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By Brad J. Bushman • June 29, 2008

Children around the nation are looking forward to the end of the school year, with summer vacation giving them the freedom to play their favorite video games hour after hour. Instead of rightfully worrying that these games have the potential to hijack their children's futures, parents may be relying on a recently published book that claims to tell "the surprising truth about video games."

"Perhaps the biggest lesson we learned from our research," write Lawrence Kutner and Cheryl Olson in *Grand Theft Childhood*, "is that most parents should not worry about violent...games having a profound effect on their children's behavior or values." They advise parents to focus instead on more important risk factors for violence – deteriorating family relationships, friendships and school achievement. "Violent video games," they write, "are pretty low on that list."

Not according to a 2001 report by the U.S. Surgeon General, ranking exposure to television violence relatively high on the list of early risk factors for youth violence, ahead of broken homes, abusive parents, antisocial peers, and school achievement.

The Surgeon General's report focused on TV rather than video game violence. But there are at least three reasons to believe that violent video games might be worse. First, video game play is active whereas watching TV is passive. People learn better when they are actively involved. Suppose you wanted to teach a person how to fly an airplane. What would be the best method to use: read a book, watch a TV program, or use a video game flight simulator?

Second, players of violent video games are more likely to identify with a violent character. If the game is a first person shooter, players have the same visual perspective as the killer. If the game is third person, the player controls the actions of the violent character from a more distant visual perspective. In either case, the player is linked to a violent character. In a violent TV program, viewers might or might not identify with this character.

Third, violent games directly reward violent behavior, by awarding points or allowing players to advance to the next game level. In some games, players are rewarded through verbal praise, such as hearing the words "Nice shot!" after killing an enemy. It is well known that rewarding behavior increases its frequency. (Would you go to work tomorrow if your boss said you would no



longer be paid?) In TV programs, reward is not directly tied to the viewer's behavior.

Kutner and Olson's advice to parents is particularly puzzling since their own data suggest that such games are linked to aggressive behavior. In their study, 1,254 middle school students listed their five favorite video games. The results showed that boys and girls who had played at least one M-rated game – Mature, recommended for players age 17 or older -- were much more likely to get into physical fights and hit or beat someone up.

The authors correctly note that survey responses cannot be used to establish a cause-effect relationship between playing violent video games and aggression. Although laboratory experiments can be used to establish cause-effect relationships, they quickly dismiss most lab studies as artificial and invalid.

I strongly disagree. Consider a laboratory experiment I recently conducted with some Dutch colleagues. Boys about 14 years old were randomly assigned to play a violent or nonviolent video game for 20 minutes and rated how much they identified with the video game character. Next, they completed a noise blast task, with the winner blasting the loser with a noise ranging from about 60 decibels to about 105 – about the same level as a fire alarm.

The boys were told that inflicting higher noise levels could cause “permanent hearing damage” to their partners. Of course, nobody actually got hearing damage. But our results clearly show that violent game players acted more aggressively than nonviolent game players, especially if they identified with the game character. These boys were even willing to give another boy noise levels loud enough to cause permanent hearing damage.

One boy said, “I blasted him with level 10 noise because he deserved it. I know he can get hearing damage, but I don't care!” Another boy said he liked the violent game “because in this game you can kill people and shoot people, and I want to do that too.” A third boy said, “I like Grand Theft Auto a lot because you can shoot at people and drive fast in cars. When I am older I can do such things too. I would love to do all these things right now!”

Violent video games are not the only risk factor for aggression, or even the most important factor, but they are definitely not a trivial factor. Parents should carefully monitor what video games their children play this summer, instead of being lulled into a false sense of security about the effects these games can have now and well into the future.

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