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# VIDEO GAMES AND VIOLENCE: THE ONSLAUGHT ON YOUNG MINDS

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Video games have long been popular among people of all ages. The Covid-19 pandemic led to a significant surge in the use of digital technology globally including online gaming for children and adolescents.<sup>1</sup> Video games apart from being an enjoyable way to pass time, are also a way for people to link up with one another. Particularly, during the Pandemic, they offered distinctive mood-boosting effects by distracting from worries and stress, and easing isolation by encouraging connectivity between players. While there is no doubt that some games have educational content and play a positive role in promoting learning, motor, and coordination skills, concerns have been raised about the potential negative impacts of this recreational activity.<sup>2</sup>

Children and adolescents who spend excessive time playing games have poor social skills and spend less time socializing with their loved ones. Video games may also cause harm by decreasing sleep time, impairing attention, concentration, and school performance, causing less time to engage in physical activities and other hobbies, and promoting aggressive thoughts and behaviours.<sup>3</sup>

The degree to which video game content influences aggression and violence continues to be debated in scientific literature. The lack of definitive answers means the debate rages on. The speculations about the possible links to popular video game “Player Unknown’s Battlegrounds (PUBG)” with cases of a tragic familicide by a teenager<sup>4</sup> as well as a few suicide incidents<sup>5</sup> in Pakistan have brought this question back into the spotlight: Do violent video games increase the probability of violent behavior?

Violent video games portray intentional attempts by individuals to inflict destruction on others. Many games emphasize negative themes like obscene & foul language, and lack of respect for others in authority in addition to killing people and animals. Due to the interactive nature of video games compared to other media, they may be particularly harmful.<sup>6</sup> Based on social

learning theory, repeated exposure to violent games may cause players to become numb to violence and become more confrontational with an increased likelihood of mimicking the violence while reducing empathy.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, some argue that desensitization to violence in general due to seeing violence is enhanced because of the interactive nature of games.<sup>8</sup>

It is pertinent to highlight though, that among a huge population of children and adolescents who play video games, only a very small proportion ever turns to violence in actual life. Those who are most at risk for exhibiting violent behaviors tend to have many other risk factors like violence in the family, parenting styles, substance abuse, etc., which make such behavior more likely.<sup>9</sup> Certain personality traits like being emotionally unstable, prone to rage and hostility, depression, and impulsivity may also contribute to the risk of violent behavior associated with games along with the relevant conditioning environment in-home or school.<sup>10</sup> Video games activate similar reward system in the brain as gambling and drugs of abuse, thus making children with psychiatric illnesses specifically vulnerable to the negative impact of video games. Some studies though have disputed the association between violent video games and actual violence.<sup>11</sup>

World Health Organization 2019, officially recognized “gaming” as a mental health disorder where gaming becomes the only activity in a person's life and is done to the neglect everything else. Some danger signals for gaming disorder include an obsession with gaming, difficulty in reducing time spent in playing games, displaying withdrawal symptoms, and lying about the time duration they engage in gaming.<sup>12</sup> The WHO recognition, although crucial, does little to help parents, teachers, and professionals in identifying behavior patterns and other risk factors in children and adolescents who are likely to fall prey to this addictive behavior. The American Psychological Association (APA) has also reaffirmed its stance that violent video games could increase aggression.<sup>13</sup>

Some systematic reviews have also shed light on this risk and highlighted protective factors linked to gaming.<sup>14</sup> One of the most frequently cited factors especially for pre-teens is the quality of parenting and parent-child interaction, where positive parenting is less likely to lead to addictive gaming.<sup>14</sup> Psychopathology like Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), social phobia, depression, and autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are predictive of internet addiction.<sup>9</sup> However, current international psychiatric classification systems, ICD-11 and DSM-5 do not yet include this category. However, it is very likely to be a part of future versions.

### What can be done?

As professionals, we deal with questions like 'what is healthy screen-time or 'Are online games bad?' for which there is no straightforward answer. However, the American Academy of Pediatrics and the World Health Organization have recommended certain limits to screentime till five years of age. For older children, although the time is not defined, parents should ensure that children have enough time daily for necessary activities including 8 to 12 hours of sleep, 1 hour of vigorous physical activity, schoolwork, and social-time with family and friends. The time remaining can be used for internet and gaming-related activities but here again, the content needs to be monitored for its age and tone-appropriateness. There is also an emergent need for educating children and adolescents about online citizenship and treating their online presence as similar to being in a physical public place but with more specific risks.<sup>15</sup>

Strategies to improve emotional awareness and regulation will help in keeping aggressive outbursts and violence at bay as long as it is identified in time. Mass-media campaigns about screen use as well as targeted workshops for parents and teachers are the need of the hour.

In a nutshell, video games are no doubt a wonderful tool for entertainment and learning, but younger minds still need our support and guidance to navigate their way safely through this new, slightly scary 'digital world.

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