

Special international commission on media violence confirms aggression link

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Iowa State University psychology professors Douglas Gentile (left) and Craig Anderson (right) were co-authors of the book "Violent Video Game Effects on Children and Adolescents" and were significant contributors to a new international Media Violence Commission on the known effects of media violence exposure. Credit: Photo by Bob Elbert, Iowa State University News Service

As president of the International Society for Research on Aggression (IRSA) and with consent of the organization's elected council, Craig Anderson appointed an international Media Violence Commission last December to prepare a public statement on the known effects of media violence exposure, based on the current state of scientific knowledge. The Iowa State University Distinguished Professor of psychology appointed 12 IRSA researchers to the commission, including Douglas Gentile, an ISU associate professor of psychology.

The [Media](#) Violence Commission's research-based report concludes that the research clearly shows that [media violence](#) consumption increases the relative risk of aggression, defined as intentional harm to another person that could be verbal, relational, or physical. The report is published in the September/October issue of the journal [Aggressive Behavior](#).

"Basically, the commission looked at, 'What does the research literature say?'" Anderson said. "In addition, we asked them to make some recommendations, if they chose to do so, about public policy. It really was kind of an open-ended charge."

A well-known researcher on the effects of media on children, Gentile says commission members took a fair and balanced look at all of the existing research to see if they could achieve consensus, and then summarized what they found.

In their report, the commission wrote that aside from being sources of imitation, violent images—such as scenes in movies, games or pictures in [comic books](#)—act as triggers for activating aggressive thoughts and feelings already stored in memory. If these [aggressive thoughts](#) and feelings are activated over and over again because of repeated exposure to media violence, they become chronically accessible, and thus more likely to influence behavior.

"One may also become more vigilant for [hostility](#) and [aggression](#) in the world, and therefore, begin to feel some ambiguous actions by others (such as being bumped in a crowded room) are deliberate acts of provocation," the commission wrote in the report.

The commission recommends that parents know what media their children and adolescents are using. Rating systems often provide too little detail about media content to be helpful, and in any case, are not

substitutes for parents' watching, playing, or listening to the media their children use.

"Parents can also set limits on screen use (The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends no screen time for children under 2 and no more than one to two hours total screen time per day for children/youth 3-18), and should discuss media content with their children to promote critical thinking when viewing," the researchers wrote. "Schools may help parents by teaching students from an early age to be critical consumers of the media and that, just like food, the 'you are what you eat' principle applies to healthy media consumption."

While most public policy has focused on restricting children's access to violent media, the commission found that approach to have significant political and legal challenges in many countries. For that reason, it recommends putting efforts into improving media ratings, classifications, and public education about the effects of media on children.

"Improving media ratings really has two pieces. One is that the media ratings themselves need to be done by an independent entity—meaning, not by an industry-influenced or controlled system," said Anderson, himself a leading researcher of the effects of violent media on children. "They need to be ratings that have some scientific validity to them."

"But the other piece is education, and if parents aren't educated—not just about what the ratings system does, but also about why it's important for them to take control of their child's media diet—then it doesn't matter how good the ratings system is, because they're going to ignore it anyway," he added.

Anderson hopes the final report will have value to child advocacy groups.

"Having such a clear statement by an unbiased, international scientific group should be very helpful to a number of child advocacy groups—such as parenting groups—in their efforts to improve the lives of children," he said.

More information:

onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/ab.21443/full

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