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Group calls for controls on violent images and lyrics; Some want bolder warnings and tighter laws; others say it's the parents' fault

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It ranges from television shows where bulky male wrestlers hit scantily clad women over the head with chairs to video games that mark success by the number of people a player "kills" to song lyrics and websites celebrating the power of the gun.

Violence is everywhere on TV, in music and on the Internet.

And, with all children spending about 6 1/2 hours a day consuming those various forms of media, a new coalition of academics, teachers' unions, police and parents says it's clear youngsters are being exposed to way too much violence.

Likening the connection between media violence and attitudes and behaviour to that of smoking and lung cancer, they're calling on government, industry and parents to do more to combat it.

"We have listened to the research, we've taken on board the facts, and cigarette packages now carry large and graphic warnings of the dangers of smoking," professor **Peter Jaffe** of the University of Western Ontario told a Queen's Park news conference yesterday. "We have to ask ourselves where are the warnings on the many forms of violent media readily accessible by children.

"Tiny ratings stickers just don't cut it."

There remains a vigorous debate over what causal connection there is, if any, between violence in the media and aggressive behaviour. There are also critics who say that rather than censoring the content of such programming, parents should take more responsibility for what children are exposed to.

But Jaffe, an education professor at Western's Centre for Research and Education on Violence Against Women and Children in London, Ont., said upon review of more than 1,000 studies over the past three decades there is "clear and compelling" evidence of the negative impact of violence on children and youth.

Its pervasiveness desensitizes people, particularly children, so nothing is shocking or wrong, he said.

At the news conference, the coalition played a video clip of male wrestlers beating up and tearing at the clothes of females in the ring. If their recommendations are adopted, the group hopes such images would be severely curtailed or even banned outright.

"We continue to escalate the images of violence," said Jaffe, a father of four who is also a trustee with the Thames Valley District School Board in the London area. "This is a wake-up call.

"We're not going to take it any more."

Among the measures the group called for are:

Changing the Criminal Code's public incitement of hatred laws so girls and women are protected.

Amending the Broadcasting Act to establish "a watershed hour" of 9 p.m. for radio and television stations to limit the violent programming seen by young people.

Having provincial governments legislate an age-based classification system for recorded music similar to one that exists for films, music videos and video games.

A spokesperson for Premier Dalton McGuinty said there are no plans for such a warning system.

"We appreciate the presentation made and will consider the advice presented," said Jane Almeida. "However, at this time, our priority for students is on smaller class sizes, anti-bullying programs in schools and character education."

Officials with Canadian broadcasters and the music industry said there are already safeguards in place to keep violent content away from children. Compact discs carry labels warning about objectionable lyrics and radio and television stations have rules that keep such material off air until 9 p.m.

Ignoring the rules can cost stations their licence. And, broadcasters note, viewers are able to make complaints about violence - or any other content - to the Canadian Broadcast Standards Council.

"There will always be organizations and individuals who have concerns," said Pierre Pontbriand, a spokesperson with the Canadian Association of Broadcasters. But Pontbriand said the debate about content is "a much broader issue than just looking at broadcasting," noting that his organization has an extensive media awareness campaign.

"It's important that we educate the youth about the potential, as well as the dangers, of all media."

To that end, the coalition also said they are working with Ontario education officials, teachers and parent groups to develop programs that will help children better analyze and critique media they are exposed to and the impact it has on them and those around them.

"As a society we do have to face the impact of media violence in individual homes as well as in the broader community," said Emily Noble, president of the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario.

The connection between violence in the media and aggressive behaviour has been central in some recent deadly events.

In September, a violent webpage was in the spotlight after Kimveer Gill went on a shooting spree at Montreal's Dawson College, killing a student and injuring about 20

others before killing himself. His online life featured hate-filled and violent writings as well as the glorification of guns.

Last January, cab driver Tahir Khan was killed when his taxi was T-boned in Toronto by a car allegedly involved in a street race. Police said they found a copy of the popular video game Need For Speed next to one of the young drivers now facing charges in the case.

In late 2005, Liberal MP Dan McTeague tried to keep rap artist 50 Cent from Canada, arguing he promotes violence. That followed a decision by Paramount Pictures to pull some billboard ads for a movie about his life, which showed the rapper holding a gun in his left hand and a microphone in his right.

Jaffe rejected suggestions the coalition is using censorship as a way of absolving parents of responsibility for monitoring exposure to all forms of media.

"We are focusing on parents," he said. "But I think part of our message is that parents can't do it alone."