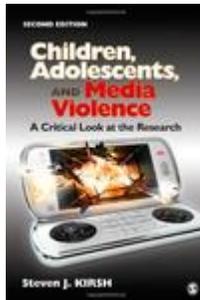


## Myths and Facts About Youth and Violent Media

A review of



### **Children, Adolescents, and Media Violence: A Critical Look at the Research (2nd ed.)**

by Steven J. Kirsh

Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2012. 408 pp. ISBN 978-1-4129-9643-3 (hardcover); ISBN 978-1-4129-9642-6 (paperback). \$100.00, hardcover; \$56.00, paperback



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Today's children and adolescents consume a heavy dose of media violence. Youths spend an average of over seven and a half hours a day with entertainment media, many of which have violent content (Funk, Baldacci, Pasold, & Baumgardner, 2004; Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010). Thus, understanding media violence effects is an important goal for psychologists, parents, teachers, policy makers, and society in general.

However, the media violence literature is not always easily accessible and understandable. News reports of media violence research are often misleading, revealing a disturbing gap between what is reported and the actual state of scientific findings (Bushman & Anderson, 2001). Unfortunately, the scientific community has not been entirely successful in communicating research findings to the general public.

Part of the problem lies in journalism's obsession with getting both sides of the story, even when only one side is backed by strong scientific evidence. Another part is that the video game industry has deep pockets and many devotees who are sophisticated in persuasion in this age of electronic "news" and misinformation. Still another is people's general fear of government censorship, a fear that appears to drive a need to believe that if some harmful effects are acknowledged, then violent media will be banned.

Two additional, related aspects of the failure of media effects researchers to effectively communicate what has been known for decades are that (a) violent media effects are inherently complex and (b) most scientific summaries of the vast research literature are difficult for the educated layperson to comprehend (e.g., Anderson et al., 2010). There is not much to be done about the former problem. But Steven Kirsh's book *Children, Adolescents, and Media Violence: A Critical Look at the Research* goes a long way toward solving the latter.

This book provides an excellent overview of research concerning media violence effects. Findings are presented from a wide array of topics within media psychology, including theoretical frameworks, basic scientific methodology, key historical issues, current findings on effects of a variety of different media types, developmental differences in media violence effects, the magnitude of media violence effects, and implications of research findings on public policy.

Kirsh strikes a good balance between breadth and depth, presenting a concise yet holistic review of the media violence literature. The book does a great job of integrating diverse findings and providing a deeper understanding of processes underlying media violence effects that can benefit both psychologists and a general audience.

Special attention is devoted to how media violence effects can be viewed from a developmental perspective, a topic that has been extensively discussed by media violence researchers but has been much less extensively researched (Anderson, Gentile, & Buckley, 2007). Although researchers have theorized that effects of media violence on children are likely to differ depending on the developmental stage of the child, the majority of studies in this field have focused on overall effects of media violence rather than on age differences (e.g., Bushman & Huesmann, 2012). In the new edition of *Children, Adolescents, and Media Violence*, Kirsh effectively links media violence research to relevant theoretical perspectives on child development, critically evaluates findings as they relate to development, and points to key areas that require future research.

Another strong point is that the book couples key findings from media psychology with an overview of relevant research methods. Throughout the book, basic scientific methodology and statistics are explained in an accessible way, enabling nonpsychologists to critically evaluate studies described in the text. This feature might be most attractive to teachers who want to use this book as course material or to laypersons who wish to become informed consumers of psychological research.

It seems that some of the public confusion concerning media violence effects stems from misunderstanding scientific reasoning and methodology (Huesmann & Taylor, 2003). For example, critics who question the fact that media violence has effects on viewers sometimes do so because they miscomprehend probabilistic causality, claiming that “lots of people consume media violence, but they do not all become mass murderers.” It is hoped that works such as this book will help increase understanding of research methods by the general public and thereby narrow the gap between scientific facts and public knowledge.

There are a few points in the book with which we disagree, but these are relatively minor. For example, Chapter 3, “Theories of Aggression” tries to accomplish too much in too little space. This leads to unnecessarily narrow interpretations of modern theories, interpretations that understate their utility and validity and that overstate weaknesses. The section on comedic cartoon violence could give the reader the impression that such media have no effect on aggression, but the research suggests otherwise. The chapters on TV, movie, and video game violence do a reasonable job of explaining the difficulties of interpreting various types of research, but they underestimate the value of existing longitudinal studies in ruling out common alternative explanations and potential moderator effects, and do not sufficiently distinguish between short-term effects and long-term effects.

Furthermore, some of the “methods” issues Kirsh raises, such as the need to control for frustration during video game play, have in fact been controlled in many studies, in contradiction to what Kirsh says (p. 243). In many experimental studies, violent and nonviolent games have been selected to be equal on frustration (and difficulty, fun, etc.), and in other studies such factors have been controlled statistically. The significant increases in aggressive behavior and cognition have been found in such well-controlled experimental studies.

Finally, there are a few factual misstatements (surprisingly few, given the huge scope of material covered). For example, the Anderson et al. (2007) experimental study had 9- to 12-year-olds play *children’s* games, not T-rated games (as stated on page 239) and found that violent children’s games can increase short-term aggression. The study also found that older adolescents (17+) were similarly affected by children’s and teen-rated violent games. Another example is the statement (p. 247) that “by law, M-rated video games can only be sold to youth 17 years of age or older.” There is no law in the United States restricting sales of M or even “Adults Only” games to children. The rating system is a “voluntary” one created and controlled by the video game industry (as is true of music, TV, and movie rating systems).

In conclusion, Kirsh’s new book accomplishes the daunting task of presenting the broad media violence literature in a scientifically precise manner while also being easily readable and enjoyable. This book should be of interest to media effects researchers, psychologists, psychology students, parents, teachers, policy makers, and all others who wish to extend their knowledge of media violence effects. It could be used as a textbook in undergraduate classes in psychology or in communication studies. To media effects

researchers and other experts, it provides a comprehensive and current overview of research findings in this field as well as avenues for future research.

To those who are new to the topic of media psychology, this book can give a firm basis for understanding violent media effects, coupled with an introduction to relevant theory and scientific methodology. Readers are sure to enjoy Kirsh's good sense of humor and engaging writing style. Last but not least, it is hoped that through increasing understanding of research in this field among parents, educators, and other caregivers, this work might help prevent and reduce some of the effects of negative media violence on children and teens.

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