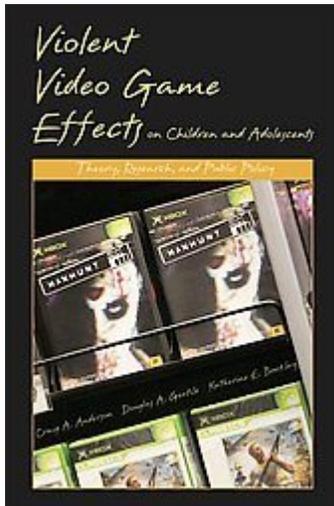


Anderson, C. A., Gentile, D. A., & Buckley, K. E. (2007). *Violent video game effects on children and adolescents*. (ISBN13: 9780195309836; ISBN10: 0195309839; Hardback, 200 pages)



Reviewed by Adrienne McFaul

The causal link between violent media consumption and increases in aggressive behaviors has been known since the 1970s, and has been demonstrated through laboratory and field studies as well as through longitudinal research (Anderson et al., 2003; Bushman & Huesmann, 2006). The bulk of the extant research has focused on the effects of violent television and movies. Video games became popular in the US in the 1980's and since their inception have become increasingly both violent in their content and seemingly realistic due to advances in graphic and interactive game play technologies. It has been hypothesized that precisely because of their interactive nature, video games should lead to greater increases in aggressive behavior as compared to more passive media consumption such as television viewing (Anderson & Bushman, 2001). For example, a recent study published in *Aggressive Behavior* demonstrated via a mixed experimental-naturalistic design that playing violent video games produced greater aggressive behavior than did watching violent video games being played (Polman, Orobio de Castro, & van Aken, 2008).

Despite recent provocative findings, investigation of violent video game effects is a relatively new area of inquiry in contrast to other types of violent media effects. *Violent Video Game Effects on Children and Adolescents*, written by Craig Anderson, Douglas Gentile, and Katherine Buckley (Oxford University Press, 2007) addresses the critical need for scholarship on the risks of violent video game use for children and adolescents. Researchers as well as policymakers, parents and students interested in gaining a greater understanding of the power and the dangers of playing violent video games would do well to avoid relying on popular journalism on the subject, written by non-specialists and often gleaned from secondary sources. Luckily, with Anderson et al.'s new volume, readers can bypass incomplete and occasionally unreasonable interpretations of the media effects literature. Anderson, Gentile, and Buckley have written a brilliant, highly accessible volume on the effects that playing violent videogames have on kids and teens. *Violent Video Game Effects on Children and Adolescents* explains the logic, history, and science behind the domain of media effects research and introduces the emerging focus on video games in the field to a broad readership.

The book's introduction provides an overview of the methods used by media effects researchers, explaining terms and measurements that have informed decades of media effects research and providing a clear and necessary explanation of how scientists think about and demonstrate causality. When presented with findings from research on violent media, a common response from teens is often: "I play a lot of violent video games, but I haven't killed anyone," and adolescents tend not to endorse exposure to violent media as a causal influence on aggressive behavior (Boxer & Tisak, 2003). The authors place individual experiences in context, explaining the importance of the presence of cumulative, multiple factors in understanding the development of violent behavior. They also explain that aggression is much more than just violence and offer a lucid discussion of what aggression is and how it is measured within the

laboratory. According to Anderson and colleagues, aggression can be conceptualized as occurring on a continuum with extreme violence at one end and less severe and more mundane behaviors (such as being rude and disruptive) at the opposite end. Readers will understand how laboratory measures of aggression, as well as questioning research participants about their beliefs and attitudes toward aggression, inform the understanding of more severe forms of aggression.

Three new studies on video game violence follow. As basic questions have been preempted by the introduction, the reader is well-prepared to understand the fundamental background and logic behind these three studies. Making the new studies even more accessible are page-long synopses embedded near the end of each study. The casual reader will be able to breeze through technical details without missing out on the main methodological features and important findings.

Study 1 involved children and college students playing either a violent or non-violent video game, and then having the chance to punish an ostensible opponent with a noise blast. The findings of this study provided a challenge to assumptions about whether children grow out of their susceptibility to the effects of violence exposure as they become young adults. Past theory assumed that individuals become less susceptible to the effects of exposure to violent media. These findings indicate that susceptibility to the effects of violent video game exposure continues into early adulthood. Study 1 also has important implications for the ESRB (Entertainment Software Rating Board) video game rating system. Games rated E, meaning appropriate for everyone, were associated with increases in aggressive behavior analogous to games rated as only appropriate for teens and adults.

Next, in Study 2 high school students completed surveys on their aggressive behaviors, aggressive beliefs and attitudes, and media exposure. The results of the survey indicated that, after controlling for the effects of gender, aggressive beliefs and attitudes, and total time spent consuming media, the amount of violent video games that an adolescent plays still predicts aggressive behavior, including more severe violence. This means that female high school students, along with the boys, are also susceptible to the negative effects of violent video game play. The survey results also had implications for media use and academic success. Increased time spent consuming media was associated with decreases in academic achievement.

Finally, Study 3 queried children, their peers and teachers on aggressive behaviors and violent media consumption twice during a school year. The first published longitudinal study on the effects of violent video game use, this study was able to capture changes in children's behavior over time. What they found was that children who played a lot of violent videogames changed over the school year, becoming more aggressive. In other words, higher levels of violent video game play at time 1 were associated with increases in aggressive behavior at time 2. These changes were observed during an average of only five months. Again, these changes were seen in girls as well as boys. And again, these results also had implications for media use and academic success. Increased time spent consuming media was again found to be associated with decreases in academic achievement.

In the last third of the book, the authors discuss what the three new studies might mean within the broader contexts of violence prevention efforts, parenting practices, and public policy. The authors emphasize that scientific facts are only one element of an informed public policy and highlight the importance of scientific ethics in making sense of implications that the research might have for society. As the authors remind us, science does not exist in a vacuum. Legal issues, personal values, and political realities make up the context in which scientific facts might affect policy decisions. Recent political actions taken regarding policy on violent video games as

well as potential avenues of policy reform are then reviewed. Common problems encountered in creating ratings and warning labels, entertainment licensing, and government restrictions are discussed. Research by Bushman (2006) indicated that warning labels may actually attract people to violent programming. Such issues illustrate difficulties inherent in creating effective public policy.

The book concludes with a much needed list of tips for parents and care-givers on how to responsibly discern which games may be appropriate for the children and adolescents in their lives. An important point that the authors make throughout the monograph is that no one is immune to the negative outcomes associated with violent video game use. However, two potential mitigating factors did emerge from this research. Both greater parental involvement in children's media use and being characteristically forgiving were associated with smaller increases in aggressive behavior in children exposed to violent video games. Additionally, an important tip for parents is to not rely on the ESRB video game rating labels. Parents should play games themselves or watch someone else demonstrate the game. Many parents will be surprised to find what the games their kids are playing actually entail.

Readers should walk away understanding that video games are not to be feared, but should be enjoyed responsibly. Responsibility is predicated upon an understanding of the science behind violent media effects. *Violent Video Game Effects on Children and Adolescents* is an important tool that will help kids, teens, and families become more responsible gamers.

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