

**Testimony of
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**“Violent and Explicit Video Games: Informing Parents
and Protecting Children”**

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Video games have become a favorite activity for American children and youth. 96% of boys and 78% of girls play video games on a regular basis with girls playing an average of five hours per week and boys thirteen.¹ While the majority of games produced are appropriate for young players, a growing number of titles feature extreme violence and gore as well as sexual content. While they represent only a fraction of games on the market these ultra-violent games are particularly popular with pre-teen and teenage boys. 78% of boys report that M-rated games are among their top five favorites and 40% name an M-rated game as their favorite. 77% of boys under seventeen own an M-rated game.²

Over the past ten years the National Institute on Media and the Family has tracked and monitored the growth of the video game industry. Last fall we released our tenth Video and Computer Game Report Card as well as a ten year retrospective on the industry. It is clear that the games have become more violent, more sexually explicit and more profane. Ratings creep and the reluctance of the industry sponsored ESRB to use the AO rating (Adults Only) mean that these games are available to more and more children and youth.

A growing body of research shows that games influence young players. While the industry touts the studies that show the positive effects, they discredit those that demonstrate any harm. The psychological and behavioral studies show that violent video games increase real world aggression in kids.³ The newest frontier in research is brain based and point to a number of important factors related to the impact of video game violence on youth.

1. Experiences that happen during a young brain's growth spurts have a greater impact than at any other time.
2. Contrary to earlier beliefs, the teenage brain is still under construction with the growth spurts involving impulse control, anger management, and the control of sexual urges undergoing major development.⁴
3. The discovery of "mirror cells" explains why young players are likely to imitate the behaviors they rehearse on the screens.⁵
4. Brain research shows that the circuits related to aggression activate while playing violent video games while those responsible for impulse control de-activate.⁶

The combination of psychological and brain based research provide a growing rationale for the need to prevent young gamers from playing very violent and sexually explicit games. The urgency grows because of the following factors.

1. Game technology continues to advance making the games more realistic and engaging. The goal of the industry is virtual reality.
2. Some game producers seem intent on pushing the boundaries of violence. Take Two Entertainment has the games *Bully* and *Grand Theft Auto 4* in the production pipeline.
3. Sexual content will increase. The game *Naughty America*, a sex simulation game, will be released this summer. Last week video game producers met with leaders from the sex entertainment industry. A veteran game designer was quoted as saying, "Don't tell me I have to abide by this little Disney-esque palette. I may

never even use the hard-core end of the palette in any game I make. But don't tell me I can't do that."

4. The future of games is in the on-line environment making it more difficult to control sale and access.

Therefore, it is more urgent than ever to inform and educate parents to become MediaWise®. Education is going to be more effective than legislation prohibiting the sale of games for two reasons:

- All legislative efforts have been invalidated by the judicial system as violations of first amendment rights. The exception to this may be the sexually explicit games which may be covered under laws prohibiting the sale of sexually explicit material to minors.
- As game sales migrate to an on-line environment access will be easier and retail sales will be less important.

Therefore I would recommend that policy leaders support efforts to educate parents. The following steps would be useful.

1. Develop a universal rating system for all visual media. The current alphabet soup of ratings is confusing to parents and is the reason that so many parents still do not know understand the ESRB ratings.
2. Instruct the industry to be clearer about the potential harm for youth. Currently the industry sends a double message. On the one hand, they tell parents to pay attention to ratings and at the same time they deny that games can have any

- harmful effects. The tobacco industry, for example, has to label their products as potentially harmful to users.
3. Instruct the game industry and retailers to accelerate their efforts to keep M-rated games out of the hands of minors.
 4. Instruct on-line game producers and distributors to have effective age verification policies.
 5. The current distinction between M-rated and AO-rated (adults only) games is confusing and almost meaningless since so few games ever receive the AO rating. This should be revised.
 6. Independent validity and reliability evaluations of the ESRB rating system should be done and reported to policy makers.
 7. Support the promotion and distribution of independent ratings.
 8. Support public education efforts to educate parents, youth professionals, communities and organizations serving youth. Programs like our MediaWise® program strive to do exactly that. Our website at mediawise.org provides independent ratings, research findings, information, and education resources for parents.

¹ Gentile, D.A., Paul Lynch, Jennifer Ruh Linder, & David Walsh. "The effects of violent video game habits on adolescent hostility, aggressive behaviors, and school performance. *Journal of Adolescence* 27 (2004) 5-22.

² National Institute on Media and the Family. "Eight Annual Video and Computer Game Report Card" December 8, 2003.

³ Anderson, C.A. & Brad Bushman, (2001) Effects of Violent Video Games on Aggressive Behavior, Aggressive Cognition, Aggressive Affect, Physiological Arousal, and Prosocial Behavior: A Meta-analytic Review of the Scientific Literature. *Psychological Science*, 12 (2001) 353-359.

⁴ Walsh, DA. *Why Do They Act That Way? A Survival Guide to the Adolescent Brain for You and Your Teen*. New York: Free Press, 2004.

⁵ Gallese, V. "The Roots of Empathy: The Shared Manifold Hypothesis and the Neural Basis of Intersubjectivity. *Psychopathology* 36 (2003) 171-180.

⁶ Philips, H. "Violent video games alter brain's response to violence," <http://www.newscientist.com/article.ns?id=dn8449> (Accessed June 9, 2006)