

# Marketing Violence

Studies Raise Concerns Over Video Games

By Father John Flynn

Executive summary:

- Children have too easy access to Mature-rated games.
- There is now a substantial body of evidence that exposure to violence through the media does indeed increase aggression.
- Children and adolescents are spending an increasing amount of time playing video games (in 2004: boys 13 hours per week, girls 5 hours per week).
- The research revealed that the interactive nature of video games results in a stronger relationship with violent behavior, compared to non-interactive media such as television or movies.
- What happens at home influences behavior. Children whose parents set more limits on media usage were less aggressive.
- There should be increased efforts at public education, so that parents are more aware of the risks their children run with video games. The authors also recommend that parents discuss with their children the question of violence at resolving conflict.
- Improving the ratings system for games, and putting more explicit warnings on the games themselves could also help.

ROME, MAY 20, 2007 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- A couple of new publications in the United States shed light on the long-standing debate over media violence and children. In April the Federal Trade Commission published the latest in a series of reports on the issue.

Titled: "Marketing Violent Entertainment to Children," it provides an overview of the exposure of children and adolescents through music, films and video games to content normally reserved for an adult audience.

There has been progress, the report observes, with more limits on ads for movies and video games. Nevertheless, the Commission notes that with regard to video games advertisements for the M-rated games still reach large numbers of children and young teens. The M rating (mature) designates that the games are suitable for an audience of 17 years of age and above.

The report cited concerns by critics, who argue that children have too easy access to M-rated games. For example, a 2005 survey by the National Institute on Media and the Family found that 70% of children in grades 4 through 12 reported playing M-rated games.

The second publication is a book, published earlier this year, titled: "Violent Video Game Effects on Children and Adolescents." (Oxford University Press, USA). The book is the result of a joint effort by three psychologists: Craig A. Anderson; Douglas A. Gentile; and Katherine E. Buckley.

The book starts by noting the difficulty, from a scientific point of view, in establishing a relationship of direct causality between exposure to violent video games and violent behavior. Over the years researchers have carried out many studies on the more general question of media violence. The overwhelming conclusion of what is now a substantial body of evidence is that exposure to violence through the media does indeed increase aggression.

Research in the area of video games is, however, more limited. To remedy this deficit in the evidence the bulk of the book presents the results of three new studies on video games.

As a preliminary the authors observe that children and adolescents are spending an increasing amount of time playing video games. Recent surveys show school-age children devoting about 7 hours a week playing video games. Generally, boys spend more time playing video games, with one 2004 survey of students showing 5 hours a week for girls and 13 hours for boys.

Not only do children and teens spend considerable amounts of time playing video games, but they do so with little parental oversight. Over 50% of students in one study said their parents never checked the ratings for video games before giving the go-ahead for their purchase or rental.

#### New evidence

In the first of the three new studies that form the core of the book the authors explain that they tested 161 9-to 12-year-olds, and 354 college students. Each was randomly assigned to play a violent or non-violent game. Subsequently, participants played another game in which they were asked to set punishment levels to be delivered to another person.

The results demonstrated that those who had played the violent video games punished opponents more severely than those who had played the non-violent games. In addition, the research revealed that the interactive nature of video games results in a stronger relationship with violent behavior, compared to non-interactive media such as television or movies.

A result that surprised the researchers was that there was no apparent difference between the children and college students. This is in contrast with the view held by many that children are more vulnerable to media violence, and indicates college students are just as much affected.

On a positive note, based on information from those surveyed, it turned out that what happens at home influences behavior. Children whose parents set more limits on media usage were less aggressive.

The second study consisted in a survey of 189 high school students. The results showed a positive relationship between those who played a greater number of violent video games and possessing more hostile personalities.

The survey took into account factors that could influence the results, such as the amount of time spent playing games, the normal differences that exist in attitudes between males and females. Even after taking these and other elements into consideration the researchers concluded that playing violent video games was a significant predictor of aggressive behavior.

The study also found that the more time students spent on the combination of video games and watching television, the poorer were their academic results.

The final study examined 430 third, fourth and fifth graders, at two times during a school year. The student's peers and teachers were also questioned, in order to obtain more information about the level of aggressiveness of the group studied.

More aggressive, less sociable

By examining the group over a period of time, on average there was a gap of 5 months between the measurements, the researchers were able to conclude that children who

played a greater number of violent video games early in the school year had changed later on, and came to see the world as a more hostile place. They also became more aggressive and less inclined to socialize with their peers.

The results showed no apparent differences between boys and girls. In fact, the researchers concluded that no one is truly immune from the effects of media violence.

As in the first study the factor of controls put in place by parents had an important influence on children. If at home there are controls on both the amount of time spent playing video games and the content of them, then children suffer a lesser degree of ill-effects.

Proceeding to a general evaluation of the relationship between media violence and its effects on children and adolescents the authors conclude that the impact of the media is far from trivial. Given this, and considering that almost all children play video games, if society were to reduce the exposure of this group to violence through games there would be a significant social impact for the better.

In spite of evidence showing the harmful effects of media violence the authors admit that so far attempts to put any legal restrictions on children's access to violent video games have had little success.

An alternative approach is to increase efforts at public education, so that parents are more aware of the risks their children run with video games. The authors also recommend that parents discuss with their children the question of violence, pointing out the inappropriateness of aggressive behavior in resolving personal problems.

Improving the ratings system for games, and putting more explicit warnings on the games themselves could also help, the authors point out. In addition, community action to pressure retailers not to sell violent games to children can be effective.

On May 20 the Church celebrated World Communications Day. Benedict XVI's message for the event was titled: "Children and the Media: A Challenge for Education." The problem of violence in the media was one of the questions dealt with by the Pope.

"In this context an adequate formation in the right use of media is essential: Parents, teachers, and the ecclesial community are called to collaborate to educate children and young people to be selective and to develop a critical attitude, cultivating a taste for what is aesthetically and morally valid."

"Any trend to produce programs and products -- including animated films and video games -- which in the name of entertainment exalt violence and portray anti-social behavior or the trivialization of human sexuality is a perversion, all the more repulsive when these programs are directed at children and adolescents," the Pontiff declared. (No. 3) Strong words, but well-grounded, as the latest research amply demonstrates.

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