



Violent Video Games - Psychologists Help Protect Children from Harmful Effects

Psychological research confirms that violent video games can increase children's aggression, but that parents moderate the negative effects.

Findings

Fifty years' of research on violent television and movies has shown that there are several negative effects of watching such fare (see <http://www.psychologymatters.org/mediaviolence.html>). Because video games are a newer medium, there is less research on them than there is on TV and movies. However, studies by psychologists such as Douglas Gentile, PhD, and Craig Anderson, PhD, indicate it is likely that violent video games may have even stronger effects on children's aggression because (1) the games are highly engaging and interactive, (2) the games reward violent behavior, and because (3) children repeat these behaviors over and over as they play (Gentile & Anderson, 2003). Psychologists know that each of these help learning - active involvement improves learning, rewards increase learning, and repeating something over and over increases learning.

Drs. Anderson and Gentile's research shows that children are spending increasing amounts of time playing video games - 13 hours per week for boys, on average, and 5 hours per week for girls (Anderson, Gentile, & Buckley, under review; Gentile, Lynch, Linder, & Walsh, 2004). A 2001 content analyses by the research organization Children Now shows that a majority of video games include violence, about half of which would result in serious injuries or death in the 'real' world. Children often say their favorite video games are violent. What is the result of all this video game mayhem?

Dr. Anderson and colleagues have shown that playing a lot of violent video games is related to having more aggressive thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Anderson & Bushman, 2001). Furthermore, playing violent games is also related to children being less willing to be caring and helpful towards their peers. Importantly, research has shown that these effects happen just as much for non-aggressive children as they do for children who already have aggressive tendencies (Anderson et al., under review; Gentile et al., 2004).

Parents have an important role to play. Psychologists have found that when parents limit the amount of time as well as the types of games their children play, children are less likely to show aggressive behaviors (Anderson et al., under review; Gentile et al., 2004). Other research suggests that active parental involvement in children's media usage-including discussing the inappropriateness of violent solutions to real life conflicts, reducing time spent on violent media, and generating alternative nonviolent solutions to problems-all can reduce the impact of media violence on children and youth (Anderson et al., 2003).

Significance

Children spend a great deal of time with violent video games at exactly the ages that they should be learning healthy ways to relate to other people and to resolve conflicts peacefully. Because video games are such good

teachers, it is critical to help parents, educators, and policy-makers understand how to maximize their benefits while minimizing potential harms.

Practical Application

In 1993, the video game industry began putting ratings on video games (E for 'everyone,' T for 'teen,' and M for 'mature'). Psychologists such as David Walsh, PhD, have conducted research on how useful the ratings are and how easily children can purchase mature-rated video games (e.g., Walsh & Gentile, 2002; see http://www.mediafamily.org/research/report_vgrc_index.shtml to see annual results). This research has caused the video game industry to improve its ratings systems and to improve its policies regarding marketing mature video games to children.

Research has shown both the deleterious effects of violent video games on children and the ease with which children can purchase mature-rated games (e.g., FTC, 2003). These combined types of studies have influenced several major retail stores (e.g., Sears, Target, Walmart) to create policies preventing children under 17 from buying mature-rated video games. Researchers are continuing to study how effectively stores enforce such policies.

Some researchers have created school curricula to help teach children to reduce their total amount of screen time and/or the types of programs and games watched/played. Although the research is still limited, these curricula show many positive effects, such as a reduction of aggressive behaviors on school playgrounds (Robinson et al., 2001).

Some cities, states, and countries have considered legislation preventing the sale of mature-rated video games to children (similar to laws preventing the sale of tobacco to children). Also, Dr. Anderson is among the psychologists helping policy-makers to understand the problems that violent video games can pose for children's healthy outcomes. (see his testimony before Congress <http://www.psychology.iastate.edu/faculty/caa/abstracts/2000-2004/00Senate.html>). In addition, numerous child advocacy and parent support groups have incorporated video game research findings into their web sites and educational materials. Examples include [National Institute on Media and the Family](#), [Lion and Lamb project](#), [Young Media Australia](#), [Children Now](#), [Center for Successful Parenting](#), [Action Coalition for Media Education](#), and [Victorian Parenting Centre](#).

Cited Research

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Robinson, T.N., Wilde, M.L., Navracruz, L.C., Haydel, K.F., & Varady, A. (2001). Effects of reducing children's television and video game use on aggressive behavior: A randomized controlled trial. *Archives of Pediatric Adolescent Medicine, Vol. 155*, pp. 17-23.

Walsh, D. A., & Gentile, D. A. (2001). A validity test of movie, television, and videogame ratings. *Pediatrics, Vol. 107*, pp. 1302-1308.

Additional Sources

APA Public Information Brochure:

[Violence on Television: What do Children Learn? What Can Parents Do?](#)

National Institute on Media and the Family:

[Fact sheets on the effects of media on children and families](#)

[Annual MediaWise Video Game Report Cards](#)

American Psychological Association, June 8, 2004

Violence on Television

What do Children Learn? What Can Parents Do?

<http://www.apa.org/pi/vio&tv.html>

Violent programs on television lead to aggressive behavior by children and teenagers who watch those programs.

That's the word from a 1982 report by the National Institute of Mental Health, a report that confirmed and extended an earlier study done by the Surgeon General. As a result of these and other research findings, the American Psychological Association passed a [resolution in February 1985](#) informing broadcasters and the public of the potential dangers that viewing violence on television can have for children.

What Does the Research Show?

Psychological research has shown three major effects of seeing violence on television:

- Children may become less sensitive to the pain and suffering of others
- Children may be more fearful of the world around them
- Children may be more likely to behave in aggressive or harmful ways toward others.

Children who watch a lot of TV are less aroused by violent scenes than are those who only watch a little; in other words, they're less bothered by violence in general, and less likely to anything wrong with it. One example: in several studies, those who watched a violent program instead of a nonviolent one were slower to intervene or to call for help when, a little later, they saw younger children fighting or playing destructively.

Studies by George Gerbner, Ph.D., at the University of Pennsylvania, have shown that children's TV shows contain about 20 violent acts each hour and also that children who watch a lot of television are more likely to think that the world is a mean and dangerous place.

Children often behave differently after they've been watching violent programs on TV. In one study done at Pennsylvania State University, about 100 preschool children were observed both before and after watching television; some watched cartoons that had a lot of aggressive and violent acts in them, and others watched shows that didn't have any kind of violence. The researchers noticed real differences between the kids who watched the violent shows and those who watched nonviolent ones.

'Children who watch the violent shows, even 'just funny' cartoons, were more likely to hit out at their playmates, argue, disobey class rules, leave tasks unfinished, and were less willing to wait for things than those who watched the nonviolent programs,' says Aletha Huston, Ph.D., now at the University of Kansas.

Real-Life Studies

Findings from the laboratory are further supported by field studies which have shown the long-range effects of televised violence. Leonard Eron, Ph.D., and his associates at the University of Illinois, found that children who watched many hours of TV violence when they were in elementary school tended to also show a higher level of aggressive behavior when they became teenagers. By observing these youngsters until they were 30 years old, Dr. Eron found that the ones who'd watched a lot of TV when they were eight years old were more likely to be arrested and prosecuted for criminal acts as adults.

A Continuing Debate

In spite of this accumulated evidence, broadcasters and scientists continue to debate the link between the viewing TV violence and children's aggressive behavior. Some broadcasters believe that there is not enough evidence to prove that TV violence is harmful. But scientists who have studied this issue say that there is a link between TV violence and aggression, and in 1992, the American Psychological Association's Task Force on Television and Society published a report that confirms this view. The report, entitled *Big World, Small Screen: The Role of Television in American Society*, shows that the harmful effects of TV violence do exist.

What Parents Can Do

While most scientists are convinced that children can learn aggressive behavior from television, they also point out that parents have tremendous power to moderate that influence.

Because there is a great deal of violence in both adult and children's programming, just limiting the number of hours children watch television will probably reduce the amount of aggression they see.

In addition:

Parents should watch at least one episode of the programs their children watch. That way they'll know what their children are watching and be able to talk about it with them.

When they see a violent incident, parents can discuss with their child what caused the character to act in a violent way. They should also point out that this kind of behavior is not characteristic, not the way adults usually solve their problems. They can ask their children to talk about other ways the character could have reacted, or other nonviolent solutions to the character's problem.

Parents can outright ban any programs that they find too offensive. They can also restrict their children's viewing to shows that they feel are more beneficial, such as documentaries, educational shows and so on.

Parents can limit the amount of time children spend watching television, and encourage children to spend their time on sports, hobbies, or with friends; parents and kids can even draw up a list of other enjoyable activities to do instead of watching TV.

Parents can encourage their children to watch programs that demonstrate helping, caring and cooperation. Studies show that these types of programs can influence children to become more kind and considerate.

For More Information

If you're Interested in reading more about the research and public issues discussed in this brochure, you may find the following books and articles helpful:

Comstock, G. (1991). *Television in America*. Newbury Park, CA; Sage Publications.

Huston, A.C., Donnerstein, E., Fairchild, H., Feshbach, N.D., Katz, P.A., Murray, J.P. Rubinstein, E.A., Wilcox, B. & Zuckerman, D. (1992). *Big World, Small Screen: The Role of Television in American Society*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.

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The American Psychological Association (APA) located in Washington, D.C., is the largest scientific and professional organization representing psychology in the United States and is the world's largest association of psychologists. APA's membership includes more than 132,000 practitioners, researchers, educators, consultants and students. Through its divisions in 49 subfields of psychology and affiliations with 58 state and territorial and Canadian provincial associations, APA works to advance psychology as a science, as a profession and as a means of promoting human welfare.

Associated Press
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By Jesse J. Holland
Associated Press

Groups Link Media to Child Violence

http://www.fradical.com/groups_link_media_to_child_violence.htm

WASHINGTON (AP) - Marking what one lawmaker called a turning point in the battle against entertainment violence, four national health associations are directly linking violence in television, music, video games and movies to increasing violence among children.

``Its effects are measurable and long-lasting," the four groups say in a statement. ``Moreover, prolonged viewing of media violence can lead to emotional desensitization toward violence in real life."

The joint statement by the American Medical Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Psychological Association and the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry will be the centerpiece of a public health summit Wednesday on entertainment violence.

``The conclusion of the public health community, based on over 30 years of research, is that viewing entertainment violence can lead to increases in aggressive attitudes, values and behaviors, particularly in children," the organizations' statement says.

Advocating a code of conduct for the entire entertainment industry, Sen. Sam Brownback, R-Kan., compared the statement to the medical community declaring that cigarettes can cause cancer.

``I think this is an important turning point," said Brownback. ``Among the professional community, there's no longer any doubt about this. For the first time, you have the four major medical and psychiatric associations coming together and stating flatly that violence in entertainment has a direct effect on violence in our children."

The Motion Picture Association of America and the National Association of Broadcasters refused to comment Tuesday on the medical associations' statement. ``I'm not going to comment on something we haven't seen," said Jeff Bobeck, spokesman for the National Association of Broadcasters.

The four health professional groups left no doubt about their feelings in the statement:

``Children who see a lot of violence are more likely to view violence as an effective way of settling conflicts. Children exposed to violence are more likely to assume that acts of violence are acceptable behavior," it said.

``Viewing violence can lead to emotional desensitization toward violence in real life. It can decrease the likelihood that one will take action on behalf of a victim when violence occurs."

``Viewing violence may lead to real life violence. Children exposed to violent programming at a young age have a higher tendency for violent and aggressive behavior later in life than children who are not so exposed."

Brownback said he hopes the statement will convince lawmakers that something has to be done about media violence. And, he said, ``I hope parents will look at this and say that they're going to have to police their children's entertainment violence content the same way they police what their children eat and other health issues."

One entertainment violence monitoring group, The Lion & Lamb Project in nearby Bethesda, Md., cheered the statement. ``Right now, the message we're sending children in the media is that violence is OK ... that it's part of life and sometimes it's even funny," executive director Daphne White said. ``We're even using violence for humor now."

Bobek said television now has V-chips and a rating system to help parents take control of what their children watch. ``We think more parents need to control their remote control," Bobek said.

But White said the entertainment industry markets video games and toys to children based on R-rated movies, has increased the violence in movies and shows that are rated for children and even previewed adult-oriented movies during children's G-rated movie. ``The industry has been actively marketing adult stuff to children while saying it's the adults' fault," she said.