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 agreement, 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.