



A Different(ial) Perspective: How Social Context Influences the Media  
Violence-Aggression Relationship among Early Adolescents

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media violence-aggression relationship among early adolescents**

Does violence on television and in games make teens more aggressive? The answer to this question is subject to passionate debates among parents, children, journalists, and academics. Some of them are convinced that kids become more aggressive after playing *Call of Duty* or *Grand Theft Auto*, and others are equally convinced that this is not the case. These discussions often implicitly assume that media violence will influence all youth in the same way: Either (all) teens become more aggressive, or they (all) don't. But this does not really match with our everyday experience of media effects, where simply not everyone gets emotional when watching *Love Actually* or aroused when watching *Die Hard*. This is because there are many differences among teens, such as in their disposition, developmental level, or social context. It doesn't seem logical, then, to expect that effects of media violence exposure are the same for all teens (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013a, 2013b). Instead, it is better to ask *which* teens become more aggressive as a result of media violence exposure. That was the main aim of this dissertation. Rather than assuming that the effect of media violence on aggression is the same for everyone, this dissertation investigated whether *some* adolescents are more vulnerable to media violence. To that end, we investigated the social context of adolescents – their family, parents, and peers – and how this influences the relationship between media violence and aggression.

### **Conclusions**

For this dissertation, a large-scale study was set up in which circa 500 Dutch families with children between 10 and 14 years old were tracked for several years. The dissertation reports the results of five empirical studies. Together, these studies provide five main conclusions about the relationship between media violence and aggression:

1. Media violence exposure does not lead to an increase in aggression over time for *all* adolescents.
2. *Some* adolescents do become more aggressive as a result of playing violent games or watching violent television programs. Specifically, media violence was related to increased aggression among teens who are growing up in a high conflict family or who perceive much aggression in their peer group.

3. Other teens may even become *less* aggressive as a result of media violence exposure. Among teens in positive or neutral social contexts (environments without aggression in the family or peer group), media violence exposure was either not related to aggression, or related to *lower* aggression at a later time.
4. The reason that some teens become more, and others less aggressive as a result of media violence exposure is because teens in different social contexts *experience* such media content in different ways. For example, teens in high conflict families experienced more arousal during violent game play, which was related to higher aggressive behavior. Among youth with many aggressive friends, media violence increased their perception that these peers approve of aggression. On the other hand, youth whose friends were not aggressive thought that their friends would be *less* approving of aggression. These differences in perception were related to increased versus decreased aggressive behavior, respectively.
5. Lastly, this dissertation showed that measures in which adolescents themselves estimate the amount of time spent with media violence are valid ways of assessing such exposure. Still, there is plenty of room left for improvement.

These findings show that it is meaningful and necessary to consider differences between media users when studying media effects. This helps us to better grasp the subtle nature of media effects in teens' lives. In addition, this dissertation shows that more attention for the role of social context in media research is justified.

### **Practical implications**

Practically, this dissertation provides two take-aways for parents, teachers, and other people involved in children's behavior. First of all, **media violence exposure is not directly problematic for the majority of children and adolescents**. Most of the teens surveyed in this dissertation did not become more aggressive over time as a result of violent game play or violent TV viewing. Therefore, this dissertation does not indicate a need for large-scale, one-size-fits-all interventions in which violent games are banned from stores or parents are encouraged to prohibit all violent media content. At the same time, this dissertation does not suggest that youth should endlessly binge on violent games and television programs. The adage "too much of anything is always a bad thing" certainly applies here too, and children may not always be ready for certain content from a developmental perspective. It remains important for parents to play a guiding role in their children's media use, because they are in the best position to evaluate whether certain content is appropriate for *their* individual child.

To achieve this, parents can learn more about violent media entertainment through rating systems such as Kijkwijzer and PEGI (Pan European Game Information), by trying media themselves (perhaps together with their children), and use their own expertise as a parent to determine whether the content is right for their child.

Second, **concerns about media violence exposure are warranted for youth growing up in negative social environments.** Media violence exposure is an additional risk factor for adolescents in high conflict families or aggressive peer groups. However, the effect of media violence on aggression was quite small even in these vulnerable groups. Still, for teachers and health care professionals working with these teens and their families it is good to know that reducing media violence exposure (especially when done in dialogue with the teen) can be a small but helpful step in the right direction.

This dissertation contributes to the scientific literature and the public debate by investigating *which* early adolescents become more aggressive as a result of media violence exposure, rather than assuming that such effects are present or absent for all youth. Although the rhetoric surrounding media violence effects seems to suggest that effects are either large and important, or small and unimportant, the conclusion of this dissertation is that media violence can have a small yet meaningful effect on youths' aggressive behavior. Adolescents in negative social contexts become slightly more aggressive over time as a result of playing violent games and watching violent television shows. On the other hand, adolescents growing up in normal or positive social environments tended to show no change in or even *less* aggressive behavior as a result of media violence exposure. This shows that there is no one-size-fits-all answer to media effects questions. Instead, it is more meaningful – theoretically, empirically, societally – to acknowledge that media plays a complex role in children's lives. By applying a different(ial) perspective to the classic question of media violence and aggression, this dissertation offers important new insights and a step towards a more balanced understanding of media violence effects.