

The Psychological Effects of Violent Media on Children

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Abstract

Recent research has shown that connections between children playing violent video games can cause later aggressive behavioral problems. In retrospect studies have also shown a twelve percent increase in aggressive behavior after watching violent television as well. Some parents and psychologists have said that there are children who benefit from the proficiency and coordination of playing video games while others disagree. Critics of video games claim that watching violent television is less detrimental due to the children not physically playing out the violence. Research has also shown heavy viewers, which is four or more hours a day, put in less effort at school, have poorer reading skills, play less friendly with friends, have fewer hobbies and activities, and are more likely to be overweight. The American Psychological Association says there are three major effects of watching violence in the media (i.e.: video games/television) children may become less sensitive to the pain and suffering of others, children may be more fearful of the world around them, and children may be more likely to behave in aggressive or hurtful ways toward others.

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Everything that children see or hear in the media early on in their lives affects them in some way. Positive parenting role models indicate that in the best interest of our children we should limit their exposure to violent acts. Unfortunately, violence is one of the most popular forms of entertainment. Over sixty percent of television shows being shown in prime time contain some form of violence. There are two very opposite sides of this issue. The media who market the violent television, video games and other forms of entertainment argue this is safe entertainment and the others argue that violence promotes violence

Current research tends to agree with the proponents who argue that violent media is associated with aggressive behavior. Risky behavior by children and young adults can include violence against others, lack of remorse for consequences. The type of faulty thinking creates stressors in children which can lead to the onset of many different symptoms. Children who view media violence are more likely to have increased feelings of hostility, decreased emotional response to the portrayal of violence and injury that lead to violent behavior through imitation. An example here would be the television show Jack Ass. There have been several accidents related to young men attempting stunts that are done on the show. The act of imitating what they have seen on a television show causes injury to themselves or others around them.

The Academy of Pediatrics says "More than one thousand scientific studies and reviews conclude that significant exposure to media violence increases the risk of aggressive behavior in certain children, desensitizes them to violence and makes them believe that the world is a 'meaner and scarier' place than it is." If children begin to think that this type of violence is normal behavior these thoughts are often said to be difficult to change later on in life. This is similar to the studies of domestic violence where children who are exposed to violence either become offenders or victims because they believe that what they are exposed to is the norm. One instance that brought the worry of violence in media is the Columbine incident. The two young men that committed this act of violence were said to have played numerous hours of violent video games. Their exposure to violence is said to have been the cause

since the children involved in Columbine came from secure home environments with active parental influence. As with Michael Carneal, from Kentucky, who in 1997 shot and killed three of his classmates. He too was also said to have been a video game fanatic. Michael Breen an attorney in the case against Michael Carneal stated in court; "Michael Carneal clipped off nine shots in a 10-second period. Eight of those shots were hits. Three were head and neck shots and were kills. That is way beyond the military standard for expert marksmanship. This was a kid who had never fired a pistol in his life, but because of his obsession with computer games he had turned himself into an expert marksman" (Ivory, 2003), (Hanson, 1999, p. 15). These two instances in a whole may be small evidence however, proves that violent media play a role in such violence.

Another view from researchers suggests that performing violent acts in video games may be more contributing to children's aggression than passively watching violent acts on television. According to this view, the more children practice violent acts, the more likely they are to perform violent acts (Cesarone, 1994). In most video games women are usually portrayed as persons who are acted upon rather than as initiators of action, in the extreme they are depicted as victims. Games such as, Grand Theft Auto promote prostitution, theft, and violent behavior. This game encourages males to act out these behaviors to move further along in the game. The movie the Matrix for example was said to be the triggering factor to the violent high school students that wore trench coats. They were eventually arrested for trying to play out their role as "The One." Research has found that males play video games more often than women which may be the producing factor of such violence in video games. It is believed that acting out such violence as opposed to just viewing the violence causes the children to become more familiar with how to act out violence without consequences.

On the other hand the makers of these violent types of media such as movies, video games and television argue that violent children are drawn towards these types of violent entertainment. These people believe that the child must have been exposed to more than just programming in order to exhibit behaviors that they may have seen on television or in the media. Some will argue though that the real effect is so small that in fact one hypothesis suggests that exposure to violent media can actually provide a healthy release for the frightening emotions of children and young adults. At the age children begin to play video games they have not quite developed the ability to distinguish between what is reality and what its not. This can cause young children to act upon the violence they have viewed on television, video games and such, not knowing that what they are doing is wrong or inappropriate.

Unfortunately violent situations are all too common in everyday entertainment and there are far less programming choices that are non-violent than there are violent. The National Coalition on Television Violence reported there has been a consistent increase in the number of violent themed video games. These games increased from fifty three percent in 1985 to eighty two percent in 1988 (Cesarone, 1994). The agreement amongst researchers on television violence is that there is a significant increase from 3% to 15% in individuals' aggressive behavior after watching violent television (Cesarone, 1994). Even if the choices did exist the research has proven parents actually have no clue as to what their children watch on television. Parents need to be attentive to the content these games have and question whether they are appropriate for the age of their child. Parents should also monitor the amount of time their children spend playing video games. For instance a co-workers eight year old child said to me "I watched an 'R' rated movie one time because there were not any parents around." In one multicultural study that was completed, found that in six different nations young Americans had the least amount of work responsibility assigned to them. This leads to an excess number of manufactured video games and store bought materials to entertain them. Rather than being forced to go outside to participate in activities they are encouraged to stay inside and watch television or play video games alone. Together these two factors contribute to video game over usage. A study conducted in 1989, on video game usage and content found that most of the arcade games contained "antisocial values of a violent nature" (Ivory, 2001).

The only part of the issue that researchers do agree about is that violent media types are not the only cause of children committing violent acts. The involvement of parents in what their children watch, how the family interacts with each other, what the children are exposed to in their environment are also

indicators of how they will behave and what value system they will follow. In 1995 one research revealed that both impulsive and reflective young adults showed increased amounts of violent aggression towards play objects after playing violent and non-violent video games. However, in a contradictory study it was found that there was not a difference between children that were exposed to violent media and those who were exposed to non-violent media. The catharsis theory disputes the claim that violent video game content encourages aggression (Ivory, 2001). This theory suggests that the emotional drive evoked by violent video game play reduces the chance of a child actually exhibiting violent behavior; the child's fantasy play and imagined actions causes the child to have reduced urges to act out aggression in actual behavior (Ivory, 2001).

Whatever you believe, the US surgeon generals report only suggests possible short term effects. There is no strong evidence on the long term effects of media violence. The fact is that research is stronger towards media violence being a precursor to increased aggression in children and young adults. This fact alone should be enough for parents to become more involved in what their children are exposed to. According to Wartella and Reeves, "Our review found a progression from early attention to studies of media use to increasing emphasis on issues of physical and emotional harm, and changes in children's knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors" (Ivory, 2001).

There are some responsible companies who are taking steps to inform parents about the content of the entertainment. Cartridge locks were developed by one company in 1990 to prevent unsupervised access to video games. Several companies have developed their own rating system for violence to help parents monitor their child's free time. X-Unfit and XV (highly violent), PG and G ratings are the ratings from The National Coalition on Television Violence to rate video game violence. With hopes that other video game makers will follow Sega has developed their own rating system which include general, mature, and adult audience. As for Nintendo they use the general rating that is used for movies; G, PG, PG-13 and R rated. The only problem with these ratings are that some parents are not aware of them and stores still sell these games to children that are not old enough to be purchasing them. However, this is a helpful guide for parents that do monitor there child's form of entertainment.

In conclusion, not one research conducted could prove either positive or negative long term outcomes of violent media. The fact of the matter is that parents should monitor and be more attentive to their children. In the act of a busy life we all tend to forget the real life issues. Parents need to pay more attention to their children's lives and not sit them in front of the television, weather it is for movies, video games, or general television shows. In my opinion in this day and age most parents get too wrapped up in their own lives to be overly concerned about what their children are doing. Raising a child is hard enough in this day and age but you add all the outside media violence and it makes it ten times harder to steer your child in the right direction. Does that really mean violent media causes children to be violent? I don't believe so these children get bored and should be limited to the types of media entertainment they are exposed to. All we can do as parents is pay attention to our children and stay involved in their lives before it is too late.

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