

# Video Games - Do they make kids violent?

Help your child build healthy video game habits

Kids, teens, and adults all like video games. We talk about them at school and at the dinner table. But you may wonder if video games can change the way your child acts. You may worry most about games that have violence or fighting.

Not all research has been able to show a link between gaming and violence or aggression. A new study saw a link between violent video games and *some* players becoming more violent over time. Nicholas J. Westers, Psy.D., ABPP, clinical psychologist at Children's Health<sup>SM</sup>, explains that it isn't the same for everyone.

## Why can video games cause kids to act violently?

It is normal for your child to relate with people or characters they see in media - TV, movies or online who are like them. This makes it easier for them to act and think like them. The same may happen with video games.

## How can I help my child have healthy gaming habits?

"The strongest protector against any problematic behaviors or mental health issues is a healthy relationship with parents," Dr. Westers states. "Children feel more comfortable speaking with parents when they have a strong connection and parents are more likely to recognize and empathize with children."

Dr. Westers offers 2 simple ways to help make healthy habits when playing video games:

### 1. Make rules about video game use

"Video games should be a privilege, not a right," Dr. Westers says. "Parents need to establish clear and consistent rules around playing games."

Those rules should include:

- When they can play video games
- How long they can play
- What they must do before playing video games, like homework or chores
- How to act and be a good sport during play, and how to act when they win or lose

It may be hard to set rules for gaming when it's your child's favorite thing to do. But these rules keep them from playing too long. When they play too long, they may not get enough sleep. They may not eat healthy food. And they may feel unhappy or sad (depressed).

"It's unlikely a child or teenager will set limits for themselves when engaging in a fun activity, especially when it's one they may use as an escape," Dr. Westers says. The excitement they feel in reaching a high score makes them want to keep playing so children "need their parents' help to set limits and learn self-control."

"It's best to establish rules sooner rather than later," Dr. Westers adds. "It's hard to put limits on video games after they've started playing. Parents should also keep in mind the rules apply to them as well, to set an example for their children."

## **2. Play with your child or teen and talk about how it makes them feel**

"Parental involvement is key across the board when it comes to relationships with children," Dr. Westers says. "That's just as true with video games as it is for anything else. When parents are present and involved, it's easier to talk with children about what they see, and model good behavior. Plus, having a shared interest, like video games, is a great way to bond with your kids."

You can find video games to play together or watch your child play. Dr. Westers tells parents to talk with their child about what is happening in the game and remind the child it is not real.

"Show empathy," he says. "Talk to your child about how it makes you feel when your character gets hurt or hurts someone else and compare it to how you would feel in the real world. Remind your child about your values as a family and say clearly what type of behavior is absolutely off limits in real-life."

Treat video games as you would any TV shows or movies. Talk about what is happening and what lessons they might have learned. Talk about how you both feel when you win or lose.

"Video games elicit a lot of emotions – from excitement to frustration," Dr. Westers says. "Talk about good sportsmanship and how you cope with those feelings – whether that's not being a sore winner or loser or knowing your limits and when it's time to turn off the game and walk away when you're getting too frustrated."

Talk with your children about how to control their feelings while playing, and how these feelings may affect how they act when not playing. When you tell them you are worried, they may be more willing to listen

## **What warning signs should I look for?**

You know your children best. Dr. Westers says you should talk with your child if you are worried about their gaming.

Look for these signs:

- Acting with more aggression or violently.
- Being alone more than normal
- Worse grades
- Being irritable or angry often
- Having a hard time sleeping
- Taking an interest in weapons like those in the game

All of these things may be due to gaming but could also be due to other things in their life. "In isolation of each other, these signals can mean a lot of different things," Dr. Westers says.

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“But they shouldn’t be brushed off as typical adolescent behavior if they co-occur. Try to talk with your child to see if you can get to the bottom of what’s bothering him or her. And if you are still concerned, connect with your child’s doctor or a mental health specialist.”

You can also watch for **early signs of video game addiction** if you are worried your child is playing too often and it is changing the way they act.