

## **Now Showing on Children's TV: Unsafe Behavior**

**David Lowenstein, Ph.D.  
Psychologist**

A new study finds that children's TV programs often show characters defying safety rules and getting away with it: running into a street without looking, riding in a car without a seat belt, bicycling without a helmet.

Accidents are the leading cause of death and disability among children in the U.S. An earlier study found that kids who watch lots of television are far more likely to end up in a hospital with injuries than kids who do not.

Could watching TV characters do dangerous things lead children to behave the same way? It is not yet clear, according to authors of the new study, published in Archives in Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine (February 2000). But, they say, it is an issue that needs to be explored further.

The researchers analyzed 200 children's programs that aired in a major suburban TV market over one week. The analysis focused on TV depictions of unsafe behavior, without any consequences, that children could imitate. These researchers found that 47% of the children's shows contained one or more acts of unsafe behavior, and 33% had more than three such acts. Fifty-seven percent of these depictions aired on cable stations, compared to 23% on public television, and 60% of all such depictions were in cartoons, compared to 33% in action shows.

The study's author says most kids spend more time watching TV than in the classroom. They found that by the age of 18, the average American child has spent more time watching TV than receiving formal classroom instruction. The researchers concluded that children's understanding of the world is shaped by what they see on television. Research has continually shown that kids incorporate television depictions into their perceptions about the world. A recent study also found that kids who watch four hours of TV per day are four times more likely to be hospitalized for injury than kids who don't watch TV are. Behavior that is learned early is likely to last.

The benefits of safety education could be outweighed by unsafe television messages. So, it is vital that parents and professionals understand that this information might have policy implications for children's programming. Watch what your children are watching.