

Study: Cutting TV, video game use can make kids less aggressive

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CHICAGO (AP) -- A school-based program that discourages television and video game use makes grade-school children less aggressive, a Stanford University study suggests. While previous research has linked exposure to media violence with increased aggression, few potential solutions have been evaluated, the authors said.

Their findings indicate "that the effects of televised violence in kids are really reversible," said Dr. Thomas Robinson, the lead author and an assistant professor of pediatrics. The study, published in the January edition of the Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine, involved third- and fourth-grade children at two comparable public elementary schools in San Jose, Calif.

At one school, 120 participants received no intervention and served as a control group. At the other, 105 children received 18 lessons, 30 to 50 minutes long, over six months on reducing the use of television, videotapes and video games. Researchers trained regular classroom teachers, who led the program.

Children initially reported the amount of TV, videos and video games they watched. They were challenged to abstain for 10 days, and then to watch no more than seven hours a week. Households involved had their televisions hooked up to a device that could prevent the set from being turned on if the child exceeded a limit that parents were encouraged to establish.

At the outset, the youngsters reported an average of about 15 & 1/2 hours of television viewing weekly, five hours of viewing videotapes and three hours of playing video games. That fell by about one-third by the end of the course, to an average of about nine hours of television viewing, 3 1/2 hours of videotapes and 1 1/2 hours of video games. Content of the programs and games kids watched was not assessed, though the authors assumed some were violent.

Children were asked to rate their classmates' aggressiveness at the beginning of the study, in September 1996, and at the end, the following April, identifying such things as who started fights or often said "Give me that!" Peer reports of aggression were similar at the two schools at the outset. By the study's end, there were about 25 percent fewer such reports among participants at the intervention school compared with the control group, Robinson said.

Researchers also measured changes in verbal and physical aggression by regularly observing the playground behavior of subgroups of about 50 participants at each school. At the end of the study, there were fewer observed incidents in the intervention group compared with the control group, he said.

The authors acknowledge limitations of their study, including that they only looked at two schools and didn't assess whether there was any violence in what kids watched. But Dr. Katherine Kaufer Christoffel, a children's violence expert not involved in the study, said the findings are in line with research suggesting overexposure to even nonviolent media can make kids more aggressive.

That theory is plausible because children who watch lots of TV or video games may spend less time interacting with others and may thus have fewer social skills, said Christoffel, a professor of pediatrics and preventive medicine at Northwestern University. She praised the study for bolstering "the notion that there is a relationship between media exposure and childhood behavior and that it is modifiable." However, she questioned whether the decreases noted in the study are lasting. Robinson said he's testing the program's effects in a longer and larger study, of about 900 students at 12 schools, that may answer whether it results in long-term reductions in aggression.