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Virtual Violence: How Does it Affect Children?

By: David L. Hill, MD, FAAP

Since the earliest motion pictures, adults have worried about how children would respond to violent imagery. Now that mobile screens offer kids unlimited access to violent images and videos, we have even more to worry about.

As a parent or caregiver, you may feel overwhelmed by the thought of how virtual violence can affect your child. But there are practical steps you can take to protect kids of all ages, helping them place what they see and hear in a healthier context.

Understanding what virtual violence means in your child's world

Virtual violence is any act of aggression your child might absorb through TV, movies, video games, social media and other digital channels. It includes the simulated violence in blockbuster films and amateur videos and the animated violence embedded in cartoons and interactive games. News reports (/English/family-life/Media/Pages/Talking-To-Children-About-Tragedies-and-Other-News-Events.aspx) of real-life tragedies also deliver an endless loop of virtual violence that young people see and hear 24/7.

Keep in mind that virtual violence isn't limited to instances of physical harm. Aggressive, threatening, racist or hateful statements can be just as damaging to children who witness them.

What children see (or play) influences how they behave

Decades of research (https://publications.aap.org/pediatrics/article/138/2/e20161298/52469/Virtual-Violence?autologincheck=redirected?nfToken=00000000-0000-0000-0000-000000000000) link virtual violence to aggressive thoughts, feelings and actions in children. And even though we're still learning about the effects of violent content video games (/English/family-life/Media/Pages/Video-Games-Set-Your-Own-Ratings-System.aspx) and social media (/English/family-life/Media/Pages/social-media-and-your-childs-mental-health-what-research-says.aspx), experts agree that kids are deeply influenced by brutality wherever they experience it.

Witnessing violent acts—whether real or simulated—may give kids the sense that aggression is normal and acceptable. This may lead them to act out what they see and hear, especially if they witness violence at home (/English/healthy-living/emotional-wellness/Pages/stress-and-violence-at-home-during-challenging-times.aspx) or in their communities. Newer studies show that exposure to virtual violence can trigger mental health struggles, including depression (/English/health-issues/conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/childhood-depression-what-parents-can-do-to-help.aspx) and anxiety (/English/family-life/family-dynamics/Pages/help-your-child-manage-fears-and-anxieties.aspx).

It's worrisome enough to think of the short-term effects on our children. But long-term studies also show that exposure to virtual violence in childhood leads to aggressive behavior in adulthood, even when people stop consuming violent media in later years.

5 practical steps to protect children & teens from the effects of virtual violence

You can't shield your child from all forms of virtual violence. But these 5 steps can help minimize the harm that violent content can do to your child's health, now and in the future.

1. **Limit what very young children watch and play.** If you have children under age 6, try to exclude violent content from their "media diet." Kids this young cannot distinguish fantasy from reality. To them, even violence that seems cartoonish to use seems real.

2. **Use parental controls and media ratings.** A variety of technologies promise to offer you control over your children's viewing and playing habits, and they can certainly be helpful if you learn how to use them. But no program can replace your personal involvement in your children's choices. Young children should always ask permission before they watch or play video games on any device. Learn more about TV content ratings (http://www.tvguidelines.org/resources/TV_Parental_guidelines_Brochure.pdf) and movie ratings (https://www.filmratings.com/Tips) that can help you choose wisely for your family. The Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB (https://www.esrb.org/)) publishes helpful ratings for games and apps, and Common Sense Media (https://www.commonsensemedia.org/) provides a wealth of ratings, tips and insights.

3. **Watch or play with your kids.** Your attention has tremendous power. Explain that you're interested in the things they like to watch and play. Sit down with them for a while to gauge the level of virtual violence in their favorite shows, movies, games or apps. This gives you a base of knowledge that can help you set realistic limits and expectations later on.

4. **Discuss what you see.** When enjoying entertainment with your child, take time to talk with them about it. Ask how especially violent or aggressive scenes made them feel. Show interest in their impressions and opinions without arguing with them. You can share your own views without suggesting that any single opinion is 100% right or wrong. For example, you might say, "I can understand why that character was angry. But I hate to see people get violent instead of finding other ways to settle their differences."

   These conversations compare what your child is seeing with your family values (/English/healthy-living/emotional-wellness/Building-Resilience/Pages/Books-to-Build-Character-Teach-Important-Values.aspx) such as respect, tolerance, kindness (/English/healthy-living/emotional-wellness/Building-Resilience/Pages/Kindness-Can-Make-a-Big-Difference.aspx) and mutual understanding. They also give you the chance to call out instances where violence is rewarded or glamorized and offer a differing viewpoint.

5. **Create a family media plan** (/english/fmp/pages/mediaplan.aspx). The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) offers an easy-to-use tool to help parents and caregivers manage family media usage. You'll find a list of media priorities to choose from, practical tips to assure success, and the ability to print and share your plan with caregivers, family and friends. You can even save your plan and edit it as your family's needs change over time.

Parent Tips on Virtual Violence and Kids from the American Academy of Pediatrics

Seeing your child's risks with clear eyes

Though we may hear what all this research is trying to tell us, we might also want to believe we don't have to worry about our own kids. Just as 90% of all U.S. adults see themselves as better-than-average drivers, millions of us assume that virtual violence is something other parents have to worry about.

I'm a parent, too, and I've fallen into this trap before. I hate to think that my sweet son might be harmed by the violent video games he enjoys playing. But I've seen how his behavior changes after he spends hours absorbed in them. And ɑ‿ ̩ediatrician, I'm equally concerned about the violence kids see in movies, videos, social media and news reports, lly school shootings and other tragedies where children are hurt or killed.

Your pediatrician is ready to support you

No single violent movie or video game will make your child violent – and failing to screen out every instance of virtual violence does NOT make you a bad parent. What matters is the amount and intensity of virtual violence your child absorbs over time. You can protect your child's health by monitoring what they watch and play and putting common-sense rules in place, based on your child's age, temperament and unique needs.

If you're worried about virtual violence, don't hesitate to ask your pediatrician for guidance. Media use is one of many health-related subjects your child's doctor discusses with parents often. They can offer practical tips that are tailored to your family situation and, whenever needed, refer you to mental health providers who can address specific concerns or symptoms you might be seeing in your child.

More information

- Video Games: Set Your Own Ratings System (/English/family-life/Media/Pages/Video-Games-Set-Your-Own-Ratings-System.aspx)
- Age-Appropriate Media: Can You Trust the Parental Guidance Ratings? (/English/family-life/Media/Pages/TV-Ratings-A-Guide-for-Parents.aspx)
- Family Media Plan (/english/fmp/pages/mediaplan.aspx)
- Children, Adolescents and the Media (http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/cgi/doi/10.1542/peds.2013-2656) (AAP Policy Statement)

About Dr. Hill:

David Hill, MD, FAAP (http://doctordavidhill.com/) practices pediatrics in Wayne County, NC, and serves as an Adjunct Assistant Professor of Pediatrics at the UNC School of Medicine. He is co-host of the AAP's flagship podcast, Pediatrics on Call, and serves as Associate Editor of Pediatric Care Online Patient Information. Dr. Hill is a past Chair of the AAP Council on Communications and Media.

Author David L. Hill, MD, FAAP
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