

# The Evolution of Virtual Violence: How Mobile Screens Provide Windows to Real Violence

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Public discussion of child and adolescent exposure to “virtual violence” typically focuses on the simulated violence that occurs within gaming applications and the glamorized or normalized violence depicted in television and movies. Historically, the American Academy of Pediatrics has also framed virtual violence in this way, as virtual consumption of either simulated or fictional violence.<sup>1-4</sup> This traditional perspective is well-described in the most recent Virtual Violence Policy Statement, published in this issue of *Pediatrics*.<sup>5</sup>

However today, youth have unprecedented access to portable devices with internet, photo, and video capabilities<sup>6-10</sup> that fundamentally change the scope, magnitude, and outcomes of virtual violence exposures by providing access to real violence that can be captured and consumed, virtually.

In contrast to the fictional violence Christakis et al<sup>5</sup> caution against, now youth can produce, view, and share problematic content,<sup>11</sup> including images of community violence, school violence, sexual violence, and police violence on their smart, portable devices. Some social media feeds even provide unsolicited and unwelcome exposure to acts of actual terrorism, gender violence, and war.

Mobile exposures to real violence are distinct from the simulated violence depicted in gaming applications and other real violence pictured on television news.<sup>4</sup> The difference is

mobile exposures can be captured and shared by and among youth without adult supervision or knowledge, independent of structured rating systems, and unrestricted by traditional viewing controls that commonly manage television, movie, and gaming selections.<sup>1,11</sup> This portable access broadens the scope of violence children can be exposed to virtually.

Social networks like Facebook and photo- and video-sharing applications like Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and Snapchat may also increase the magnitude of virtual violence exposures by broadcasting real violence beyond simple geographic or school boundaries. Because nearly 3 in 4 teens have access to a smartphone in the United States and 71% use more than 1 social media platform, posting still and video of violent events can be easy, reach expansive social networks,<sup>6,7</sup> contribute to undesirable digital footprints,<sup>9</sup> and result in shared experiences of trauma. These outcomes are complex and may vary by individual identity (eg, ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation), social context, or physical setting.

Previously, exposure to first-person shooter games and other acts of fictional violence were noted to “increase aggressive thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.”<sup>3,4</sup> Now, exposure to real violence through mobile devices may additionally result in feelings of distress, victimization, or fear<sup>12</sup>: feelings that may be shared among social groups, initiate prosocial or

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aggressive behaviors, and may be heightened by knowledge that these events occurred in the real world.<sup>4</sup>

To illustrate this, consider 2 contemporary examples.

First, consider what happens when youth view images of terrorist violence in the Middle East. For some, it can engender fear and anti-Muslim and anti-Arab sentiments, spur cyber-bullying, and result in physical bullying, intimidation, and aggression toward Muslim students as well as those incorrectly perceived to be Muslim. And for youth who practice Islam, these perceived and actual threats may result in concealing their religious identity in public spaces like school.<sup>13,14</sup>

Second, picture an African American youth viewing a video of police shooting and killing another African American with whom they relate. Although not directly victimized, witnessing the incident may cause distress.<sup>15</sup> Yet virtually viewing police violence can also generate solidarity and, as a recent report noted, galvanize activism for police reform.<sup>16</sup>

Historically, risks and recommendations regarding virtual violence were primarily based on age.<sup>1-5</sup> But growing mobile access to real violence prompts discussion of outcomes that may be unique to the various families, communities, or cultural groups with whom children identify. For some, sharing virtual violence may provide important tools to ensure police accountability, bolster valuable social action, or monitor public safety. For others who lack media literacy<sup>11</sup> or the developmental maturity to process violence, it may also result in emotional desensitization, concerns regarding personal safety, or aggression toward others.<sup>3,4,9</sup>

The emergence of smart, mobile technologies as predominant ways for youth to interact, communicate, and share images underpins an

important evolution in virtual violence. The deluge of public video-capture, from private surveillance to wearable technology with recording capabilities, introduces ever-changing ways real violence is experienced and shared in real-time or in perpetuity online. As screen usage patterns shift among millennials and centennials, it may constitute a growing digital divide between the exposures of today's youth and that of preceding generations.<sup>11</sup>

Pediatricians can help families navigate evolving forms of virtual violence by raising parent awareness of the complexities associated with youth recording, posting, texting, or viewing images of real violence with peers. They can also assist families in proactively engaging youth to thoughtfully create, explore, and share media content, reinforce the value of coviewing media,<sup>1,2,4,5,9,11</sup> and review age-appropriate ways to ensure youth safety. This allows parents to provide context to help youth decipher associated emotions and risks,<sup>12</sup> model and practice empathy, and provide outlets for processing troubling events.

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