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A concerned mother debates a producer of TV cartoons over a recent Surgeon General's report that linked violent cartoons and programs with short-term aggressive behavior in children.

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"Is There a Link Between Cartoons and Violence?" Matt Lauer, correspondent. NBC Today Show.
Transcript

Is There a Link Between Cartoons and Violence?

MATT LAUER, co-host: Kicking, punching and screaming, it's standard fare for kids who watch action-packed cartoons on television. But does it make children more violent? A recent surgeon general's report found a link between violent media and short-term aggressive behavior in children.

Kathryn Montgomery is president of the Center for Media Education, which advocates less violence in children's programming. Andy Heyward is the president of Dic Entertainment, a leading producer of children's animated television.

LAUER: Ms. Montgomery, let me start with you. Is it really true that--that cartoons kids are watching today are more violent than say the cartoons we watched when we were growing up?

Ms. MONTGOMERY: Well, there's definitely been a change in the kinds of kids programming that we see today. Now, we have programs that are based on toys where there is a whole array of products and licensed characters associated with the program. And we've seen a new kind of program that is often called the combat--combat violence program--combat violence, which really has a whole theme of violence.

LAUER: Yeah, but I watched the Roadrunner and the Coyote when I was a kid, and there were toys related to that cartoon and--and the coyote was constantly blowing things up and dropping things off a cliff. Is it worse than that?

Ms. MONTGOMERY: Well, it's a different kind of violence, in the sense that we're not looking at animals--animated animals, but rather with the Power Rangers and with some of the other new Japanese cartoons, you have characters that are closer to human characters, often, and you have programs that are based on a whole theme of violence.

LAUER: Mr. Heyward, as somebody who produces a lot of these animated features, do you agree that the level of violence and the kind of violence has increased?

Mr. HEYWARD: I'd really have to disagree. I've been not only producing them, but I've been a writer of cartoons my whole career, and if you look back going over the years, I think you see a lot less right now.
It's one of the most scrutinized areas in television. All of the producers have consultants; they work very closely with the academic community these days. And I think the things that are more in the era of the GI Joes that were produced 10 years ago, you don't see so many of those today.

LAUER: would you agree, Mr. Heyward, though, that children do react, that there is a cause and effect if you show children violence in cartoons, and they sit there, and they consume a lot--a lot of it--as the surgeon general's report indicated, that there may be an effect on their behavior, at least, in the short term?

Mr. HEYWARD: Yeah, I would agree. But I think you have to look at the things that are genuinely imitatable, or are they not? For example, you mentioned the "Roadrunner." Nobody is going to look at a cartoon where an anvil is dropped and flattens a cartoon animal and say that's something imitatable, and they're going to go out and drop an anvil out the window and hurt somebody. Those are the types of things that, you know, you still see in the--what we call the squash-and-stretch-type violence. There is--I can't point to a single cartoon that's on right now where you see things that kids can look at them, they can identify them, put them in a context in their daily life and say this is something that is going to happen.

LAUER: Mr. Heyward, isn't it the Responsibility of parents to get their kids away from the television sets, so they don't sit for hour after hour on a Saturday morning?

Mr. HEYWARD: Of course, of course. And there's so many things going on today besides just the television. You've got the computer. You've got the video games. You've got access to all of the new and emerging media and technologies that are available to kids. The thing that I think concerns a lot of us is that kids are watching television and media that is very imitatable and is very real, and they look at the context, and they can't discern that from their real life. When you watch a "Jerry Springer" show and you see kids--you see people that you know down the block from you, and your neighbors, hitting and beating each other and engaging in all kinds of anti-social behavior. That's very disturbing. I have three kids myself, and there's no way of saying to the kids, 'This is children's television time; this is not 8 to 11 Saturday morning. You can watch 11 to 2 in the afternoon when there's wrestling, and all the other types of things going on you can't watch.'

Ms. MONTGOMERY: Well, all of these things have to do with the quality of the media culture that we're creating in this particular era, and I think there are a lot of disturbing issues where the TV industry is really pushing the envelope. You're going to see more public scrutiny. I know that a lot of parents are very concerned about this, and I think what we need to look for is for some corporate responsibility.

LAUER: All right, let me make that the last word. Kathryn Montgomery, Andy Heyward, thanks both for your time, we appreciate it.

Mr. HEYWARD: Thank you.

Ms. MONTGOMERY: Thank you.