

Video Games & Violent Content



What is it about video games that captivates kids? What kinds of influences do video games really have on kids? How does screen time spent with video games differ from other types of play? When it comes to video games, it's time for a serious conversation about kids' play.

In Part 1 of today's case, Jane McGonigal — Ph.D. and game designer extraordinaire — presents an optimistic, positive stance on gaming. Based on her research, Dr. McGonigal describes why she believes gaming can make a better world. The video is a helpful jumping-off point for thinking about why the kids in your life are so drawn to video games. (Note: We know the video is from 2010, but don't let that worry you — it's still a compelling and timely summary of the *good* in gaming!)

Of course, one of parents' main concerns about video games is the violent content kids encounter — and those parents are worried for good reason. Part 2 of the case takes a closer look at the issue of violent video games and current research about the impact of media violence on young minds.

The Case: Part 1

As a group, watch the video of Jane McGonigal's TED talk, "Gaming can make a better world" up to at least 5:58. (Of course, you are welcome to watch the full, 20-minute talk if your group wants, but it's not necessary in order to dive into the discussion questions).

 https://www.ted.com/talks/jane_mcgonigal_gaming_can_make_a_better_world?language=en



Consider

- Does anything from the talk come as a surprise?
- How would you summarize Dr. McGonigal's argument about the appeal of games?
- Why, according to Dr. McGonigal, are we the *best* versions of ourselves in game world?
- Think of a kid you know personally who is a gamer. Have you ever witnessed any of the facial expressions that Dr. McGonigal mentions while they were interacting with the game? Are there other (non-video game) situations in which you've noticed similar levels of engagement, optimism, and curiosity?
- Thinking back to when you were a kid, what were your favorite activities or games, and why? Do you see any similar characteristics between your child play and current video game play?
- From your perspective as a parent, does Dr. McGonigal miss any important points about gaming? What concerns seem most relevant when you think about video games and *your* kids?

The Case: Part 2

Violent content is one aspect of video games that especially concerns many parents. The following excerpts are from Common Sense Media's 2013 report *Media and Violence: An Analysis of Current Research*¹, which summarizes key research studies and findings.

As the debate continues about media's impact, **some argue that research has “irrefutably” (Bushman & Huesmann, 2012) shown a causal link between media violence and aggressive behavior, while others say studies have shown “no evidence” (Suellentrop, 2012) of a relationship between video games and violence.**

In the aftermath of such tragic incidents [like the Aurora, CO movie theater shooting and the Newtown, CT elementary school shooting], attention often turns to the role that violent media may have played. But despite how it sometimes feels, mass murders in this country continue to be quite rare, and affixing “causes” for them is not scientifically possible. Most researchers, whether their specialty is media, psychology, violence, or criminal justice, reject the idea that any single factor can “cause” an otherwise nonviolent individual to become violent, particularly when it comes to violence on the scale of a massacre. Rather, they speak in terms of **a variety of factors that increase the risk that an individual will behave violently** — from pushing and shoving on a playground as a child to getting involved in physical fights as a teenager to hitting a spouse or committing other criminally violent acts as a young adult.

Video game effects. [...] Some scholars hypothesize that there are reasons to believe that video games may have a greater effect on violent behavior than more passive media such as television: **because users are actively engaged in actually perpetrating the violent behavior, because identification with the character is more likely, and because violent actions are rewarded with points and new levels within the game** (Bushman & Huesmann, 2012).

- [A] recent meta-analysis of research about video game violence (Anderson et al., 2010) included 12 longitudinal studies.[...] These studies, some of which were conducted internationally, included a total sample of 4,526 participants. They found a positive relationship between amount of time spent playing violent video games and later violent behavior. The average effect size was .203 (small).
- Critics of the research on video games and violence argue that these studies don't adequately control for other variables, such as exposure to familial violence or genetics [...].

The research that has been done tends to use widely varying standards for counting “violence,” ranging from studies limited to physical acts of aggression to those that include verbal threats, insults, and even accidental violence. Studies documenting media content are expensive and time consuming to conduct, and for some media are difficult to design (for example, interactive games and online content). A lack of funding prevents much progress in filling the gaps in this research.

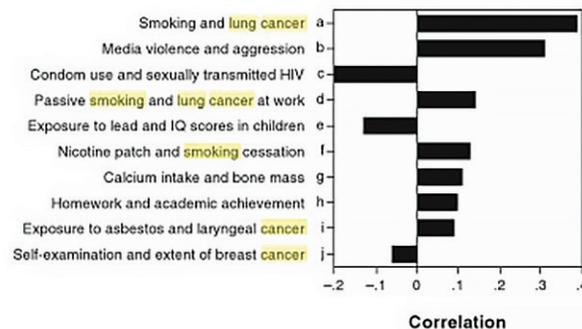
Please note that although there was a relationship between time spent playing games and later violent behavior, the effect size was small, see the chart below to see how a small effect size can actually be impactful.

There appear to be a variety of factors that can influence whether and how much violent media affects viewers [...] Wilson (2008) concludes that “**Research suggests that children, especially boys, who strongly identify with violent characters in the media are more susceptible to the long-term effects of media violence.**”

[...] Another way of looking at this is that children who are exposed to multiple risk factors are the most likely to behave aggressively. Violent media is one risk factor. **Just as not all children raised in violent homes will become violent, not all children who play violent video games will become violent** — but there is a greater chance that they will, especially if there are multiple risk factors operating at the same time.

To summarize: **It would be overly simplistic to say that playing video games directly leads kids to behave violently toward others.** Two kids can play a violent video game for exactly the same amount of time and have markedly different reactions — one might have aggressive thoughts after, while the other might not. The reason for this is that the kids have different exposure to *risk factors*, some of which are environmental (like witnessing domestic violence at home), and others that are related to the individual's temperament and sensitivities (like having antisocial traits or even depressive symptoms). **It's helpful to think of playing violent video games as one risk factor for aggressive thoughts or behaviors;** multiple risk factors can contribute to a child exhibiting aggressive or violent behaviors, and violent video games are one factor. A risk doesn't mean that the negative outcome will occur, nor should it be dismissed as insignificant.

Figure 13.3
Selected **Effect Sizes** vs. the Paik and Comstock Meta-Analytic Television Violence **Effect Size** of $r = 0.31$



Video games are tricky because they directly and immediately reward the player for aggression, such as punishing or even killing other players. This can foster a connection between positive feelings (that come from winning or beating a level) and aggressive or violent behavior. Another relevant concept from social psychology is the idea of *observational learning theory*. We see the benefits of observational learning theory when young kids mimic our modeling, touching their nose when we do or repeating language that they hear. But kids don't distinguish between the positive modeling they see and the problematic modeling they observe, so observational learning can lead to learning antisocial behaviors just as it can lead to positive behaviors. Repeated exposure to violence can also lead to what psychologists call **emotional desensitization, by normalizing the experience of seeing aggression** and leading to a distorted worldview about the prevalence and effects of violence.

So, **what can we do to help buffer or minimize the risk that violent video games have a negative impact on our kids' thoughts and actions?** There is an old saying, “You are what you eat.” Constantly consuming fried foods — particularly in the absence of other healthy foods and exercise — considerably increases the likelihood of obesity and other negative health outcomes. Similarly, we can think of kids' media consumption as a diet.

Consider

- There are definitely two sides to the argument about whether or not violent video games lead to real-life violence. Which side do you feel most aligned with — and why?
- Please refer to the bar chart above. As a group, what stood out or surprised you about this chart?
- Do you think your child's age impacts how violent video games affect him or her? If so, how?
- How do you manage what video games your child plays at friends' houses? Have you ever had a conversation with your child or other parents about your expectations or guidelines?
- Do you ever talk to your kids about the violence they see in the media? If so, what have you found works well in these conversations? If not, what stands in your way of having a conversation?

REFERENCES

- ¹ Read the full report at www.commonsensemedia.org/research/media-and-violence-an-analysis-of-current-research
www.commonsensemedia.org/blog/10-most-violent-video-games-of-2015-and-what-to-play-instead
www.commonsensemedia.org/videos/violence-in-media-really-matters
www.commonsensemedia.org/blog/tips-on-how-to-deal-with-media-violence

Effects of Conflict in Tween Sitcoms on US Students' Moral Reasoning About Social Exclusion. Mares & Braun, 2013. *Journal of Children and Media*.

Video Games and Violent Content

When it comes to video games, it's important to remember that not all games are created equal. Today, there are a ton of age-appropriate games that are engaging, stimulating outlets for kids to have fun. There are also many well-designed games, packed with educational content. (You can check out a few of our favorites here: www.common sense media.org/blog/10-most-violent-video-games-of-2015-and-what-to-play-instead)

- **Learn about the games *your* kids are playing.**

If you find that your kid is glued to a new video game, take the time to learn about what they're playing *before* you react. There are many different kinds of games, and understanding the ins and outs of a game will help you decide whether the real issue is the content of the game or simply the quantity of the game. Within some games, there are different settings that can be turned on or off to determine the level of violence a player sees. Scholars tend to agree that some kids may be especially vulnerable to the effects of media violence. Consider your kid's temperament, and pay attention to how they react after playing games with violence. If you know your kid has a tendency to identify with violent characters, try to find some nonviolent substitutes to keep him or her occupied.

Hint for parents of kids under 7: Younger kids can't consistently distinguish between fact and fantasy, which makes exposure to media violence especially problematic. Whatever you decide about violent video games for your older kids, it's a good idea to keep violent games out of younger kids' play routines — at least for the early years.

- **Analyze the building blocks of the games.**

Professor James Paul Gee looks at how some good video games include learning principles such as identity and production, risk taking and system thinking. Building off of the diet metaphor, you may want to ask yourself questions about how and why a particular game might be appealing to your child: How does it appeal to kids' imaginations? Are they put in the driver's seat? Is it age-appropriate and aligned to interests? Can kids create and experiment? Are there social components? What is the overall story? How is the design engaging? (Doesn't have to be big bucks to be appealing!)

➤ <http://www.jamespaulgee.com>

➤ http://www.skatekidsonline.com/parents_teachers/Good_Video_Games_and_Good_Learning_Updated.pdf

- **Take advantage of “teachable moments.”**

Help your kid reflect on the violence he or she sees in video games or in other media. Ask, “What are other ways that character could have solved his issue without violence?” Use the opportunity to talk to your kids about different options for appropriate ways to resolve conflicts. Distinguish video game consequences from real-life consequences by asking, “How do you think that situation would have played in our real life?” Make sure to explain the real-world consequences of violence, so your kids get that racking up bonus points for aggressive behavior is a far cry from the reality of aggressive acts in the real world.

In general, it's wise to monitor consumption of content that is heavy on violence, profanity, and sexism. Tune in to how your kid reacts after playing these kinds of games, and make adjustments that make sense for your family. Counteract the message that violence is useful and rewarding by discussing the disconnect between video games and the real world. And, as with a healthy diet, make sure that their consumption is balanced with other activities that reinforce positive interactions and reward pro-social behavior.

Advice by age

- **2- to 4-year-old** kids often see cartoon violence. But keep them away from anything that shows physical aggression as a means of conflict resolution, because they'll imitate what they see.
- **For 5- to 7-year-olds**, some of the cartoon rough-and-tumble, slapstick, and fantasy violence can actually makes kids thinks it's okay and funny to see these sanitized versions of violence. Violence that could result in death or serious injury can also be too scary, so it's better to keep these types of exposure to a minimum.
- **8- to 10-year-olds** can handle action-hero sword fighting or gunplay as long as there's no gore.
- **For 11- to 12-year-olds**, historical action — battles, fantasy clashes, and duels — is OK. But close-ups of gore or graphic violence (alone or combined with sexual situations) aren't recommended. Keep in mind that this age is exposed to A LOT of socially aggressive tween shows that involve lots of mean acts that are supposed to be funny. Kids are more apt to learn behaviors from those main characters they are exposed to, so it warrants the need to check on what types of messages those main characters are giving.
- **Kids age 13 to 17** can and will see shoot-'em-ups, blow-'em-ups, high-tech violence, accidents with disfigurement or death, anger, and gang fighting. Point out that the violence portrayed hurts and causes suffering, and limit the time they're exposed to violence, especially in video games.
- **Most M-rated games aren't right for kids under 17.** The kid down the street may have the latest cop-killer game, but that doesn't mean it's good for him. The ultra-violent behavior, often combined with sexual images, affects developing brains. Just because your child's friend is allowed to play violent games or watch violent movies doesn't mean they're OK for your child.

Rule of thumb when it comes to different ages: visually graphic things can be especially disturbing to younger kids while more realistic situations are more disturbing to older kids.

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Digital Dilemmas are brief hypothetical situations and corresponding questions designed to foster cross-generational conversations about different aspects of adolescents' digital lives. Use this fictitious scenario, based on real-life stories, to spark a conversation at home with your children and open up the discussion about these very important topics.

Jaden isn't a "hard-core gamer" compared to many of the other kids he knows, but he does have a few video games that he loves. His latest favorite is *Doom Battle*. Jaden's parents are constantly bugging him about how much time he spends gaming, but from Jaden's perspective, he spends way less time playing than most of his friends. Plus, he finds that it's a great way to unwind and relax after a long day at school. Jaden's parents tell him to "do something productive" or "at least go hang out with your friends." Yet Jaden doesn't see gaming as a waste of time, and he often is playing with his friends. Lately, his parents have been threatening to put time limits on his video game playing, and Jaden feels like he's being punished when he hasn't even done anything wrong.

- ? What seems realistic (or unrealistic) about this story?
- ? In what ways do you agree with Jaden's parents about gaming? In what ways can you relate to Jaden's perspective?
- ? Do you think the kinds of video games Jaden is playing makes a difference? Why, or why not?
- ? Is playing video games with friends a good way to bond?
- ? What do you think of the idea of parents setting limits on gameplay? How many hours would seem like a fair amount of daily playing time?