Many parents worry about the influence that the media has on their teen. You may have even heard news reports following violent incidents that single out certain celebrities, or blame violent video games, as the cause of all teen aggression. But does the television your teen watches, or the games they choose to play, really have the potential to change their behavior?

The answer to this question is a definite yes. Based on the work of Stanford psychologist Albert Bandura, we know that teens do learn in part by watching. This means that they do often watch, and then imitate, the behaviors they see in movies and games. But before you worry that your teen is going to start acting like a vampire, or that you will find them preparing for the zombie invasion, it is important to recognize that teens do not just mindlessly copy everything they see. However, research has shown that there are some things that can increase the chance your teen will choose to observe and imitate.

What increases the chance that your teen will copy the behaviors they see?

- Teens are more likely to copy anyone they see as a role model, especially when that role model seems to be rewarded for their behavior (e.g., Celebrities given fame and fortune for acting bad).
- Teens are more likely to copy the behaviors of anyone they see as similar to themselves (e.g., boys are more likely to copy other boys and student athletes to copy professional athletes).
- Video games are especially influential because they allow your teen to have the active first-hand experience of playing.
- Teens are also more likely to copy real world behaviors. So while the chance that your teen will run into a zombie today is slim, the chance that they will eventually drive a car is much greater. Therefore, teens that play racing games do tend to drive more recklessly in real life.

What you can do.

- **Know your teen’s role models.** Talk with your teen about their role models; make sure they know that sometimes people become famous for the wrong reasons.
- **Focus on real world behaviors.** Remember, they are more likely to copy behaviors from movies and games when they find themselves in similar real world situations (e.g. behind the steering wheel). Express your concern and tie the virtual to the real world.
- **Discuss the consequences.** Movies may end with a daring gunfight, and winning video games may be based on the number of ‘kills’, giving teens a feeling that this behavior is being rewarded. Make sure to discuss the consequences of this behavior in the real world.