

NEWS FLASH!

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Video Games Approved for Teens Often Contain Sex and Violence, Study Concludes

Video games rated appropriate for teenagers often include adult content that may not be suitable for young players. As a result, parents, physicians and other adults should talk to children about video game content. Those are among the conclusions of a new study in the February 18 edition of the Journal of the American Medical Association (Vol. 291, No. 7).

Content and Ratings of Teen-Rated Video Games explores the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) rating system for video games, and examines the content of games that are rated appropriate for teens. Researchers randomly selected 81 teen-rated video games and played each game for at least one hour to assess the content and compare it with the content descriptors assigned by the ESRB.

They found that the content rating system often did not fully describe the violent, sexual or criminal content in the game, and the games' ratings did not always match researchers' findings. Researchers found sexual themes behaviors or dialogue related to sex, as well as depictions of exposed breasts, buttocks or genitals in 22 of the video games examined (27 percent). But just 16 of those games had content descriptors for sexual themes. And games were "significantly more likely" to depict females partially nude or engaged in sexual behaviors than males, according to Content and Ratings.

Violence, blood and profanity also were present in the teen-rated video games. Nearly all (98 percent) of the selected games included "intentional violence," 90 percent rewarded or required the player to injure characters, and 69 percent rewarded or required the player to kill. Despite the presence of violent content, Content and Ratings did find that the ESRB content descriptor for violence "provides a good indication" that the game contains violence.

The popularity of video games, combined with the growing realism of these games, "suggests the need for parents to take advantage of opportunities to talk with children and adolescents about video game content," states Content and Ratings. "We believe that physicians, particularly pediatricians and specialists in adolescent medicine, should ask patients and their parents about their experience with video games, and that the medical

and public health communities should continue to have an active role in educating parents about video game content.”

Legislative Response Last year, U.S. Representative Joe Baca (D-CA) introduced H.R. 669, the Protect Children from Video Game Sex and Violence Act of 2003, in the House of Representatives. The bill, which has not yet been voted on, would impose penalties on those who sell or rent video games to minors that depict nudity, sexual conduct, or other content harmful to minors.

The legislation was drafted in response to a 2001 Federal Trade Commission study that showed that four out of five children between the ages of 13 and 16 are able to purchase “mature”-rated games. These games allow players to watch strip shows, have simulated sex with prostitutes, assault innocent bystanders, car-jack soccer moms, using illegal drugs, commit mass murder, and kill police officers.

Research in the Journal of Personality and Psychology in April 2000 concluded that exposure to violent video games poses a greater danger than exposure to violence in television or movies because of the interactive nature of video games. In video games, the player assumes the identity of the character and actively participates. In addition, video games are played repetitively and can become addictive, and often reward players for taking part in violent behavior.

More information about violent content in video games is available on Congressman Baca’s web site, www.house.gov/baca.