The Depiction of Drug Use in Video Games

Since their invention in the 1970s, video games have enjoyed a steady rise in popularity. For most parents, the question is not whether to allow video games, but which ones. Violence in video games has been controversial since the first pixelated sword slash, and for many parents, remains an important factor in whether or not they purchase a particular game. The overt depiction of drug use in video games doesn't have as long a history, and so some parents may be less aware that their children may be exposed to drug references or may play characters that use drugs as part of the game play.

Since its inception in 1994, the Entertainment Software Ratings Board (ESRB) has assigned a rating to each video game officially released in the US and Canada. Though it is a self-regulating organization, it behooves the ESRB to rate games appropriately as they are watched by a number of consumer and parent groups. As with the motion picture rating system, the rating gives an indication of the minimum appropriate age to play a game (such as T for teen), as well as specific content that may be of interest to consumers considering the game. These content descriptions can be very specific, which can be a useful guide when purchasing games. The ESRB website has a searchable database where one can look for a specific title or see all games that contain a certain kind of content. While this is good guideline, it isn't perfect – there have been a handful of controversies over the years in cases where game content is discovered that wasn't warned about in the ESRB rating.

Research covering video game depictions of drug use and their possible connection to real-life drug use remains sparse. One study finds a correlation between an increase in risk behaviors (drug use among them) and video game use generally. It
does not, however, directly examine in-game depictions of drug use, and furthermore, it finds a similar correlation between certain kinds of internet use and an increase in risk behaviors. Furthermore, it is important to note that the study merely suggests a correlation, not a causal relationship. As video game use continues to grow in popularity, however, there is no doubt that more research will be done to clarify these relationships.

Regardless of research, most parents instinctively want to protect their children from the harm of drug abuse. It is still an effective strategy to shield younger children from drug references in video games – most, if not all, video games depicting drug use also contain graphic violence and other content that makes them easily identifiable as not suitable for children. As kids head toward their teen years, however, the shielding strategy becomes more difficult to maintain. Along with movies, music, and other kids at school, video games are just one way that kids may learn about drug use. A more effective strategy at this stage is to help adolescents and teens understand the dangers of drug use, and to help them see the differences between those real-world consequences and the depictions they may see in video games. In this way, a video game may be used as a jumping off point for a meaningful discussion with a young person about the real effects of drug use.

For further information regarding this article please contact Chris Foster at the Maternal Substance Abuse and Child Development Project, Emory University School of Medicine, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, 1256 Briarcliff Road, N.E., Suite 309W, Atlanta, Georgia, 30306. You can also phone us at 404-712-9800 or visit our website at http://www.emory.edu/MSACD

1http://www.esrb.org/ratings/search.jsp
2http://www.springerlink.com/content/w487673k5415k142/fulltext.html
The Maternal Substance Abuse and Child Development Project is funded in part by the Georgia Department of Human Resources Division of Public Health