Violence in Media: TLC Standards
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The Learning Clinic Rolling Ridge Residential Program and Country Day School have, since the program's inception, maintained a zero tolerance for student access to media that reflects gratuitous violence, themes of degradation, victimization, sexual behavior, advocacy for drug use, religious intolerance or hate themes.

We have refocused our attention on our standards and the consistent and reliable monitoring of adherence to our policy on violent material.

We have met with students, staff and parents to discuss reasonable parameters for media standards across all TLC settings.

We have established student-staff committees, presented a faculty workshop and surveyed staff and students regarding observations of indices of violent themes currently being used on campus and among our students.

The following student-staff survey is interesting and worthy of sharing as it provides a baseline sample, at a point in time, reported by student-staff self reports.

Our concern is for monitoring levels of violent materials and maintaining dialogue with each constituency represented in our community about how to maintain high standards and reduce access to violent materials throughout our program.

Status of Violence at TLC

Violence in media is pervasive. Student access to violent media has been, for the entire 27 years of TLC's existence, an important concern. We do not endorse gratuitous violence in movies, reading material, computer games, videos, DVD's, student language-spoken or written, role playing "games", theatrical themes, music, or any form of pornography.

We have consistently required TLC staff to monitor sources of violence and redirect students to other choices for activities. Our concern about violent media and its effect on student behavior pre-dates the data reflected in the research of the last decade. Violent experiences are demonstrated to influence and increase the occurrence of aggressive behavior in children and adolescents.

We have asked clinicians, teachers, and residential staff to ask for parent support and to monitor their ability to supervise their children's access to violent materials. The expectation is that parents will restrict access to violent materials at home.

Our TLC policy on violence and our efforts to limit access to violence has been consistent. The Massachusetts incident that resulted in the death of a child is coincidental with our restatement of the need for everyone to adhere to our longstanding school policy.

The vulnerability of TLC students to the negative influences of violent themes is greater because of the issues characteristic of their clinical and social treatment goals. We intend to maintain a violence-free environment for those who work and learn within our programs. Student prerogatives are many and their empowerment is incorporated into the program structure.

Our policy to restrict violent materials will not be changed by student perceptions about the program limits on access to violent themes in media and activities and their belief that it is their right, in our environment, to pursue violent material.

It is important that parents endorse and act on the need for limiting access to violent materials in all settings: home, school and community.

Student attitudes toward "right to gaming and realistic violence" are a concern

I have received several lengthy written statements from student advocates regarding their right to access violent media.

The student assertion is that they <u>all</u> perceive the difference between realistic and fictitious video and/or violent computer based "games".

The ideas are, of course, suggestive of the typical components of any adolescent response to adult limits and the perceived adult control over their behavioral options. But the student attitudes in some cases are deeper and more disturbing than the usual adolescent pursuit of independence.

The focus on access to "animated blood", "animated violence", "suggestive themes", "mild language" and "lyrics" suggests a deep reliance on "gaming" and interaction preferences for power, control, and active violence through games. Constructive social interaction with people is not a high student priority. It is not student exercise of video or computer options and internet access generally, but rather it is the specific content of gaming that stimulates their violent interest. Violent and/or anti-social action is the central theme evident in their preferred materials.

One student refers to an "outdated 1960 morality that is influencing" TLC standards and staff standards of "censorship". The self characterization as a "gamer" is the predicate for his right to access violent material.

There is a desensitization process toward violence evident in the student-perceived acceptance of violent content. The development of a self definition that is linked to the interaction and role requirements of a violent "gamer" persona is also evident.

The new student definitions of morality, moral behavior and ethical interactions are defined increasingly by animated DVD and computer games.

The effect of repeated practice and redundant rehearsals of violent acts, initiated by the gamer as he acts in his role in the "game", is dangerous. The danger is not only from desensitizing the person to acts of violence but validation of the student's violent personal responses to other persons.

This student's response to violent media behavior is a treatment concern. It is not an adolescent student rights' issue.

Repetitive practice under the condition of "gaming," in combination with clinical issues associated with ADHD, Bipolar or Asperger Syndrome disorders, are of particular concern. Student learning of violent attitudes and behavior is unacceptable. Parents need to be more active and proactive in monitoring violent materials and creating acceptable options for their children.

Morality and ethics instruction begins at home and sound parenting requires the discussion about why the rehearsal of violent, albeit "fictitious" acts of blood letting, are out of bounds with the social ethic we wish to instill.

Personal Note: Violence and Individuals with Asperger Syndrome

I have provided educational services to children and adolescents since 1963. In my professional experience I have had a continuous relationship with children on the autistic spectrum and their families for forty-four years.

I have known autistic children who demonstrated aggression toward others both verbally and in physical ways. I have observed "self-directed" injuries most often in the behavior of young pre-school and elementary age children, particularly those children who had been diagnosed as autistic and who had IQ scores of 75 or below.

Most aggression by these children was situational and elicited by the stimulus of noise, threat, avoidance of food, textures unpleasant to the touch, or abrupt changes in routines. These children benefited from treatment and demonstrated improvement over time. In my experience with these severely autistic children, I have not observed malice, pre-meditation of violence, or intent to do serious harm to others.

My experience was, and is currently, different in terms of individuals with a diagnosis of high-functioning autism, Asperger Syndrome or NVLD—diagnoses that share common characteristics. For children with these diagnoses, the incidents of aggression are significantly less than that of children diagnosed as Autistic. Children who have the diagnoses of high functioning autism, Asperger Syndrome, or Non verbal Learning Disabilities are treatable; when such children do show aggression, their behavior can be redirected to alternatives to aggression, verbal or physical.

The majority of the hundreds of individuals I have observed, educated and treated have been able to <u>avoid</u> physical aggression by turning to learned constructive alternative behaviors. These individuals show no evidence of violent behavior, such as assault. In my forty-four years of working with young people, I have never observed or been involved with an incidence of violence that was caused by an individual with an Asperger Syndrome diagnosis and resulted in death or serious injury to another person.

The recent tragedy in a Massachusetts public high school has generated the following questions:

1. Do the symptoms associated with Asperger Syndrome cause a student to become violent and assault another person?
        The answer is, No, not in my experience.

2. Are Asperger Syndrome individuals often victims of aggression and violence?
        Yes, most assuredly. The research provides evidence that AS children are the victims of frequent bullying, threats, aggression by peers, siblings and friends of siblings. Ninety-four percent of over 400 families of children with an Asperger child reported such victimization of their AS child. There are more incidents of violence directed at AS students than from AS individuals.

Another question that parents ask has to do with the effects of violent themes in popular culture on children who have Asperger Syndrome. Research shows that children and adolescents are vulnerable to the influence of violent themes in video games, music, movies, DVD's, books and other sources. Children with Asperger Syndrome are vulnerable to repetitive exposure to patterns of violent themes, personal victimization and peer modeling of violence. Exposure to violent themes may influence an individual's behavior and responses. I have observed the effects of these types of influences on AS students in terms of their pursuit of such themes in games and materials and their degree of perseveration on violence.

Violent role-playing games may have a more pronounced influence on children's thinking and acting. I have observed violent talk, art and writing as the result of repeated exposure to violence in media and to violent role-playing.

But I have not seen violent, premeditated acts directed at others as a result of exposure to media experiences. Nor have I observed an intentional act of self-directed, violent aggression, or suicide, by an individual with Asperger Syndrome. My research indicates no patterns of violent behavior directed at either self or others by AS individuals.

All of us are exposed to themes and scenes of violence through television, the internet, books, movies, newspapers, news reports, and art. But repetitive exposure to violence may have a significant effect when combined with some of the symptoms of Asperger Syndrome, such as poor self-regulation, impaired social judgment, lack of empathy and perspective taking and lack of social networks.

We who are teachers and parents of AS students must be alert to the need to decrease their exposure to violence.

We need to consistently and successfully redirect any evidence of interest in violent themes demonstrated by those with an Asperger Syndrome diagnosis. Environments that are well structured, disciplined, and supervised and that redirect a student's violent interests result in fewer incidents of aggression or violence. Secure, safe settings can be designed to provide activities and resources to serve as alternatives to and replacements for violent options. Appropriate, effective medication and behavioral therapy are also needed. Such environments yield less aggression, fewer violent interests and reduced aggressive acts for all children at school.

Tragic anomalies occur. Yet to specifically associate violence with children who have an Asperger Syndrome diagnosis is a mistake in judgment. If violence occurs then other serious clinical factors are present. TLC is in its 27th year; in our experience, individuals who have an Asperger Syndrome diagnosis do not threaten others with serious injury as a result of this diagnosis.

Results from student surveys – Meadows Building (ages 8-13)
Out of 11 students surveyed:
- ❖ 27% listed **movies with violent** content among their favorites
- ❖ 0% listed **movies with sexual** content among their favorites
- ❖ 9% listed **books with violent** content among their favorites
- ❖ 0% listed **books with sexual** content among their favorites
- ❖ 36% listed **video games with violent** content among their favorites
- ❖ 0% listed **video games with sexual** content among their favorites
- ❖ 45% listed **music CD's with violent** content among their favorites
- ❖ 45% listed **music CD's with sexual** content among their favorites

- ❖   0% listed **myspace, youtube, or chat rooms** as their favorite internet sites. 9% listed a **violent theme** game site
- ❖ 82% listed students within TLC as their best friends
- ❖ 18% listed students outside of TLC as their best friends
- ❖   0% stated they had no friends
- ❖ 27% listed negative traits when describing themselves

Results from student surveys – Overlook building (ages 12 ½ - 17)
Out of 23 students surveyed:

- ❖ 43% listed **movies with violent** content among their favorites
- ❖   0% listed **movies with sexual** content among favorites
- ❖ 17% listed **books with violent** content among favorites
- ❖   0% listed **books with sexual** content among favorites
- ❖ 17% stated they do not read
- ❖ 43% listed **video games with violent** content among favorites
- ❖   8% listed **video games with sexual** content among favorites
- ❖ 30% listed **music CD's with violent** content among favorites
- ❖ 13% listed **music CD's with sexual** content among favorites
- ❖ 13% listed **myspace, youtube, or chat rooms** among favorite internet sites. 8% listed internet sites with violent content as their favorites
- ❖ 43% listed students within TLC as their best friends
- ❖ 52% listed students outside of TLC as their best friends
- ❖   4% stated that they had no best friends
- ❖ 17% listed negative traits when describing themselves

Results from student surveys – Brooklyn building (ages 16 – 19 ½)
Out of 20 students surveyed:

- ❖ 65% listed **movies with violent** content among their favorites
- ❖ 15% listed **movies with sexual** content among favorites
- ❖ 15% listed **books with violent** content among favorites
- ❖ 15% listed **books with sexual** content among favorites
- ❖ 45% listed **video games with violent** content among favorites
- ❖   0% listed **video games with sexual** content among favorites
- ❖ 20% listed **music CD's with violent** content among favorites
- ❖   0% listed **music CD's with sexual** content among favorites
- ❖ 15% listed **myspace, youtube, or chat rooms** among favorite internet sites.
- ❖ 65% listed students within TLC as their best friends
- ❖ 50% listed students outside of TLC as their best friends
- ❖   5% stated that they had no best friends
- ❖ 15% listed negative traits when describing themselves

STAFF SURVEY RESULTS
March 2007

1) Have you ever had to confiscate any inappropriate materials from students due to violent or pornographic content?

Yes – 81%   No – 19%

Comments: Confiscated items include romance novels (highly sexualized content), violent drawings with weapons, or themes of aggression and killing, and books, magazines, and videos (residential setting) with violent content.

2) On average, how often do you need to address inappropriate content of materials with students?   (i.e. daily, weekly, monthly)

Daily – 10%   Weekly – 43%   Monthly – 48%

Comments: Most respondents indicated that students were in possession of inappropriate materials less frequently (on average on monthly basis), while staff often needed to redirect student conversations to more appropriate topics much more frequently, usually on a daily basis, especially with specific students.

3) What is the specific nature or content of the inappropriate material you have encountered is students' possession? (i.e. books, drawings, music, etc.)

Books – 43%   Music – 38%   Drawings/Artwork – 62%
Movies – 14%   Internet – 19%   Magazines/Pictures – 14%

Comments: Staff noted that it often the same students who are in possession of inappropriate materials, and again that conversations reflecting inappropriate content (discussing movies, books, music, etc.) were one of the biggest issues.

4) Do the student conversations reflect the students' exposure to violent material or media?

Yes – 100%   No – 0%

Comments: Redirecting student conversations to more appropriate topics was identified as a frequent occurrence for all staff with many of the students throughout the program.

5) Is there any specific context or setting in which violent behavior or content is increased? (i.e. during/after home visits, during unstructured breaks, after internet use)

After home visits – 52%   During breaks – 48%
During internet use – 10%   During less structured times – 48%
(i.e. community)