

Should Violent Video Games Be Banned?

Posted on October 28, 2019

Introduction

Video games are a major form of entertainment for children, adolescents, and adults. They range from educational puzzles and sports simulations to fantasy adventures, military games, and realistic crime stories. Some games contain graphic violence, blood, strong language, sexual material, or other content that may be inappropriate for younger players. These games have generated continuing debate among parents, psychologists, educators, policymakers, and members of the video game industry.

Critics argue that violent video games can increase aggressive thoughts, reduce empathy, interfere with schoolwork, disturb sleep, and encourage excessive gaming. They believe that children may be particularly vulnerable because their emotional regulation, judgment, and understanding of consequences are still developing. Some critics therefore support banning violent games, especially for people under 18.

Supporters of video games respond that most players distinguish clearly between fiction and reality. They also note that the scientific evidence linking violent game content to serious real-world violence is weak and disputed. Although some studies report small associations between violent games and aggression, others find no meaningful long-term effects. Research does not establish that playing violent video games causes murder, assault, or other serious crimes.

A total ban would also create legal and practical problems. In the United States, video games are protected forms of expression under the First Amendment. Games can tell stories, explore war and morality, criticize political systems, and present fictional conflicts in ways similar to books and films. In *Brown v. Entertainment Merchants Association* (2011), the United States Supreme Court struck down a California law restricting the sale of violent games to minors because the law could not satisfy the constitutional standard applied to content-based restrictions.

Violent video games should therefore not be completely banned. A more proportionate response is to enforce age ratings, strengthen parental controls, limit excessive gaming, improve media literacy, and restrict children's access to content that is unsuitable for their maturity. This approach recognizes possible risks without treating every player or every violent game as equally harmful.

Defining Violent Video Games

A violent video game is generally understood as a game in which players observe or participate in

aggressive conflict, injury, killing, or destruction. However, the category includes very different forms of content.

Violence in a cartoon racing game is not equivalent to graphic violence in a realistic military or crime game. In some games, violence is imaginary and directed toward monsters or robots. In others, players use realistic weapons against human characters. The context may involve self-defense, historical warfare, criminal activity, fantasy, competition, or moral decision-making.

It is therefore misleading to state that video games are mostly violent or commonly show sexual assault. Many games contain no violence at all, while others contain mild fantasy or cartoon conflict. Sexual violence is a specific content category rather than a normal feature of gaming.

The Entertainment Software Rating Board provides age categories and content descriptions for games released in the United States and Canada. An Everyone rating may include minimal cartoon or fantasy violence. Everyone 10+ may contain additional mild violence, while Teen-rated games may include violence, limited blood, suggestive themes, or stronger language. Mature 17+ games may contain intense violence, gore, sexual material, or strong language. Adults Only games are intended for people aged 18 or older.

These distinctions matter because the potential effect of a game depends partly on its realism, intensity, context, playing time, and the age and characteristics of the player. A policy that treats every depiction of conflict as equally dangerous would be too broad.

Violent Content and Gaming Disorder Are Different Issues

The original argument claims that addiction is an effect common to all video games. This statement is inaccurate. Most people who play games do not develop a clinical disorder, and frequent gaming alone does not establish addiction.

The World Health Organization recognizes gaming disorder in the International Classification of Diseases. It is characterized by impaired control over gaming, increasing priority given to gaming over other activities, and continuation despite significant negative consequences. The behavior must ordinarily continue for at least 12 months and cause substantial impairment in personal, educational, occupational, family, or social functioning. The WHO also emphasizes that gaming disorder affects only a small proportion of people who play video games.

Gaming disorder is not limited to violent games. A person may become excessively involved in a sports, strategy, simulation, or multiplayer game that contains little violence. Conversely, someone may occasionally play a violent game without losing control or experiencing any significant impairment.

The distinction can be summarized as follows:

Issue	Violent game content	Gaming disorder
Primary concern	What the game depicts	How the person plays
Main feature	Aggression, injury, killing, or graphic conflict	Impaired control and continued gaming despite harm
Can occur without the other?	Yes	Yes
Important factors	Age rating, realism, context, maturity	Time, control, priorities, impairment, consequences
Appropriate response	Content guidance and age restrictions	Assessment, behavioral support, and possible treatment

Parents should therefore consider both the nature of the content and the child's pattern of use. A game may be inappropriate because of graphic violence even when the child is not playing excessively. Another game may be age-appropriate but still create problems if it replaces sleep, schoolwork, exercise, or relationships.

The Argument That Violent Games Increase Aggression

Some psychological research suggests that violent video games may produce small increases in aggressive thoughts, feelings, or behavior. One explanation is the General Aggression Model, which proposes that repeated exposure to aggressive material can influence thoughts, emotional arousal, interpretations of social situations, and learned behavioral responses.

Greitemeyer and Mügge (2014) reviewed studies of violent and prosocial games and concluded that violent game play was associated with increased aggression and reduced prosocial outcomes. Their analysis also found that games with cooperative or helpful content could support more positive social behavior.

Prescott et al. (2018) conducted a meta-analysis of longitudinal research and reported a statistically significant association between violent game exposure and later physical aggression. The estimated

relationship was relatively small, but the authors argued that it remained observable after considering some alternative explanations.

The American Psychological Association has similarly concluded that violent game use is associated with aggressive behavior, aggressive thoughts, hostile emotions, reduced empathy, and reduced prosocial behavior. However, its 2020 statement stressed that there was insufficient scientific evidence to conclude that violent video games cause lethal or serious violent behavior.

This distinction is essential. In psychological research, aggression may include hostile language, irritating another participant, scoring higher on an aggression questionnaire, or responding more harshly during an experimental task. These outcomes are not equivalent to armed assault, domestic violence, murder, or mass shootings.

A study showing a small change in aggressive thinking does not prove that a player will commit a violent crime. Serious violence develops through complex combinations of personal, family, social, economic, and situational factors. It cannot responsibly be attributed to one entertainment choice.

Research Challenging the Link With Aggression

Other researchers have concluded that the evidence connecting violent games with real-world aggression is weak, inconsistent, or methodologically limited.

Przybylski and Weinstein (2019) conducted a preregistered study involving more than 1,000 British adolescents and their caregivers. Game violence was classified using official rating information, while caregivers evaluated adolescent behavior. The researchers found no evidence that engagement with violent games was associated with observable aggressive or reduced prosocial behavior.

Drummond et al. (2020) examined longitudinal studies of aggressive game play and youth aggression. They concluded that higher-quality studies produced effects statistically indistinguishable from zero and that the literature did not support a substantial long-term relationship between violent game content and youth aggression.

A 2024 study by Lacko et al. followed 3,010 Czech adolescents over four waves. The researchers distinguished between differences among individuals and changes occurring within the same individual over time. They found no significant evidence that increased violent game exposure caused later increases in aggression or decreases in empathy within participants. Their findings challenged the idea that violent games are a major contributor to adolescent aggression.

These disagreements do not necessarily mean that one side is dishonest. Researchers make different choices concerning samples, definitions, statistical methods, game classifications, time periods, and measures of aggression. Small changes in research design can affect the result.

The disagreement suggests that strong claims should be avoided. It is not scientifically justified to say

that violent games have no possible effect on any person. It is equally unjustified to claim that they generally turn children into violent offenders.

Violent Video Games and Criminal Violence

The strongest public concern is often not minor aggression but serious criminal violence. Available evidence does not demonstrate that violent video game sales produce an increase in violent crime.

Cunningham et al. (2016) used game sales and crime data to examine whether releases of popular violent games were associated with short- or medium-term changes in violent offenses. They found no evidence that violent games increased crime and identified possible decreases during periods of increased game play. The authors suggested that gaming might sometimes replace activities outside the home that carry greater opportunities for criminal behavior.

This finding should not be interpreted as proof that violent games prevent crime. Sales figures do not reveal precisely who played each game, and national or regional crime patterns are shaped by numerous variables. It does show why laboratory findings should not automatically be converted into claims about homicide or assault.

The fact that some violent offenders played video games is also not meaningful by itself. Video games are common, so many nonviolent people and some violent offenders will have played them. Establishing causation requires evidence that exposure contributed independently to the criminal act rather than merely occurring in the person's life.

Blaming violent games after a serious crime can distract attention from stronger risk factors, such as prior threats, domestic abuse, access to weapons, violent peer groups, substance misuse, severe family conflict, or previous criminal behavior.

Effects on School Performance and Daily Life

Concerns about academic performance should focus on excessive or poorly managed gaming rather than violence alone. A student who plays late into the night, skips homework, or withdraws from other activities may experience declining grades regardless of whether the game is violent.

The central mechanism is displacement. Time spent gaming can replace sleep, exercise, reading, schoolwork, in-person relationships, and creative activities. However, moderate gaming can exist alongside successful academic and social functioning.

It is therefore inaccurate to argue that all children who play games will lose their talents or perform poorly at school. The more useful questions are:

- Is the child completing schoolwork?

- Is the child sleeping adequately?
- Can the child stop playing when required?
- Does gaming interfere with family responsibilities?
- Does the child still participate in physical, social, and creative activities?
- Does the child become persistently distressed or aggressive when access is limited?
- Is the content suitable for the child's maturity?

A child who meets responsibilities and plays for a limited period presents a different situation from one who is gaming throughout the night and refusing school.

Potential Benefits of Video Games

An evaluation of violent games should not assume that the medium itself has no value. Games can provide entertainment, social connection, competition, storytelling, problem-solving, visual-spatial practice, persistence, and opportunities for cooperation.

Even games involving conflict may require planning, resource management, teamwork, rapid decision-making, and communication. These benefits do not make graphic content appropriate for every child, but they demonstrate that a game can contain both potentially beneficial and potentially concerning features.

The social context also matters. Playing cooperatively with friends or family members differs from isolated, uncontrolled play. Gitter et al. (2013) found that prosocial context could influence the cognitive and behavioral effects of violent game play. Violent actions presented within a cooperative or morally justified context did not necessarily produce the same responses as violence presented for hostile or antisocial purposes.

Parents should therefore evaluate the whole game rather than reacting to the presence of any conflict. They should consider the story, objectives, rewards, visual realism, online interactions, language, commercial design, and behavior the game encourages.

The Legal Problem With a Ban

A national ban in the United States would face substantial constitutional difficulties. In *Brown v. Entertainment Merchants Association* (2011), the Supreme Court held that video games qualify for First Amendment protection because they communicate ideas and social messages through characters, plot, dialogue, music, and player interaction.

The Court invalidated a California law that prohibited the direct sale or rental of certain violent games to minors. Because the law restricted speech on the basis of content, California had to satisfy strict constitutional scrutiny. The majority concluded that the law was both underinclusive and overinclusive

and that the existing voluntary rating system provided a less restrictive method of assisting parents.

A total ban extending to adults would be even more difficult to justify. Governments generally cannot suppress protected expression merely because it is disturbing or offensive. Violent material appears throughout literature, theater, film, television, mythology, and historical education.

The legal protection of games does not prevent families, schools, retailers, and platforms from using age ratings or access controls. It means that the government must not impose broad censorship without constitutionally sufficient evidence and a narrowly designed law.

Why a Ban Would Be Difficult to Enforce

A worldwide ban would also be practically unrealistic. Games are distributed through physical stores, online platforms, mobile devices, subscriptions, downloads, streaming services, and international marketplaces. A ban in one jurisdiction would not eliminate access through foreign websites, file sharing, private accounts, or unauthorized copies.

Defining violence would create another difficulty. A law would need to distinguish graphic criminal simulation from sports games, fantasy battles, historical warfare, superhero conflict, and cartoon action. An excessively broad definition might affect culturally valuable or educational works.

Enforcement could also push children toward unregulated sources lacking reliable ratings, security protections, moderation, or parental controls. Regulation is more effective when families can obtain accurate information and use legitimate platforms with established safeguards.

Age Ratings as an Alternative

The ESRB rating system offers a more precise response than a blanket prohibition. It allows parents to distinguish mild fantasy violence from realistic gore and to identify additional features such as strong language, sexual content, gambling, or online interaction.

Retail compliance has historically been stronger for video games than for several other entertainment categories. In a 2013 Federal Trade Commission mystery-shopping exercise, only 13 percent of underage shoppers succeeded in buying an M-rated game, meaning that most were refused.

Digital access creates new challenges because children may use an adult's account or make purchases without supervision. Parents should therefore apply platform controls governing purchases, age restrictions, communication, spending, and playing time.

Ratings are advisory tools rather than substitutes for judgment. Two children of the same age may differ in emotional maturity, sensitivity, and ability to understand fictional content. Parents should read content descriptions and, where possible, observe or play the game before making a decision.

Parental Involvement and Media Literacy

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that families develop media plans based on each child's health, educational, and entertainment needs. It also recommends using ratings and parental controls, participating in children's media use, and discussing the content they encounter.

Co-playing can be particularly useful. A parent who observes a game can identify frightening or inappropriate material, understand why the child enjoys it, and discuss the difference between fictional rewards and real-world consequences.

Media literacy teaches children to examine how games portray violence. Useful questions include:

- Does the game show realistic consequences of injury?
- Is violence presented as the only way to solve conflict?
- Are innocent characters harmed?
- Does the game reward cruelty?
- What values does the story communicate?
- How does fictional violence differ from real suffering?
- Are other players using abusive or hateful language?

These conversations are more educational than simply telling a child that games are bad. They help young people evaluate entertainment critically and apply the same reasoning to films, social media, and other digital content.

A Proportionate Policy Approach

A balanced policy should focus on actual risks rather than moral panic. The following framework is more defensible than a complete ban:

Concern	Proportionate response
Graphic content accessed by young children	Apply age ratings, purchase controls, and parental approval
Excessive playing time	Establish schedules, device-free periods, and bedtime limits
Declining school performance	Connect gaming privileges to responsibilities and investigate underlying difficulties

Concern	Proportionate response
Online harassment or unsafe contact	Restrict communication settings, report abuse, and supervise online play
Inability to control gaming	Seek assessment for gaming disorder or related mental health concerns
Aggressive reactions after play	Examine game content, sleep, stress, family conflict, and individual vulnerabilities
Misleading marketing to children	Strengthen platform and industry advertising standards
Uncertainty about game content	Provide detailed rating summaries and accessible parental information

Governments can support independent research, consumer information, digital safety, privacy protection, and truthful advertising. The gaming industry should provide accessible controls and avoid deliberately marketing adult-rated content to young children. Schools can teach digital citizenship, while healthcare professionals can screen for problematic gaming when functioning is impaired.

Should Games Be Banned for Everyone Under 18?

A universal ban for everyone below 18 would be too broad. The category of minors includes young children and 17-year-olds, who differ substantially in maturity and understanding.

The ESRB system already recognizes these differences. Teen-rated games are generally intended for players aged 13 or older, while Mature games are generally intended for those aged 17 or older. A rule prohibiting all violent content until adulthood would treat mild fantasy combat and graphic realistic killing as though they were identical.

However, parents should generally prevent young children from accessing graphic, realistic, or adult-oriented violence. Younger children may have more difficulty placing frightening content in context and may imitate behavior without fully understanding its consequences.

For adolescents, decisions can be based on age, maturity, behavioral history, game content, playing environment, and ability to maintain balance. Restrictions may be appropriate for a teenager experiencing sleep loss, emotional dysregulation, declining grades, or compulsive use even when another teenager can play the same game without those problems.

Overall Evaluation

Argument for a ban	Evaluation
Violent games may increase aggression	Some studies find small effects, but results are disputed and do not establish serious criminal violence
Games are addictive	A small proportion of players develop gaming disorder; addiction is not an effect of every game
Children may neglect school and talents	Excessive gaming can displace important activities, but moderate use does not inevitably cause failure
Violent content may be inappropriate	Strong justification for age controls, not necessarily for a total ban
Parents cannot control access	Digital access is challenging, but platform controls, ratings, and supervision remain available
Banning games would reduce crime	Current research does not provide convincing evidence for this conclusion
Games have no meaningful value	Games can offer storytelling, social interaction, strategy, cooperation, and entertainment
All minors require the same restriction	Children and adolescents differ significantly in age, maturity, and circumstances

The evidence supports caution, particularly for young children and individuals already experiencing behavioral or emotional problems. It does not support the claim that all violent games produce the same effects or that all players become addicted or violent.

Conclusion

Violent video games should not be completely banned in the United States or throughout the world. Such a policy would be scientifically difficult to justify, constitutionally problematic in the United States, and nearly impossible to enforce across global digital platforms.

Research on violent games and aggression remains contested. Some studies identify small associations with aggressive thoughts or behavior, while other high-quality longitudinal and preregistered studies find no meaningful effect. Most importantly, the evidence does not demonstrate that violent video games cause murder, assault, or other serious crimes.

Concerns about problematic gaming are legitimate, but violent content and gaming disorder are separate issues. Gaming disorder involves impaired control, increased priority given to gaming, and continued play despite substantial harm. It affects only a minority of players and can develop around violent or nonviolent games.

The appropriate response is targeted protection rather than total censorship. Young children should be shielded from graphic and realistic violence. Parents should use age ratings, content descriptions, purchase restrictions, communication controls, and time limits. They should also observe games, speak with their children about fictional violence, and monitor sleep, education, physical activity, and relationships.

Retailers and digital platforms should make age information visible and provide effective tools for controlling purchases and online communication. Researchers should continue using transparent, preregistered, and longitudinal methods to determine whether particular forms of game content affect particular groups of players.

A total ban assumes that every violent game is equally harmful and that every child responds in the same way. The evidence does not support either assumption. A more responsible policy respects freedom of expression while giving families the information and tools required to make age-appropriate decisions.

References

American Academy of Pediatrics. (2021). *Media and children*.

American Psychological Association. (2020). *Resolution on violent video games*.

Brown v. Entertainment Merchants Association, 564 U.S. 786 (2011).

Cunningham, S., Engelstätter, B., & Ward, M. R. (2016). Violent video games and violent crime. *Southern Economic Journal*, 82(4), 1247–1265. <https://doi.org/10.1002/soej.12139>

Drummond, A., Sauer, J. D., & Ferguson, C. J. (2020). Do longitudinal studies support long-term relationships between aggressive game play and youth aggressive behaviour? A meta-analytic examination. *Royal Society Open Science*, 7(7), Article 200373. <https://doi.org/10.1098/rsos.200373>

Entertainment Software Rating Board. (n.d.). *Ratings guide*.

Gitter, S. A., Ewell, P. J., Guadagno, R. E., Stillman, T. F., & Baumeister, R. F. (2013). Virtually justifiable homicide: The effects of prosocial contexts on the link between violent video games, aggression, and prosocial and hostile cognition. *Aggressive Behavior*, 39(5), 346–354.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/ab.21487>

Greitemeyer, T., & Mügge, D. O. (2014). Video games do affect social outcomes: A meta-analytic review of the effects of violent and prosocial video game play. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 40(5), 578–589. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167213520459>

Lacko, D., Machackova, H., & Smahel, D. (2024). Does violence in video games impact aggression and empathy? A longitudinal study of Czech adolescents to differentiate within- and between-person effects. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 159, Article 108341.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2024.108341>

Prescott, A. T., Sargent, J. D., & Hull, J. G. (2018). Metaanalysis of the relationship between violent video game play and physical aggression over time. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 115(40), 9882–9888. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1611617114>

Przybylski, A. K., & Weinstein, N. (2019). Violent video game engagement is not associated with adolescents' aggressive behaviour: Evidence from a registered report. *Royal Society Open Science*, 6(2), Article 171474. <https://doi.org/10.1098/rsos.171474>

World Health Organization. (n.d.). *Gaming disorder*.