



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on October 31, 2011

Study Links TV Profanity to Teen Cursing and Aggression

Young people who are exposed to profanity on television and in video games are not only more likely to use profanity themselves, but also to engage in aggressive behaviors. Those are the findings of a new study published in *Pediatrics*, the journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics.

Researchers at Brigham Young University (BYU) studied 266 middle school students in the Midwest, comparing their attitudes about profanity and aggression to their exposure to profanity on television programs and in video games. Participants were asked to identify their three favorite television programs and video games, and then rate each of them with respect to the amount of profanity. The study found that teens exposed to profanity through those mediums were more likely to resort to profanity themselves, as well as to exhibit aggressive behavior and physical violence.



“Profanity is kind of like a stepping stone,” Sarah Coyne, the study’s lead researcher, explained to [LiveScience.com](#). “You don’t go to a movie, hear a bad word, and then go shoot somebody. But when youth both hear and then try profanity out for themselves it can start a downward slide toward more aggressive behavior.”

According to the LiveScience report, researchers “found links between the amount of swearing in video games and television and how often the students used profanity themselves.” While researchers determined that study participants who used more profanity were also more likely to exhibit aggressive behavior, “because the study is correlational it can only show that swearing on TV is indirectly linked to aggression, not whether one causes the other,” noted LifeScience.

Explained Coyne: “On the whole, it’s a moderate effect. We even ran the statistical model the opposite way to test if the violent kids used more profanity and then sought it out in the media, but the first path we took was a much better statistical fit even when we tried other explanations.”

The researchers conceded that there were limitations to the study, including the fact that they relied on self-reporting by the subjects, which the researchers noted can be subjective and filled with variables. Also, the study accounted for profanity only in video games and on TV, ignoring others sources such as profanity heard in music and used by family members. Additionally, many video games can connect to online communities, which are notorious for profanity and aggressive language.

At least one critic of the study argued that the researchers appeared to be motivated by socially conservative values. “The authors assume that words ‘harm’ children, and they need to be ‘protected’



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from words," Timothy Jay, a researcher from Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts, told LiveScience. "This is an assumption without basis, though widely held by conservatives and many social scientists. There is no evidence that words on TV cause people harm."

In fact, argued Jay, there is a positive side to profanity that the study ignored. "There is a literature that shows the prosocial effects of media on children," he said. "The authors ignore these reports. The authors make no case for profanity being beneficial, as in humor elicitation, or social bonding, or as a coping mechanism, or as a relief from pain."

The study's authors, part of BYU's School of Family Life, said that their research is "the first of its kind to reveal any harmful relationship between exposure to profanity in media and attitudinal and behavioral outcomes among adolescents."

They noted that their research emphasized the need for more warnings about objectionable content on television and in video games. While such warnings do exist in the television industry, "there are many times when programs contain profanity but do not receive the appropriate rating," the authors wrote. "As a whole, the television industry should aspire to be more accurate with ratings concerning profanity. In addition, profanity in television is becoming more frequent, even in 'family-friendly' programs. Such a trend is troubling, especially when taken in the context of our results."

As for video games, labeled warnings typically do not include any mention that participants can join a "live" game with uncontrolled participants who often engage in profanity-laced dialogue. "Game descriptions should include warnings to parents regarding exposure to profanity or other questionable conversation through this route," the authors advised.

Coyne also advised that parents need to take a more proactive role in monitoring the shows their kids watch and the games they play, keeping an ear open for profanity. "We tend to be passive viewers," she said. "We're so used to hearing profanity all over the place, we might not even notice it [on TV]."

She added: "As a society we've gotten pretty lax concerning profanity. We're desensitized to it. This study shows that it does matter. It matters where [kids] hear it, and parents should maybe be a little more vigilant about profanity exposure in the media."



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