

Profanity in TV and video games linked to teen aggression

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While it's been long established that watching violent scenes increases aggression levels, a new study in the medical journal *Pediatrics* suggests that profanity in the media may have a similar effect. *Pediatrics* is the top-ranked journal in its field and among the top 2 percent most-cited scientific and medical journals in the world.

The study appears to be the first to examine the impact of profanity in the media, which sounds surprising considering how central language is to movie and TV ratings.

To explore this overlooked issue, scholars at Brigham Young University gathered information from 223 [middle school students](#) in the Midwest. The data is not longitudinal, but BYU family life professor Sarah Coyne explains that the statistical techniques applied give more clues than would simple correlation tests.

Specifically, the statistical modeling points to a chain reaction: Exposure to profanity is associated with acceptance and use of profanity, which in turn influence both physical and relational aggression.

"On the whole, it's a moderate effect" said Coyne, the lead author of the *Pediatrics* study. "We even ran the [statistical model](#) the opposite way to test if the violent kids used more profanity and then sought it out in the media, but the first path we took was a much better statistical fit even when we tried other explanations."

Brad Bushman, a media expert at Ohio State University who was not involved with the study, concurs after reviewing the research.

"This research shows that profanity is not harmless," said Bushman, a [mass communications](#) professor. "Children exposed to profanity in the media think that such language is 'normal,' which may reduce their inhibitions about using profanity themselves. And children who use profanity are more likely to aggress against others. These are very important findings for parents, teachers, and pediatricians."

The connection between profanity and adolescent aggression remained significant even while accounting for the influence of portrayals of aggression in the shows and games popular with the middle school students involved in the study.

"Profanity is kind of like a stepping stone," Coyne said. "You don't go to a movie, hear a bad word, and then go shoot somebody. But when youth both hear and then try profanity out for themselves it can start a downward slide toward more aggressive behavior."

In one regard, Coyne says the ratings systems were "ahead of their time" by steering young people away from profanity without scientific research to state why. Yet she also sees a new gap in the [video game](#) ratings system when it comes to educating parents about games that enable online interaction between players.

Provided by Brigham Young University

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