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Exposure to Media Violence Increases Aggressive and Violent Behavior

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The extent to which media violence causes youth aggression and violence has been hotly debated for more than fifty years. Despite many reports that exposure to violent media is a causal risk factor, the U.S. public remains largely unaware of these risks, and youth exposure to violent media remains extremely high. Among the public advisories that have been generally ignored are congressional hearings in 1954, U.S. surgeon general reports in 1972 and 2001, a National Institute of Mental Health report in 1982, and a Federal Trade Commission report in 2000. In addition to government studies, reports have been issued by scientific organizations such as the American Psychological Association (in 1994, 2000, and 2005), the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, the American Medical Association, the American Academy of Family Physicians, and the American Psychiatric Association.

The most recent [2003] thorough review of the research on media violence, by an expert panel convened by the U.S. surgeon general, concluded, "Research on violent television and films, video games, and music reveals unequivocal evidence that media violence increases the likelihood of aggressive and violent behavior in both immediate and long-term contexts." Hundreds of original empirical studies of the link between media violence and aggression have been conducted, and numerous reviews of those studies both narrative and statistical have come to the same conclusion. Indeed, one analysis found clear evidence that exposure to media violence increases aggressive behavior as early as 1975.

The newest form of media violence violent video games played on computers, video game consoles, handheld systems, the Internet, and even cell phones also is the fastest growing. Although most youth still spend more time each week watching TV, including movies, than playing video games, the time they spend with video games is increasing rapidly, and a growing share of youth is spending many hours playing video games. For example, about 90 percent of U.S. youth aged eight to eighteen play video games, with boys averaging about nineteen hours a week. Annual surveys of college freshmen over time reveal that as twelfth graders they spend ever-increasing amounts of time playing video games. The finding is especially true for boys....

We review evidence on the link between youth violence and violence on television and film and on video games. We could find no studies on the effects of violence in advertising on aggressive or violent behavior, but the effects of such violent content are likely to be similar.

Television and Movie Violence and Violent Behavior

Television and movie violence are the most extensively researched forms of media violence. Studies using all three major research designs have all reached the same conclusion exposure to television and movie violence increases aggression and violence.

Experimental studies [studies in which the researcher controls all the risk factors] have shown that even a single exposure increases

aggression in the immediate situation. For example, Kaj Bjorkqvist randomly assigned one group of five- to six-year-old Finnish children to watch violent movies, another to watch nonviolent ones. Raters who did not know which type of movie the children had seen then observed them playing together in a room. Children who had just watched the violent movie were rated much higher on physical assault and other types of aggression. Other experiments have shown that exposure to media violence can increase aggressive thinking, aggressive emotions, and tolerance for aggression, all known risk factors for later aggressive and violent behavior.

The most popular video games played by youth contain violence. Even children's games ... are likely to contain violence.

Many cross-sectional studies [studies that look at a group at one point in time] have examined whether people who view many violent TV shows and movies also tend to behave more aggressively. Such studies generally find significant positive correlations. For example, one group of researchers studied the links between "aggressive behavioral delinquency," such as fighting and hitting, and TV violence viewing in samples of Wisconsin and Maryland high school and junior high school students. They found significant positive links between TV violence exposure and aggression for both boys and girls. Another research team reported 49 percent more violent acts in the past six months by heavy viewers of TV violence than by light viewers.

Researchers also have used longitudinal studies [studies over a period of time] to investigate television violence effects, using time periods that range from less than one year to fifteen years. One research team studied a group of six- to ten-year-olds over fifteen years. They found that both boys and girls who viewed television violence committed more aggression (physical, verbal, and indirect) during young adulthood. The study found the same link when the outcome examined was outright physical violence, such as punching, beating, choking, threatening, or attacking with a knife or gun. This media violence study is one of the few to include measures of violent crime. Because it is a well-conducted longitudinal study, it lends considerable strength to the view of media violence as a causal risk factor for aggression, violence, and violent crime. Interestingly, although frequent exposure to TV violence during childhood was linked to high levels of adulthood aggression, high aggressiveness during childhood did not lead to frequent viewing of television violence in adulthood.

Violent Video Games and Violent Behavior

The most popular video games played by youth contain violence. Even children's games (as designated by the industry-sponsored Entertainment Software Ratings Board) are likely to contain violence. More than 30 percent of games rated "E" (suitable for everyone) contain a violence descriptor; more than 90 percent of "E10+" games (suitable for those ten years and older) contain a violence descriptor. About 70 percent of fourth to twelfth graders report playing "Mature"-rated games (suitable for those seventeen and older), which contain the most graphic violence of all.

Research on video game violence is less extensive than that on TV and film violence, but the findings are essentially the same. Experimental studies in field and laboratory settings generally find that brief exposure to violent video games increases aggressive thoughts, feelings, and behavior. For example, one laboratory study assigned children and college students randomly to play either a children's video game that involved shooting cartoon-like characters or a nonviolent children's video game. Later, all participants completed a standard laboratory task that measures physical aggression. Those who had played the violent children's game displayed a 40 percent higher aggression rate than those who had played a nonviolent game. The effect was the same for both elementary school children and college students. In a field experiment, children were randomly assigned to play either a violent or nonviolent video game and then were observed by trained coders during a free-play period. The children who had played the violent game displayed significantly more physical aggression than those who had played a nonviolent game.

Media violence exposure has a larger effect on later violent behavior than does substance abuse, abusive parents, poverty, living in a broken home, or having a low IQ.

To date, the only published longitudinal study that clearly delineates the possible influence of violent video games used a relatively short time span of six months. The researchers conducting the study assessed the media habits and aggressive tendencies of elementary school children, as well as a host of control variables, twice within a school year. The children who were heavily exposed to video game violence early in the school year became relatively more physically aggressive by the end of the year, as measured by peers, teachers, and self-reports. Cross-sectional studies have also found positive correlations between exposure to violent video games and various forms of aggression, including violent behavior and violent crimes.

All three types of studies have also linked violent video games to a host of additional aggression-related cognitive, emotional, and behavioral outcomes. Outcomes include more positive attitudes toward violence, increased use of aggressive words or solutions to hypothetical problems, quicker recognition of facial anger, increased self-perception as being aggressive, increased feelings of anger and revenge motives, decreased sensitivity to scenes and images of real violence, and changes in brain function associated with lower executive control and heightened emotion.

Media Violence Is a Risk Factor for Violent Behavior

The research evidence shows clearly that media violence is a causal risk factor for aggressive and violent behavior. There is considerably less evidence concerning violent crimes, but the few cross-sectional and longitudinal studies that included violent crime measures also found similar links with media violence. The size of the media violence effect is as large as or larger than that of many factors commonly accepted by public policymakers and the general public as valid risk factors for violent behavior.... [Several] studies have directly compared video game and TV violence using the same participants and the same measures; they generally find a somewhat larger effect for video games. Thus, we expect that the effect of violent video games on long-term violence will be larger than that of TV violence and smaller than that of gang membership. Furthermore, it is likely that overall media violence exposure has a somewhat larger effect than any individual type of media violence. In any case, the figure makes clear that media violence exposure has a larger effect on later violent behavior than does substance use, abusive parents, poverty, living in a broken home, or

having low IQ.

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