

Violent video games may increase aggression in some but not others, says new research

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Playing violent video games can make some adolescents more hostile, particularly those who are less agreeable, less conscientious and easily angered. But for others, it may offer opportunities to learn new skills and improve social networking.

In a special issue of the journal *Review of General Psychology*, published in June by the American Psychological Association, researchers looked at several studies that examined the potential uses of video games as a way to improve visual/spatial skills, as a health aid to help manage diabetes or pain and as a tool to complement psychotherapy. One study examined the negative effects of violent video games on some people.

"Much of the attention to [video game](#) research has been negative, focusing on potential harm related to addiction, aggression and lowered [school performance](#)," said Christopher J. Ferguson, PhD, of Texas A&M International University and guest editor of the issue. "Recent research has shown that as video games have become more popular, children in the United States and Europe are having fewer behavior problems, are less violent and score better on standardized tests. Violent video games have not created the generation of problem youth so often feared."

In contrast, one study in the special issue shows that video game violence can increase aggression in some individuals, depending on their personalities.

In his research, Patrick Markey, PhD, determined that a certain

combination of [personality traits](#) can help predict which young people will be more adversely affected by violent video games. "Previous research has shown us that personality traits like psychoticism and aggressiveness intensify the negative effects of violent video games and we wanted to find out why," said Markey.

Markey used the most popular psychological model of personality traits, called the Five-Factor Model, to examine these effects. The model scientifically classifies five personality traits: neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness and conscientiousness.

Analysis of the model showed a "perfect storm" of traits for children who are most likely to become hostile after playing violent video games, according to Markey. Those traits are: high neuroticism (e.g., easily upset, angry, depressed, emotional, etc.), low agreeableness (e.g., little concern for others, indifferent to others feelings, cold, etc.) and low conscientiousness (e.g., break rules, don't keep promises, act without thinking, etc.).

Markey then created his own model, focusing on these three traits, and used it to help predict the effects of violent video games in a sample of 118 teenagers. Each participant played a violent or a non-violent video game and had his or her hostility levels assessed. The teenagers who were highly neurotic, less agreeable and less conscientious tended to be most adversely affected by violent video games, whereas participants who did not possess these personality characteristics were either unaffected or only slightly negatively affected by violent video games.

"These results suggest that it is the simultaneous combination of these personality traits which yield a more powerful predictor of violent video games," said Markey. "Those who are negatively affected have pre-existing dispositions, which make them susceptible to such violent media."

"[Violent video games](#) are like peanut butter," said Ferguson. "They are harmless for the vast majority of kids but are harmful to a small minority with pre-existing personality or mental health problems."

The special issue also features articles on the positives of video game play, including as a learning tool. For example:

- Video games serve a wide range of emotional, social and intellectual needs, according to a survey of 1,254 seventh and eighth graders. The study's author, Cheryl Olson, PhD, also offers tips to parents on how to minimize potential harm from video games (i.e., supervised play, asking kids why they play certain games, playing video games with their children).
- Commercial video games have been shown to help engage and treat patients, especially children, in healthcare settings, according to a research review by Pamela Kato, PhD. For example, some specially tailored video games can help patients with pain management, [diabetes](#) treatment and prevention of asthma attacks.
- Video games in mental health care settings may help young patients become more cooperative and enthusiastic about [psychotherapy](#). T. Atilla Ceranoglu, M.D., found in his research review that video games can complement the psychological assessment of youth by evaluating cognitive skills and help clarify conflicts during the therapy process.

More information: Review of General Psychology Special Issue on Video Games, Vol. 14. No. 2:

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