

"Report on Violence in the Media and Children"

Hearing Testimony
submitted to the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and
Transportation
by

The Honorable Bart Peterson

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September 13, 2000

Mr. Chairman, Senator Hollings, and distinguished Members of this panel, I would like to thank you for calling this hearing and presenting me with the opportunity to share my views and experiences

with you regarding the marketing of violent materials to our nation's youth by the entertainment industry. In the wake of the conclusions reached by the Federal Trade Commission in its recently released report, I am pleased to share with you a step that we have taken in Indianapolis to help reduce children's exposure to violent video games.

We live today in a culture steeped in violence. From movies and television to music and video games, violent images so pervade American popular culture that many of us feel immune to their effects.

But recent studies show we are anything but immune. Even more disheartening, violent media - including violent video games -- is especially popular with the most impressionable and the least mature consumers of popular culture: our children. As the Federal Trade Commission's recent investigation found, the home video game industry has marketed its products to children under age 17, despite ratings indicating the games are unsuitable for children that young. In another disturbing trend, many of the school shooters of the past few years were avid violent video game players. Investigators have attributed several of the shooters' accuracy to the "training" they received from playing realistic violent video games.

Studies show that playing violent video games increases people's aggressive thoughts and behaviors. In a study published in the April 2000 issue of the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, Drs. Craig A. Anderson and Karen E. Dill found that repeated exposure to violent video games increased players' aggressive thought patterns, which can lead to increased aggressive behavior. Drs. Anderson and Dill also noted that the active nature of violent video games may well make them even more dangerous than other forms of media violence, such as TV and movies. Likewise, in a joint

statement on the impact of entertainment violence on children, the American Medical Association, the American Psychiatric Association, and several other prominent health organizations concluded that viewing violence can desensitize children, possibly leading them to engage in real life violence, and that the effect of violent video games and other interactive media may be "significantly more severe" than other forms of violent media.

In my own experience, I have found that when I share excerpts of popular violent video games with concerned parents, they are generally shocked at the level of violence in them. The days of Pac-Man are long over, but even the most conscientious parents often seem unaware of the kinds of games their children play and how violent these games actually are.

Nonetheless, nothing generally stops an unsupervised child from walking into an arcade and playing horribly violent video games. Parents can control whether their children play violent video games at home or watch violent TV shows; they should also be able to control the kinds of video games their children play outside the home.

That's why I proposed a city ordinance to restrict children under age 18 from playing video games with graphic violence or strong sexual content without parental consent. The ordinance -- which is widely considered to be the first of its kind in the nation -- requires businesses to label all games that contain graphic violence or strong sexual content. In addition, video arcades must erect a partition to separate these games from other games. Recently, the Indianapolis City-County Council passed the ordinance unanimously, with the support of a broad coalition of citizens and community groups.

I believe this ordinance puts parents back in the driver's seat when it comes to violent video games. It enables parents - not video game marketers - to decide whether their children should play a

particular game. As studies show, violent video games affect different children differently. Some parents may decide certain violent video games are suitable for their children, but the choice should lie with them. Regardless of whether parents allow their children to play these games, this ordinance will both raise their awareness about the games and encourage them to play more active roles in monitoring their children's activities.

The recent report released by the Federal Trade Commission clearly shows that the entertainment industry, including video game manufacturers, is not effectively regulating themselves. Alternative solutions are needed to allow parents to make informed decisions regarding their children's access to violent materials. I firmly believe that a small amount of local regulation, such as the ordinance recently passed in Indianapolis, can play a large role in reducing a problem that is increasingly plaguing our society.

I would like to again thank the Chairman and distinguished Members of this panel for allowing me to express my views. I would be happy to answer any questions, and to assist the Committee in any way in its efforts to address this important issue.