Does Game Violence Make Teens Aggressive?
Kristin Kalning, MSNBC, 2006

In a recent research study, adolescents played two different types of video games for 30 minutes. Teens that played the violent game (right) showed increased activity in the amygdala, which is involved in emotional arousal.

Can video games make kids more violent? A new study employing state-of-the-art brain-scanning technology says that the answer may be yes.

Researchers at the Indiana University School of Medicine say that brain scans of kids who played a violent video game showed an increase in emotional arousal – and a corresponding decrease of activity in brain areas involved in self-control, inhibition and attention.

Does this mean that your teenager will feel an uncontrollable urge to go on a shooting rampage after playing “Call of Duty?”

Notes on my thoughts, reactions, and questions as I read:
Vince Mathews, the principal investigator on the study, hesitates to make that leap. But he says he does think that the study should encourage parents to look more closely at the types of games their kids are playing.

“Based on our results, I think parents should be aware of the relationship between violent video-game playing and brain function.”

Mathews and his colleagues chose two action games to include in their research — one violent the other not.

The first game was the high-octane but non-violent racing game “Need for Speed: Underground.” The other was the ultra-violent first-person shooter “Medal of Honor: Frontline.”

The team divided a group of 44 adolescents into two groups, and randomly assigned the kids to play one of the two games. Immediately after the play sessions, the children were given MRIs of their brains.

The scans showed a negative effect on the brains of the teens who played “Medal of Honor” for 30 minutes. That same effect was not present in the kids who played “Need for Speed.”

The only difference? Violent content.

What’s not clear is whether the activity picked up by the MRIs indicates a lingering — or worse, permanent — effect on the kids’ brains.

And it’s also not known what effect longer play times might have. The scope of this study was 30 minutes of play, and one brain scan per kid, although further research is in the works.

OK. But what about violent TV shows? Or violent films? Has anyone ever done a brain scan of kids that have just watched a violent movie?

Someone has. John P. Murray, a psychology professor at Kansas State University, conducted a very similar experiment, employing the same technology used in Mathews’ study. His findings are similar.

Kids in his study experienced increased emotional arousal when watching short clips from the boxing movie “Rocky IV.”

So, why is everyone picking on video games? Probably because there’s a much smaller body of research on video games. They just haven’t been around as long as TV and movies, so the potential effects on children are a bigger unknown. That’s a scary thing for a parent.

Larry Ley, the director and coordinator of research for the Center for Successful Parenting, which funded Mathews’ study, says the purpose of the research was to help parents make informed decisions.

“There’s enough data that clearly indicates that [game violence] is a problem,” he
says. “And it’s not just a problem for kids with behavior disorders.”

But not everyone is convinced that this latest research adds much to the debate—particularly the game development community. One such naysayer is Doug Lowenstein, president of the Entertainment Software Association.

“We've seen other studies in this field that have made dramatic claims but turn out to be less persuasive when objectively analyzed.”

The ESA has a whole section of its Web site dedicated to the topic of video game violence, which would suggest that they get asked about it—a lot.

And they’ve got plenty of answers at the ready for the critics who want to lay school shootings or teen aggression at the feet of the game industry. Several studies cited by the ESA point to games’ potential benefits for developing decision-making skills or bettering reaction times.

Ley, however, argues such studies aren’t credible because they were produced by “hired guns” funded by the multi-billion-dollar game industry.

“We’re not trying to sell [parents] anything,” he says. “We don’t have a product. The video game industry does.”

Increasingly parents are more accepting of video game violence, chalki it up to being a part of growing up.

“I was dead-set against violent video games,” says Kelley Windfield, a Sammamish, Wa.-based mother of two. “But my husband told me I had to start loosening up.”

Laura Best, a mother of three from Clovis, Calif., says she looks for age-appropriate games for her 14-year-old son, Kyle. And although he doesn’t play a lot of games, he does tend to gravitate towards shooters like “Medal of Honor.” But she isn’t concerned that Kyle will become aggressive as a result.

“That’s like saying a soccer game or a football game will make a kid more aggressive,” she says. “It’s about self-control, and you’ve got to learn it.”

Ley says he believes further research, for which the Center for Successful Parenting is trying to arrange, will prove a cause-and-effect relationship between game violence and off-screen aggression.

But for now, he says, the study released last week gives his organization the ammunition it needs to prove that parents need to be more aware of how kids are using their free time.

“Let’s quit using various Xboxes as babysitters instead of doing healthful activities,” says Ley, citing the growing epidemic of childhood obesity in the United States.

And who, really, can argue with that?
Demonstrate Understanding
1. Describe the experiments and results the author uses to support the idea that game violence makes kids more violent. Use evidence from the article to support your answers.

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Demonstrate Understanding
2. Identify two facts and two opinions from the article:

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Develop an Interpretation
3. Evidence is given on both sides of the game violence argument. Which side is more convincing and why? Provide examples from the article to support your answer.

Develop an Interpretation
4. What does the gaming industry have to gain or lose from this debate? Use examples from the article to support your answer.
Analyze Text
5. What was the author's purpose in writing this article? Use information from the article to support your answer.

Analyze Text
6. The author includes the comparison of violent movies to violent video games and their effect on behavior. Why does the author include this comparison in the article?