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Playing video games for better, not worse

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ANN ARBOR, Mich.—Some video games can make children kinder and more likely to help—not hurt—other people.

That's the conclusion of new research published in the current (June 2009) issue of *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, a top-tier, peer-reviewed academic journal.

The article presents the findings of three separate studies, conducted in different countries with different age groups, and using different scientific approaches. All the studies find that playing games with prosocial content causes players to be more helpful to others after the game is over.

The report is co-authored by a consortium of researchers from the United States, Japan, Singapore and Malaysia.

"Dozens of studies have documented a relationship between violent video games and aggressive behaviors," said lead author Douglas Gentile, an Iowa State University psychologist. "But this is one of the first that has documented the positive effects of playing prosocial games."

Prosocial video games involve characters who help and support each other in nonviolent ways.

"These studies show the same kind of impact on three different age groups from three very different cultures," said Brad Bushman, a University of Michigan co-author of the report. "In addition, the studies use different analytic approaches—correlational, longitudinal and experimental. The resulting triangulation of evidence provides the strongest possible proof that the findings are both valid and generalizable."

"These studies document that children and adolescents learn from practicing behaviors in games," said Rowell Huesmann, a U-M co-author of the report.

One study examined the link between video game habits and prosocial behavior among 727 secondary students in Singapore, with a mean age of 13. Students listed their favorite games and rated how often game characters helped, hurt or



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killed other characters. They also answered questions about how likely they were to spend time and money helping people in need, to cooperate with others and share their belongings, and to react aggressively in various situations.

As in numerous other studies, the researchers found a strong correlation between playing violent video games and hurting others. But the study also found a strong correlation between playing prosocial games and helping others.

The second study analyzed the long-term connection between video game habits and prosocial behavior in nearly 2,000 Japanese children ages 10 to 16. Participants completed a survey about their exposure to prosocial video games, and rated how often they had helped other people in the last month. Three to four months later, they were surveyed again, and researchers found a significant connection between exposure to prosocial games and helpful behavior months later.

"This suggests there is an upward spiral of prosocial gaming and helpful behavior, in contrast to the downward spiral that occurs with violent video gaming and aggressive behavior," said Bushman, a professor of communications and psychology and a research professor at the U-M Institute for Social Research (ISR).

For the third study, the researchers carried out an experiment with 161 U.S. college students, with a mean age of 19. After playing either a prosocial, violent, or neutral game, participants were asked to assign puzzles to a randomly selected partner. They could choose from puzzles that were easy, medium or hard to complete. Their partner could win \$10 if they solved all the puzzles. Those who played a prosocial game were considerably more helpful than others, assigning more easy puzzles to their partners. And those who had played violent games were significantly more likely to assign the hardest puzzles.

"Taken together, these findings make it clear that playing video games is not in itself good or bad for children," Bushman said. "The type of content in the game has a bigger impact than the overall amount of time spent playing."

Established in 1949, the Institute for Social Research (ISR) is among the world's oldest survey research organizations, and a world leader in the development and application of social science methodology. ISR conducts some of the most widely-cited studies in the nation, including the Survey of Consumer Attitudes, the National Election Studies, the Monitoring the Future Study, the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, the Health and Retirement Study, the Columbia County Longitudinal Study and the National Survey of Black Americans. ISR researchers also collaborate with social scientists in more than 60 nations on the World Values Surveys and other projects, and the Institute has established formal ties with universities in Poland, China, and South Africa. ISR is also home to the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR), the world's largest computerized social science data archive. Visit the ISR Web site at: <http://www.isr.umich.edu> for more information.

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