

Violent video games, unlocked guns a dangerous combo for kids

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(HealthDay)—Shoot 'em up video games might be making your children

far too comfortable with how they approach and handle real-life firearms, a new study argues.

Kids who played a version of Minecraft featuring guns were much more likely to handle a happened-upon but unloaded firearm than kids whose Minecraft game featured swords or no weapons at all, researchers found.

Worse, those kids were also more likely to point the gun at themselves or a playmate and pull the trigger, said lead researcher Brad Bushman, chair of mass communication at Ohio State University.

"This is not a game that is bloody or gory," Bushman said of Minecraft, "so you have to wonder how more realistic shooting games would affect children's perceptions regarding the safety of firearms."

For the study, 250 kids aged 8 to 12 spent 20 minutes playing specially designed versions of Minecraft, a game known for its distinctively blocky, pixelated graphics.

Kids were paired with another playmate and randomly assigned to play one of three versions of Minecraft—one in which guns were used to kill monsters, another where swords were used, and a third that was utterly nonviolent and featured neither weapons nor monsters.

After 20 minutes of play, the children were sent to another room stocked with toys. The room also included a cabinet containing two disabled 9 mm handguns.

There were 220 children in the study who came across the handguns while playing, and what they did after finding the firearms is telling.

About 62% of kids who played Minecraft featuring guns touched the handgun, compared with 57% of the kids who had swords in their [video](#)

[game](#) and 44% of those who played a nonviolent video game, researchers report.

What's more, twice as many kids who played with crude video game guns wound up aiming the real-life firearm and pulling the trigger at either themselves or their playmate.

About 3% of kids exposed to gun violence in Minecraft pulled the trigger of the real handgun, compared with 1.4% of kids who had video game swords and only 0.14% who played the nonviolent game.

Roughly 1 in every 5 children notified an adult about the [firearm](#), the study discovered. About 6% told an adult without touching the gun, as kids are told to do, and another 16% told an adult but also touched the gun.

The results show how important it is for parents to monitor their children's video [game](#) playing, Bushman said.

"You don't let your kids eat junk food. The same should be true for media," Bushman said. "You shouldn't let them consume junky media."

The new results jibe with a 2017 study of his, which found that kids who watched movies featuring gun violence were more likely to handle and use guns, Bushman added.

Nearly 1,300 children younger than 18 die every year from shootings, and about 5,800 are treated for gunshot wounds, according to a 2017 study in *Pediatrics*.

Although it's important to monitor kids' media diet, it's even more crucial to safely store firearms out of the hands of children, said Cassandra Crifasi, an assistant professor with the Johns Hopkins Center

for Gun Policy and Research.

Even before video games existed, kids played with toy firearms—water guns or cap guns or finger guns or guns imagined from bits of fallen wood, said Crifasi, who wasn't involved with the study.

"Kids are innately curious and they're going to play with these things, so I think it's important we separate kids from firearms when they aren't supervised," Crifasi said. "We know from some national survey data we've done that only 55% of homes with children store their guns safely."

The best way to keep children safe is to remove all guns from the home, according to Nationwide Children's Hospital in Columbus, Ohio.

Guns kept in the house should always be unloaded and locked, stored out of reach and sight of [children](#). Ammunition should always be stored separately.

The new study was published May 31 in the journal *JAMA Network Open*.

More information: Justin H. Chang et al. Effect of Exposure to Gun Violence in Video Games on Children's Dangerous Behavior With Real Guns, *JAMA Network Open* (2019). [DOI: 10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2019.4319](https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2019.4319)

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