

## The Influence of Video Games on Our Children: **What Can Parents Do?**

It is an undeniable reality of child development that children will copy behavior to which they are exposed. This often works to parents' benefit, as they are very influential teachers of their children by "modeling" attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors which they wish their children to emulate. On the other hand, this can also become a major problem for children who

are allowed to watch hours of unmonitored television and to play hours of computer or video games.

How much should parents be concerned about the impact of television and video games on their children's behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs? A number of facts in combination underscore that parents should be quite concerned.



**"I told her the homework load was seriously cutting into my X-Box quality time."**

Gary Olsen, Dubuque Schools, [www.dubuque.k12.ia.us](http://www.dubuque.k12.ia.us)

## School Mental Health Services Are Integral to Student Success

Mental health is as important as physical health to children's quality of life and directly impacts their learning and development. Children cannot learn effectively if they are struggling with a mental health problem, such as depression, or feel overwhelmed by academic, social, or family pressures. It is important to recognize that mental health is not simply the absence of mental illness; it also means having the necessary skills to cope with life's challenges. Students, families, schools, and society at large benefit when schools meet the needs of the whole child by fostering social-emotional skills and identifying and preventing mental health problems early.

### **Mental health matters to students, parents, and schools because:**

- Good mental health is essential to success in school and life.
- Too few children with mental health concerns currently receive the help they need.

- Mental health exists on a continuum encompassing mental wellness (resiliency and/or social skills), mental health problems (mild signs and symptoms interfering with performance), and mental illness (diagnosable disorders).
- Left unaddressed, mental health problems are linked to academic and behavior difficulties, dropping out, delinquency, and at-risk behaviors.
- Schools are a natural place to meet children's mental health needs.
- Children who receive mental health support are happier and do better in school.
- School-based mental health services are a wise investment because prevention and intervention are less costly than negative outcomes of unmet mental health problems or remediation.

- School psychologists, school social workers, and school counselors can provide a continuum of mental health services in school.

*Taken from these resources by the National Association of School Psychologists:*

*Removing Barriers to Learning & Improving Student Outcomes: The Importance of School-Based Mental Health Services*

[www.nasponline.org/press/removingbarriers.pdf](http://www.nasponline.org/press/removingbarriers.pdf)

*The Continuum of School Mental Health Services*

[www.nasponline.org/press/continuum.pdf](http://www.nasponline.org/press/continuum.pdf)

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## The Influence of Video Games (continued from page 1)

Children today are watching screens of various sizes on average 38 hours a week compared to engaging in two hours per week of reading and four hours per week doing homework. Research indicates that the number of violent acts on TV per hour is around 30, while almost 80% of the 33 most popular video games contain violence or aggression as part of the play. Perhaps most importantly, over 30 years of psychological research provides indisputable evidence of the negative impact on children of exposure to violence in media. One particularly striking finding comes from a 22-year study by Drs. Eron and Huesmann, two psychologists who followed 875 children into their adulthood. They found that youngsters who watched significant amounts of television violence at eight years of age were much more likely to commit violent crimes or engage in child or spousal abuse at the age of 30. Alarming, research thus far suggests that **violence-filled video games have even more influence than TV**. While watching TV is generally a passive activity, video games require active involvement. They are a powerful teaching tool for the following reasons:

- They are highly interactive and engaging.
- They are designed to immediately provide high levels of positive reinforcement and reward for mastery. They continue to engage the player by presenting “the next level or task” just beyond the previous task, with the promise of greater reward, status, or power.
- They also reward repetition, or practice.

Research indicates that video games with violent themes or activities have the potential to increase a player’s aggressive feelings, thoughts, and behaviors. They may enhance the ‘attractiveness’ of aggression for children as a solution to problem situations. In

turn, children may display less pro-social behavior (showing concern, caring, and helpfulness towards peers) and less thinking about alternative solutions to problems.

*“video games with violent themes or activities have the potential to increase a player’s aggressive feelings, thoughts and behaviors”*

Is all television and video-gaming bad for children? Not at all, as this is a “good news, bad news” story. Children are often actively absorbed by television programming that is at their developmental level. Quality television that is geared to the interests and comprehension capacities of youngsters at a given age can be a powerful, positive educational tool (e.g., “Sesame Street” or shows on the Discovery Channel). Video games have been shown to be an excellent way to introduce children to technology, provide practice in following directions, and develop fine motor and spatial skills. Specific educationally designed video games have also been successful at remediating some types of reading problems (such as dyslexia) and teaching healthy behaviors such as the self-care of asthma and diabetes. Medical students have even been successfully taught surgical procedures through specially designed video games.

In general, it has been established that children who see more violence exhibit more aggressive behaviors, both as youngsters and as adults. However, there is some good news to this story as well. Not all kids are equally susceptible to the influence of violence or other potentially problematic behaviors, attitudes or beliefs depicted on TV or in video games. The critical factor that determines the degree to which children will be

influenced is parental involvement and modeling. That is, if parents are loving, involved with their children, and discourage violent behaviors, children will be much less influenced by the models that they see on the screen. On the other hand, if parents are uninvolved, unavailable, or permissive of violence, their youngsters are much more likely to be highly influenced by what they play or view. It is quite worrisome that one research study found that only 40% of parents looked at the industry rating (regarding the appropriateness of content for different age groups) of a video game before renting or purchasing it for their child.

So what can parents do to help their children enjoy the beneficial aspects of video games, while protecting them from the potentially powerful negative effects? In general, current research suggests that parents should limit the amount of time children spend watching or playing video games and closely monitor the content of those games. Specifically, **the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that children not spend more than one or two hours per day in front of all electronic screens**, including video games (whether handheld, console, or computer), TV, DVD, and computers for non-academic use. Other specific suggestions include the following:

- Require that homework and chores be done before game playing, making playing games a reward.
- Check the age game ratings on the box. M-rated games are generally not meant for children or youth.
- Explain to your children why you object to certain games.
- Avoid “first person shooter” games.
- Before getting a game, rent it and preview it yourself or check “KidScore” (on the internet) for parent generated game reviews.

## Video Games and Aggression (continued from page 2)

- Do not put video game consoles or computers in children's bedrooms where they can shut the door and isolate themselves.
- Pick non-lethal games that require the player to come up with strategies and make decisions in a game environment that are more complex than "punch, run, and kill."
- Play and enjoy the game with your child. Talk about the content of the game and ask your child what's going on in the game.
- Look for games that involve multiple players to encourage group play.
- Encourage your child to play with friends away from the video game set. Get them involved in school or community activities.

The question of whether video games are "good" or "bad" for children is an oversimplification. Playing violent

games for hours every day can increase aggressive behaviors and decrease school performance and pro-social skills. Playing a nonviolent game with others can increase social interaction, improve visual-motor and attention skills, and provide enjoyment. An educational game may even improve academic skills. Video games can and do have powerful effects on children, both good and bad. Parents are strongly recommended to be involved with their children and provide guidance on the content of video games and the amount of time spent playing them.

*This article was written by Douglas O. Lipp, Ph.D., FCPS school psychologist at Chantilly High School's Comprehensive Emotional Disabilities Services Site.*

*The following websites are valuable resources for parents seeking out more information:*

[www.nasonline.org](http://www.nasonline.org)

*The National Association of School Psychologists provides information regarding parenting and promoting healthy children, families, and schools.*

[www.parentstv.org](http://www.parentstv.org)

[www.common sense media.org](http://www.common sense media.org)

*These websites provide reviews of video games, movies, and TV shows. They also provide important research-based information to parents regarding the impact of media on children.*

[www.pta.org](http://www.pta.org)

*For over 100 years, the national PTA has promoted the education, health and safety of children and families.*

[www.psychologymatters.org](http://www.psychologymatters.org)

*The goal of this website sponsored by the American Psychological Association is to provide the public with "news you can use" on such topics as promoting positive child development, stopping bullying, and helping youth better cope with anxiety and depression.*

## Children and Sleep: Recommendations for Parents

Children need sufficient sleep to perform their best. Sleep is essential for a child's health and growth. It promotes alertness, memory, and performance. Poor sleep can lead to health concerns, mood swings, behavior problems, and cognitive problems that impact a child's ability to learn in school. Each child has different sleep needs. In general though, children from ages 5 to 12 require between 10 to 11 hours of sleep each night.

It is important for parents to help their child establish good sleep patterns. Here are some suggestions to try:

- Set the example. Show your child your own sleep is a priority.
- Make sure your child gets plenty of exercise during the day.
- Establish a bedtime routine that ends in the room where the child sleeps. A consistent, predictable routine each night allows a child to relax and settle in for sleep. Here is an example routine: 1) take a shower, 2) brush teeth, 3) get on pajamas, 4) read a book, 5) dim lights, 6) put your child to bed, and 7) kiss goodnight and leave.
- Make bedtime the same each night. Our bodies get used to a schedule and become ready to fall asleep. Bedtimes should not vary much during the weekends.
- Keep the bedroom environment conducive to sleep throughout the night...cool, dark, and quiet.
- Limit caffeinated drinks during the day and avoid them completely up to 5 hours prior to bedtime.
- Avoid large meals prior to bedtime. Allow your child to eat a light, healthy snack instead.
- Ensure that the bedroom is for sleeping, not entertainment. Keep electronic devices (video games, computers, TVs, etc.) out of the bedroom. Exposure to bright lights at night stimulates the brain and keeps people awake. Encourage quiet activities that lower arousal.
- Encourage your child to fall asleep on his or her own. Do not allow your child to sleep in bed with you. A child who falls asleep on his or her own will better be able to return to sleep during normal nighttime awakenings.

*For more information, visit Sleep for Kids at [www.sleepforkids.org](http://www.sleepforkids.org).*

