

# WHAT PARENTS CAN DO

From the book  
*Grand Theft Childhood:  
The Surprising Truth About  
Violent Video Games, and  
What Parents Can Do*  
by Lawrence Kutner, Ph.D.  
& Cheryl K. Olson, Sc.D.  
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The first step is to reframe the often-asked question, "How do I protect my child from violent video games?" to "How do I help my child make the most of time spent playing video games?" It's not boxing, it's aikido. You don't want either to meet force with force or to abdicate control. Instead, you want to work with and redirect your child's skills and interests.

## Stay involved

The majority of the teenage boys we interviewed said that their parents were ignorant about video games in general and about their own game play in particular. (Before undertaking this research, we counted ourselves among that group.) Our survey found that only five percent of boys and six percent of girls said that they played video games "always" or "often" with a parent, stepparent or foster parent. More than three-quarters of the teenagers said that they "rarely" or "never" did so.

A good place to begin is by learning some of the terms gamers use. How is a "first-person shooter" such as *Doom* or *Halo* structurally different from a "third-person shooter" such as *Grand Theft Auto* or *Tomb Raider*? (In the former, you see the game environment as if you are a

character enmeshed in it. In the latter, you see the body of the character you're controlling as that character moves through the game environment.) What's a MMORPG? (A Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game like *World of Warcraft* is a game in which many players interact online in a complex virtual world.) What's a cheat code? (These are programming codes used by game testers and players to alter the behavior of a game or its characters, allowing you to skip a level or get unlimited ammunition, or preventing you from being killed.)

Have your children tell you about these game genres and terms. Why do they like some types of games but not others? When and why do they use cheat codes? Get the conversation going.

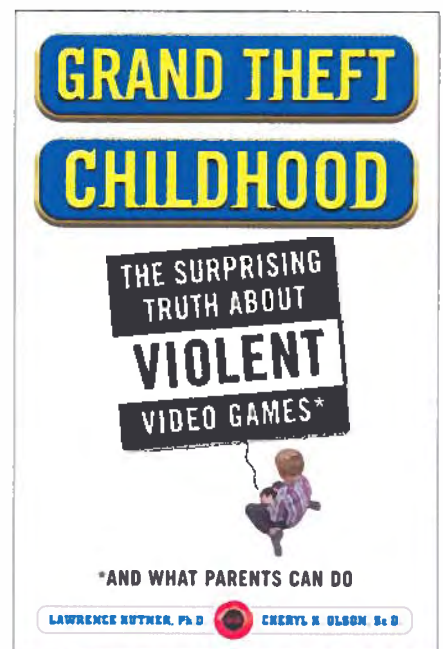
For many parents, using the game interface can be a barrier, whether it's a computer keyboard or a game console. It's intimidating to see a child fluidly manipulate a joystick or a set of buttons, especially when our own first efforts usually result in our on-screen characters repeatedly walking into virtual walls or crashing cars. Our children rapidly toggle between views of the game's landscape. We see all the data on the screen, but we don't know where to look. Experiences like this leave us feeling as frustrated as toddlers trying unsuccessfully to take our first steps.

As 13-year-old Terry told us, "We actually attempted to teach our mom how to play *ESPN Football* once. Mom turns my controller on, and then she says,

'How do I choose my team?' My brother says, 'Oh, just press the analog stick.' 'But where is the analog stick?' 'There's two of them right there.' 'Which one do I use?' It was hilarious, really."

Trisha shared her sense of incompetence with the other parents in her focus group: "I know how to turn the PlayStation on. But I don't know how to use the controllers at all."

Michael Jellinek, M.D., professor of pediatrics and psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and the chief of child and adolescent psychiatry at Massachusetts General Hospital, says that parents' awkwardness and hesitancy with video game



controls and lack of familiarity with the games can be used to your advantage when it comes to strengthening relationships with your children. He's sometimes "prescribed" video games that parents and kids can play together. "I've used golf,

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football or car racing games," he said. "It changes the dynamic of the parent constantly teaching the child, to the child teaching the parent."

At home, Jellinek plays a variety of video games with his children. "We've played *Grand Theft Auto* and a lot of football and racing games. We played *Sniper*; it's a pretty exciting game. I like the technical aspects of it. We've played *U-Boat*. We used to have family contests on *Caterpillar*."

Daphne Bavelier, Ph.D., professor of brain and cognitive sciences at the University of Rochester, has preteen twins who play video games. "They will do 15 minutes of back-and-forth argumentation about moves, and how this Pokémon would have been better than the other in that situation." For parents who are uncomfortable with game controllers, she suggests looking for games that allow you to talk about strategies and decision-making with your child as a way to connect and teach.

Research conducted in the Netherlands by Drs. Peter Nikken and Jeroen Jansz found that parents who played video games themselves had a different on the risks and benefits of those games on their children: "[They] were more optimistic about the positive effects and less worried about the negative effects." They also were more likely to play video games with their children.

### Reframe your perspective

Our research suggests that violent video game play can be a marker of increased risk for certain behaviors. For example,

girls who played any M-rated game "a lot" were three times as likely to say that they'd damaged property just for fun during the previous year, compared to girls who played E or T games. M-gamer boys were more than twice as likely as non-M-gamer boys to do so.

But there are several important things to keep in mind, even though these differences sound dramatic and perhaps even frightening. First, the category of behavior is broad, as are many categories of delinquent behaviors. There's a big difference between throwing a rock at an abandoned building and setting fire to someone's car, even though both acts would qualify as damaging property.

Second, the actual number of kids who do these things is pretty low. While 15 percent of the M-gamer girls said that they'd damaged property for fun, that also means that 85 percent of the M-gamer girls said that they had not. For almost all of the problem behaviors we measured, the majority—and often the vast majority—of M-gamer kids didn't do those things.

Third, remember that we can talk about relationships or correlations, but not causality. We don't know if playing M-rated games inspires some kids to act that way, if acting that way inspires kids to play M-rated games, or if something else is going on.

The best approach, we believe, is to look at violent game play—especially if these constitute the majority of games your child plays—as a sign that you should be paying closer attention to a host of potential behavioral

issues. Most of the time there won't be any problems. But it's a marker of increased risk.

### Focus on media literacy

No matter how many or what restrictions or controls you may place on your children's video game play or their access to the Web, odds are that they will be exposed to the type of material that concerns you, whether it's violence, sex, radical politics or anything else. Children need the tools and perspective to handle (or ignore) that material.

In fact, focusing exclusively on restricting your children's access can backfire. The "forbidden fruit" can become more attractive. This doesn't mean you should not use the parental controls that come with most new game systems, or that you should not set standards for what your children might play at different ages. We encourage both of those things. But they're not enough.

Children, and especially teenagers, need the tools to make informed judgments about media content when you're not around, no matter what or how inflammatory that content may be. They also need to understand and be able to identify likely motives behind the creation and distribution of that material—whether it's in a commercial game, an "advergame," or a recruitment game.

For more information, and links to videos for parents, visit:  
[www.grandtheftchildhood.com](http://www.grandtheftchildhood.com)