

Violent Video Games—Lesson Plan

Student Objectives

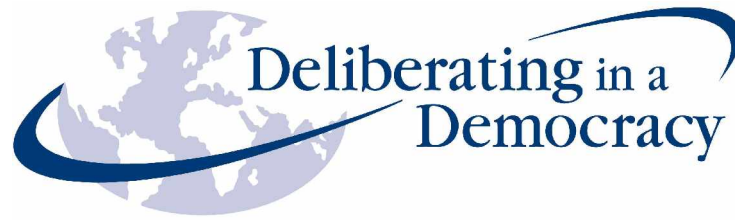
- Learn how experts understand the causes of violence.
- Identify research that explores possible connections between media portrayals of violence and violent behavior among young people.
- Analyze the reasons for supporting and opposing limits on violent video games for young people.
- Identify areas of agreement and disagreement with other students.
- Decide, individually and as a group, whether governments should place a criminal penalty on the selling or renting of violent video games to young people; support decisions based on evidence and sound reasoning.
- Reflect on the value of deliberation when deciding issues in a democracy.

Question for Deliberation

Should our democracy place criminal penalties on anyone who sells or rents violent video games rated AO (ESRB) or 18+ (PEGI) to persons younger than 18?

Materials

- Lesson Procedures
- Handout 1—Deliberation Guide
- Handout 2—Deliberation Worksheet
- Handout 3—Student Reflection on Deliberation
- Violent Videos—Reading
- Violent Videos—Selected Resources
- Violent Videos—Deliberation Question with Arguments
(optional—use if students have difficulty extracting the arguments or time is limited)



Violent Video Games—Reading

1 *In 1999, two teenage students shot and killed twelve other students and a teacher*
2 *at Columbine High School in the United States. The two killers seem to have*
3 *practiced their attack by using a modified version of the video game Doom.*

4 Statistics show that the rate of violent crime in the United States surpasses the rate in any
5 other Western democracy. Consider these numbers:

- 6 • Homicide is the second leading cause of death for Americans age 15 to 30 and the leading
7 cause of death for African Americans in that age bracket.
- 8 • By the 7th grade, the average American child will have witnessed 8,000 murders and
9 100,000 acts of violence on television.

10 What are the causes of violence? There is no easy answer, and probably no single cause.
11 Some experts argue that there are biological reasons. They believe that some people have genes
12 or a chemical make-up that make them more likely to be violent. Others blame such social
13 problems as poverty, discrimination, lack of hope, the breakdown of family values, childhood
14 abuse, or drug and alcohol addictions. Finally, some point to cultural factors, such as the amount
15 of violence portrayed in the media.

16 **Violence on Television**

17 Some people say that so much violence on television makes American society more violent.
18 They think that watching a lot of violence makes people more likely to act violently. In 1972,
19 the U.S. Surgeon General, the highest medical officer in the American government, said that

20 “televised violence . . . does have (a negative) effect on certain members of our society.”

21 Numerous scientific studies since then have supported the surgeon general’s position.

22 Many social scientists also agree that televised violence can contribute to antisocial behavior
23 in children. For example, after a five-year study, the American Psychological Association
24 reported in 1992 that “TV violence can cause aggressive behavior and can cultivate values
25 favoring the use of aggression to resolve conflicts.” In other words, watching violent TV can
26 make the viewer violent.

27 Defenders of television believe that the problem is more complicated. After all, not everyone
28 who watches a murder drama goes out and commits murder the next day. Millions of people
29 view violence on television, but only a few commit acts of violence. Violence in entertainment,
30 they claim, is being held responsible for a broader problem in society. Violence on TV reflects
31 but does not cause the level of violence in American society.

32 Some scholars agree. A 1999 study found “disturbingly high” levels of violence among 2,000
33 third- to eighth-grade students. But the study found only a modest link between this violence and
34 watching heavy doses of televised violence. Students who were most at risk for becoming violent
35 were those who had witnessed or were victims of real-life violence at home, in the community,
36 or at school.

37 **Video Game Violence**

38 Violent video games raise similar concerns. Computerized video games were first introduced
39 to the public in the 1970s. Today, many popular video games feature high levels of realistic
40 violence. How do children respond to video games?

- 41 • Seventy-nine percent of American youth play computer or video games on a regular basis.

42 On average, young people between the ages of 7 and 17 play these games eight hours each
43 week.

- 44 • Violent games account for some 80 percent of video game industry revenues, while sports
45 and other video game formats account for only 20 percent of the market. In a sample of 33
46 popular games by two major game makers, 80 percent had violent content.
- 47 • Children seem to favor violent games. In one study of seventh- and eighth-grade students, 50
48 percent of the preferred games were violent, only 2 percent were educational.

49 **Studying the Effect of Violent Video Games**

50 There has been less research on video game violence than on televised violence. However,
51 many researchers have concluded that violent video games have negative effects on young
52 players. A 2001 study reviewed 35 different research studies on violent video games and
53 concluded that there was a consistent pattern of results in five areas. Exposure to violent video
54 games (1) increases the desire to be physical; (2) increases violent thoughts; (3) increases
55 aggressive emotions; (4) increases aggressive actions; and (5) decreases positive actions.

56 While many experts agree with these conclusions, some disagree. In 1999, John Sherry also
57 conducted a review of the research and concluded that the “overall effect of these games on
58 aggressiveness does not appear great.” He did, however, agree that newer, more violent games
59 do show a greater effect.

60 **Current Policies**

61 Currently, the video game industry regulates itself. Most North American video game
62 manufacturers use the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) system. In this system,
63 reviewers rate the content of each game in terms of violence, crude language, sex, and substance

64 abuse. In Europe, the Pan European Games Information (PEGI) system uses age-based ratings
65 for interactive games. Games reviewed by ESRB or PEGI receive a rating symbol on the game
66 box: the ESRB rating “AO” (Adults Only) or PEGI rating “18+” marks a game as suitable only
67 for people 18 and older. In addition, the back of the box of an ESRB- or PEGI-reviewed game
68 displays symbols that describe games as showing violence, sex, substance abuse, and other
69 content. Game manufacturers are encouraged—but not required—to submit their games for
70 review; Nintendo and Sega, for example, have their own procedures.

71 Video game critics say that current policies are not adequate. They cite a 2003 U.S. Federal
72 Trade Commission (FTC) report that found that 78 percent of children ages 13 to 16 could buy
73 video games with “M-Mature” (ages 17 and older) ratings. They also argue that many parents do
74 not know what kinds of video games their children buy and play. They point to the case of the
75 Columbine High School killers, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. According to the Simon
76 Wiesenthal Center, which studies Internet hate groups, Harris and Klebold had modified the
77 violent video game *Doom* by giving the players unlimited ammunition and the victims no way to
78 fight back. It seems likely that the two killers practiced their attacks using the game. It is also
79 unlikely that their parents even knew what they were doing.

80 Even before the FTC report was issued, the Interactive Digital Software Association, a trade
81 group for the video game industry, developed video game marketing standards and practices that
82 also included methods of enforcement. The new system posts warning signs, trains sales staff,
83 and requires proof of age for anyone who wants to rent or buy violent videos.

84 **Current Debates**

85 Some people have called for even stronger restrictions on video games. Critics of voluntary

86 ratings claim that the system is not working. They claim that stores do not enforce voluntary
87 ratings and parents are unaware of them. They also do not trust the \$10 billion a year video game
88 industry to police itself when there is so much money to be made selling products to young
89 people.

90 Some governments agree with stronger restrictions. In 2005, the American state of Illinois
91 passed the “Violent Video Games Law,” which made it a crime for retail stores to sell or rent
92 violent or sexual video games to minors. Stores must place parental warnings on video game
93 labels and post signs explaining the existing industry ratings. Violators of the law will be fined
94 \$1,000 for the first violation and \$5,000 or up to a year in prison for each additional violation.

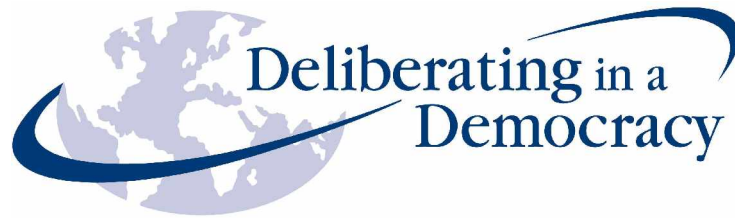
95 Opponents of these restrictions claim that such punishments are not necessary. They argue
96 that the video game industry is taking appropriate steps to protect younger players and that there
97 is still no “scientific certainty” that violent video games actually hurt young people. Without this
98 kind of evidence, opponents argue that punishments like those for selling cigarettes or tobacco to
99 young people are not justified. Finally, some argue that criminal penalties would violate
100 democratic principles of free expression. In the United States, the Supreme Court has upheld
101 criminal penalties for distributing cigarettes, alcohol, and pornographic materials to minors, but
102 lower federal courts have already struck down video game laws.

103 No decision has been reached regarding what to do about violent video games and their
104 effects on children. Such debate will arise whenever a democracy must balance the right to free
105 expression with its duty to protect the vulnerable members of society from harm.



Violent Video Games—Selected Resources

- Anderson, Craig A., *FAQs on Violent Video Games and Other Media Violence* (Ames, IA: Iowa State University, Department of Psychology, 2002),
http://www.psychology.iastate.edu/faculty/caa/Video_Game_FAQs.html.
- Anderson, Craig A. and Karen E. Dill, "Video Games and Aggressive Thoughts, Feelings, and Behavior in the Laboratory and in Life," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (2000), Vol. 78: 4, pp. 772-790, <http://www.apa.org/journals/features/psp784772.pdf>.
- Croddy, Marshall, and Bill Hayes, *Criminal Justice in America* (Los Angeles: Constitutional Rights Foundation, 2000).
- Entertainment Software Rating Board, "ESRB Game Ratings: Frequently Asked Questions" (New York: Entertainment Software Rating Board, 2005),
http://www.esrb.org/esrbratings_faqs.asp.
- Forbes, Beth, "Expert: Video Violence Minimally Affects Kids," *Purdue News* (June 1999),
<http://news.uns.purdue.edu/html4ever/9906.sherry.video.html>.
- Huffstutter, P.J., "Illinois Seeks to Curb Excessive Video Games," *Los Angeles Times* (December 16, 2004).
- Illinois General Assembly. Public Act 94-0315, "Violent Video Game Law" (720 ILCS 5, Article 12A. Violent video games), enacted July 25, 2005,
<http://www.ilga.gov/legislation/publicacts/94/PDF/094-0315.pdf>.
- Janushewski, Derrick, and Myna Truong, "Video Games and Violence," *Building the Virtual City: Suggestions for Shaping a Viable Cybersociety* (Hamilton, Canada: McMaster University, 1999),
<http://socserv2.mcmaster.ca/soc/courses/stpp4C03/ClassEssay/videogames.htm>.
- Pan European Games Information (PEGI), "What Is PEGI?" (Brussels, Belgium: PEGI, n.d.),
<http://www.pegi.info/index.html>.
- Parvaz, D., "Video Game Research Yields Wide Ranging Conclusions," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* (October 14, 1999),
<http://seattlepi.nwsource.com/videogameviolence/stdy14.shtml>.
- Singer, Mark I., David B. Miller, Shenyang Guo, Daniel J. Flannery, Tracy Frierson, and Karen Slovak, "Contributors to Violent Behavior Among Elementary and Middle School Children," *Pediatrics* (October 1999), Vol. 104:4, pp. 878-884,
<http://www.pediatrics.org/cgi/content/full/104/4/878>.
- Walsh, David, *Video Game Violence and Public Policy*, paper presented at the Playing by the Rules: The Cultural Policy Challenges of Video Games Conference, Chicago, Illinois, October 26-27, 2001, <http://culturalpolicy.uchicago.edu/conf2001/papers/walsh.html>.



Violent Video Games—Deliberation Question with Arguments

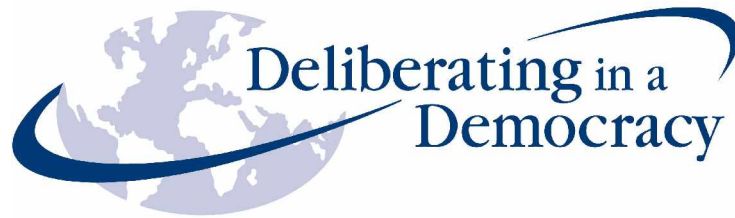
Deliberation Question

Should our democracy place criminal penalties on anyone who sells or rents violent video games rated “AO” (ESRB) or “18+” (PEGI) to people younger than 18?



Arguments to Support the Deliberation Question

1. The current rating and self-regulation system is not working. Video game producers are interested in making money, not protecting children. Stores do not enforce the system, and parents are unaware of it. As a result, young people are able to buy violent games.
2. Evidence connects violent video games and violence in real life. Many researchers have concluded that violent video games have negative effects on young players.
3. There is already too much real violence in the lives of children. Playing with violent video games stimulates children to act aggressively and decrease positive behaviors.
4. Government can help parents protect young people and bring them up in a positive way. Controlling how much violence children experience in video games is a reasonable thing to do.
5. Democratic governments have a responsibility to protect vulnerable members of society. The U.S. Supreme Court has upheld criminal penalties for selling cigarettes, alcohol, and pornographic material to minors. The Court is likely to find similar penalty for violent video games constitutional.



Violent Video Games—Deliberation Question with Arguments

Deliberation Question

Should our democracy place criminal penalties on anyone who sells or rents violent video games rated “AO” (ESRB) or “18+” (PEGI) to people younger than 18?



Arguments to Oppose the Deliberation Question



1. The video game industry has developed a new warning system that should help keep violent games out of children’s hands. The new system will include enforcement methods and efforts to inform the public about the rating system.
2. There is no strong scientific evidence that violent video games cause violent behavior. Without such proof, there is no argument for imposing criminal penalties for selling violent video games as there are for selling cigarettes, alcohol, or pornography to minors.
3. Parents, not government, have children. Parents have the responsibility for raising their children and teaching them that violence is wrong.
4. Real violence is what harms children and should be prevented. A 1999 study showed that students who are most at-risk to become violent are those who have seen or been a victim of real-life violence.
5. Such a law is an unconstitutional limit on democratic principles of free speech. In a democracy, the people make their own decisions. Young citizens need practice in making informed choices.