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Do video games, movies make our children aggressive? Area officials, researchers debate link between violence and certain media

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When children and teens play out violent scenarios on video games, do their aggressive actions in the virtual world cause some to cross over and carry out the same violent behavior in real life?

Some police officers and researchers believe that shooting virtual beings and carrying out other violent acts while immersed in the fictional world of some video games can make a child more aggressive in the real world.

Since Jan. 1, there have been close to 50 shooting incidents reported in The Oakland Press.

Many have been multiple shootings by young people.

Among those stories was the Feb. 28 incident in northern Ohio, where a 17-year-old teen shot and killed three students and left one paralyzed after a shooting spree at Chardon High School.

In Pontiac, a 15-year-old boy was charged with shooting two women during a home invasion.

And in Detroit, a 9-month-old baby was killed when gunshots were fired at his home.

It is difficult to say whether any of these incidents were influenced by video games.

Oakland County Sheriff Michael Bouchard said, "I certainly believe that the proliferation of violence in a variety of settings from video games to movies has desensitized our youth to the impact of violence.

"As a result, I think there is less inhibition for some about being violent."

Although Bouchard didn't know of a particular recent local shooting that was tied to video games, the connection was definite in more than one highly publicized school shooting.

Games a factor in Columbine

Teenagers Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, who killed 13 people and wounded 23 at Columbine High School before killing themselves, enjoyed playing the bloody video game "Doom," according to researchers Brad Bushman of the University of Michigan and Craig Anderson of Iowa State University, who pointed the case out in a paper "Effects of Violent Video

Games on Aggressive Behavior.”

Harris created a customized version of “Doom,” with features that were similar to aspects of the pair’s actual shootings, said Bushman, who has spent years researching the impact of television violence and video games.

Oakland Community College Sgt. Patrick Baldwin, 53, a former U.S. Army military police officer, trains area officers on how to react in the event of violence in schools. He believes the games, as well as violence in television and movies, can make children and young adults more aggressive.

Baldwin said much of his training is based on the books and teachings of Lt. Col. David Grossman, co-author of “Stop Teaching Kids to Kill,” with Gloria DeGaetano. Grossman has been a speaker at OCC.

Teen learns to shoot

This is posted on Grossman’s website: “In Paducah, Ky., Michael Carneal, a 14-year-old boy who stole a gun from a neighbor’s house, brought it to school and fired eight shots at a student prayer group as they were breaking up. Three school girls were killed; one was paralyzed.

“Prior to stealing this weapon, he had never shot an actual handgun before. Of the eight shots he fired, he had eight hits on eight different kids. Five were head shots, the other three upper torso.”

According to other reports of the incident, Carneal was influenced by a movie featuring a school shooting and learned his marksmanship from a video game.

Citing the youth’s marksmanship and killing ability, Grossman and DeGaetano said on the website, “There is blame to be laid right at the feet of the makers of violent video games, the TV networks and the Hollywood movie studios — the people responsible for the fact that children often witness literally hundreds of violent images a day.”

Parents, teachers and citizens are urged to help stop the wave of killing and violence and encouraged to use the authors’ book to help do it.

OCC trainer

Baldwin said he has been tracing school shootings for awhile because he does training at CREST on how to stop a school shooter if an incident happens locally.

He agrees with the authors.

“A child by the age of 13 has probably witnessed 10,000 to 100,000 acts of violence, or it could be more. Visualization is an extraordinarily positive tool,” Baldwin said, noting that visualization is used by athletes to improve their performance, and that shooting over and over when playing video games is actually a method of training and conditioning.

At OCC’s CREST center, members of local police and fire departments are trained through crime scenarios that take place in a simulated town.

“We train a lot, about once a quarter, while a kid may be doing it for hours and hours,” Baldwin said.

“Just like we shouldn’t feed kids crack cocaine, we shouldn’t feed them violent visual imagery,” Baldwin said. He cited one game that is, “so vile we don’t speak of (what happens in the game) among polite company.”

However, Baldwin made it clear he doesn't think that all kids will be influenced to do a violent act because of the games.

"It is the same as a cigarette causing cancer," he said. Not every kid will be violent because of video games, and not every smoker will get cancer, he said.

Some kids might be more predisposed by other factors toward violence.

Baldwin is among those who say parents are responsible for what games their children are playing.

Research finds connection

Bushman, a psychology professor at both U-M and Ohio State University, and a group of researchers from U-M and the University of Iowa have done studies that indicate the games have an impact on aggression.

"Habitual playing of violent video games by children and adolescents is related to engaging in more aggressive behavior and to more aggression-related cognition, such as normative beliefs and fantasies about aggression," according to a study Bushman led with U-M researchers Rowell Huesmann, Maureen O'Brien and Wendy Garrard.

In the report with U-M's Research Center for Group Dynamics by the Aggression Research Group that includes Bushman and Huesmann, a three-year study of boys and girls in Michigan and Iowa was conducted by the U-M group and two Iowa State University researchers.

The results indicated that habitual playing of violent video games had even more effect on girls than boys, and more on fourth-graders than on the second- and-ninth-graders surveyed.

Some of the games children were playing included "Grand Theft Auto," "Dragon Ball," "Bully," "Mortal Kombat," "Scarface" and "Halo."

In another study of 3,033 youths, Bushman and Anderson found the results, "clearly support the hypothesis that exposure to violent video games poses a public health threat to children and youths, including college-age individuals.

"Exposure is positively associated with heightened levels of aggression in young adults and children ... and in males and females," the researchers said.

Caution to parents

Debb Bayer, director of OCC's CREST training center, is a retired Flint police lieutenant and has raised four boys who are now grown.

Bayer has had no requests for any training in regard to violence and video games, but she has some strong opinions on the issue.

"I think there are a lot of social obligations that are not being met," Bayer said. "Parents are not teaching their teenagers and young people the value for life.

"We see a whole generation stay in their room and play these games. Unfortunately, (the violence in games, TV and movies) is what they see and assimilate. A lot of games are listed with age-restricted laws because of the violent content," Bayer said.

However, the U.S. Supreme Court last year ruled that video games — no matter how violent — are protected under the

First Amendment and cannot be banned.

Supporters have defended the games, saying hundreds of thousands play them and don't commit crimes.

But Bayer said even if the games can't be banned, parents need to take responsibility.

"Most parents don't know what's in those video games and they (buy them because they) occupy the kids," Bayer said.

Besides the games themselves, Bayer is concerned that children aren't learning to socialize with others because of the games, and the use of texting and other forms of communication that don't involve person-to-person contact.

"They aren't outside. They are not being physical. We used to have a lot of games with several kids in the neighborhood involved," she said.

Bayer said children need the foundation to understand that the way they play the games is not the way people should handle their problems.

Bushman and his group asked, "We wonder whether exciting video games can be created to teach and reinforce nonviolent solutions to social conflicts. If marketed with the same zeal and dollars as destructive games ... would they be as profitable?"

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