Adolescents’ empathy hit by ‘violent video games’

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A new survey of 700 secondary school students reveals that “playing violent video games” was cited as a negative influence when it came to levels of empathy, social responsibility, and civic behaviour.

The findings are made in a report entitled Empathy, Social Values, and Civic Behaviour Among Early Adolescents in Ireland, conducted by academics at the Unesco Child and Family Research Centre at NUI Galway.

It explores a number of different sources, including a literature review which looked at the influence of peer behaviour, schools, and media exposure, among others.

Quantitative research involved a large, national survey of 700 young people (aged 12-16) from 12 secondary schools throughout the country, looking at current levels of empathy, social responsibility, and civic behaviours and how these values are shaped by their social environments.

In all three categories, violent video games were cited as negative influences while parent civic engagement was cited as a negative influence when it came to empathy.

By contrast, a range of positive influences was referred to by those questioned, including parental social responsibility, participation in youth clubs, and participating in activities such as music and drama.

It also found “boys showed lower empathy and social concern than girls”.

In-depth focus group findings showed that many believed that young people are likely to show empathy towards their friends, but may lack empathy for “others” who are different from them.

One 17-year-old said: “We don’t want to do anything out of the norm for fear of not being accepted.”

As for the role of schools, the report notes “a conflict between the high-level policy aims of educating students for the workforce and educating young people for positive citizenship, with a strong case for universal youth work provision”.

It states that some youths feel social media encourages narcissism and “can desensitise young people from caring about societal issues”, but can also connect young people to the wider world and make them aware of social issues.