers to justify and modify the inclusion of violent solutions to conflict*
The media development and production industry in Australia should be challenged to consider the known impacts of media violence on a young audience, and their responsibility to consider including alternative solutions to conflict than violence.

  Violence that is particularly damaging (ie violence that is glamorised) should be avoided. It should not be beyond the wit and talent of Australian scriptwriters to write dramas that are interesting, involving and exciting without resorting to violent solutions to conflict .

  Those who program for children and young people should avoid repeated screenings of product (including cartoons) where violence is glamorised.

* *Videogames: classification and content*
  There are particular concerns about the impacts of violent computer games on children and adolescents. The interactive aspects of games makes it more likely that these will be more influential than just watching violence. (American Psychological Association 2003) .

  Australia's system for the classification of games presently excludes games which would be classified R18+ or higher. This provision should be retained as it prevents the more extreme violent games from being in the home hire and sale system and accessible to the young .

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Appendix 1

The ACCM is a not-for-profit national community organisation whose mission is to support families, industry and decision makers in building and maintaining a media environment that fosters the health, safety and wellbeing of Australian children.

Its patrons are Baroness Susan Greenfield and Steve Biddulph.

ACCM has a national Board representing the states and territories of Australia, and a comprehensive membership of organisations and individuals who support its mission

ACCM membership includes ECA (Early Childhood Australia (formerly AECA Australian Early Childhood Association)), ACSSO (Australian Council of State Schools Organisations), AHISA (Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia), AEU (Australian Education Union), Enough is Enough, SAPPA (South Australian Primary Principals Association), Federation of NSW P&C (Parents & Citizens), and the Mothers' Union in Australia.

ACCM's core activities include the collection and review of research and information about the impact of media on children's development, and advocacy for the needs and interests of children in relation to the media.

ACCM's core services include:

- the national freecall 24/7 Children and Media Helpline (1800 700 357);
- the ACCM website www.youngmedia.org.au containing evidence based information about media and children (attracting over 1000 visits per day);
- the award–winning, popular *Know before you go* child-friendly movie review service (now with more than 480 movie reviews);
- the development of parent media awareness materials,
- making submissions and participating in media interviews related to media regulation.

ACCM's current issues include the early s*xualisation of children in and by the media, the impacts of media violence; the marketing of violent entertainment and junk foods to the young; management of screen time and content by the very young.

ACCM's programs are lead by a team of expert volunteers, supported by a small paid staff. Its programs are supported by project grants and much volunteer input.

The ACCM is a structured as a company limited by guarantee. Its ABN is 16 005 214 531. The organisation is registered for GST, has DGR and ITEC status,