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Violent media's effects seen

U-M study tracks kids; recheck in adulthood finds more violence

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Exposure to violent movies, television shows and video games significantly increases the risk that the viewer or player will behave aggressively in both the long and short term, according to a new University of Michigan study published Tuesday in the Journal of Adolescent Health.

It's a topic that has been debated extensively, but this is one of the first studies that shows the relation between viewing media violence and real criminal behavior, according to the study's author, L. Rowell Huesmann, a senior research scientist at the U-M Institute for Social Research.

"This is the first study that shows a relation between childhood exposure to violent TV, playing violent video games, seeing violent movies, and behaving violently enough to be incarcerated as a delinquent,'' said Huesmann, a professor of communication studies and psychology.

Huesmann and his team followed a group of children for three years as they moved through middle childhood. They found increasing rates of aggression for both boys and girls who watched more television violence, even when taking into account initial aggressive tendencies and other background factors. A 15-year follow-up of those children showed that those who habitually watched violent media grew up to be more aggressive young adults.

Huesmann also cited many independent studies and experiments with similar results, stating that the majority of one-shot survey studies have shown that children who watch more media violence on a daily basis behave more aggressively on a daily basis. In another experiment cited, both children and adults who watched a violent movie showed significantly more aggression than the children and adults who watched a nonviolent movie when playing a physical game immediately after watching the films.

Video games were also addressed in the study, although experiments involving exposure to violent games are not as extensive or long-term.

"Because players of violent video games are not just observers but also 'active' participants in violent actions and are generally reinforced for using violence to gain desired goals, the effects on stimulating long-term increases in violent behavior should be even greater for video games than for TV, movies or Internet displays of violence,'' Huesmann wrote in the study.

Josh Williams, owner of Digital Ops gaming center on Liberty Street in Ann Arbor, said he finds the article "disheartening,'' especially because his store and the social gaming it offers provide a haven for some kids who might not otherwise fit in or have an opportunity to socialize.

"I can't even begin to tell you the number of parents we've had come in here, thanking us for giving their kids a safe place to do something fun and creative,'' Williams said. "We've provided a place for a lot of 13- to 18-year-old kids who might not have had another place to go."

Zach Wigal, a 17-year-old Saline High School student who is planning a Halo video game tournament to benefit charity, said that he disagrees that playing violent games begets violence.

"I've been playing video games since I remember, including violent games,'' Wigal said. "Have I seen someone get super mad? Yes, but only in the sense that they're getting beat down and they're pretty mad. It's all in good fun.''

However, Wigal said he thinks that kids who might be prone to violence could be influenced by what they

see or do when they play these games.

"If you come out of a comedy club, if the comedian was good, you're usually in a happy mood, you're laughing," he explained. "I think with any form of media, whether it be comedy, music, video games, there's always a certain element of influence."

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