

❖ Violence on Television



Television is enjoyed by millions of Canadians each day. Canada's private broadcasters recognize, however, that certain TV programs are unsuitable for younger viewers. In conjunction with others in the broadcast sector, private broadcasters have taken action to help parents and caregivers manage their family's viewing choices.

One important initiative undertaken by the CAB involved development of the CAB Violence Code, first introduced to broadcasters in 1987.

The guidelines set out in this code are intended to assist CAB members in the creation, scheduling, purchase, broadcast and distribution of programs, and are also designed to complement the general principles set out in the *CAB Code of Ethics*.

Some Questions Viewers May Have

Q: *How does the CAB Violence Code define "children" and what are its provisions relative to children's programming?*

A: "Children" refers to persons younger than age 12. The code also notes eight points about the nature of programming for children. It states that this genre requires "particular caution in the depiction of violence" and specifies that "very little violence" of either a physical, verbal or emotional nature shall be portrayed.

Distinguishing between what is acceptable in live-action as compared with animated programming, the code says that in shows featuring "real-life characters", violence shall only be portrayed when essential to the development of character and plot. While animated programming can contain non-realistic violence, it must "not have violence as its central theme."

Content intended for children must also deal carefully with themes which could "threaten their sense of security," including: domestic conflict, the death of parents or close relatives, the death or injury of children's pets, street crime or the use of drugs. Similarly, "programming for children shall deal carefully with themes which could invite children to imitate acts" they see on screen, such as: the use of plastic bags as toys, the use of matches, the use of dangerous household products as playthings, or dangerous physical acts such as climbing apartment balconies or rooftops.

The code also discourages depiction of realistic scenes of violence which "create the impression that violence is the preferred way, or the only method to resolve conflict between individuals" or which minimize the effects of violent acts." It emphasizes the importance of ensuring children understand the consequences of such acts.

Q: *What is the purpose of the CAB Violence Code?*

A: The code outlines programming standards and scheduling provisions for the broadcast of information, news and entertainment programming. It ensures viewers can make educated choices about the programming they watch, and that children are not exposed to any gratuitous violence. In addition to the regulatory restrictions articulated above, these measures include:

- **A watershed hour** of 9:00 pm. Broadcasters do not air programs that include any violence intended for adult audiences before 9:00 pm or after 6:00 am;

- **Program rating systems** that take into account the intended viewing audience;
- **On-screen icons** to inform viewers of the appropriate viewing audience;
- **Required frequent viewer advisories** (both on-screen and audible); and
- **V-Chip encoding** that allows parents to block access to programs containing violent material intended for adult audiences.

These industry codes and standards are administered by the Canadian Broadcast Standards Council (www.cbsc.ca), an independent organization comprised of public and industry representatives. The CBSC provides recourse for members of the public regarding the application of broadcast standards.

If a viewer is concerned about the content or the scheduling of programming, they may complain. Once the complaint arrives at the CBSC, a process is in place to respond to the issue or issues raised. The CBSC has proven to be an effective mechanism for self-regulation and is fully supported by the CRTC.

Q: *Broadly speaking, what have private broadcasters done to protect our children?*

A: Canada's private broadcasters have led the way in creating regulatory mechanisms and strong industry codes to ensure audiences are fully informed when making their viewing choices. Working in cooperation with the CRTC and such other stakeholders as the CBSC and the Action Group on Violence on Television (AGVOT), the CAB developed the current, mandatory system of industry codes and standards through extensive public consultations.

Adherence to these codes is a condition of licence and Canada's private broadcasters agree to observe them. The CRTC reviews broadcaster compliance with the codes from time to time and when licensees apply for licence renewal.

Q: *Why not monitor the programming to forestall complaints?*

A: The various codes exist to guide programmers and to respond to public complaints. The codes are not intended to be the basis of a censorship system which would be both intrusive and costly. The present system – paid for by broadcasters – strikes a balance between protecting the public and punishing any offending broadcaster.

Canada's private broadcasters have also shown their commitment by airing several award-winning national public service campaigns on issues related to violence.

Q: *Does the system work?*

A: There is not the slightest doubt that it does. With the system of codes and other checks and balances in place, broadcasters understand what programming is permitted to air, and at what time of day. Returning to the important issue of protecting our children, it should be noted that it was thanks to the CBSC that the Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers left Canadian airwaves in 1994, shortly after the violence code came into effect. In the area of children's television, no inappropriate violent programming has ever replaced the Power Rangers on Canadian television in the last 14 years.

Interestingly, there is no organization in the United States that deals with violence on television. Neither the Federal Communications Commission (the equivalent of the CRTC) nor any self-regulatory body is ensuring that standards be upheld and breaches remedied.