

# Media violence, impulsivity and family conflict tied to aggressive behaviors in teenagers

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Teenagers exposed to TV and film violence and high levels of household conflict are at risk of engaging in aggressive behaviors, according to a

new study by researchers at three U.S. universities.

Especially prone to aggressive tendencies are those who also have high levels of impulsivity, the six-member research team reported in a study published online ahead of print in the journal *Aggressive Behavior*.

The research—an online survey of some 2,000 teens aged 14-17 and equally representing both blacks and whites—also found that parental monitoring, more so for white teens, help to protect against aggressive behavior.

"Accounting for all the risk factors we looked at in this study, parental monitoring continued to have a strong protective effect," said lead author Atika Khurana, a professor at the University of Oregon and director of graduate programs in the UO's prevention science program.

"It was quite interesting that for adolescents who had high levels of [media violence](#) exposure, family conflict, impulsivity and sensation-seeking, [parental monitoring](#) still continued to provide a protective effect against aggressive tendencies," she said.

The study, Khurana said, sought to provide a nuanced look at the unique and combined role of different risk and protective factors including media violence exposure and parental involvement on [adolescent](#) aggression.

The survey captured [teen](#) viewing of 29 mainstream top-grossing mainstream movies from 2014 and 34 black-oriented movies from 2013 and 2014, as well as the viewing of top 30 television shows in the 2014-15 season for black and non-black adolescents, all of which were coded to account for acts of violence occurring in five-minute increments.

Teens were asked what shows they had watched, how many times they viewed each, and whether they had engaged recently in a physical fight, face-to-face bullying and cyberbullying as measures of aggression.

To measure family conflict, the teens were asked if their home life involved criticism, hitting each other, cursing, arguing and throwing things when angry. Teens also replied to questions about how often their parents spent time talking with them, engaging in fun activities, and family meal time.

Other questions probed parental supervision of media use, such as restricting and forbidding the viewing of violence and adult content, and parent-led discussions about media violence, which often does not result in consequences, versus the ramifications of violence in real-life. Impulsivity and sensation-seeking levels were measured using widely-used self-report questionnaires.

"Media violence is a known risk factor for aggression in adolescents," Khurana said. "The purpose here was to see how strong a risk factor it is compared to other risk and protective factors and how it operates in tandem with these factors."

Media violence alone, the researchers concluded, is a strong risk factor for aggression, even when the adolescents were low in all the other risk factors. "The effect is no doubt greater if you also have other risk factors such as [family conflict](#) and impulsivity, but it is nonetheless significant even for those at lower risk in other categories," Khurana said.

While parental supervision was associated with lower levels for aggression, this study, she said, only captured the self-reporting of adolescents in a single round of data collection. A longitudinal study is needed to clarify how strongly parental involvement impacts [aggressive behavior](#) over time and if it can alter the effect of [media violence](#)

exposure.

For effectiveness, she said, parental intervention in media viewing needs to be age appropriate. Actions that restrict or forbid viewing of violent media works best with younger adolescents but can be counterproductive with older teens.

"Communication style is also important," Khurana said. "Setting boundaries but allowing some autonomy and independence is vital."

**More information:** Atika Khurana et al, Media violence exposure and aggression in adolescents: A risk and resilience perspective, *Aggressive Behavior* (2018). [DOI: 10.1002/ab.21798](https://doi.org/10.1002/ab.21798)

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