



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, rents, or shows violent video games to minors?

Materials

- Lesson Procedures
- Handout 1—Deliberation Guide
- Handout 2—Deliberation Worksheet
- Handout 3—Student Reflection on Deliberation
- Reading
- Selected Resources
- 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 at*
2 *Columbine High School in the United States. The two killers seem to have practiced their*
3 *attack by using a modified version of the video game Doom.*

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

10 **Violence on Television: An International Concern**

11 By the seventh grade, the average American child will have witnessed 8,000 murders and
12 100,000 acts of violence on television. Some people say that so much violence on television
13 makes American society more violent. They think that watching a lot of violence makes people
14 more likely to act violently. In 1972, the U.S. Surgeon General, the highest medical officer in
15 the American government, said that “televised violence . . . does have (a negative) effect on
16 certain members of our society.” Numerous scientific studies since then have supported the
17 surgeon general’s position.

18 Concern over televised violence is not restricted to the United States. As early as 1994, at a
19 meeting convened by The Carter Center to discuss radio and television policy, representatives

20 from Russia, the Czech Republic, and other new democracies recommended that “Images of
21 violence should be transmitted with the utmost discretion. Broadcasters should *voluntarily* agree
22 to avoid broadcasting violent images while children are likely to be in the audience.” In
23 Lithuania, broadcasters voluntarily rate programs according to the ages for which they are
24 appropriate. Because these restrictions are voluntary, however, some groups in Lithuania,
25 including teachers’ associations, support stronger government regulation.

26 Many social scientists agree that televised violence can contribute to antisocial behavior in
27 children. After a five-year study, the American Psychological Association reported in 1992 that
28 “TV violence can cause aggressive behavior and can cultivate values favoring the use of
29 aggression to resolve conflicts.” In other words, watching violent TV can make viewers violent.

30 Defenders of television believe that the problem is more complicated. After all, not everyone
31 who watches a murder drama goes out and commits murder the next day. Millions of people
32 view violence on television, but only a few commit acts of violence. Violence in entertainment,
33 they claim, is being held responsible for a broader problem in society. Violence on TV reflects,
34 but does not cause, the level of violence in American society. Some research supports this
35 position. While a 1999 study conducted at Case Western Reserve University and Kent State
36 University found “disturbingly high” levels of violence among 2,000 third- to eighth-grade
37 students in the United States, the researchers found only a modest link between this violence and
38 watching televised violence. Students most at risk for becoming violent were those who had
39 witnessed or were victims of real-life violence at home, in the community, or at school.

40 **Video Game Violence**

41 Violent video games raise similar concerns. Computerized video games were first introduced
42 to the public in the 1970s. Today, many popular video games feature high levels of realistic

43 violence. How do children respond to video games? In a 2001 study, psychologists Craig
44 Anderson and Brad Bushman reviewed 35 different studies on violent video games. Some of the
45 statistics they cited include these facts:

- 46 • Seventy-nine percent of American youth play computer or video games regularly. On
47 average, young people ages 7 to 17 play these games eight hours each week.
- 48 • Violent games account for some 80 percent of video game industry revenues, while
49 sports and other video game formats account for only 20 percent of the market. In a
50 sample of 33 popular games by two major game makers, 80 percent had violent content.
- 51 • Children seem to favor violent games. In one study of seventh- and eighth-grade students,
52 50 percent of the preferred games were violent, only 2 percent were educational.

53 Although there are less research data on the effects of video game violence than on the
54 effects of televised violence, many researchers have concluded that violent video games have
55 negative effects on young players. In their 2001 analysis, Anderson and Bushman also concluded
56 that there was a consistent pattern of results in five areas. Exposure to violent video games (1)
57 increases the desire to be physical; (2) increases violent thoughts; (3) increases aggressive
58 emotions; (4) increases aggressive actions; and (5) decreases positive actions.

59 While many experts agree with these conclusions, some disagree. In 2001, communications
60 researcher John Sherry also conducted a review of the research and concluded that the “overall
61 effect of these games on aggressiveness does not appear great.” He did, however, agree that
62 newer, more violent games do show a greater effect.

63 **Current Policies**

64 Currently, the video game industry regulates itself. Most North American video game

65 manufacturers use the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) system. In this system,
66 reviewers rate the content of each game in terms of violence, crude language, sex, and substance
67 abuse. In Europe, the Pan European Games Information (PEGI) system uses age-based ratings.
68 Games reviewed by ESRB or PEGI receive a rating symbol on the game box: those with violent
69 or sexual content may receive the ESRB ratings “AO” (Adults Only—18 and over) or PEGI
70 rating “18+” (suitable only for people 18 and older). The back of the box displays symbols that
71 describe games as showing violence, sex, substance abuse, and other content. Manufacturers are
72 encouraged—but not required—to submit games for review; Nintendo and Sega, for example,
73 have their own procedures.

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

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

87 **Current Debates**

88 Some people have called for even stronger restrictions on video games. Critics of voluntary
89 ratings claim that the system is not working. They claim that stores do not enforce voluntary
90 ratings and parents are unaware of them. They also do not trust the \$10 billion a year video game
91 industry to police itself when there is so much money to be made selling to young people.

92 Some governments agree with stronger restrictions. In 2005, the American state of Illinois
93 passed the “Violent Video Games Law,” which made it a crime for retail stores to sell or rent
94 violent or sexual video games to minors. Stores must place parental warnings on video game
95 labels and post signs explaining the existing industry ratings. Violators of the law will be fined
96 \$1,000 for the first violation and \$5,000 or up to a year in prison for each additional violation.

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

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



Violent Video Games—Selected Resources

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- 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, rents, or shows violent video games to minors?

YES—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 penalties for violent video games constitutional.



Violent Video Games—Deliberation Question with Arguments

Deliberation Question

Should our democracy place criminal penalties on anyone who sells, rents, or shows violent video games to minors?

NO—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.



Lesson Procedures

Step One: Introduction

Introduce the lesson and the Student Objectives on the **Lesson Plan**. Distribute and discuss **Handout 1—Deliberation Guide**. Review the Rules of Deliberation and post them in a prominent position in the classroom. Emphasize that the class will deliberate and then debrief the experience.

Step Two: Reading

Distribute a copy of the **Reading** to each student. Have students read the article carefully and underline facts and ideas they think are important and/or interesting (**ideally for homework**).

Step Three: Grouping and Reading Discussion

Divide the class into groups of four or five students. Group members should share important facts and interesting ideas with each other to develop a common understanding of the article. They can record these facts and ideas on **Handout 2—Deliberation Activities** (Review the Reading).

Step Four: Introducing the Deliberation Question

Each **Reading** addresses a Deliberation Question. Read aloud and/or post the Deliberation Question and ask students to write the Deliberation Question in the space provided on **Handout 2**. Remind students of the Rules for Deliberation on **Handout 1**.

Step Five: Learning the Reasons

Divide each group into two teams, Team A and Team B. Explain that each team is responsible for selecting the most compelling reasons for its position, which you will assign. Both teams should reread the **Reading**. Team A will find the most compelling reasons to **support** the Deliberation Question. Team B will find the most compelling reasons to **oppose** the Deliberation Question. To ensure maximum participation, ask everyone on the team to prepare to present at least one reason.

Note: Team A and Team B do not communicate while learning the reasons. If students need help identifying the arguments or time is limited, use the **Deliberation Question with Arguments** handouts. Ask students to identify the most compelling arguments and add any additional ones they may remember from the reading.

Step Six: Presenting the Most Compelling Reasons

Tell students that each team will present the most compelling reasons to **support** or **oppose** the Deliberation Question. In preparation for the next step, Reversing Positions, have each team listen carefully for the most compelling reasons.

- Team A will explain their reasons for **supporting** the Deliberation Question. If Team B does not understand something, they should ask questions but NOT argue.
- Team B will explain their reasons for **opposing** the Deliberation Question. If Team A does not understand something, they should ask questions, but NOT argue.

Note: The teams may not believe in or agree with their reasons but should be as convincing as possible when presenting them to others.

Step Seven: Reversing Positions

Explain that, to demonstrate that each side understands the opposing arguments, each team will select the other team's most compelling reasons.

- Team B will explain to Team A what Team A's **most compelling** reasons were for **supporting** the Deliberation Question.
- Team A will explain to Team B what Team B's **most compelling** reasons were for **opposing** the Deliberation Question.

Step Eight: Deliberating the Question

Explain that students will now drop their roles and deliberate the question as a group. Remind the class of the question. In deliberating, students can (1) use what they have learned about the issue and (2) offer their personal experiences as they formulate opinions regarding the issue.

After deliberating, have students find areas of agreement in their group. Then ask students, as individuals, to express to the group their personal position on the issue and write it down (see My Personal Position on **Handout 2**).

Note: Individual students do **NOT** have to agree with the group.

Step Nine: Debriefing the Deliberation

Reconvene the entire class. Distribute **Handout 3—Student Reflection on Deliberation** as a guide. Ask students to discuss the following questions:

- What were the most compelling reasons for each side?
- What were the areas of agreement?
- What questions do you still have? Where can you get more information?
- What are some reasons why deliberating this issue is important in a democracy?
- What might you or your class do to address this problem? Options include teaching others about what they have learned; writing to elected officials, NGOs, or businesses; and conducting additional research.

Consider having students prepare personal reflections on the Deliberation Question through written, visual, or audio essays. Personal opinions can be posted on the web.

Step Ten: Student Poll/Student Reflection

Ask students: "Do you agree, disagree, or are you still undecided about the Deliberation Question?" Record the responses and have a student post the results on www.deliberating.org under the partnerships and/or the polls. Have students complete **Handout 3**.



Handout 1—Deliberation Guide

What Is Deliberation?

Deliberation (meaningful discussion) is the focused exchange of ideas and the analysis of arguments with the aim of making a decision.

Why Are We Deliberating?

Citizens must be able and willing to express and exchange ideas among themselves, with community leaders, and with their representatives in government. Citizens and public officials in a democracy need skills and opportunities to engage in civil public discussion of controversial issues in order to make informed policy decisions. Deliberation requires keeping an open mind, as this skill enables citizens to reconsider a decision based on new information or changing circumstances.

What Are the Rules for Deliberation?

- Read the material carefully.
- Focus on the deliberation question.
- Listen carefully to what others are saying.
- Check for understanding.
- Analyze what others say.
- Speak and encourage others to speak.
- Refer to the reading to support your ideas.
- Use relevant background knowledge, including life experiences, in a logical way.
- Use your heart and mind to express ideas and opinions.
- Remain engaged and respectful when controversy arises.
- Focus on ideas, not personalities.



Handout 2—Deliberation Activities

Review the Reading

Determine the most important facts and/or interesting ideas and write them below.

- 1) _____
- 2) _____
- 3) _____

Deliberation Question

Learning the Reasons

Reasons to Support the Deliberation Question (Team A)	Reasons to Oppose the Deliberation Question (Team B)

My Personal Position

On a separate sheet of paper, write down reasons to support your opinion. You may suggest another course of action than the policy proposed in the question or add your own ideas to address the underlying problem.



Name: _____

Date: _____

Teacher: _____

Handout 3—Student Reflection on Deliberation

Large Group Discussion: What We Learned

What were the most compelling reasons for each side?

Side A:

Side B:

What were the areas of agreement?

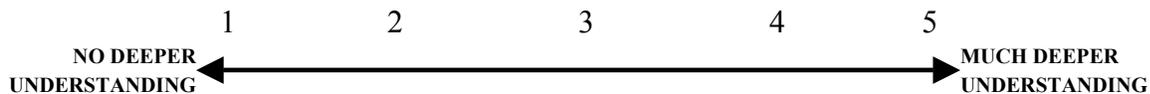
What questions do you still have? Where can you get more information?

What are some reasons why deliberating this issue is important in a democracy?

What might you and/or your class do to address this problem?

Individual Reflection: What I Learned

Which number best describes your understanding of the focus issue? [circle one]



What new insights did you gain?

What did you do well in the deliberation? What do you need to work on to improve your personal deliberation skills?

What did someone else in your group do or say that was particularly helpful? Is there anything the group should work on to improve the group deliberation?