Violent Video Games Promote Teen Aggression and Violence

*Teens at Risk, 2013*

“There are reasons to believe that violent video games may have a larger harmful effect than violent TV and film.”

In the following viewpoint, Craig A. Anderson discusses the influence of media violence—including violent video games—on youth. Anderson contends that the research demonstrates a clear connection between violent video games and teen aggression. Anderson is a professor at Iowa State University and one of the leading experts about studies on media violence.

As you read, consider the following questions:

1. The viewpoint notes a distinction between violence depicted in passive forms and active forms of media. What is one of the passive forms of media?
2. According to the author, is there a direct link between use of violent video games and the well-known incidents of school shootings?
3. Why, according to the viewpoint, does the entertainment industry spend so much money arguing against the connection between media violence and aggression?

1. For your 2003 article on The Influence of Media Violence on Youth, you and a distinguished group of media scholars selected by the National Institute of Mental Health reviewed 50 years of research on media violence and aggression. What have been the main research steps, and what are the main conclusions?

Craig A. Anderson: Most of the early research focused on two questions:

1. Is there a significant association between exposure to media violence and aggressive behavior?
2. Is this association causal? (That is, can we say that violent television, video games, and other media are directly causing aggressive behavior in our kids?)

### Media Violence Causes Aggressive Behavior

The results, overall, have been fairly consistent across types of studies (experimental, cross-sectional, and longitudinal) and across visual media type (television, films, video games). There is a significant relation between exposure to media violence and aggressive behavior. Exposing children and adolescents (or “youth”) to violent visual media increases the likelihood that they will engage in physical aggression against another person. By "physical aggression" we mean behavior that is intended to harm another person physically, such as hitting with a fist or some object. A single brief exposure to violent media can increase aggression in the immediate situation. Repeated exposure leads to general increases in aggressiveness over time. This relation between media violence and aggressive behavior is causal.

2. What have researchers focused on in more recent years? How does exposure to media violence increase later aggressive behavior?
Early aggression researchers were interested in discovering how youth learn to be aggressive. Once they discovered observational learning takes place not only when youth see how people behave in the real world but also when they see characters in films and on television, many began to focus on exactly how watching such violent stories increases later aggression. In other words, more recent research really focused on the underlying psychological mechanisms. In the last 10 years there also has been a huge increase in research on violent video games. Based on five decades of research on television and film violence and one decade of research on video games, we now have a pretty clear picture of how exposure to media violence can increase aggression in both the immediate situation as well as in long term contexts.

The Short-Term Impact of Media Violence

Immediately after consuming some media violence, there is an increase in aggressive behavior tendencies because of several factors.

1. Aggressive thoughts increase, which in turn increase the likelihood that a mild or ambiguous provocation will be interpreted in a hostile fashion.
2. Aggressive (or hostile) emotion increases.
3. General arousal (e.g., heart rate) increases, which tends to increase the dominant behavioral tendency.
4. Youth learn new forms of aggressive behaviors by observing them, and will reenact them almost immediately afterwards if the situational context is sufficiently similar.

The Long-Term Impact of Media Violence

Repeated consumption of media violence over time increases aggression across a range to situations and across time because of several related factors.

1. It creates more positive attitudes, beliefs, and expectations regarding aggressive solutions to interpersonal problems. In other words, youth come to believe that aggression is normal, appropriate, and likely to succeed.
2. It also leads to the development of aggressive scripts, which are basically ways of thinking about how the social world works. Heavy media violence consumers tend to view the world in a more hostile fashion.
3. It decreases the cognitive accessibility of nonviolent ways to handle conflict. That is, it becomes harder to even think about nonviolent solutions.
4. It produces an emotional desensitization to aggression and violence. Normally, people have a pretty negative emotional reaction to conflict, aggression, and violence, and this can be seen in their physiological reactions to observation of violence (real or fictional, as in entertainment media). For example, viewing physical violence normally leads to increases in heart rate and blood pressure, as well as to certain brain wave patterns. Such normal negative emotional reactions tend to inhibit aggressive behavior, and can inspire helping behavior. Repeated consumption of media violence reduces these normal negative emotional reactions.
5. Repetition increases learning of any type of skill or way of thinking, to the point where that skill or way of thinking becomes fairly automatic. [This includes] ... learning how to aggress.

3. Is there a difference between the effects of TV/film violence versus video-game violence?

Most of the research has focused on TV/film violence (so-called "passive" media), mainly because they
have been around so much longer than video games. However, the existing research literature on violent video games has yielded the same general types of effects as the TV and Cinema research. At a theoretical level, there are reasons to believe that violent video games may have a larger harmful effect than violent TV and film effects. This is a very difficult research question, and there currently is no definite answer. But, recent studies that directly compare passive screen media to video games tend to find bigger effects of violent video games.

**Negative Effects of Violent Media**

4. *Is that why there have been so many school shootings by kids who play lots of violent video games? Can such games turn a normal, well-adjusted child or adolescent into a school shooter?*

No, that would be an overstatement, one that mainstream media violence researchers do not make. The best way to think about this is the risk factor approach. There are three important points to keep in mind.

First, there are many causal risk factors involved in the development of a person who frequently behaves in an aggressive or violent manner. There are biological factors, family factors, neighborhood factors, and so on. Media violence is only one of the top dozen or so risk factors.

Second, extreme aggression, such as aggravated assault and homicide, typically occurs only when there are a number of risk factors present. In other words, none of the causal risk factors are "necessary and sufficient" causes of extreme aggression. Of course, cigarette smoking is not a necessary and sufficient cause of lung cancer, even though it is a major cause of it. People with only one risk factor seldom (I'm tempted to say "never") commit murder.

Third, consumption of media violence is the most common of all of the major risk factors for aggression in most modern societies. It also is the least expensive and easiest risk factor for parents to change. In sum, playing a lot of violent games is unlikely to turn a normal youth with zero or one or even two other risk factors into a killer. But regardless of how many other risk factors are present in a youth's life, playing a lot of violent games is likely to increase the frequency and the seriousness of his or her physical aggression, both in the short term and over time as the youth grows up.

5. *Are some social groups more susceptible to the negative effects of violent video games than others? Are some groups immune to these effects?*

There is some research suggesting that individuals who are already fairly aggressive may be more affected by consumption of violent video games, but it is not yet conclusive. Similarly, video game effects occasionally appear to be larger for males than females, but such findings are rare. Most studies find that males and females are equally affected, and that high and low aggressive individuals are equally affected. One additional point is worth remembering: Scientists have not been able to find any group of people who consistently appear immune to the negative effects of media violence or video game violence.

6. *How important is the distinction between realistic violence versus fantasy violence?*
This is an extremely important question because it is so frequently misunderstood. Many people, including psychiatrists and psychologists, tend to think: "Well, it is just a game, this boy (girl) is able to understand the difference between it and reality. Let us not worry about it." One of the great myths surrounding media violence is this notion that if the individual can distinguish between media violence and reality, then it can't have an adverse effect on that individual. Of course, the conclusion does not logically follow from the premise. And in fact, most of the studies that have demonstrated a causal link between exposure to media violence and subsequent aggressive behavior have been done with individuals who were fully aware that the observed media violence was not reality. For instance, many studies have used young adult participants who knew that the TV show, the movie clip, or the video game to which they were exposed was not "real." These studies still yielded the typical media violence effect on subsequent aggressive behavior.

7. Aren't there studies of violent video games that have found no significant effects on aggression?

Yes, such studies do exist. In any field of science, some studies will produce effects that differ from what most studies of that type find. If this weren't true, then one would need to perform only one study on a particular issue and we would have the "true" answer. Unfortunately, science is not that simple....

Marketing Violence

8. But what about the claims made by the media industries and by some other media violence experts, who say that the existing research evidence shows no effects of violent media?

The various entertainment media industries have lots of money to spend on trying to convince the general public and political leaders that there is nothing to worry about. And they do spend large sums on this. Unlike the research community, which has no vested interest in the topic, the media industry is very concerned about profits and will do almost anything to protect those profits. A recent book by James Steyer titled The Other Parent: The Inside Story of the Media's Effect on Our Children, reveals much about how this works in the U.S. I suspect that most people would be shocked by many of the revelations contained in this book. I personally have witnessed media industry lobbyists lie about a factual issue, watched them get caught in that lie, and then seen the same lobbyist deliver the same lie to a different group a year later. So, one must distinguish between real vs. industry supported experts....

9. Does violence sell?

Clearly, violence does sell, at least in the video game market. But it is not clear whether the dominance of violent video games is due to an inherent desire for such games, or whether this is merely the result of the fact that most marketing dollars are spent on promoting violent games instead of nonviolent ones. One great irony in all of this is the industry belief that violence is necessary in their product in order to make a profit. One result of that belief is that most of marketing efforts go into marketing violence. In fact, the media has seemingly convinced many people in the U.S. that they like only violent media products. But nonviolent and low violent products can be exciting, fun, and sell well. Myst is a good example of an early nonviolent video game that sold extremely well for quite some time. More recent examples include The Sims, many sports and racing games, and many simulation games. Interestingly, in some of our studies
college students have to play nonviolent video games. Some of these students report that they have never played nonviolent games, and are surprised to learn that they like some of the nonviolent ones as much as their violent games.

10. So are video games basically bad for youth?

No, a better summary statement is that a well-designed video game is an excellent teaching tool. But what it teaches depends upon its content. Some games teach thinking skills. Some teach math. Some teach reading, or puzzle solving, or history. Some have been designed to teach kids how to manage specific illnesses, such as diabetes, asthma, and cancer. But all games teach something, and that "something" depends on what they require the player to practice. In short, there are many nonviolent games that are fun, exciting, and challenging. Children and adolescents (and adults) like them and can learn positive things from them. Some even get you to exercise muscles other than those in your hands. In moderation, such games are good for youth. But parents and educators need to check the content of the games they are considering for the youth in their care. You can't simply use the game ratings, because many games rated by the industry as appropriate for children and for teens contain lots of violence. But with a bit of parental effort, and some household rules about game-playing, the youth's gaming experience can be fun and positive.

Further Readings

Books


**Periodicals**


• Media Awareness Network "Beauty and Body Image in the Media." www.media-awareness.ca.


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