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Is it worse for a child to see pornography or graphic violence?

By Brian Palmer

Posted Tuesday, June 28, 2011, at 5:02 PM ET



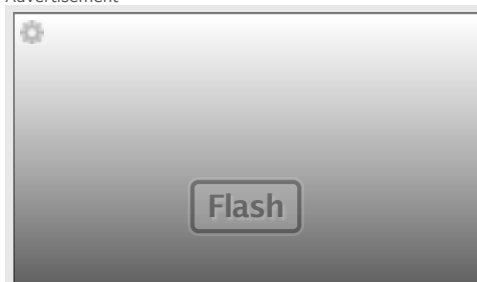
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The Supreme Court struck down a California law regulating the sale of violent video games to children on Monday. Writing for the majority, [Justice Scalia noted](#) that, unlike sexual content, which can be regulated, violence [has been part of children's entertainment](#) for centuries. History aside, do we know whether exposure to sex or violence is worse for children?

No, but the studies on violence are almost uniformly better constructed and controlled. Researchers have [repeatedly shown](#) (PDF) in [blind](#) experiments that children are more aggressive in the moments after playing violent video games, and long-term studies suggest that the effects may be lasting among habitual gamers. As for pornography, there is some research showing that increased consumption of sexually explicit material leads to earlier sexual experiences, higher [teen pregnancy rates](#), and undesirable views about gender roles. But these studies are problematic. Most of them involve questionnaires—because university ethics committees won't allow researchers to expose minors to sexual material (even though they're OK with violence). And it's not clear whether viewing pornography causes negative outcomes, or if children who view pornography have some underlying issue that both causes the negative outcome and leads them to seek out porn. (The long-term research on gaming has the same shortcoming, but at least it's paired with short-term evidence that indicates causation.) There are also some surprises in the sex research. Despite the rarity of condoms in pornography, researchers have found no evidence that young porn consumers are less likely to use contraception or more likely to contract a sexually transmitted disease than their peers who have never seen a dirty movie.

Most of the leading studies on violent video gaming are experimental in nature. Researchers separate participants into two groups—one plays a violent game and the other something more benign. Following their gaming sessions, the subjects must impose some form of punishment on an unseen third party, as in Stanley Milgram's infamous [electroshock experiment](#). For example, the children might determine the volume of an irritating sound that the victim will be forced to hear. A more modern version instructs the participants to pour however much hot sauce they like on a dish that will be served to a victim who hates spicy food. In virtually all large-scale studies, researchers find that the children who just finished the shoot-'em-up game will opt for more brutal punishment.

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Scientists have also begun to [monitor the flow of blood](#) in the brains of subjects either during or immediately after a violent video gaming session. The emerging research suggests that the games impair the part of the brain responsible for impulse control.

The most common study design for exposure to sexual media is the large-

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scale survey. Investigators typically ask hundreds or thousands of children whether and how often they visit sexually explicit websites or watch R- or X-rated movies, and then inquire

into their sexual behaviors. Some researchers keep it relatively clean, asking only about how many sexual partners the kids have had and whether they've ever been pregnant. Others are far more explicit, asking about [particular sexual acts](#) and whether the subjects like to get high before sex.

Another common study asks children about incidental or unwanted exposure, which usually means stumbling upon a pornographic website. Since these are one-time incidents in the past, researchers usually don't attempt to correlate them with the participants' general attitudes toward sex. Instead, they probe the kids for their responses to the images. Children sometimes report [embarrassment or a fear of the Internet](#) (PDF), but most report no negative response.

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*Explainer thanks Craig A. Anderson of Iowa State University, Jane Brown of the University of North Carolina, Patricia Greenfield of UCLA, and Daniel Linz of UCSB.*

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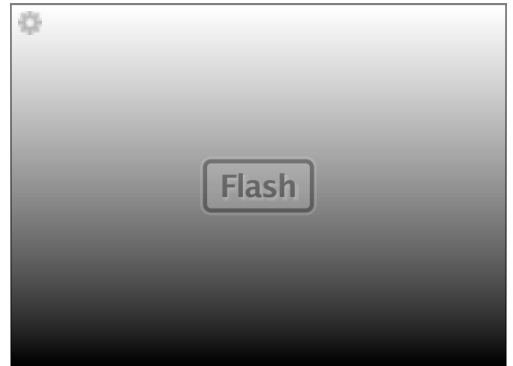
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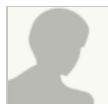
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**Ricky Mason**

The main difference here is that ...violence in movies and games is FAKE. Even digital pornography is fake, and is not at all comparable to movies and life where sex is portrayed.

Even though in "the majority" of shows and movies, sex is faked, you still have groping, and an intimate act occurring between 2 people. You can fake penetration, but not any other type of intimate interaction.

There's actually a really good discussion on the "Spartacus" message boards on IMDB...i suggest people check it out.

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**Tom Love**

A lot of people are making this distinction, but if digital pornography is as fake as digital violence, then why the outrage over sex in computer games?

It's a convenient rationalization, but I don't think it reflects the actual basis of the puritanism we're talking about.

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**Tom Love**

Also, we seem to have it backwards. We're happily equating on-screen sex with the reality of human relationships, and failing to equate on-screen violence with the reality human relationships. Why?

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**George Simeon**

"unlike sexual content, which can be regulated, violence has been part of children's entertainment for centuries."

The inconsistency or the argument aside (why is it that one form of media content be regulated and the other not?)

I wonder whether these justices would rather be subjected to entertaining sex or entertaining violence?

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**mikaydee**

Where is the citation to the long-term studies that show the possible lasting effects of violence on habitual gamers, so that we can see how "possible," "lasting," "habitual," and "gamers" are defined and operationalized. I wasted a lot of time over the last twenty years playing Sims, Civilization, and Super Mario Kart, and I recently spent an entire Saturday afternoon building a Minecraft replica of my childhood home. I wonder if it has possibly made me a more violent individual....

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**mr\_bubb**

Jesus Christ, this country. We're ok showing chain-saw dismemberment on national tv at 8 p.m., but if a nipple slips at the Super Bowl we can't function. God I want to live in Europe.

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Liked by Andy M-S



**opus512**

Breyer put it best, IMO;

"What kind of First Amendment would permit the government to protect children by restricting sales of that extremely violent video game only when the woman — bound, gagged, tortured, and killed — is also topless?"

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**iris**

"...or if children who view pornography have some underlying issue that both causes the negative outcome and leads them to seek out porn."

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excuse me? if "children" are people under 18 that's around 99% of all of them. what 16 year old, male or female, hasn't watched porn? And most of us are fine. Jesus.

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**Ry Kro**

You know what my dad did, he sat me down and told me it was all a movie. That the blood wasn't real and that bullets kill you in reality if they hit you.

Then he put in the VHS tape ( yes i'm old shush ) PREDATOR in, after that TERMINATOR, after that ROBOCOP..... we went down the line..... oh ALIEN was a blast my first time.

The point is I sat down WITH MY PARENTS and they explained to me what was going on and that doing these things in real life was NOT OK.

Then randomly one day my father explained PRON vs SEX.... there is a difference people.

BE A FREAKING PARENT AND TALK WITH YOUR CHILD.

The violence is not the problem,  
The Porn is not the problem,  
Parents that fail at life and their jobs as parents THEY ARE THE PROBLEM.

now if you don't mind i'm going to go beat off while playing "Thrill Kill"

for fun facts Google THRILL KILL VIDEO GAME. ( that was a game that was canned because it was so, /cough bloody"

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Liked by Jason Ross Tiberius Kirk



**Kevin Miner**

First of all . . . great headline.

Second of all: these sexual studies do not appear to differentiate between sexual conduct and outright pornography. There is a difference.

And third, let's get real. What do you think is more distressing for a small child: to accidentally walk in on mommy and daddy making love? Or mommy and daddy yelling and hit one another?

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Liked by Devils Advocate Alan



**Yaz**

Huh? Pornography is not analogous to mommy and daddy making love. Neither is an argument between parents analogous to the type of violence seen in graphically violent video games.

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Liked by Tiberius Kirk



**Kevin Miner**

I didn't say that pornography was analogous to two parents making love. I said that context was everything.

I also didn't say parents arguing, I said parents arguing and hitting one another. I made no comparison to physical violence between spouses and that of video games. I was merely pointing out the fallacy of our intellectual lightweight Justice Scalia.

Making distinctions and determining what is and what is not appropriate for children would be better left to child psychologists than a group of nine lawyers.

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**Gen Mal**

So the question is would you rather your child have sex or commit murder.....tough question.

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Liked by Alan



**perimeter285**

Best title ever!

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**Steve R**

I wouldn't want to expose my hypothetical children to either pornography or graphic



violence. I think most people would agree with that statement, with the biggest point of contention being at what age it's okay for them to see certain things.

But I think it's much more revealing to consider simple nudity vs. violence. You can put an awful lot of violence into a PG-13 or even a PG movie, but virtually any glimpse of nudity means an R rating. Isn't that twisted? That we're more concerned about shielding our kids from – gasp – the human body than we are about shielding them from violent images?

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Liked by Laura Marie



**Pax Terminus**

Yup. My feeling exactly. I have never been traumatized by seeing Nicole Kidman or Jessica Biel nude on the screen.

But I cannot take a single episode of Law&Order: SVU. I mean literally, I cannot watch a full episode without hyper-ventilating. I wonder what is inside a mind of an average American that they made 10 seasons of this show.

But than again, I am just a wimpy Euro-trash... :P

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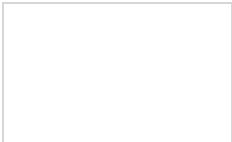
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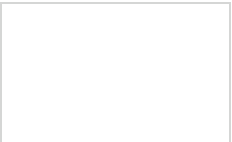
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