



TV: The Modern Babysitter

Professor: Childhood habit can become adult addiction

By Tom Mainelli
Staff Reporter

Most children watch between six and eight hours of television every day.

According to the American Psychology Association, by the time those children reach the end of their elementary education, most will have watched more than 8,000 murders and 100,000 violent acts.

Is all that television and violence having a negative effect on children and their families?

After much study, research and discussion, the experts agree on one thing — they all have their own opinions.

UNL sociology professor Jennifer Lehmann definitely has an opinion on the topic.

"I'm opposed to television, period," Lehmann said.

"It is like an addiction to cigarettes — with very few redeeming qualities and many detrimental factors. It is a bad habit that was not designed for our benefit, but for advertisers," she said.

Lehmann said she had three major criticisms of television.

The first is that it draws children and adults away from other activities.

"When kids watch six hours of television, they don't take the time to read books, exercise and communicate," she said. "They substitute television for knowledge and experience."

Television's content is another factor, she said.

"Television content is very unrealistic and simplistic. The means of persuasion on television condition children to see things irrationally."

Lehmann said she es-

timated that about 99.9 percent of advertising was based on irrational nonarguments about why the consumer should buy a product.

Lehmann also criticized television's overall structure. "The whole activity is so passive, both mentally and physically," she said.

That passivity has led to an acceptance of increasing amounts of violence on television and the real world, she said.

"I know that I used to have a stronger reaction to violence on television than I do now," she said.

But Lehmann said she would blame economic fac-

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tors, not television, for the increasing amount of real violence on the streets.

She said while television desensitized people to the violence, it probably didn't cause it.

"The biggest problem is that you can't get people to react — to fight against wrongs — when those wrongs become commonplace to them," she said.

Janis Jacobs, an associate professor of psychology at UNL, is convinced that children are affected by the violence they see on television.

"Research done over the last 20 years shows that all the television violence is having a negative effect," she said.

"Children watch the 'good guys' engage in violence, then get rewarded. While the younger children are impacted the most, it seems to increase everyone's aggression," Jacobs said.

Preschool children can be affected the most, she said, because they often have a difficult time distinguishing between reality and fiction.

Children sometimes have a problem with the concept of "pretend quality," she said.

"They watch television or play a game where people are killed, but they come back in the end — which makes death seem less than final. This should cause some concern," Jacobs said.

Another problem is that violence is overrepresented on television, she said.

"Television often makes violence seem more common than it actually is," she said.

Despite all of the violence they watch, Jacobs said most children outgrew problems related to television violence.

"For most children, the rest of their social world balances out these effects in the long run," she said. "The problems are socialized away."

Michael Stricklin, a professor in the College of Journalism and Mass Communications and a "professional mass media watcher," said a strong social background could prevent much of the confusion children had with television and violence.

"Young children really need someone to help them understand what they are watching," he said.

"If there is someone there to help explain what is real and what isn't, then the child can begin to understand how television fits into their lives."

Supervision is the key, he said.

"Don't use the media as a baby-sitter."

But Lehmann said she was skeptical of supervised viewing.

"If they still spend six to eight hours in front of the television, even with supervision, it isn't much better."

Lehmann said if she had children, she would get rid of her television.

It may seem extreme, she said, but parents have the power and responsibility to do what they think is best for their children.

"Parents need to learn how to interact with their children," she said.

Instead of placing a child in front of the television, she said parents should "take them outside to play, introduce them to reading — cultivate them."

By introducing them to different options, the children can make the informed decision about television when they become adults, she said.

"If a child grows up addicted to television, then as an adult, they will see few choices," she said.

"They will simply become addicted adults."

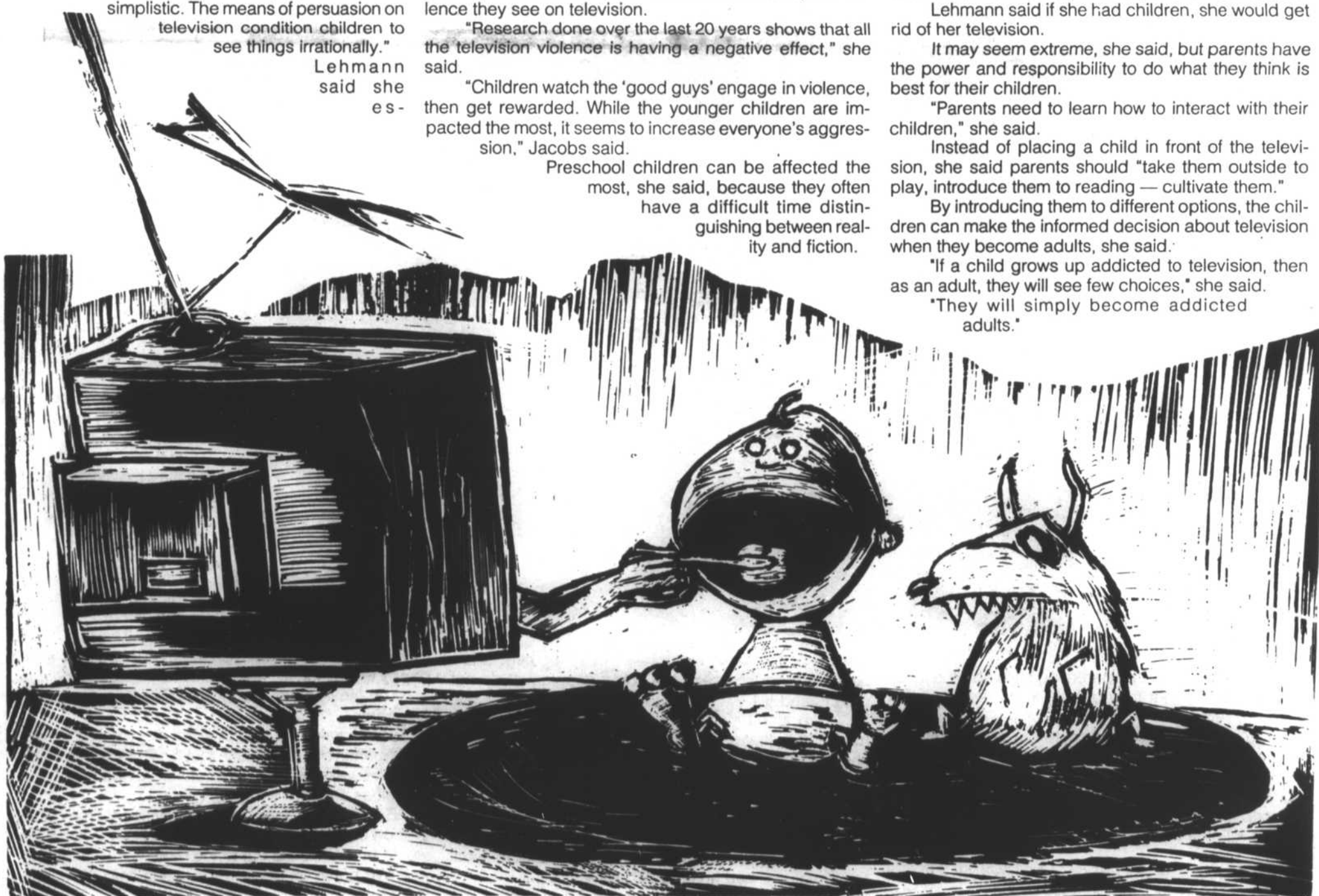


Illustration by James Mehling