

Videogames can encourage good behavior in youth

New studies by Iowa State University psychology researchers have found further evidence that youth who play prosocial video games — games in which characters help others in nonviolent ways — can increase helpful and decrease hurtful behavior.

Craig Anderson, a Distinguished Professor of psychology; and Douglas Gentile, an associate professor of psychology; have collaborated with ISU psychology graduate students and other researchers on three new studies and a book chapter. One study — led by Iowa State psychology Ph.D. graduate Muniba Saleem — will be published in a future issue of the journal *Aggressive Behavior*, and is the first experimental study on children (ages 9-14) that compares the short-term behavioral effects of playing prosocial, neutral and violent video games.



In the study, 191 children (104 males, 87 females) played either a prosocial (*Chibi Robo*), neutral (*Pure Pinball* or *Super Monkey Ball Deluxe*), or violent (*Crash Twinsanity* and *Ty2*) children's (cartoon characters) video game. Their helpful or hurtful behaviors were then assessed simultaneously through a new "tangram" measure — one that allows the participant to either help or hurt a partner's ability to solve a puzzle project.

Prosocial games increase helpful behavior

The study found that video games with prosocial content increased helpful and decreased hurtful behaviors, while the games with violent content had the opposite effect.

"One of the interesting findings among these 9- to 14-year-olds is that we show both effects [prosocial and violent] in the same study, relative to a neutral game," said Anderson, a leading researcher on the behavioral effects of video games on children. "In this paper, we've focused more on the prosocial aspect, in part because that's newer. But this research shows that you can use the same kind of video game platform [as violent games], and if you have prosocial behaviors modeled in the game, you can increase the prosocial behavior — just as many prior studies have shown that violent games increase antisocial behavior."

Saleem, Anderson and Gentile produced similar results in a new study of 330 college students, which will also be published in a future issue of *Aggressive Behavior*. Briefly playing nonviolent prosocial games reduced students' feelings of hostility and increased their positive effect, whereas playing violent games tended to have the opposite effects.

Their new studies complement three 2009 studies by Gentile, Anderson and other colleagues, who also found that those who played prosocial games exhibited more cooperation and empathy. Those studies are referenced in a chapter they published with Karen Dill, director of the Media Psychology Doctoral Program at Fielding Graduate University in Santa Barbara, Calif., in the "Handbook of Children and Media." (Sage, 2011).

Video games are good teachers

The new research further reinforces how video games can be effective teachers of both good and bad behavior.

“Video games are wonderful teachers and motivators, but content matters,” Anderson said.

“In the children’s study these were all very cartoonish games — they were all rated appropriate for everyone — and yet we still show the violent harm aspect, as well as the prosocial, good aspect of some E-rated games,” he continued. “That just goes to show you that you can’t, as a parent, just rely on the rating because the rating system doesn’t really capture the potential harmfulness or helpfulness of a game.”

Anderson and Gentile collaborated with ISU psychology graduate students Sara Prot and Katelyn McDonald on a third paper to be published in a future issue of the journal *Pediatric Clinics of North America*, titled “Video Games: Good, Bad, or Other?” The authors conclude that the research clearly shows that video games can affect players in multiple ways simultaneously.

They offer the following advice for pediatricians, parents and other caregivers on choosing and using video games:

- **Ask about games and other media use at well-child checkups.** Pediatricians and general practitioners are in the unique role of helping parents to understand that they need to take their children’s media use seriously.
- **Do not rely solely on ratings.** Even games rated E for Everyone often contain depictions of violence. Instead, try playing the game yourself, ask someone to demonstrate it for you, or look for descriptions or video clips of the game on the Internet.
- **Choose well.** Select nonviolent games that have been shown to have positive effects, such as educational games, prosocial games and exergames.
- **Set limits on both the amount and content of the games.** Create clear rules about the amount of time and the kind of content that is allowed.
- **Keep game devices in public space.** When gaming devices are in private space (child’s bedroom), it is very difficult to control either content or time.
- **Stay involved.** Explain to your children why playing violent games for an excessive amount of time may be harmful to them.
- **Spread the word.** Help educate others in your community (parents, youth, public officials).