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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.

[Glossary of Psychological Terms](#)

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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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](#)

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