



Children And Violent Video Games

More and more kids are playing video and computer games — especially ultra-violent ones that are top sellers. Research shows that children are also spending increasing amounts of time playing them: an average of 13 hours per week for boys and five hours for girls. A recent content analysis by the research organization Children Now shows that a majority of video games include violence and about half of the violent incidents would result in serious injuries or death in the "real" world.

Do you know what games your children are playing and what impact all the violence can have on them?

According to the American Psychological Association, violent video games can increase children's aggression. Dr. Phil explains, "The number one negative effect is they tend to inappropriately resolve anxiety by externalizing it. So when kids have anxiety, which they do, instead of soothing themselves, calming themselves, talking about it, expressing it to someone, or even expressing it emotionally by crying, they tend to externalize it. They can attack something, they can kick a wall, they can be mean to a dog or a pet." Additionally, there's an increased frequency of violent responses from children who play these kinds of video games.

Dr. Phil also points out that violent video games don't teach kids moral consequences. "If you shoot somebody in one of these games, you don't go to jail, you don't get penalized in some way — you get extra points!" This doesn't mean that your child will go out into the world and shoot someone. "But they do use more aggressive language, they do use more aggressive images, they have less ability to control their anger and they externalize things in these violent ways. It's absolutely not good," says Dr. Phil.

Furthermore, the American Psychological Association says playing violent games correlates to children being less caring and helpful toward their peers. And these effects happen just as much for non-aggressive children as they do for children who already have aggressive tendencies. Children spend a great deal of time with violent video games at exactly the ages that they should be learning healthy ways to relate to other people and to resolve conflicts peacefully.

And, according to the National Institute on Media and the Family, it's not just a concern when it comes to young children. Teenage brains are in the midst of growth spurts, making teens very impressionable. Just when teens are wiring the circuits for self-control, responsibility and relationships that they will carry with them into adulthood, violent games activate their anger center while dampening the brain's "conscience." And think of the more subtle impact: What do you think the effect is when your kids spend time with violence simulators that glorify gang culture, celebrate brutality, lionize crudeness, and trivialize violence toward women?

How can parents minimize any potential harm? Psychologists have found that when parents limit the amount of time as well as the types of games their children play, children are less likely to show aggressive behaviors. Other research suggests that active parental involvement in children's media usage — including discussing the inappropriateness of violent solutions to real life conflicts, reducing time spent on violent media, and generating alternative nonviolent solutions to problems — all can reduce the impact of media violence on children and youth. If you play video games with your child, Dr. Phil suggests alternative activities that allow you to have more interaction with your child, such as playing a board game together or going for a walk and exploring together.

Parents should also pay attention to video games' ratings. Following are the guidelines that were established by the Entertainment Software Rating Board:

- **EC** is for "early childhood." May be suitable for ages 3 and up. Contains no material that parents would find inappropriate.
- **E** is for "everyone." May be suitable for ages 6 and up. May contain minimal violence, some comic mischief and/or mild language.
- **E10+** is for "everyone 10 and older." May be suitable for ages 10 and up. Titles in this category may contain more cartoon, fantasy or mild violence, mild language, and/or minimal suggestive themes.
- **T** is for "teen." May be suitable for ages 13 and up. May contain violent content, mild or strong language, and/or suggestive themes.
- **M** is for "mature." May be suitable for persons ages 17 and up. May contain mature sexual themes, more intense violence and/or strong language.
- **AO** is for "adults only." Have content suitable only for adults. May include graphic depictions of sex and/or violence. Adult Only products are not intended for persons under the age of 18.
- **RP** is for "rating pending." Titles have been submitted and are awaiting final rating.

More Tips for Parents:

Children Now, an independent research and action organization, recommends these tips:

- Know your child. Different children handle things differently. If your child becomes aggressive or unsettled after playing violent video games, don't buy such games, regardless of the child's age. Likewise, if your child likes playing games with characters that look like her or him, purchase games with characters that fit the bill.
- Read the ratings. Every video and computer game should be rated for age appropriateness on the front of the packaging. Some games also have labels with content descriptions on the back of the packaging. Be sure to read both of these labels in order to determine whether the game is age appropriate for your child and whether it contains material that you do not wish your child to be exposed to.
- Read more than the ratings. While the ESRB ratings can be helpful, they do not tell the whole story. Some features that you may consider violent or sexual may not be labeled as such by the ESRB. In addition, the ESRB does not rate games for the positive inclusion of females or characters of color. The language on the packaging may give you a better idea of the amount and significance of violence and sexuality, and the presence of gender and racial diversity or stereotypes in the game.
- Go online. The [ESRB website](#) provides game ratings as well as definitions of the rating system. In addition, you can visit game maker and distributor Web sites to learn more about the contents of a game. Some have reviews that will provide even more information about the game.
- Rent before you buy. Many video rental stores also rent video games and consoles. Take a trial run before you purchase a game. There is no better way to know what kind of material is featured in a game than to play it yourself.
- Talk to other parents. Find out which games other parents like and dislike as well as which games they let your child play when she or he visits their house. This is a good way to learn about the games that your child enjoys, games that other parents approve of, and to let other parents know which games you do not want your child playing.
- Play the games with your child. Know what your child is being exposed to and how they react to different features in the games.
- Talk about what you see. If your child discovers material that he or she finds disturbing or that you find inappropriate, talk about it. This is a great opportunity to let your child know what your values are as well as to help him or her deal with images that may be troubling.
- Set limits. If you are worried that your child spends too much time playing video games, limit the amount of time or specify the times of day that video games can be played.
- Put the games in a public space. Just as with the Internet, keep your game consoles and computers in public family space so that you can be aware of the material your child is viewing.
- Contact the game makers. If you find material that you think is offensive or inappropriate, let the people who make and sell the games know about it. Likewise, let game makers know if you think that a game provides healthy messages or images. They do care what you think!

For more information, visit:

- [American Psychology Association](#)
- [The National Institute on Media and the Family](#)
- [Children Now](#)