



Media violence can have negative impact on the developing brain

By Melanie Dallas, LPC

Last August I was invited to testify at the Georgia General Assembly's House Study Committee on School Security. As a licensed professional counselor that spent many years working with children and adolescents, one of the topics I covered in my testimony was the impact of violent visual media on youth.

Although the connection between violent media and violent acts has been controversial, a growing body of research provides evidence of the negative impact violent visual media – including video games, movies and the internet – can have on youth.

Over the past 15 years, numerous studies have helped us have a much better understanding of brain development in young people, and the impact life events can have. It's an often complex but very important connection.

Although a majority of brain development occurs in the first three years of life, the brain continues to grow, develop and change until a person is almost 30. A lot can happen in that much time, and the developing brain is extremely sensitive to stress.

Dr. Bruce Perry, a physician who has done extensive research on youth and violence, found that children's brains develop in a use-dependent fashion. In other words, the events to which youth are exposed – good and bad – will impact how their brains develop.

For example, a child who is exposed to multiple languages or who learns to play an instrument develops neural pathways that can accelerate language or musical abilities throughout life. Likewise, exposure to violence, in the home or through media such as video games and movies, can also hard-wire the brain in a way that alters emotional, behavioral and cognitive functioning.

A specific concern in this regard are first-person violent video games. These games use technology very similar to what law enforcement and military personnel use for combat and SWAT training. During critical times of youth brain development, such games allow our youth to practice lethal behaviors, de-sensitizing the brain to violence and potentially impacting the development of values such as care and concern for others.

In July, 2000, at a bipartisan conference on Capitol Hill, a group of medical and psychiatric authorities that included the American Medical Association, American Psychological Association, American Academy of Pediatrics and American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry issued a joint statement about the impact of violent media on youth:

“Viewing entertainment violence can lead to increases in aggressive attitudes, values and behavior, particularly in children. Its effects are measurable and long-lasting. Moreover, prolonged viewing of media violence can lead to emotional desensitization toward violence in real life.”

The group also noted that preliminary studies indicate the negative impact of video games may be significantly more severe than television, movies or music. Now, almost 20 years later, studies have found that this is indeed the case – and each of these organizations have such information available on their websites.

So what can we do to help our children? First, parents, make sure that you know exactly what games your children are playing and monitor their exposure to violent visual media. Watch their video games to see what violent visual content is there. If you haven't done this, I think you will be surprised, if not shocked. You can limit the amount of time your children play video games, or prohibit your children from playing violent video games at all.

If you are a youth and are concerned for safety in your community and school, know the impact that violent visual media has. Get a group of friends or student council leaders and organize a no media challenge. You can find more information here: <http://www.takethechallengenow.net>.

Of course, this is a complex issue and there are likely many more actions we can take. But awareness is critical. As we strive to make sure our children's brains develop to learn reading, writing and critical thinking, we must also make sure they are not learning violence and aggression.