

Video Games and Real-Life Aggression: A Review of the Literature

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Executive Summary

In response to a legislative request, we reviewed the research literature on the topic of the possible link between violent video games and real-life violence. We searched three computerized databases (PsycInfo, ERIC, and Medline) and identified 25 reports of scientific studies related to this topic. We divided the studies into three age groups: preschool and elementary school children; middle and high school students; and college students and young adults. We identified seven to nine studies per age group.

At present, it may be concluded that the research evidence is not supportive of a major public concern that violent video games lead to real-life violence. However, this conclusion might change as more research is conducted on more recent and increasingly violent and realistic games.

Preschool/elementary school children. For children about ages 4-8, we found relatively consistent evidence (three out of four studies) that playing video games with aggressive content caused an increase in aggression or aggressive play during free-play immediately after the video game play. Because of the experimental designs (providing strong evidence of causality) and the realistic outcome measure (behavioral observations during free-play), this research indicates that preschool and early elementary school children show increased aggression or aggressive play immediately after playing a video game with aggressive content. The studies did not provide evidence that harm was inflicted as a result of the aggression, or assess whether there were any long-term effects.

Middle and high school students. Studies of middle and high school students showed mixed results. Because of these mixed results and the weaknesses of correlational study designs in distinguishing cause and effect, this research indicates that at this time it is not known whether violent video games have detrimental, positive, or no consistent effects on aggression in this age group.

One experimental study showed no effect of playing a video game with aggressive content on subsequent aggression. Eight other studies (including five correlational, one quasi-experimental, and two descriptive studies) had varying findings. For example, among three studies examining whether more aggressive boys are more likely to prefer violent video games, one study found the predicted association, one found no association, and one found the reverse pattern, that is, boys who preferred non-violent games scored high on a measure of delinquency and boys who preferred violent games did not.

College students and young adults. Studies of college students and young adults showed mixed results. Out of four experimental studies of self-rated hostile mood after violent video game play, only two showed increased hostile mood. Out of four studies using other measures of hostility/aggression, only one showed an association

between hostility/aggressions and video game play. Because of these mixed results, this research indicates that at this time it is not known whether video game play affects aggression or hostility in this age group.

Major limitations of the current research include: Lack of experimental studies addressing whether playing violent video games causes increased aggressive behavior in teenagers or young adults; lack of studies addressing whether individuals with other risk factors for violence (e.g., a history of being abused) might have more negative responses to video game violence than other youth; and lack of longer term measurements of behavior in young children.

Given the ubiquity of violent video games and the findings from experimental studies indicating that playing violent video games may lead to increased aggression in young children immediately following play, we believe that additional well-designed, experimental studies are needed. New research would utilize games with levels of violence that reflect games currently available to children. We recommend that studies focus on moderate to long term effects of playing violent video games among young children. The lack of experimental studies for students in middle and high school also needs to be addressed.

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