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Parents' and Sons' Perspectives on Video Game Play

A Qualitative Study

Lawrence A. Kutner

Cheryl K. Olson

Dorothy E. Warner

Sarah M. Hertzog

Department of Psychiatry, Massachusetts General Hospital

Public policy efforts to restrict children's access to electronic games with violent or sexual content are often predicated on assumptions about parental concerns. As an initial step in determining whether those assumptions are accurate, the authors conduct focus groups of 21 adolescent boys and 21 of their parents or guardians to explore parents' concerns, compare parents' and children's perceptions, and see whether these are consistent with the focus of proposed legislation and other public policy efforts. Parents' primary concern is that games not interfere with their children's schoolwork, social skills, and exercise. They worry about exposure to violent content, but definitions of and opinions about what is harmful vary and may not match proposed public policies.

Keywords: *video games; focus groups; media violence; adolescence; parenting*

Whether played on a game console, computer, or handheld device, electronic interactive games punctuate the lives of today's adolescents. A two-state survey of a diverse sample of middle-school youth found that 85.2% played electronic games at least one day per week (Olson et al., 2007). Among 11- to 14-year-olds who participated in a national survey by

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the Kaiser Family Foundation, 63% played an electronic game on a typical day, for an average of 69 minutes (Roberts, Foehr, & Rideout, 2005).

The widespread use of sophisticated game technologies that were not available during their own formative years has taken some parents by surprise. Dozens of studies have been published about the effects of electronic interactive games on children and adolescents, with most focusing on potential negative consequences of game play (Anderson, Funk, & Griffiths, 2004). Many researchers, clinicians, and policy makers are also concerned that video games, particularly games with violent content, could promote aggressive thoughts, feelings, and behavior (Bensley & Van Eenwyk, 2001; Gentile, Lynch, Linder, & Walsh, 2004). Publicity about adult content in the best-selling *Grand Theft Auto* series, and the removal of one version from retail stores because of “hidden” depictions of graphic sex acts, heightened some parents’ fears (Schiesel, 2005). News reports, along with television dramas implicating violent games in fictional acts of murder, perpetuate these fears (Glassner, 2004; Soulliere, 2003).

The sociocultural and ecological contexts in which children and adolescents engage in media involvement—including the values and viewpoints of parents, family, friends, teachers, and other important members of the community—act as filters for media messages (Gelfond & Salonijs-Pasternak, 2005; Jordan, 2004). As part of this equation, it is important to understand how parents perceive and attempt to regulate their children’s video game use and how children respond.

Regulating Children’s Exposure to Mature Video Game Content

In the United States, the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) assigns age-based ratings to interactive games. This self-regulatory body was established in 1994 by the Entertainment Software Association, an industry group. In 2006, just more than half of games designed for sale at retail outlets were rated “E” (deemed suitable for “everyone” ages 6 and older; ESRB, 2007). Games rated “T” (teen—may be suitable for ages 13 and older) can contain violence, minimal blood, and infrequent swearing. Those rated “M” (mature—may be suitable for ages 17 and older) may feature intense violence, gore, sexual content, and/or strong language. A new category, “E10+” (for everyone 10 and older) was recently added to bridge the gap between “E” and “T” content.

Studies by the Federal Trade Commission (2004) suggest that M-rated games are frequently sold to young adolescents. In the first quarter of 2005

alone, legislation to protect minors from (variously defined) violent and/or sexual content in interactive games was introduced in 17 states and the District of Columbia. A number of states (including California, Illinois, Louisiana, Michigan, Minnesota, and Oklahoma) enacted such laws; to date, all have been blocked or overturned by Federal District Court judges (Child-Responsible Media Campaign, 2007). Federal proposals have also been introduced, including the Family Entertainment Protection Act (S.2126), which would prohibit children under age 17 from purchasing or renting games rated "M."

Absent regulations, it is up to parents to control their children's exposure to inappropriate game content. Little is known about parents' specific concerns about video games in general and violent or sexual game content in particular or how parents are attempting to address these concerns. In the Kaiser Family Foundation survey noted above, one fifth (21%) of children ages 8 to 18 said their parents had rules about which (console) video games they could play; one in four (24%) reported rules about length of play. Just 16% agreed that their parents "check the parental warning or rating of the videogames I play." By comparison, 46% of children reported that their family had rules about watching television. Children in Grades 7 to 12 from households with any rules about video game play reported playing an average of 6 minutes less per day, a statistically insignificant difference.

Some research has looked at parents' reactions to real-world behavior that is contrary to their values, as compared to behaviors modeled in the media. In an interview-based study of 40 parents of young adolescents, parents were more likely to restrict access to undesirable media content (e.g., featuring scantily dressed or rebellious youth) than access to hypothetical peers who engaged in similar behaviors. By comparison, parents were prone to use less controlling strategies, such as discussing values or deferring to their child's judgment, in response to undesirable peers (Padilla-Walker, 2006). This suggests that parents may feel more threatened by, or less confident of their ability to control, media influences.

To date, most studies of parental efforts to influence children's media use have focused on television. Researchers have identified a variety of parental television mediation strategies, including restrictive (setting time limits or forbidding certain programs), instructive or evaluative (discussing or explaining aspects of content during or after viewing), covieing (without explicit discussion), and unfocused (an unstructured, relaxed approach to television use; Valkenburg, Krcmar, Peeters, & Marseille, 1999). Another restrictive strategy, noted by Jordan, Hersey, McDivitt, and Heitzler (2006), is behavior contingency (television use requiring completion of homework or chores). A study comparing responses from parents and children (ages 9 to 13) found

that social coviewing was the most common method of guidance and that parents reported providing more guidance than children reported receiving (Koolstra & Lucassen, 2004).

Video games, which involve active participation as well as some understanding of new technologies and the structure of game narratives, are more challenging for parents to monitor in this way. In an online survey of 536 Dutch parents and their children (ages 8 to 18) regarding mediation of video game play (Nikken & Jansz, 2006), children reported less mediation than did their parents, but both parties ranked restrictive mediation as most common and coplaying as least common.

A survey by the Annenberg Public Policy Center (Woodard & Gridina, 2000) found that in homes where game technology was present, 49% of parents of children ages 2 to 17 forbade particular content and 59% restricted time spent on video games, at least some of the time. Half agreed that they talked about content during use at least occasionally, but just 28% encouraged particular video game content (compared to 74% who encouraged viewing of specific television content). This may reflect a relative lack of familiarity with video games, including how any genres or aspects of games might benefit their children.

Various studies have found that active mediation by parents (talking with children about what they are watching) can shape the influence of violent television content. However, studies of adolescents have found that some parents' attempts to protect their children from media violence, such as restricting what they can watch, could backfire, promoting negative feelings toward parents, increased watching of the restricted content with peers, and somewhat more positive attitudes toward the restricted content (Cantor & Wilson, 2003; Nathanson, 2002).

Other parental behaviors may influence children's perceptions and use of violent media. A study of parents of children ages 6 to 12 (Vandewater, Lee, & Shim, 2005) found that high scores on measures of family conflict were positively correlated with use of mildly violent video games (e.g., *Super Mario Brothers* and *Donkey Kong*, which feature slapstick violence) and negatively correlated with nonviolent games (e.g., *Reader Rabbit*, *Tetris*).

Game ratings are another tool parents might use to guide or monitor children's play, but we lack a nuanced understanding of how parents use ratings or what other information they might like to have. The ESRB assigns both age-based letter ratings and "content descriptors" denoting presence of various types of potentially objectionable content (e.g., violence, blood, profanity, drug use, or nudity). In an industry-sponsored survey of more than 500 parents of children ages 3 to 17 who play video

games, 72% described ratings as the most important or a very important consideration in making game purchase decisions (ESRB, 2006). A Kaiser Family Foundation survey (Rideout, 2004) found that half (52%) of parents had used video game ratings, similar to the proportion who had used television program ratings. When asked which medium was of greatest concern in terms of inappropriate content, video games ranked last at 5%, behind television (34%), "all equally" (20%), Internet (16%), movies (10%), and music (7%). (This survey included 1,001 parents of children ages 2 to 17; video games might have ranked higher among parents of older children or parents of children who regularly play electronic games.)

Goals of the Current Study

More information on parent perspectives is needed so that clinicians, researchers, and policy makers can effectively counsel parents on wise media use, plan or interpret quantitative studies, and develop effective regulations. Furthermore, while policy efforts emphasize limiting the access of young adolescents to inappropriate game content, no published qualitative studies include their perspectives. Parents would also find it useful to understand how their concerns may match or conflict with those of their children. Although parents worry about the effects of mass media on their children's values, research has consistently shown that, despite increased parent-child conflict in early adolescence, children are likely to agree with parental standards (Smetana, Campione-Barr, & Metzger, 2006).

To address these gaps, we conducted focus group studies of young adolescent boys and their parents. We chose to focus on young adolescents because (a) their activities are less subject to adult oversight than those of younger children; (b) they may be more vulnerable to the influence of violent content during this stage of cognitive, emotional, social, and neurological development (Kirsh, 2003); and (c) the prevalence of externalizing problems tends to peak in midadolescence (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Parents seemed more likely to be concerned about boys' game play habits, as they are more likely than girls to play video games in general (Roberts et al., 2005) and action or combat games in particular (Roberts, Foehr, Rideout, & Brodie, 1999). Boys are also more likely to exhibit aggressive antisocial behavior (Eley, Lichtenstein, & Stevenson, 1999).

This study was intended to explore and identify themes in parents' and boys' discussions. We also considered the following research questions:

1. What are parents' concerns about their sons' use of video games and of games with violent content in particular?
2. What do boys believe their parents think about video games? What do they believe are their parents' concerns regarding video games with violent content?
3. Why do parents think their sons play video games?
4. What influence do boys believe violent video games have on their lives or on the feelings and behaviors of other children?

Method

Participants

We recruited 21 seventh- and eighth-grade boys ages 12 to 14 and one parent or legal guardian of each boy, for a total of 42 participants. Adult participants included 12 mothers, 8 fathers, and 1 uncle, ages 29 to 51, who lived in the same home with the child at least half of the time. The families came from 12 cities and towns in the greater Boston area. One quarter of the adults identified themselves as members of ethnic or racial minority groups (primarily African American) on paperwork completed before the start of each group.

The study was publicized via a routine e-mail broadcast that reaches more than 2,500 employees of the Partners HealthCare System, which includes Massachusetts General Hospital. We also posted flyers in local businesses and near schools. Respondents were screened by telephone. To qualify, boys had to report playing video or computer games at least 2 hours per week. They also needed to have played two or more "Teen" (for ages 13 and older) or "Mature" (for ages 17 and older) rated games (using ratings assigned by the ESRB) from a list of eight bestselling violent games. Games were selected based on three criteria: availability on the industry-leading PlayStation 2 console (at minimum), the popularity of the game (based on sales data), and the presence of violent content (shooting, fighting, and/or blood).

Procedure

We held eight focus groups: four with boys and four with their parents/guardians. Groups averaged five participants and lasted 75 to 90 minutes. Parents and boys gave written consent or assent to participate. The Partners/Massachusetts General Hospital human research committee approved the protocol and procedures. Each participant was paid \$50.

Participants were told during screening that the groups would discuss adolescent video game play (defined as electronic games played on consoles,

computers, or handheld devices) but were not informed of the specific emphasis. Parent and child focus groups were held in a suburban office building, concurrently in separate rooms. A senior researcher and a research assistant moderated each group. Moderators posed open-ended questions that addressed the previous list of research questions, in addition to following themes introduced by participants. Standardized probe questions were used to elicit details (Stewart & Shamdassani, 1990). Audio recordings were made of all focus groups with permission from the participants.

To stimulate conversation and provide a visual reference, printed color images from the eight video games were displayed on the table. Although all of the games include scenes of violence, only nonviolent screenshots were presented so that boys were not exposed to additional or novel violent content. To start the child focus group discussions, each boy was asked to select a game screenshot from the table and to describe what he liked about his chosen game. Boys were asked the following:

- What do you like about (this particular) video game? What is your favorite part? What do you like to do?
- Is there a character in this game that you especially like? What is it that you like about them? (The way they look, what they say, things they can do . . . ?) If you could be that character in real life—if you woke up tomorrow as that character—what would you want to do?
- Some people think that games with fighting, shooting, or blood can affect the way kids behave. Do you think games like these can make kids act or think any different? (Probes: Do you think you would be different in any way if you had never played any violent games? Do you think these games could change the behavior of younger kids?)
- Your parents are in the next room. Suppose I asked your mom or dad what they think about your playing video games. What do you think they would say? (What do you think she/he is saying right now?)
- What about games with fighting or blood . . . do your parents feel differently about those? If I asked your mom/dad about the games on the table here, what would she/he say? How do your parents decide what games you can play? (Do they look at the ratings?)

Moderators posed these questions to parents:

- Do you have any concerns about your son's video game play?
- Do you think some parents are worried about the wrong things with respect to video games? (Things that might be unnecessary or inappropriate or not really a problem?)

- What about video games with violent content? Are there different concerns for these? Are there games you don't want your son to play? How do you prevent that?
- Why do you think your son plays video games? Would your son give the same answer, or do you think he'd have a different perspective? Are there different reasons why he plays sports games versus fantasy games versus fighting games?
- Does your son play particular violent games? If you asked him why he likes the violence/why he likes certain violent games, what do you think he might say?
- Are you familiar with the rating system for video games? Do you ever look at or use the ratings or other information on the game box? What kinds of information would you like to have about what's in your son's games?

Data Analysis

After each group, the moderators discussed themes that emerged and noted unanticipated findings. The audio recordings of focus group discussions were fully transcribed by a research assistant. The principal investigator and coinvestigator (who were the primary group moderators) and the research coordinator reviewed the paper transcripts, checking the original audio recordings as needed to confirm meaning, and coded responses to the research questions. We also made marginal notes on recurring themes or comments. After each researcher reviewed the first set of parent/son transcripts, we conducted reliability checks to ensure consistency in interpretation and coding terminology among reviewers. Two research assistants separately analyzed the transcripts, paying particular attention to themes that emerged independently during the discussion (Mason, 1995). After completing the initial analyses, reviewers discussed their findings and compiled a document that included each other's notes, so that data analyses were both independent and collaborative. We also created charts of representative participant quotes grouped by theme, to confirm parallelism across data sources (times and informants; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Results

The following results are organized in terms of our research questions, followed by unexpected themes or topics unrelated to our a priori questions. Examples of parents' and boys' statements are provided as quotations to further articulate themes. Parent/child pairs are numbered to permit comparison of responses.

Content analysis of the data revealed four primary areas of parental concern: (a) the balance boys struck between video game play and other activities,

(b) the restrictions on video game use imposed by each household, (c) the content of video games, and (d) the influence video games could have on boys.

Balance Concerns

Parents' first-mentioned and most frequent concern was not about video game content but rather the amount of time each boy spent playing these games:

[Dad 6] He plays a little bit too much. We've tried to create more balance in his life. He does get out, but he'd prefer to be sitting there playing that game.

[Mom 9] I have taken the machine away and I have hidden it because he loses all concept of time.

Parents worried that time spent playing video games was displacing other important activities and could impair physical health and social skills:

[Mom 16] When I was a kid, everyone was out in the street playing. . . . They've just become lazy—my son—and overweight, and zombie-like.

[Mom 1] I was complaining for a good long year about physical activity: "You can't just stay up there!" So he got *Dance Dance Revolution* [where players jump on a pad to imitate dance moves]. He plays that all the time, and that's good—moving, y'know.

[Mom 17] Five, six years from now, will they be able to socialize in a group amongst people who don't necessarily play these games?

Another common concern was that school grades and homework not suffer because of game play:

[Mom 16] He doesn't have any outside activities except this. But then, he has As and Bs. I'm trying to choose my battles.

When asked what their parents think about video games, boys similarly mentioned balance issues before content concerns:

[Son 3] She probably thinks I play a lot, and I don't really play that much.

[Son 13] If I'm supposed to be doing something, and then I start playing video games, my mom yells at me. She comes over, pulls the plugs out of the TV, and says, "Go walk the dog!"

[Son 10] As long as I do other stuff, chores, homework, they don't really care [what games I play].

Restrictions on Game Play

In line with concerns about balance, most parents said they restrict game play on school days but are more lenient on weekends. They expressed frustration with monitoring game play. Most parents said they tried to limit access to content they found inappropriate but felt powerless to entirely prevent their children's access to objectionable content. A mother of twins described her difficulty monitoring her children's separate but simultaneous video game play:

[Mom 3] With my daughter with her laptop computer in her room, I can't be watching both of them all the time to see if they're talking to strangers or to see if someone is getting killed in the other room on PlayStation. It's just nerve-wracking!

Parents acknowledged that despite their best efforts, their children would still have access to games they found inappropriate through their peers. They tried to focus their control over the video games present in their homes. But parents admitted having little control over game play away from home:

[Mom 21] There's enough negative stuff out there that I can't stop my boys from learning. I don't want to bring it into my home and have nudity, swearing, bloody violence on my TV screen.

[Dad 13] But I can't really limit; he may bring a Mario game to his buddy's house and bring back a *Grand Theft Auto* when I'm not aware of it.

[Mom 12] Well, I know that he does not play this game in my house, because I don't own it. But [*Grand Theft Auto*] *Vice City*—he seems to know all the characters, and what they say, so he must be playing it someplace.

To reduce exposure to inappropriate content, some parents try to rent and observe games before buying them or talk with parents of their children's friends about games:

[Dad 15] Usually I hang around, I just keep my mouth shut, I just watch. "What a great game." And then if I want to get rid of it, just tell them it's time to get rid of it.

Lack of technological savvy sometimes hampered parents' efforts to monitor game content:

[Mom 8] I'm not that knowledgeable about—I mean, I know how to turn the PlayStation on, but I don't know how to use the controllers at all.

Most parents seemed aware of game ratings, and some reported using them to make decisions, most often rejecting all M-rated games. When asked, parents had little understanding of what a Mature game specifically includes or how it might differ from a Teen-rated game:

[Mom 18] I see the "E," I know it's for everyone. When I see the Teen, I know the 10-year-old, he can't have it. Then I see Mature: that's when I say, "Okay, I'm going to read to see exactly what's going on here."

[Dad 19] I'm looking at the packages and the nudity and stuff like that. I don't really know too much about the rating systems.

[Mom 11] I can imagine that the "M" game, by definition, would not have things like nudity or would not have things like—I pray to God—like drugs. Or it would not have excessive violence. But I don't know; I've never seen one.

Content Concerns

When asked specifically about video game content, parents most often voiced concern about depictions of violence or nudity. Their objections seemed to focus more on their son's exposure to mature content that conflicts with their values at too young an age rather than a fear that their child would actually model the behavior.

Violence. Concerns about and definitions of violence varied considerably among parents but centered around three interlinked issues—the realism of the violence, the target of the violence, and the context or goal of the violence—which they felt would determine the potential for harm. Parents were generally not bothered by games with fantasy settings or featuring cartoon characters in farcical situations. But the more human the characters—particularly the victims or "bad guys"—the more troubling the content became:

[Dad 4] They can shoot as many trolls as they want, and it can be pretty bloody without really bothering me that much. But if you had a game where it looks like real people, that bothers me more; there might be some carryover.

Several parents specifically objected to violence against women as well as to stereotyping of women and minorities:

[Mom 16] A lot of these games, the bad guys are people of color, and the women are portrayed . . . they're objectified. It's a disgrace.

Others worried about the context of violence and how central it was to the game:

[Mom 17] It's not accidental. It's intentional. They just are out to kill people in some of these games, and I don't think that kids should watch it.

Sex. Although opinions on violence were diverse, parents were universally and strongly concerned about children's exposure to any sexual content, whether nudity or sexual acts:

[Mom 18] It's bad enough to expose the body, but then they have the sexual [activities], and that's just going over, that's way beyond.

[Mom 1] [*Grand Theft Auto*] is actually a very clever game. . . . But it really should be limited to adults. You start seeing the prostitutes, and it's a riot, if you are looking at it as an adult. But I step back and go, "Hey, my 13 year old has never seen that!" He doesn't have that whole background information.

Mom 12 was one exception, noting that the sexual innuendo in games like *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* could have an innocent appeal to preteens:

I think that some of the comments and jokes and situations were over his head. But there's nothing more fun at that age [then 11] to be in the house where the older brother comes in the room and explains what a lap dance is, right? And the little boys are laughing their heads off; now they know stuff that parents don't know.

Sons' Perceptions of Parents' Restrictions and Content Concerns

Most boys indicated that their parents were ignorant about video games in general or about their own game play in particular:

[Son 1] [My parents] don't really know about my games. If they come upstairs to my room and see it, they'll say, "Oh, that's nice," "That looks like fun," or something like that.

Boys seemed to have a good understanding of their parents' content concerns. For example, Son 16 said that before playing video games,

“Sometimes I’ll say to my mom, ‘I’m going to go kill some people,’ just to tease her. She gets annoyed.”

Some boys (but not all) reported attempts by parents, usually mothers, to restrict or monitor games with violent content or bad language, including Mature-rated games. This often occurred after the game had already been rented or purchased:

[Son 19] Some games, they don’t really care. But maybe if I got an “M” game, they’d be watching me a bit more to try and figure out if it’s bad. If it’s bad, they might take it away.

[Son 15] When *Grand Theft Auto 3* first came out, I got it. Then it was on the news and all my friends’ moms were talking about it to my mom, like, “Oh, it’s so violent and the language is so strong.” So then she wants to take the game away.

Confirming the suspicions expressed by parents, boys reported gaining access to restricted games at the homes of friends or relatives:

[Son 11] My brother, he has friends and they sometimes had him borrow some [M-rated] games. So we don’t own them, but yes, we play them.

Interestingly, Son 11 also said:

Being around [mom] so much has told me which games not to even ask her to play. And those games, I now don’t even like. . . . So really, it’s like she’s given me the image of what to play, what not to play.

Notably, none of the parents or boys viewed sports games as violent, with the possible exception of wrestling.

Boys had much less to say about sexual content in games. A number of boys expressed disgust at the idea of nudity in games, and many said that they had not realized that any video games included sexual content.

Concerns About Influence of Game Violence

Parents made a number of comments related to the influence of games on children (Table 1). A central concern was that game violence could distort children’s view of reality or lead to imitation. But that concern was consistently for other people’s children and not, as many pointed out, for their own sons.

Table 1
Parent Comments/Concerns About the Influence of Video Games on Boys (Most to Least Frequent)

Observed Positive Effects	Worries About Harmful Effects
Fosters fun, excitement, fantasy, creative expression	Could desensitize a child to violence and encourage imitation
Teaches child strategic and goal-directed skills	Could lead a child to misinterpret the world as terrifying and violent
Promotes social relationships (shared conversation and activities)	Could harm development of social skills through isolation
Relaxes child, helps reduce stress and anger	Could cause irritability because of excessive frustration by games
Improves hand-eye coordination	

Media stories linking games to real-life violence, such as school shootings, worried several parents. But again, parents expressed confidence that their own sons would not be adversely affected by violent games:

[Mom 3] I know that there are a lot of kids out there that do act out—I've read anyway—from movies or games. I don't have any fears of [my son] going out and doing things that's in the game. I talked to him about it in the past, and he's like, "I'm not that stupid."

[Dad 5] Frankly, I don't see any basis for believing that these games somehow influence a person to such an extent that they lose all sense of right and wrong in what they would do in any ordinary social situation. I think they really see it as entertainment, much like if they went to the movies.

Rather than lead to actual violent behavior, some parents feared that repeated exposure to game violence might lead boys to misinterpret the world around them and, as Mom 11 put it, could create "an underlying sense of terror that life is just violent—that awful things happen all the time to people."

Sons' Perceptions of the Influence of Video Games

Like their parents, boys also mentioned the potential for harmful influence but did not think that they would be negatively affected by video game play. Urban legends about the influence of video game violence abound. For example, Son 12 said, "I heard on the news that there was this one kid who played *Vice City* all night and all day, and he got mad at his parents and he killed them."

Several boys raised the issue that games and other violent media content could [Son 4] “make people less sensitive. . . . If you watch lots of violent movies, you can get it into your head that violence isn’t a very bad thing, ‘cause you see it all the time.” They also thought violent games could be a negative influence on less mature youth and described the need to protect younger siblings from violent content in games. As Son 17 said, “Because if you don’t know the consequences of your actions, you can just go out, start shooting people and you’ll go to jail for life, and that’s not a good thing.”

However, when questioned, none of them knew anyone who had been so influenced in real life. Son 20 said that with “good parents, you’re not going to be brought up that way” and pointed out that even in some very violent games, such as *Halo*, “you don’t see people really die. All you see is aliens, and the blood is blue. So you see the unrealistic of it.” Son 10 noted, “Mom and dad, they know that I know right from wrong.” As Son 1 put it, violent games might “make some kids fantasize a little, like, ‘I wish I could do that!’ or ‘That would be so much fun, if I could,’ but you’re not actually planning on ever doing it.”

Son 7 brought up the influence of television news stories about violence and compared it to the fantasy violence of games:

I don’t really think video games will influence kids as much as the news. That can influence kids and that’s real. . . . I play video games, and I go, “Oh, that stuff won’t happen.” And if I see it on the news, it kind of freaks me out.

Son 6 agreed and said, “It’s scary, ‘cause you don’t feel safe.” Dad 7 echoed his son’s concerns:

The gun fighting is just fun. . . . But [my son] sees the news and he doesn’t like the news. He sees what’s happening to kids, and that upsets him.

Parents’ Perceptions of Why Sons Play Video Games

When parents were asked what attracted their sons to violent games, they mentioned curiosity, control, and excitement:

[Mom 10] I think he would say that he wants to see the blood and guts. . . . It’s something that in his world you don’t see in real life. Even if the dragon gets his head cut off, he wants to know is the blood red? Is it blue? Is it green?

[Mom 21] [There’s] monotony associated with a lot of the sports games, driving games, the more *Mario*-type games. . . . With the violent games, there’s learning going on. You can actually change your objective and strategy.

Mom 21 also noted that the variety of new and “cool” weapons added to the appeal. Several parents mentioned that their sons used games to handle stress or to work out anger. But Mom 3 disagreed, describing her observation of video game play increasing her son’s anger: “My main concern with him and PlayStation is he gets on edge if he can’t beat it, and gets irritable towards everyone.”

Despite concerns about social isolation, parents noted the central role of games in teens’ social life. Other parents mentioned the appeal of trading strategies and codes and the social status gained by owning or beating the latest game:

[Mom 1] We finally broke down and got a video game because [my son] kept coming home saying, “I’m completely out of the conversation. I don’t have anything to talk about. I don’t have anything to add.”

(A detailed analysis of the sons’ perspectives on their use of violent games, along with the views of 21 boys from a second set of focus groups, is presented in the companion article “The Role of Violent Video Game Content in Adolescent Development: Boys’ Perspectives.”)

Discussion

Parents of young adolescent boys have strong opinions and concerns about their sons’ use of electronic games. In line with proposed policies, parents are concerned about the influence of violent content. These findings parallel the results of a survey on parents’ concerns about television violence by Hoffner and Buchanan (2002), which found that parents perceived their own children as less affected by media violence than other people’s children.

However, there was surprisingly little consensus on what sort or amounts of violent content parents might harm their sons; opinions varied based on the realism, target, and context of the violence. These nuances should be taken into account when interpreting surveys of parent opinions about video games. There was general agreement, however, that children should be protected from exposure to games containing nudity or sexual acts.

Parents and sons tended to agree that it’s difficult for parents to carefully monitor video game play and exposure to inappropriate content. The most common parental mediation strategies appeared to be restrictive (e.g.,

attempts to prevent M-rated games or games with certain types of violence from entering the home), including behavior contingency (requiring the completion of homework or chores before play). Some parents reported occasional coviewing (watching play without explicit discussion). Only a few boys reported that a parent or other adult relative played games with them with any regularity.

Boys were able to accurately describe common parental concerns about balance, content, and influence. Although boys thought younger children should be protected from violence—often citing many of the same reasons adults give when expressing concerns about adolescents' exposure to violent games, such as copying inappropriate, illegal, or dangerous behaviors in the real world—they had little concern for their own exposure. On the issue of sexual content, boys saw eye to eye with their parents. Finally, both parents and sons saw potential for positive effects of video games (even some violent game play).

This suggests that boys are receptive to and cognizant of their parents' concerns and that parents can appeal to their shared values when discussing concerns about games with their sons. Parents and sons may also find common ground around issues such as protecting younger siblings from exposure to inappropriate game content. A recent survey found that young teens are more likely to play M-rated games if they frequently play with older siblings (Olson et al., 2007). Parent-child discussions are important because many of parents' key concerns, such as excessive time spent playing games, are outside the realm of public policy. Similarly, although policies might prevent young adolescents from purchasing or renting violent games, they can't keep boys from trading such games or playing them at friends' homes. Parent-child discussions of games also provide an opportunity to talk about the nature and consequences of violence in everyday life.

It's notable that many parents and boys mentioned things they had heard or read about harmful effects of violent games, even though these did not reflect their real-life observations. (This study does not address whether or how the concerns of parents or boys correlate with existing data on media effects.) Future studies might explore how media coverage of video games may influence parent opinion and behavior. The influence of children's socioemotional and cognitive development on parents' concerns about game content also deserves further study.

Although this fell beyond the scope of our study, several parents and sons spontaneously compared the fantasy of video games to what they perceived as the scary reality of television news content. Exposure to television news may increase fear and perceived risk (Romer, Jamieson, & Aday,

2003) and could desensitize children to violence or make violence seem like a justified or admirable response to conflict (Walma van der Molen, 2004). This topic merits further study, including how exposure to such “real” media violence contrasts or interacts with exposure to fantasy violence in games. It might also be instructive to compare games that are meant to be realistic (such as *America’s Army*) to games that are equally violent and physiologically arousing but clearly not realistic (e.g., games set on alien planets).

It’s important to note that a qualitative study such as this, with a small sample size, cannot be generalized to all parents and should not be over-interpreted. There are also other themes we could have explored, such as how boys mislead parents about the content or use of violent games and how parents’ relative ignorance of technology contributes to this. We focused on themes that would provide insights on the variety and nature of parent concerns and of parent-child differences that may guide the creation of policies and educational programs. These findings also support clinicians in encouraging parents to talk with children about video games and violence.

More study is needed regarding specific information parents would like to receive to make judgments about appropriate games for their children, where they would like to receive this information (e.g., at point of sale, on the Internet), and whom they view as credible sources of information. Furthermore, little is known about how to improve parents’ self-efficacy regarding their ability to manage children’s exposure to inappropriate media content (Jordan, 2006). Combining information about wise media use with education on parenting styles and parent-adolescent communication (Knafo & Schwartz, 2003) may increase the effectiveness and perceived value of parent education programs.

Although American policy proposals tend to focus on “ultraviolent” and/or Mature-rated games, other factors deserve consideration. For example, there may be overlooked hazards in Teen-rated games, which generally fail to show the consequences of violence (e.g., dead bodies dissolve and disappear; blood is absent or colored blue). Television research suggests that showing negative consequences of violence, including suffering of and harm to victims, could reduce the likelihood of imitation (Wilson et al., 2002).

To better understand what’s in their children’s games, parents can look for reviews on nonprofit or commercial Web sites (e.g., Commonsensemedia.org, Gamespot.com; Villani, Olson, & Jellinek, 2005). Clinicians might also recommend that parents keep game systems and computers out of children’s bedrooms or other isolated locations where they can’t be monitored.

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Lawrence A. Kutner is codirector of the Center for Mental Health and Media. He earned his PhD in psychology from the University of Minnesota. His research interests include parent-child communication and using mass media to destigmatize mental illness.

Cheryl K. Olson is codirector of the Center for Mental Health and Media, Massachusetts General Hospital Department of Psychiatry. She received her doctor of science degree in health and social behavior from the Harvard School of Public Health. Her research interests include adolescent mental health, effects of mass media on youth, and using media to change health behaviors.

Dorothy E. Warner (formerly Dorothy Salenius-Pasternak) is currently a project coordinator at the Judge Baker Children's Center in Boston. She earned her PhD at the Eliot-Pearson Department of Child Development, Tufts University. Her research interests include electronic play, the socioemotional development of children with chronic illness, and virtual communities as therapeutic/educational environments.

Sarah M. Hertzog earned her MA in child development from Tufts University. She is currently completing her PhD at the Cornell University College of Human Ecology.