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Study links violent video games to violent thought, action

A study in the March issue of *Psychological Bulletin*, a journal of the [American Psychological Association](#), shows that playing violent video games increases violent thinking, attitudes and behaviors among players. And it does nothing to promote positive social behaviors.

Psychologist [Craig Anderson](#) of Iowa State University and his team analyzed existing studies of 130,000 people from the U.S., Europe and Japan. His findings held for players in Western and Eastern cultures, for male and female players and for players of various ages. They also contradict some earlier studies, whose findings the current authors say are tainted by "selection bias" -- the method by which they selected studies to analyze.

The new study notes that while violence in movies and TV shows has long been examined for its potential impact on viewers' proclivity for violence, video gaming, a much newer phenomenon, has not yet been so fully explored.

In its review of data, the new research found that exposure to violent video games was associated with aggressive behavior, aggressive cognition and aggressive "affect." It desensitizes users and is associated with lack of empathy and a lack of "prosocial" behavior.

In an accompanying commentary, [Christopher Ferguson](#) and John Kilburn of the department of behavioral applied science and criminal justice at Texas A&M International University note flaws in Anderson's analysis, including what they say is his own selection bias. Ferguson -- whose earlier research is the main object of Anderson's criticism -- points out that, even with what he views as a bias in Anderson's selection of studies, Anderson found only a weak connection between violent video gaming and violent thoughts and deeds. Finally, Ferguson notes that violent crime in the U.S. and other developed nations where video games are played has decreased over the decades during which video gaming has grown in popularity. The commentary concludes:

Although it is certainly true that few researchers suggest that VVGs [violent video games] are the sole cause of violence, this does not mean they cannot be wrong about VVGs having any meaningful effect at all. Psychology, too often, has lost its ability to put the weak (if any) effects found for VVGs on aggression into a proper perspective. In doing so, it does more to misinform than inform public debates on this issue.

Michael D. Gallagher, president of the Entertainment Software Association, responded in a prepared statement:

Numerous authorities, including the U.S. Surgeon General, the

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Federal Trade Commission, the Federal Communications Commission and numerous courts have thoroughly and critically examined the social science research and found that it does not establish any causal link between violent content and violent behavior.

Most recently in 2008, Drs. Cheryl K. Olson and Lawrence Kutner, co-founders and directors of the Harvard Medical School Center for Mental Health and Media, conducted a study funded by the U.S. Department of Justice on the effects of video games on young teenagers. In contrast to previous research, they studied real children and families in real situations. In their authoritative analysis, [Grand Theft Childhood](#), they found that 'the strong link between video game violence and real world violence, and the conclusion that video games lead to social isolation and poor interpersonal skills, are drawn from bad or irrelevant research, muddleheaded thinking and unfounded, simplistic news reports.'

But the new study's authors, confident in their findings, say it's time to move toward a fix:

Concerning public policy, we believe that debates can and should finally move beyond the simple question of whether violent video game play is a causal risk factor for aggressive behavior. Instead, we believe the public policy debate should move to questions concerning how best to deal with this risk factor. Public education about this risk factor -- and about how parents, schools, and society at large can deal with it -- could be very useful.

"Video games are neither inherently good nor inherently bad," the study says. "But people learn. And content matters."

Do your kids play violent video games? Do you think those games affect the way they think or act? Please vote in today's poll:

Do you see evidence in your family that playing violent video games spurs violent thoughts and actions?

- No, because we don't play violent video games.
- No, and if I did, I would take those games away.
- It's hard to tell: Kids sometimes act in violent ways, whether they play video games or not.
- Yes, but I figure the games are a good outlet for burning off steam.
- Yes, and it concerns me a lot.

[view results](#)

This is a non-scientific user poll. Results are not statistically valid and cannot be assumed to reflect the views of Washington Post users as a group or the general population.

We're tweeting! You can follow the Post's Local Living writers, including Jennifer, at [@wposthome/local-living](#). And keep track of my "[Me Minus 10](#)" effort to lose 10 pounds before I turn 50 at [twitter.com/jhuget](#).

By Jennifer LaRue Huget | March 1, 2010; 12:01 AM ET

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