

More than playing around?

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Violent movies and video games: mindless entertainment, a harmless outlet for natural aggression, or a negative influence on kids' behaviour? An educational psychologist outlines the evidence.

... The degree to which the environment external to the home can influence the development of our children (for good or bad) has long been of concern to our community. We move further and further from the time when home and school were the major contact points between children and the world. As communication from the outside world into our homes becomes more and more pervasive, these concerns naturally intensify.

Whether from the potential influence of Saturday afternoon flicks, or of rock and roll music in the Fifties, of radio on the previous generation, of television on subsequent generations, and of computers and video games in recent years, there is for many parents a sense of loss of control over the experiences to which their children are subjected. Additionally, parents have been concerned that some of the introduced experiences may be harmful to society in general and to their own children in particular. Societal responses to those concerns may be seen in the voluntary codes of conduct in media, in statutory controls and in advisory guidelines and censorship for films.

Do violent films, videos or computer games precipitate violence for some children and adolescents? It is very difficult to prove one way or the other, as causes can only be impugned, never directly observed. Does providing an idea or image or activity to someone cause violent behaviour, or merely provide it with some direction? The evidence provided by copycat events suggests that some people at least are prey to having their own behaviour stimulated by events they have only indirectly observed.

Is there any difference between video games, videotaped film and TV in their potential effects? Videos, of course, allow repeated viewing. If viewing violence can influence behaviour, then the opportunity for repetition places videos further along a spectrum of potentially influencing events.

How much more likely is an individual to be influenced by violent video games, in arcades and at home, that involve activity rather than passive viewing? In games, the person doesn't simply hear about or view violent behaviour but actually participates in an analogue of that behaviour and suffers no consequences—either in the sense of having to confront the horror of human distress, injury, blood, gore and death, or in the sense of having to pay a social penalty for the behaviour.

There are important questions for our community and they become more complicated as technology increasingly blurs the boundaries between reality and fantasy. Past and present research may provide at least some information to assist our judgement of what actions if any we should take.

There is a longer history of studying television violence than video games. As there are some distinct similarities, there are lessons to be learned from this earlier work.

The consensus among researchers on television violence is that there is usually a noticeably increased level of aggressive behaviour (from 3 to 15 per cent) in individuals after watching violent television. The American Psychological Association has documented research studies that demonstrate a correlation between viewing of television violence and subsequent aggressive behavior (Clark, 1993).

An important outcome in the context of video games is that the more children practise violence acts, the more likely they are to perform violent acts (Clark, 1993). Research on television violence clearly shows that heavy exposure causes negative effects on children's development and behaviour (Walsh, 1996).

If heavy exposure is important in the effects of TV violence, what sort of games and with what frequency might our young people be playing? A Canadian study (Media Analysis Laboratory, 1998) noted that:

- parents are less likely to set rules or monitor video game playing than television watching;
- boys play video games twice as much as girls;
- boys prefer violent games to other types;
- 85 per cent of young people consider violent games harmful;
- 95 per cent of young people considered the games addictive;
- video games are in the daily routine of 85 per cent of males in the United States of America.

It appears that parents consider a computer to be a valuable tool in their children's development without realising its potential negative role, and hence their vigilance is lessened. The extent of playing is alarming—and highlights the difference between the effects of the limited video game access in arcades and the ready availability in the home.

In 1998, Dietz examined thirty-three popular video games and found that almost 80 per cent of games preferred by young people had strong violence in the game. A high proportion of the violence was directed toward other people, and about 20 per cent of the games depicted violence towards women. Buchman's 1996 study surveyed nine hundred students from Years 4 to 8 on their video game preferences. Almost 50 per cent of the favorite games chosen were of the fantasy violence or human violence type. Girls more often chose games of the fantasy violence kind, whereas boys strongly indicated a preference for games with human violence. Another survey found that forty of the forty-seven top-rated Nintendo video games had violence as a theme.

At present there are too few studies to support definitive causal links between video game violence and children's behaviour or development. However, the National Coalition on Television Violence (1990) found that nine of twelve research studies on the impact of violent video games on normal children and adolescents reported harmful effects. Video game playing has not yet been implicated as a causal agent in psychopathological behaviour, such as mass murder, but research suggests that there is at least a short-term relationship between playing violent games and increased aggressive behavior in younger children (Funk, 1993).

Some people have suggested that video game violence may actually be beneficial rather than harmful to the emotional development of children, providing an outlet for their innate aggression. The idea is that humans are rather like pressure vessels and—for some children at least—violent impulses emerge unprovoked from the unconscious and must be released one way or another. If they are released in ways that do not immediately harm others (such as violent video games) then such release is to be encouraged. The violent impulses thus purged, the child is able to behave in a calm and socially responsible manner. This 'catharsis' hypothesis, which derives from Freudian theory and does not have serious support within the psychological profession, was also put forward (in support of tolerating violence in films) in the earliest days of the television violence debate. Subsequent studies found no evidence to support the proposition at that time, and there is no compelling reason to resurrect it now that the research on electronic game violence is being considered.

A better understanding of the role of learning in the development of violent behaviour (as opposed to violence emerging unbidden from a dark place in the soul) has focused attention on the importance of role models. For young children, imitation is one of the most powerful modes of learning, and this may render them vulnerable to the effects of playing and observing video game violence. In Schutte's 1988 study of a group of 5- to 7-year-olds, children later imitated precisely what they had been just doing in the video games. Those who played active but non-violent games played in that non-violent manner, whereas those children who played games with violent themes showed more aggression. In another illuminating study of 4- to 6-year-olds, aggressive behavior in free play increased after they had played or even merely observed a violent video game (Silvern, 1987).

In Irwin's 1995 study of sixty Year 2 boys (ages 7 and 8) similar results were noted. Those boys who played aggressive video games were much more aggressive in subsequent free play and in a 'coping with frustration' exercise than were boys who played non-aggressive video games. Cooper (1986) studied Year 5 girls and noted that they exhibited increased aggression in free play, whether they had engaged in the playing of violent video games or had merely observed. These studies suggest that, in the short term, the impact of violent video games reaches out to the interested observers, whether in the home or in the arcade.

Other methods have been used to measure aggression. A questionnaire survey was used in a study of middle school and high school students. Fling (1992) found heavy video game use correlated with aggressive attitudes toward property and people. Kirsh's 1998 study similarly found that, after playing a very violent video game, children assigned more hostile motives to others than did children who had just played a non-violent video game.s

Studies to date indicate that playing violent video games does have negative effects, especially for younger children. They are generally short-term studies, however. It is unclear whether there are long-term effects and whether the effects are similar across the population or are confined to a group of children who could be considered at-risk. Finding some means of identifying which children are more vulnerable than others, and being able to do something about it, are clearly crucial issues. Further extended research is obviously needed, especially on these issues.

In fact, there are many other questions that require investigation and research thus far has not been able to answer most of them. For example: is portrayed low-level violence or portrayed high-level violence more likely to be attempted by children? Does the influence of simulated violent events depend on the degree of realism portrayed? If a child acts out low-level violence after exposure to a violent video game, movie or TV show, does this increase the probability of that child exhibiting high-level violence? Does violence become less alien to children as the frequency of exposure increases, other things being equal? Are there personality traits or life experiences that increase the likelihood of exposure to violence promoting violent behaviour? How might, for example, a child who emerges from an abusive home react to violence in entertainment compared to one from a supportive home?

Research may never provide definitive answers to these questions. Perhaps our judgements need to be made on the grounds of common sense and community values.

In the absence of clear evidence that such games are safe entertainment for our children, what position should we adopt? The conservative position places the onus for evidence of safety upon the promoters of the activities considered to be possibly harmful. Yet many conservatives saw rock and roll as a force for evil in the Fifties, likely to destroy society and the youth of the day. Looking back to the effects of the music and the calls for its banning, we see the proposition as laughable. Nor do we want to be overly reactive, attempting to shield our children from awareness of the negative and unpleasant aspects of life.

Suppose these games are harmless for the majority of children, but damaging for some children. In our society we tolerate many activities known to be harmful to some members—consider alcohol and gambling as examples where the harm is real but limited. The costs and benefits are often debated, but usually freedom of access prevails. The major difference between these tolerated dangers and violent games is the age at which the risk occurs. As a society we accept a responsibility for the safety of minors, and we do not provide them with free choice of potentially harmful habits such as alcohol and gambling. Should society take a lead on violent video games, or should the responsibility be left to every household to determine?

Another perspective to consider is not whether such video games are harmful, but whether they are desirable. Portrayed and simulated violence may be found to have no strong causal relationship with real violence. In that case, it becomes an issue for parents to determine in their own homes. Yet many parents are unaware of the extent of such game-playing on home computers and are not in a position to make a judgement on those grounds.

At the moment it is unclear whether there is a risk, to whom, and how serious it is.

At one extreme are those who see no harm in the activities or who argue the inevitability of aggressive activities, among boys in particular.

At the other extreme are those who see the influence of violence in video games as devastating. Lieutenant Colonel David Grossman was engaged for more than twenty-five years in developing training programs to teach soldiers how to kill. The hurdle to overcome in teaching people to kill, in his view, is one of psychological resistance—not technical ability. He describes the psychological conditioning techniques employed to eliminate that resistance, arguing that the desensitising techniques used by the army are similar to those found in violent electronic games: "Children don't naturally kill; they learn it from violence in the home and, most pervasively, from violence as entertainment in television, movies, and interactive video games" (Grossman, 1998).

Where does this leave us? Perhaps there will come a point at which we say enough is enough, and we simply haven't yet reached that point. Is virtual reality the next step in the sequence of increasing realism and participation in violence? Are we prepared to see our children with video headpieces and gloves battling with guns and knives against virtual baddies? Producing virtual slaughter? Is that close enough to the bone?

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You want more? David Grossman was featured on ABC Radio National's 'Background Briefing' program in 1999. [Full transcript and audio available on-line.](#)

Is aggression (as observed in the studies described above) the same as violence? What causes violence? US criminologist Lonnie Athens says serious violent behavior is almost always the byproduct of a single specific developmental pattern--first, childhood brutalization and subjugation; then learning that [violence can bring respect](#); next, achieving respect through violence; and, lastly, regular criminal violence. [more]

Virginia Postrel argues in Reason magazine (August 1999) that stifling creativity by banning films is harmful to society. After all, "any objective standard that would censor The Matrix... would have to curb Macbeth... as well. Shakespeare's Scottish play is horrifyingly violent" and if the argument is about notions of 'quality', well, Will had his off days too. [[more](#)]

[Salon magazine](#) looks at how 'peace studies' subjects at US universities have morphed into 'violence studies', and what such developments might say about the academic--and student--mind-set.

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