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Violent TV, games pack a powerful public health threat

By Diane Swanbrow and Jared Wadley
News Service

Watching media violence significantly increases the risk that a viewer or video game player will behave aggressively in both the short and long term, according to new U-M research.

The study, published Nov. 27 in a special issue of the Journal of Adolescent Health, reviews more than half a century of research on the impact of exposure to violence in television, movies, video games and on the Internet, says lead researcher L. Rowell Huesmann.

"The research clearly shows that exposure to virtual violence increases the risk that both children and adults will behave aggressively," says Huesmann, the Amos N. Tversky Collegiate Professor of Communication Studies and Psychology, and a senior research scientist at the Institute for Social Research (ISR).

In his article, Huesmann points out that U.S. children spend an average of three to four hours a day watching television. "More than 60 percent of television programs contain some violence," he says, "and about 40 percent of those contain heavy violence.

"Children are also spending an increasingly large amount of time playing video games, most of which contain violence. Video game units are now present in 83 percent of homes with children."

Media violence significantly increases the risk that both children and adults will behave aggressively, according to research conducted by Huesmann and ISR colleague Brad Bushman.

How significantly?

"Exposure to violent electronic media has a larger effect than all but one other well-known threat to public health. The only effect slightly larger than the effect of media violence on aggression is that of cigarette smoking on lung cancer," Huesmann says.

"Our lives are saturated by the mass media, and for better or worse, violent media are having a particularly detrimental effect on the well-being of children," he adds. "As with many other public health threats, not every child who is exposed to this threat will acquire the affliction of violent behavior. But that does not diminish the need to address the threat — as a society and as parents by trying to control children's exposure to violent media to the extent that we can."

The supplement was funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

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