Are there dangers of playing violent video games?

The American Psychological Association (APA) has released a new 2015 report on violent videogames. Based on a thorough review of recent studies, the report concludes: "The research demonstrates a consistent relation between violent video game use and heightened aggressive behavior, aggressive cognitions, and aggressive affect and reduced prosocial behavior, empathy and sensitivity to aggression."

But what does this conclusion mean for parents? Let's talk first about what the APA conclusion does NOT mean.

What the research DOESN'T say

The APA research review does NOT mean that violent video games are the biggest or even a major cause of aggression. Other factors, such as family violence, having an anger-prone personality, poverty, harsh parental discipline, peer rejection, and school problems, are established risk factors for aggression.

It does NOT mean that video games always cause aggressive thoughts, feelings, and behavior, instantly, in every child. Although the bulk of studies do find a small link between violent video games and some sort of aggression, there are plenty of studies that fail to find this association or find it only under certain circumstances or for certain people.

It definitely does NOT mean that all kids who play violent video games will turn into mass murderers.

Few parents are worried about their kids becoming violent criminals. The more relevant question for most parents is, *"Will playing violent videogames make my kid more likely to shove a classmate, squabble with a sibling, or be sassy to me?"* The answer is maybe, but not necessarily.

Anyone who has ever felt excited, tense, or frustrated while playing a video game has been "affected" by them. Whether that translates into meaningful real-life outcomes is the issue.

Does exposure to violent movies or video games make kids more aggressive?

Although experts agree that no single factor can cause a nonviolent person to act aggressively, some studies (though not all) suggest that heavy exposure to violent media can be a risk factor for violent behavior. Children who are exposed to multiple risk factors -- including substance

abuse, aggression, and conflict at home -- and also consume violent media are more likely to behave aggressively. Of viWhile exposure to violent media is only one of several risk factors, it is one that parents have control over. As parents, we can make a choice to consistently expose our kids to media that reflects our own personal values and say "no" to the stuff that doesn't. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends Common Sense Media as a resource to guide media selections.

There are so many great benefits to media and technology, including the potential to teach valuable skills. Doing research about TV shows, movies, or games before your kids watch, play, and interact with them will go a long way in helping them avoid the bad stuff.

Implications for parents - What's YOUR policy on violent video games?

- Just say no

Some parents will decide to ban violent video games from their homes, just on principle, because they don't want to support or encourage violent entertainment. This is a perfectly legitimate position. From this perspective, it doesn't matter if the effects of violent video games are big or small, or under what circumstances they occur. The answer is "No. They don't fit our values."

If you decide to do this, explain to your child the reasons behind your decision. Like the researchers in this area, you'll need to decide what "counts" as violence, which is not always clear. Does a racecar game where players can push each other off the track count as violence? How about a history-based strategy game involving war but not blood? This would be an interesting conversation to have with your child that could lead to an exploration and clarification of values.

- Let it go

Some parents will decide that they're not worried about the effects of violent video games. This can also be a legitimate position. If your home and neighborhood are reasonably peaceful, and you have a generally happy, kind, empathic child, who does at least fairly well in school, is able to think critically (i.e., is over age nine or, even better, over age twelve), has other interests, and good friends, then the effects of playing violent video games are likely to be minimal.

In day-to-day life, there are many things that can lead children to have aggressive thoughts, feelings, and behavior, including getting homework with long division, being asked to clean up their room, and being pestered by a sibling. Kids are also more likely to behave aggressively when they're tired, hungry, or stressed. It's not clear whether these other factors have larger or smaller effects on aggression than playing violent video games. As parents, sometimes we try to address the circumstances that trigger bad behavior, and sometimes we just focus on teaching our children to behave appropriately, regardless of the circumstances.

- Find a middle ground

Many parents will try to adopt a policy on violent video games that's somewhere between all or none. There's evidence that greater parental monitoring of violent content in children's overall media exposure is linked to kids being rated by teachers as more helpful and less aggressive behavior, six months later (Gentile et al., 2014).

First, Parents can influence the content of video games that their children play. They can avoid games with realistic violence or those labeled "M" for mature content. They can also steer kids toward video games that are fun and exciting but not violent or even ones that involve positive social actions (e.g., Chibi Robo, Lemmings, Super Mario Sunshine). There's research showing that playing prosocial videogames can increase kind attitudes and behavior (e.g., Gentile et al., 2009; Greitemeyer & Osswald, 2009; Saleem et al., 2012). **Common Sense Media (www.CommonSenseMedia.org) is a good source of descriptions and reviews of video games that can help you make an informed decision about a particular game.**

Second, parents can limit the amount of time that kids spend playing video games, including violent video games. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends no more than one hour per day of total screen time for elementary school children and no more than two hours a day for high schoolers. Practically, it's easier to permit video games only on certain days or during certain hours than to quibble with your child about "I only got to play for 17 minutes!" Keeping electronics out of children's bedrooms, especially at night, is also a very good idea. Making sure your child has plenty of "real life" activities he or she enjoys is a more indirect but often very effective way to limit time spent on video games.

Finally, parents can also influence the impact of violent video games by playing them with their children and/or by talking about them. Be careful about preaching with older kids and teens, because they tend to tune that out. Try asking questions to help your child think things through, such as:
- What do you think is or isn't realistic about this game?
- Why do you think this game got the rating it did?
- Why do you think the game developer included that?
- Why do you think this game is so popular?
Just as kids can learn to think critically about advertisements, they can learn to look at video *games in a more analytical way.*

*****No matter what policy you decide on regarding violent video games, your child will probably still say or do aggressive things sometimes. It takes lots of real life practice for kids to learn how to manage frustration, understand other people's perspectives, and resolve conflicts peacefully.*

Information Resource Provided By: Latiana Wilson, MSW, School Mental Health Consultant (Department of Health and Mental Hygiene-Office of School Health)