

Video Violence

Exposure to violent video games can increase aggressive behavior.

Remember the first video games that came out about 25 years ago—Pong and Pac Man? They seemed harmless enough. How much aggression could be stirred up by watching a ball bounce across a screen or a small cartoon creature eat dots?

But consider the popular games of today. Violence abounds. Even in a cartoon game like Super Mario Brothers, the play involves destroying other creatures.

In a recent study (Dietz, 1998) involving Sega and Nintendo video games, nearly 80 percent were found to be violent in nature. Twenty-one percent were deemed violent toward women.

The game creators and manufacturers contend that violent video games are only entertainment, that kids know the difference between real and fictional violence. They downplay the potential harm to kids. But according to recent studies, their opinions are, at best, uninformed.

The truth is, according to studies published in the April 2000 issue of the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, exposure to violent video games can increase aggressive behavior over both the short and the long term. These studies support the idea that violent video games may be potentially more dangerous than television and movies.

Here's why:

- * In many video games, the player is asked to assume the character of the aggressor and control his or her actions. Being able to identify with an aggressor heightens aggression.
- * Game players are active participants. Rather than watching passively, as in the case of television and movies, kids interact electronically with the game. They have the opportunity to choose to act aggressively. The responses they learn can lead to later aggression.
- * Violent video games often have rewards and punishments that reinforce performing aggressive behavior. When a child playing a game chooses a violent behavior and then is rewarded, he sees an advantage in becoming aggressive.

In combination, these three strategies of modeling, rehearsing and rewarding violence provide a powerful learning environment for children. The games increase kids' knowledge of violence and allow them to practice it. Should we be surprised, then, when kids act out in violent and aggressive ways?

The studies indicated that the relationship between aggression and violent video games was stronger for men and people who already had aggressive traits. Playing the games was also positively related to delinquency!

Sadly, the production of these games is not decreasing. In spite of the results of studies such as the ones I have cited and the controversy over the role violent video games have played in recent school shootings, violent video production continues.

Why? Because violence, like sex, sells!

If I sound annoyed, I am. As a mom, I find the production of this material not only offensive but also potentially harmful to our kids. I also find it paradoxical that in a country that verbalizes concern for children and spends millions of dollars on programs to help aggressive kids, we ignore the marketplace's contribution to violence.

Please don't talk to me about First Amendment freedoms. I know people have the right to produce violent videos. The question is, should they? Common sense, and now science, tell us this isn't healthy.

What can you do?

First, refuse to buy violent games. Second, speak against the production and sale of this material every chance you get. Third, agree with other parents to keep one another up-to-date regarding the research.

For your own children, monitor exposure to games, keeping tabs on what games are played at your own home, as well as at other people's homes. Discuss the potential effects of playing the games. Teach your children the importance of guarding their hearts and minds. Model nonviolent ways to handle conflict. Finally, fill your children's minds with the things of God.

Make a decision today to keep these games out of your homes. Contrary to popular opinion, they are more than entertainment—they are a source of very real harm to our kids.