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This Just In: Parents Impact Kids More Than Video Games Do

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commentary Should we worry about fantasy violence? Yes, writes college professor Tony Durr. We should also worry about how we're parenting.

BY TONY DURR / FEBRUARY 28, 2013 1:17 PM PST

Editors' note: The following is a response to Jim Kerstetter's commentary, "Why do we blame games for real-world violence?"

I have fond memories of the hours lost playing Medal of Honor on PlayStation 2 and even the original GoldenEye on Nintendo64.

It was immersive and exciting, and to me it was entertainment. Now as a parent I have a different perspective: I wonder if such games are actually bad for my own kids. That's why I found Jim Kerstetter's article "Why do we blame games for real-world violence?" an interesting read, and also felt compelled to clarify some of the information and share my thoughts.

In his article, Kerstetter mentions that a 2010 issue of Review of General Psychology (one of many journals published by the American Psychological Association) focused on video game violence. In actuality, the issue focused on the topic of video games in general and mostly on video games as tools for cognitive enhancement, particularly massively multiplayer online (MMO) games (an interesting topic for another day).

The issue did contain two articles that spoke to video game violence: one
where the author argues that the harmful effects of video game violence have been overexaggerated, and another article arguing that video game violence may increase aggression in some people, particularly those who are already predisposed to violence. With such conflicting information from experts, how am I supposed to make informed decisions about my own kids? I played my fare share of violent video games; did they make me more violent or aggressive?

I'd like to think they didn't, but there's something about immersing one's consciousness into any environment filled will violence for hours on end that makes me think it's a question worth asking.

One of the more significant pieces of literature on video game violence compiled the results of 130 different studies from many different countries in what researchers call a meta-analysis (a fancy way of combining all 130 studies into one). The findings were published in Psychological Bulletin (also published by APA) in 2010. After extensive analysis, the authors concluded that exposure to violent video games does cause an increase in aggressive behavior, aggressive thoughts, and aggressive feelings, as well as a decrease in feelings of empathy and pro-social behavior.

The findings of this extensive study make it pretty clear that there is a link between video game violence and real-world violence. With that said, it's also important to understand that even though there's this strong evidence that video game violence does cause real-world violence, the strength of that effect is small compared with other variables known to cause violence. To put that a different way, violent video games can make people more aggressive, but something like being a victim of violence or poor family bonding have a much, much stronger impact.

Which brings me to my final point: I wholeheartedly agree with Kerstetter that parent involvement may be the single best way to address concerns regarding aggressive behaviors in kids. There are mounds of research that study every conceivable aspect of parenting; one interesting body of research is attachment theory. Many hyper-involved parents describe themselves as "attachment parents" and have taken the ideas of attachment theory to an extreme.
Regardless of how far you go with such ideas, one thing is clear, the quality of the bond between parent and child is pretty powerful. Kids that do not have strong attachments to caregivers can be sad, anxious, rejecting, or angry. As any parent will tell you, creating a strong bond with your children is incredibly complicated, yet at the same time it is astoundingly simple -- care about your kids and care about what they are doing. Parents paying attention to what video games their kids are playing is part of that, but it is a pretty tiny part.

Even better is to, as Kerstetter said, "learn about the classes they're taking and the friends with whom they're spending time." Being involved in all aspects of your children's lives is what really makes a meaningful impact; video games are just one out of probably a million things parents need to be mindful of. What we know about the connection between video game violence and real-world violence shouldn't be ignored, but more importantly everything we know about good parenting shouldn't be ignored either.