

Video Games and Violence: What Every Parent Should Know

By Elisabeth Wilkins

Do violent video games have an effect on childhood development?

Virginia Tech Shooter Cho Seung-Hui was said to be an avid player of Counter-Strike, a popular team-based shooting game. Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris were fans of Doom and Wolfenstein 3D, referring to the games in the videos they left for police to find after the Columbine massacre. Are you worried that your child is logging too much screen time in front of violent video games?

Ann Giordano in Denver, Colorado, who limits her sons' PlayStation time to 30 minutes a day, said, "I find that when my kids, (ages 10 and 8), are done playing video games they tend to be more aggressive with one another and sometimes just plain crabby. We do not allow any videos that are overtly violent, but even with the milder ones, they're usually shooting ray guns or driving and crashing cars plus listening to very loud music. I'm not sure why, but these fast-paced videos seem to make them more prone to acting out when the action is done. They get aggressive with each other, and as a result, they usually overdo it, then get in trouble by hurting one another."

Dr. Craig Anderson, a professor of psychology at Iowa State University and co-author of the new book, "Violent Video Game Effects on Children and Adolescents," is widely regarded as one of the foremost experts on violent video games. In his research on their effects on childhood development, in one recent study he found that "it didn't matter if the games the children played were outwardly violent. Even with cute characters and happy music, children were 40% more likely to exhibit aggressive behavior after playing." (Source)

"What seems to be happening, and there's a lot of research behind this, when you consume violent media—TV, movies or video games—for a brief period of time, you have somewhere in your head a whole bunch of thoughts that have to do with aggression, called a priming effect," said Dr. Anderson. "In this country, by the time you're five or six, most everyone has the knowledge of how to hurt someone, of fighting or shooting. When you think about aggression, that primes a whole region of your brain and primes knowledge about aggression in general. What that does is, if you're thinking aggressive thoughts and are then put in a situation where there's a provocation, even a mild provocation, it increases the likelihood that you'll regard this as somewhat more serious and intentional. You'll then respond with an aggressive response. This sort of priming effect occurs in all sorts of research today—not just with media violence. It's a relatively short term effect that we've been seeing after children play violent video games."

Long term effects: "Think of each time you do something as another learning trial. We know that repetition of any kind of decision making or thinking strengthens that particular way of thinking. If you want to memorize a telephone number, you may repeat it four to five times while you're dialing and then you forget it. But if you repeat that experience every day for two to three weeks, you don't need to look it up anymore. Because of repetition it becomes a long term memory. If you think about practicing making a decision to aggress against someone, like practicing multiplication tables, it's really the same kind of learning. In both cases repetition is important. That's why we think long term effects come about. It basically makes or changes a person. A child who watches a lot of violent TV and plays violent video games is practicing looking at the world as a dangerous place where violence

and aggression are an appropriate response, more than a child would who hasn't had that exposure."

Some danger signs to watch for: "If your child is getting into conflicts with other kids at school, or having difficulties with teachers, those things do become more common as children become more aggressive in general. However, those are very late warning signs. Much of the damage has already been done by that point. But if you're seeing any of that, it's an indicator that violent media should be restricted—but that's a difficult issue as well and depends to some extent on age. A fifteen year old is much more difficult to deal with than a seven year old. Peers are very much in charge by the teen years but there are still things you can do in terms of discussing what the issues are. If the child already has a bunch of violent video games, discuss with them in an age-appropriate way the issue of the harmful effects of violent media, allow them to choose substitute games that aren't violent that are now being banned in the household."

Dr. Anderson is not against children playing video games, however. "I'm a fan of video games myself. I think they're great teaching tools—or they can be. What they teach depends very much on the content. My kids grew up playing video games, but they didn't play violent ones. Many of the games out there are educational. Some are not, but you still learn things from them like spatial skills, hand-eye coordination, and you get the added benefit of learning to be comfortable with computers. Still, it makes sense to set rules, regardless of whether it's violent content or not. Limit the time. Children don't need to be spending 15-20 hours in front of video games. Today's kids are logging 40-50 hours a week in front of a screen, if you add TV and video together—more hours than they spend in school, and that's not counting using the computer for homework. Kids need to be out playing with other kids and interacting with their parents, whether it's playing board games, card games, reading, or playing baseball."

If you've noticed your child exhibiting aggressive tendencies after playing video games, what is the best course of action? According to Dr. Anderson, reassuringly, "A kid who has no other risk factors for violence, and plays for an hour a day for a couple of days, he's not going to become a school shooter. Extreme forms of violence like school shootings and kids who get into lots of fights—they occur only when there are multiple risk factors. If you look at the school shooters in Columbine, or Paducah, Kentucky or Virginia Tech, there are multiple risk factors present. Since we started thinking about media violence in the last couple years we've found it's just one additional risk factor that increases the likelihood of aggressive behavior. But people without risk factors, it might increase the likelihood of them getting into a fight at school, but it's not going to turn them into a school shooter. However, with other risk factors present, it may increase the extremity of the kind of violence they might be willing to use if provoked. Instead of just slapping and hitting, they might consider doing much more serious damage, and using rocks or sticks or a knife.

What I typically suggest to parents is that they don't allow violent video games in their home. If and when the issue comes up, that is actually a good opportunity to talk about their values, how to resolve conflicts and disputes in a non-violent way, which are useful conversations to have with kids. In any case it's useful to convey your values to your children that violent solutions are not appropriate. Non-violent solutions can almost always be found."

About Elisabeth Wilkins

Elisabeth Wilkins was the editor of Empowering Parents and the mother of an 10-year-old son. Her work has appeared in national and international publications, including *Mothering*, *Motherhood* (Singapore), *Hausfrau*, *The Bad Mother Chronicles*, and *The Japan Times*. Elisabeth holds a Masters in Fine Arts in Creative Writing from the University of Southern Maine.

“Does My Child Have a Video Game Addiction?”

How to Set Limits Around Video Game Use By Sara Bean, M.Ed.

Is your child playing video games instead of doing schoolwork? Is he avoiding social situations—and is his behavior worsening as a result of constant gaming? I've heard the desperation and concern in the voices of many, many parents whose kids seem to spend all their time playing video games, as if possessed by some mysterious outside force. As one parent said, “I worry that my son might be addicted. When I shut the game off, he freaks out and goes ballistic! I just don't know what to do.”

Children especially can have a very hard time stopping once they get stuck in the positive feedback loops (or reward cycles) video games create.

*Note: This article is not intended for use as a diagnostic tool for your child, nor is the advice intended to take the place of treatment by a licensed medical or mental health professional.

If you're worried about the amount of time your child spends gaming, you're not alone—advisors on our 1-on-1 Coaching hear about this on a regular basis. What's more, in 2010 the Kaiser Family Foundation surveyed 2,000 children ages 8-18 in 2010 and found children's screen time totals an average of 7 hours and 38 minutes per day. Do the math: that's more than 53 hours per week in front of a screen—more than a full-time job! But understand that even if your child is playing a lot of games and gets angry when you set limits, it doesn't mean he has an addiction. In fact, while there is much buzz about “video game addiction” these days, it's not yet recognized as a true disorder by the American Psychiatric Association.

Today I'm going to discuss how you can set some limits on your child's gaming. I will also give you some simple guidelines to help figure out whether or not your child's video game use could become pathological—or in other words, unhealthy or addiction-like. I'm also going to reveal some well-kept secrets your kids don't want you to know about their game systems. You're going to love it, your kids are going to hate it—and I'm very excited to share them with you!

When Video Game Use Crosses the Line

As a parent of a child who plays video games, computer games, or games on handheld devices like cell phones, it's important to take a look at your child's overall functioning at home, at school, in their social circle and their mental or psychological functioning. First, let's take a moment to consider some positives about video games: Some games are educational, some promote physical activity, and when played with others games can help children develop the skills of sharing and cooperation. Video games can also foster resilience and they can even help to strengthen children's problem-solving skills and patience in challenging situations.

Struggling with your child's behavior?

Now I know there are many of you out there who are really struggling with your kids' video game use and see no positives in it whatsoever. This is a really tough place to be. Video game designers create the games to be highly engaging and to make the user want to keep playing. Children especially can have a very hard time stopping once they get stuck in the positive feedback loops (or reward cycles) these games create. Here are some things to look for that might mean your child's video game use is becoming unhealthy:

Your child's life seems to be dominated by video games. They seem to be his only motivator and occupy the majority of his thinking. He talks non-stop about video games when he's not playing them and spends a lot of time learning about them or planning his next opportunity to play.

Your child's social interactions inside and outside of the home have been negatively impacted—friendships seem to have dwindled, your child has withdrawn from social activities he used to enjoy, and family relationships are strained or suffering because of your child's video game use. Your child's grades are failing or his hygiene is chronically neglected because of his video game use. Stopping video games for any reason has a long-lasting negative impact on your child's emotions. He becomes depressed, moody, angry, aggressive or violent when he is unable to play. Your child has stolen video games from stores or friends, or stolen money from others in order to buy video games, more than once. He frequently lies about how much time he spends playing video games.

So what can you do to limit your child's video game playing and create healthy boundaries around it? For some of you, this will be more challenging than for others. Some kids are much more deeply involved with video games and setting limits in these cases will be harder. Here are some ideas to get you started:

1. Determine if you need more support. If most of the above examples sound like your child, or if your child becomes destructive, aggressive, threatening or violent when you try to enforce or set limits on their gaming, it might be helpful for you to talk to someone in your area who can work directly with you and your child as you make changes. This might mean talking to your child's pediatrician or working with a local therapist to determine what kinds of changes are appropriate, how to respond to negative behavior, and how to effectively enforce your limits with your child.

2. Start off slowly. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends limiting video games to one hour per day. And while it can be tempting to dramatically cut back your child's access to games, or want to remove them from your home altogether, it might be more helpful to start off slowly. Let your child know you are starting to question whether video games have a place in your home because they seem to cause a lot of problems. Offer a couple specific examples, such as "When I tell you it's time to turn them off, you use abusive language. And, your grades have gone from B's and C's to D's and F's since you started playing _____." Let your child know that instead of getting rid of the games right now, you're going to try a new rule first—and that their ability to follow that rule or not will help you determine if the games stay.

3. Be specific. Let your child know what guidelines you are going to be using to determine if video games are working out or not. James Lehman talks about four questions you can use to assess a new limit in your home:

What will we see if this is working? What will we do if this is working?

What will we see if this is not working? What will we do if this is not working?

You'll want to actually go over these questions and answers with your child. For example, you might say, "From now on the video games need to be turned off by 8 pm. If this is working, I'll see you turning them off by 8 without being abusive, and your grades might even get better in school. If this happens, we'll keep it going. If this doesn't work, I'll see you putting up a fight at 8 pm and continuing to play later than that. If that happens, you'll lose your game privileges for the next day."

4. Problem solve. Work together with your child to find a new technique he can use to try to shut down the video games in a much more timely fashion. For example, maybe you discuss

the idea of your child avoiding certain more engaging games at certain times, or set up a reward system for turning the game off when a timer goes off. Also consider how your child can cope with the unpleasant feelings caused by stopping the game, or discuss what other fun activities he can do if he's bored. Talk these things over with your child to help him be successful.

5. Be empowered. Let's face it: the user menus on these games are often not very easy to use. But, I found that most of these companies have websites with instructions for setting up parental controls. And get ready for this, parents: Did you know that Xbox is equipped with a family timer? You can program the console to shut itself off after the allotted gaming time has been used up for the day! Here are some links to some websites for more information about parental controls. Apple products are a huge challenge for parents as well, so I included them in my list below. If you find the instructions on the web hard to understand, call the company's customer support phone number for more assistance. If you're dealing with an Apple product, stop in to your local Apple store for support.

Nintendo Game Systems: Wii, Nintendo DS

X-Box 360

Playstation Game Systems: Playstation 4

Apple Products: iPad, iPhone, and iPod Touch

Antisocial—and in the Basement

We've already talked a lot about setting up some clear structure for your kids—limiting their time on games or having a clear off-time, with some logical consequences or rewards. Some parents also find it helpful to establish regular "Family Time" during which you do something as a family and there are short-term consequences for not participating. You could also require your child to participate in some sort of group activity once per week, such as a sport, club, or youth group. The key here is to let your child choose the activity. Until they choose an activity, you might restrict their game use on the weekends to encourage time with friends. Once they choose and begin an activity, let them know they don't get any access to video games at all that day if they don't attend a scheduled practice or meeting.

Perhaps the trickiest thing of all is that there is no cookie-cutter formula to determine how much video game time is too much, or what limits and consequences are appropriate for your child. Every child is different. Some children are able to shift into a different activity more easily, while others are more vulnerable targets for the highly rewarding design of the games. In the end you just have to trust your gut and go with what feels right for your family.

For more information please visit: www.esrb.org

<http://onguardonline.gov/articles/0270-kids-parents-and-video-games>

About Sara Bean, M.Ed.

Sara Bean, M.Ed. is a certified school counselor and former 1-on-1 Coaching advisor with over 10 years of experience working with children and families. She is also a proud mom.