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The Link Between Violent Video Game Use and Aggression

Given the prevalence of violent behavior in our society, and the widespread use of video games by American youth, the public has understandably been concerned about how young people are affected by playing violent video games. Statistics reveal that more than 90% of U.S. children play some kind of video game, while among adolescents ages 12–17 the figure rises to 97%. These numbers are startling, but when coupled with the fact that 85% of video games on the market contain some form of violence, they become alarming.

In August, 2015, after a comprehensive review of the research literature published between 2005 and 2013, the American Psychological Association's Task Force on Media Violence released its report. The task force concluded that "there is a consistent relation between violent video game use and increases in aggressive behavior, aggressive cognitions, and aggressive affect, and decreases in pro-social behavior, empathy and sensitivity to aggression", with some indication that higher amounts of exposure are associated with greater aggression and other adverse outcomes. Insufficient research exists, however, to confirm a connection between video game use and subsequent acts of criminal violence.

The task force was careful to point out that research has identified multiple risk factors for the development of aggression, including factors at the level of the individual, the family, the school, and the larger community. Examples of these risk factors are a history of exposure to violence or victimization, poor behavioral control (e.g., hyperactivity, impulsivity), low socio-economic status, exposure to harsh disciplinary practices, low parental involvement, peer rejection, poor academic performance, and living in deprived urban settings with few economic opportunities.

Although protective factors that buffer young people from the risks of becoming violent have not been studied as extensively as risk factors, The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have noted a number of protective factors, including:

- Exposure to school climates that are characterized by intensive supervision, clear behavioral rules, consistent consequences for aggression, and engagement of parents and teachers.

- Consistent presence of a parent during at least one of the following: when awakening, when arriving home from school, at evening mealtime, or at bedtime.

- Highly developed social skills and competencies.

- A strong commitment to school and doing well.

- Membership in peer groups that do not condone antisocial behavior and engage in pro-social activities.

Besides fostering the protective factors mentioned above, school personnel can inform parents about the connection between aggressive behavior and video game use, and encourage a variety of parental controls, including limiting play time and previewing games first to determine level of violence. ■

Reference:

8/13/15 press release about report of APA Task Force on Violent Media. http://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2015/08/violent-video-games.aspx