

The Real Issue with Virtual Violence

July 29, 2016

What is “virtual violence” and how prevalent is it? A new AAP policy statement, entitled “Virtual Violence,”

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Article type: [Pediatrics Blog](#)



What is “virtual violence” and how prevalent is it? A new AAP policy statement, entitled “Virtual Violence,” in this month’s *Pediatrics* ([peds.2016-1298](#)) defines it as any type of violence that is not experienced physically but on platforms, including computers, video games, touch-screen devices, and television. The authors, members of the Council on Communications and Media, make the point that virtual violence can be much more realistic than it has ever been portrayed in the past. Considering children may have difficulty distinguishing fantasy from reality, this may be a problem.

Virtual violence is much more prevalent than ever before. In 1998, one assessment estimated that a typical child would have seen 8,000 murders and 100,000 other acts of violence before middle school^[i] –and that report is almost twenty years old and was limited to exposure on TV alone!

Believe it or not, there are no federal rules, laws, or regulations that govern content and ratings for video games. The media industry polices itself and decides what to market. However, meta-analyses show that there is a significant association between exposure to virtual violence and aggressive behavior, aggressive thoughts, angry feelings, and physiological arousal. In addition, the authors point out that, while people understand that there can be a negative effect when one is exposed to virtual violence, there is also very much a feeling of “that only happens to other people.”

The authors make recommendations for pediatricians and parents about considering both the quantity and the content of the video exposure for children. There are also policy suggestions for violence ratings, not glamorizing or trivializing violence, and for limiting access to young children.

While I have always been aware of the existence of virtual violence, it has not been an issue that I have focused on when I talk to families. When it comes to talking about media, I have focused primarily on the amount of screen time (no more than 2 hours a day) and have not provided any guidance about the content of that screen time. However, reading this policy statement has given me something new to consider.

[i] National Committee on Television Violence. *National Television Violence Study*. Vol 3. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications; 1998

Further Reading

- [The Evolution of Virtual Violence: How Mobile Screens Provide Windows to Real Violence](#)
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