

New Gentile study on media violence and kids could have applications on school bullying

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The April suicide of 14-year-old Kenneth Weishuhn Jr. -- a South O'Brien High School (Paulina, Iowa) student who was reportedly teased and bullied by classmates -- had Iowa lawmakers questioning the effectiveness of the state's five-year-old anti-bullying law. School officials can't always identify the bullies until it's too late.

But a new study led by Douglas Gentile, an Iowa State University associate professor of psychology, may provide schools with a new tool to help them profile students who are more likely to commit [aggressive acts](#) against other students. Published in the July issue of the *Psychology of Popular Media Culture* -- a journal by the [American Psychological Association](#) -- the study identifies [media violence](#) exposure as one of six risk factors for predicting later [aggression](#) in 430 children (ages 7-11, grades 3-5) from five Minnesota schools. In addition to media violence exposure, the remaining risk factors are bias toward hostility, low [parental involvement](#), gender, physical victimization and prior physical fights.

Knowing students' risks for aggression can help [school officials](#) to determine which students might be more likely to get in fights -- or possibly bully other students -- later in the school year.

"As you gain risk factors, the risk of aggression goes up disproportionately," said Gentile, who runs the Media Research Lab at

Iowa State. "Having one or two risk factors is no big deal. Kids are resilient -- they can handle it. You get to three and there's a big jump. When you get out past four risk factors, risk is increasing at a much higher rate than you would expect.

"If we are concerned about bullying in schools, then this approach has real world implications for helping to target the kids who are at higher risk for bullying behavior so we could use our limited resources more effectively to reduce bullying in schools," he continued. "We could profile kids by measuring their risk factors. In fact, I can get over 80 percent accuracy knowing only three things -- are they a boy, have they gotten in a fight within the past year, and do they consume a lot of media violence? When you get out to having six risk factors, then we can predict with 94 percent accuracy which kids will get into fights in the coming year. We just can't predict which day."

Effects of media violence may be previously underestimated

Gentile and co-author Brad Bushman, a former Iowa State psychology professor who now is on The Ohio State University faculty, conclude that when considered with other risk factors, the effects of media violence exposure may actually be underestimated by previous scientific measures. They contend the study is one of the first to put several of the pieces together to show how the risk factors work together to predict future aggression.

"This new statistical approach [relative weight analysis] actually allows us to get probably the most accurate assessment of how much each variable [risk factor] contributes to likely aggression, in combination with the others," Gentile said. "It becomes clear that media violence is very similar to other known risk factors."

For the study, children and their teachers were surveyed twice in a

school year -- most being six months apart. Physical aggression was measured using self-reports, peer-nominations and teacher reports of actual violence.

In the self-reports, participants listed their three favorite TV shows, video games and movies. For each, participants rated how frequently they watched or played it, and how violent it was. An overall violence exposure score was computed for each participant by multiplying the violence rating by the frequency of viewing/playing, and then averaging across the nine responses. That approach has been used successfully in other studies that study children and media violence.

Media violence consumption easiest for parents to control

Gentile emphasizes that high exposure to media violence is just one risk factor for increased aggression, neither deserving special concern nor dismissal among other risk factors. What makes it different from the others is that it's the one that is most easy for parents to control.

"Most of the risk factors for aggression are really hard to change. You can't easily change whether your child has previously been in a fight or bullied," Gentile said. "That's what makes this [media violence] different is that it's actually fairly easy to control compared to most of the other risk factors. But how it acts as a risk factor is exactly the same as all others. It's not the biggest, it's not the smallest, it's actually right there in the middle of the pack."

While the researchers found that the effect of media [violence exposure](#) on a child's later aggression may be underestimated, Gentile points out that it's the combination of [risk factors](#) that ultimately proves to be the most dangerous when predicting future aggression in kids.

Provided by Iowa State University

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