

Limit kids' exposure to media violence, pediatricians say

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(HealthDay)—Media violence has become a routine part of the daily

lives of American children, and parents, lawmakers and the media should take steps to change that, a leading pediatricians' group recommends.

The new policy statement, from the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), calls on pediatricians to routinely ask about children's "media diet," and for parents to limit the violent content their kids see—whether on TV, online or in video games.

Video gaming is a particular concern, partly because of the advent of 3D technology that creates a "more immersive experience with violence," said statement author Dr. Dimitri Christakis.

Christakis directs the Center for Child Health, Behavior and Development at Seattle Children's Research Institute.

The policy statement points to a "proven scientific connection" between virtual violence and real-life aggression, the doctors say. Many studies have found such links, Christakis said.

Some media violence experts contend that such a link is far from proven.

However, Christakis noted that "aggression" can include "being rude," arguing or—for those old enough—driving aggressively.

"With children, actual physical violence is, thankfully, rare," Christakis said.

But, he added, "aggressive thoughts and feelings do precede violence."

The policy statement advises parents to: play their kids' video games with them, so they know exactly what the content is; shield children

younger than 6 from all violent media, including "cartoon violence," and ban "first-person shooter" games altogether.

Christakis acknowledged that most kids will not be turned into violent offenders because of video games or movies. But he pointed to "societal level" effects of widespread media violence.

"Let's say 2 percent of the population behaves more aggressively after being exposed to [violent media](#)," Christakis said. "Out of the 20 million people who see the latest violent blockbuster, that's 400,000 additional acts of aggressive behavior."

Much of the policy statement is aimed not at parents, but at the media.

It calls on the entertainment industry to stop glamorizing violence and using gratuitous aggression. It also says violence should not be used in a "comic or sexual context."

The [policy statement](#) also says reporters should stop presenting the link between media violence and real-life violence as "controversial." News stories falsely imply there is debate by interviewing industry representatives or "contrarian academics," the statement said.

"I guess I'm a contrarian academic," said Christopher Ferguson, a media violence researcher at Stetson University in DeLand, Fla.

Ferguson disputed the idea that there is a "proven" link between kids' exposure to media violence and aggressive behavior. He pointed to a number of studies that have found no evidence of that—his own and others' work.

"There's nothing wrong with the AAP saying, 'We would like kids to not see violence,' " Ferguson said. "But I don't know where they get the idea

that there is scientific 'consensus' on this."

Dr. Eugene Beresin is executive director of the Clay Center for Young Healthy Minds at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston.

He agreed with Ferguson about the research on [media violence](#) and kids' aggression.

But he also said most of the AAP recommendations are based on "sound judgment."

"Yes, parents should know what their kids are watching and playing," Beresin said. "They should also know who their kids are."

So, he explained, if your child tends to be aggressive, he or she probably shouldn't play a violent [video game](#). By the same token, Beresin added, that game may not be appropriate for an overly anxious child.

But the focus should not just be on entertainment, according to Beresin. "I think the most disturbing images are on the news," he said.

Plus, Beresin said, there is evidence that media images of terrorist attacks and other traumatic events can trigger post-traumatic stress symptoms in some children.

In the wake of media coverage of recent real-world incidents, such as the killing of 84 people who were celebrating Bastille Day in France last Thursday and the killing of police officers in Dallas and Baton Rouge, La., this month, Beresin had some advice for parents.

Young children, he said, are not mature enough to process those images, and should simply not see them.

With somewhat older kids—around age 10—it's possible they're seeing these things on their phones or iPads, or have heard about them from friends, Beresin said.

"I would ask them, 'Have you heard about what happened in Dallas?' for instance. Then ask them what they're thinking, get their questions."

"Then," Beresin said, "reassure them. Tell them that they and their family are safe."

Parents of teenagers, he said, should watch the news with them and then talk about it. "Ask them how they think we can make the world a better place," he suggested.

Christakis agreed. "The news can make the world seem like a very scary place," he said. "With young children, it's better that they not see it all. With older [kids](#), talk about what's happening."

More information: The Clay Center for Young Healthy Minds has advice on helping kids [deal with real-life violence](#).

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