

Playing Violent Video Games and Desensitization to Violence



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KEYWORDS

- Video games • Violence • Desensitization • Media violence • Aggression • Empathy • Moral evaluation • fMRI

KEY POINTS

- Desensitization, the reduction of cognitive, emotional and/or behavioral responses to a stimulus, is an automatic and unconscious phenomenon often experienced in everyday life.
- Exposure to media violence has been identified as potentially desensitizing for children and adolescents.
- This study reviewed data from questionnaire, behavioral, and psychophysiologic research to examine links between exposure to violent video games and desensitization to violence in children and adolescents.
- It was concluded that exposure to violent video games increases the relative risk of desensitization to violence, which in turn may increase aggression and decrease prosocial behavior.
- Parents should be counseled to discuss the differences between real and screen violence, to encourage non-violent problem-solving, and to provide empathy-building experiences.

THE PHENOMENON OF DESENSITIZATION

Desensitization, the reduction of cognitive, emotional, and/or behavioral responses to a stimulus, is an automatic and unconscious phenomenon often experienced in typical, everyday life experiences. This can be best demonstrated through the following exercise: Recall a difficult experience. Remember your thoughts and emotional reactions. Now consider your current response to this recollection. Most likely this response is not as intense as your original reaction. This change reflects normal desensitization. Human beings are simply incapable of long-term maintenance

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of an acute level of distress. Those whose reactions do not habituate are likely to develop various forms of psychopathology. However, unconscious desensitization can also be maladaptive. For example, researchers have found that children who are exposed to high levels of community violence often view violence as an ordinary part of life and may act accordingly.^{1,2} This perspective reflects desensitization to violence. Similarly, exposure to media violence has been identified as potentially desensitizing for children and adolescents.^{3,4} This article summarizes research that examines exposure to video game violence as a risk factor for desensitization to violence.

THE PREVALENCE OF VIDEO GAME PLAY

The popularity of video games with players of all ages continues to grow. According to the Entertainment Software Association, in 2013 US consumers spent approximately \$21.53 billion on games, equipment, and accessories.⁵ Children and adolescents make up a sizable proportion of these consumers: according to a 2008 to 2009 study by the Kaiser Family Foundation, 8 to 18 year olds spent, on average, 73 minutes every day playing video games on a variety of platforms.⁶ A telephone survey conducted in 2003 conveys the emerging importance of media in the lives of very young children (birth to 6 years): among those who play, the average daily playing time was 61 minutes per day.⁷ Given the trend for increasing time spent with media, including video games, these figures probably underrepresent current play.⁶⁻⁸

Research suggests that many games that are popular with children and adolescents have violent content.⁹ In the 2008 to 2009 Kaiser survey, more than half of 8 to 18 year olds reported having played a game from the violent Grand Theft Auto series, and almost half reported playing Halo, another violent game.⁶ More recent research, including cross-cultural studies, suggests that violent video games remain popular among adolescents.^{10,11} Updated data are needed regarding the video game preferences of young and very young children, given the increasing involvement of this group in video game play. However, it seems clear that video games with violent content continue to be a popular leisure choice for children and youth. Such games represent a large portion of total exposure to media violence for children and youth.

MEDIA VIOLENCE EFFECTS: A RELATIVE-RISK MODEL

Video games are only one of several sources of potential exposure to media violence. Concern about the prevalence and influence of exposure to media violence has been raised by several organizations concerned with the welfare of children and youth. For example, the American Academy of Pediatrics' policy statement on media violence includes the following: "Although exposure to media violence is not the sole factor contributing to aggression, antisocial attitudes, and violence among children and adolescents, it is an important health risk factor."^{12(p1498)}

Media violence effects have been given considerable research attention. The evidence is conclusive, despite minority views: for many, exposure to media violence can increase aggressive thought, behavior, and emotion.¹³⁻¹⁵ Anderson and colleagues¹⁶ General Aggression Model provides a relevant theoretic framework for understanding these effects. The General Aggression Model integrates several theoretic perspectives including social learning, social cognition, affective aggression, and excitation transfer. Predictions based on the General Aggression Model suggest that repeated exposure to media violence can lead to the development of aggressive beliefs and attitudes, aggressive behavioral scripts, and desensitization to violence. Relevant stimuli are considered to be either short- or long-term influences.

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