



CANADA'S CENTRE  
FOR DIGITAL AND  
MEDIA LITERACY

## Dealing With Fear and Media

Whether it's Darth Vader, the Daleks in *Doctor Who* or the winged monkeys in *The Wizard of Oz*, most of us remember seeing something on screen that we could only watch from behind a couch or under one of our parents' coats: in fact, 90 per cent of adults report an enduring memory of having been traumatized as a child by something they saw on television or in a movie. What we may not remember, however, is how serious and persistent the effects of these frightening moments and images can be. As we guide our children through their media experiences, it's important to realize that what they see can lead to problems like vivid nightmares, fear of the dark, having trouble sleeping and refusing to sleep alone.

These effects are often tied to specific events and images, such as drownings and house fires, which may result in children being unwilling to partake in related activities like water sports or building camp fires. More generally, research has found that heavy television viewing in children is associated with free-floating anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, parents are often unaware of the effect that frightening media can have on their kids, with children consistently reporting being frightened more frequently than parents reporting their children being scared.

Researchers have found that while children in the United States are most likely to have been frightened by seeing age-inappropriate content such as horror movies, Canadian children are more often frightened by animation, science fiction/fantasy, or other content such as news programming. (One-fifth of Canadian children did report being frightened by horror, however.) In general, there are three main situations when children are frightened by media: when they can see someone or something that can cause injury, when they see someone who has been or is being injured, and when someone – especially a child – is shown as defenceless or vulnerable.<sup>2</sup>

There are several reasons why parents may miss these scary episodes for kids. Children sometimes hide their fear because they want to appear mature, especially if they're co-viewing with older friends or siblings. Similarly, they may keep their fear a secret because they don't want to be excluded – or have their parents limit what they can watch. Boys may hide their fears more than girls because they are socialized to be less emotionally expressive. Teens will also intentionally expose themselves to scary images for the thrill, often in groups, as a “rite of passage” into adolescence.

---

1 Cantor, J. “The Media and Children’s Fears, Anxieties, and Perception of Danger.” In *Handbook of children and the media*, eds. Dorothy G. Singer, Jerome L. Singer. Thousand Oaks, Calif. : Sage Publications, 2012.

2 Unterstell, Sabrina and Amelie Muller. “I was very creeped out and my heart was racing’: Fear in front of the screen – retrospective view of childhood TV experiences.” *Television*, Summer 2014.



## What frightens kids in media

What frightens children can change as they get older and become more aware of the differences between fantasy and reality. Here's a quick guide to the things that most frighten kids at different ages:

- **3-5-year-olds:** This age group is most frightened by things that *look* scary; whether something is really dangerous – or even real – is much less important. A scary looking animal, person, or thing in the dark has the most impact. Because they are not yet able to distinguish between reality and fantasy, witches, ghosts and monsters (even cartoony versions that would be funny for older kids) can be very frightening to them. Sudden or strange movements and transformations also elicit strong reactions from young children: changes like Bruce Banner turning into the Hulk, for example, may be extremely frightening.
- **6-8-year-olds:** At this age children are still most frightened by overtly scary images, but they're starting to become aware of the difference between fantasy and reality. They are also becoming more interested in action-oriented programming, such as superhero movies and cartoons, which may contain frightening or disturbing material. Six-to-eight-year-olds are more likely than younger children to watch media aimed at older kids, which they may not be ready for.
- **9-12-year-olds:** Pre-teens are much less likely to be frightened by scary images or fantasy creatures; their fears centre instead on real-life dangers such as injury and death. Children in this age group are more likely to fear for their personal safety and for the well-being of their loved ones, so media depictions of children or parents in danger can be very upsetting. Kids this age are also starting to consume more media aimed at adults, so TV dramas and news can fuel their fears.
- **Teens:** Younger teens share many of the same fears as 9-12-year-olds and begin to adopt some shared by adults as well. These can include fear of embarrassment or ostracism as well as fears of large-scale catastrophes such as natural disasters and war. Teens and adults who are heavy media consumers may experience what has been dubbed “Mean World Syndrome,” which leads to greater fear of crime and distrust towards others.<sup>3</sup> This is attributed to the disproportionate amount of violent crime represented in news and entertainment media leading people to believe these types of crime occur at higher rates than they actually do. (For example, despite a dropping crime rate, heavy television viewers believe crime is on the rise.)<sup>4</sup>

## What parents can do

There are several ways to help kids deal with media-induced fears, some that are always effective and some which depend on the age and maturity of the child:

- **Respect their fear:** Don't insist that your kids watch media they find scary and don't tell them that they are being silly, unreasonable or "babies" if they are frightened. Responses like these give kids the message that they have to hide their fears from you. When watching something that might frighten kids, reassure them that you will turn it off if they find it too scary.

3 Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, and Signorielli. "Growing Up With Television: Cultivation Processes". In *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research* (2nd ed), Jennings Bryant and Dolf Zillmann, eds. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 2002. 43-67.

4 Surette, R. *Media, Crime, and Criminal Justice: Images, Realities, and Policies* (3rd ed.). Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2007.



- **Help your kids pick media** that is age-appropriate and has heroes and heroines who are confident and can be seen managing their own fear. Research has found that confident protagonists allow children to be thrilled, rather than frightened, by depictions of danger. (Scooby-Doo was cited as an example because, while some of the characters do show fear, other main characters do not, and after viewing a few episodes children quickly realize that the monsters will be unmasked at the end.)<sup>5</sup>
- **Help them deal with fear:** Young children have to learn how to manage all of their emotions, including fear. Adults can help them do this by preparing them for potentially frightening events or images. If you are watching a TV show or movie where a character is in danger, don't worry about spoiling the suspense if your child asks if the character will be all right. It's more important to defuse their fear by reassuring them. Some children's books, such as the *Scaredy Squirrel* series can help children deal with fear by showing how a character who is afraid deals with these emotions. Finally, very young children often respond well to rituals to manage their fear, such as always checking under the bed before you leave their room for the night.
- **Parent co-viewing:** Watching television and movies with your kids is a great way to be proactive. If frightening, disturbing or violent images come across the screen, don't just change the channel. Instead, take the opportunity to discuss the content with your child and help them work through any fears or worries they may have.
- **Sibling co-viewing:** Younger children look up to older siblings and want to participate in the same media activities. Encourage older siblings to sympathetically respond to their little brother's or sister's fears and to comfort them by simply holding their hand or giving them a hug. As well, ask them to consider their younger siblings when making co-viewing choices.
- **Coping mechanisms:** Physical coping mechanisms such as holding hands are effective ways to get through a scary scene for young children. Closing their eyes has been shown to be ineffective, while having them cover their ears to block out scary music and sudden sounds can reduce the sensory overload that may cause them anxiety. (If something is frightening them to that degree, though, it's probably best to turn it off.)
- **Respect ratings:** Parental rating guides exist for your benefit. Avoid exposing your children to television shows, movies or video games that are rated beyond their age. If possible, pre-screen shows and judge for yourself; you can also ask other parents' advice or search for information on a particular movie, game or television show on one of the many online review sites for parents. Keep in mind the types of things that frighten children your child's age when you make your decision: for younger children, a cartoon will not necessarily be any less frightening than a live-action film.
- **Provide safety guidelines:** If children develop a specific fear, such as a fear of drowning, give them safety rules or enroll them in lessons to help them feel more in control. Not only does this give them the confidence to go about their daily lives without missing out on opportunities, it also helps to make them more risk-aware.

5 Unterstell, Sabrina and Amelie Muller. "I loved it! It was so creepy but not in a way that made me scared.' Thrills in front of the screen." *Television*, Summer 2014.



- **Rationalize their fear:** Explaining away a fear works best with older children. A simple explanation such as “most snakes aren’t poisonous” or “our region has never had a severe tornado” can go a long way. Younger children, on the other hand, often get hung-up on negative words, like “poisonous” and “tornado.” When tragedy or disaster is in the news, it is important to talk about these events with your children. (You can see the MediaSmarts tip sheet [Helping Kids Cope With Media Coverage of War and Traumatic Events](#) for more ideas on how to deal with this.) Ensure your children understand that these events are rare and that they are unlikely to be victims.

