

Video Games and Violent Content

When it comes to video games, it's important to remember that not all games are created equal. Today, there are a ton of age-appropriate games that are engaging, stimulating outlets for kids to have fun. There are also many well-designed games, packed with educational content. (You can check out a few of our favorites here: www.common sense media.org/blog/10-most-violent-video-games-of-2015-and-what-to-play-instead)

- **Learn about the games *your* kids are playing.**

If you find that your kid is glued to a new video game, take the time to learn about what they're playing *before* you react. There are many different kinds of games, and understanding the ins and outs of a game will help you decide whether the real issue is the content of the game or simply the quantity of the game. Within some games, there are different settings that can be turned on or off to determine the level of violence a player sees. Scholars tend to agree that some kids may be especially vulnerable to the effects of media violence. Consider your kid's temperament, and pay attention to how they react after playing games with violence. If you know your kid has a tendency to identify with violent characters, try to find some nonviolent substitutes to keep him or her occupied.

Hint for parents of kids under 7: Younger kids can't consistently distinguish between fact and fantasy, which makes exposure to media violence especially problematic. Whatever you decide about violent video games for your older kids, it's a good idea to keep violent games out of younger kids' play routines — at least for the early years.

- **Analyze the building blocks of the games.**

Professor James Paul Gee looks at how some good video games include learning principles such as identity and production, risk taking and system thinking. Building off of the diet metaphor, you may want to ask yourself questions about how and why a particular game might be appealing to your child: How does it appeal to kids' imaginations? Are they put in the driver's seat? Is it age-appropriate and aligned to interests? Can kids create and experiment? Are there social components? What is the overall story? How is the design engaging? (Doesn't have to be big bucks to be appealing!)

➤ <http://www.jamespaulgee.com>

➤ http://www.skatekidsonline.com/parents_teachers/Good_Video_Games_and_Good_Learning_Updated.pdf

- **Take advantage of “teachable moments.”**

Help your kid reflect on the violence he or she sees in video games or in other media. Ask, “What are other ways that character could have solved his issue without violence?” Use the opportunity to talk to your kids about different options for appropriate ways to resolve conflicts. Distinguish video game consequences from real-life consequences by asking, “How do you think that situation would have played in our real life?” Make sure to explain the real-world consequences of violence, so your kids get that racking up bonus points for aggressive behavior is a far cry from the reality of aggressive acts in the real world.

In general, it's wise to monitor consumption of content that is heavy on violence, profanity, and sexism. Tune in to how your kid reacts after playing these kinds of games, and make adjustments that make sense for your family. Counteract the message that violence is useful and rewarding by discussing the disconnect between video games and the real world. And, as with a healthy diet, make sure that their consumption is balanced with other activities that reinforce positive interactions and reward pro-social behavior.

Advice by age

- **2- to 4-year-old** kids often see cartoon violence. But keep them away from anything that shows physical aggression as a means of conflict resolution, because they'll imitate what they see.
- **For 5- to 7-year-olds**, some of the cartoon rough-and-tumble, slapstick, and fantasy violence can actually makes kids thinks it's okay and funny to see these sanitized versions of violence. Violence that could result in death or serious injury can also be too scary, so it's better to keep these types of exposure to a minimum.
- **8- to 10-year-olds** can handle action-hero sword fighting or gunplay as long as there's no gore.
- **For 11- to 12-year-olds**, historical action — battles, fantasy clashes, and duels — is OK. But close-ups of gore or graphic violence (alone or combined with sexual situations) aren't recommended. Keep in mind that this age is exposed to A LOT of socially aggressive tween shows that involve lots of mean acts that are supposed to be funny. Kids are more apt to learn behaviors from those main characters they are exposed to, so it warrants the need to check on what types of messages those main characters are giving.
- **Kids age 13 to 17** can and will see shoot-'em-ups, blow-'em-ups, high-tech violence, accidents with disfigurement or death, anger, and gang fighting. Point out that the violence portrayed hurts and causes suffering, and limit the time they're exposed to violence, especially in video games.
- **Most M-rated games aren't right for kids under 17.** The kid down the street may have the latest cop-killer game, but that doesn't mean it's good for him. The ultra-violent behavior, often combined with sexual images, affects developing brains. Just because your child's friend is allowed to play violent games or watch violent movies doesn't mean they're OK for your child.

Rule of thumb when it comes to different ages: visually graphic things can be especially disturbing to younger kids while more realistic situations are more disturbing to older kids.