DEALING WITH FEAR AND MEDIA

WHAT FRIGHTENS KIDS IN MEDIA

Research has found that these things are most likely to be scary to children:

- Characters with a weird or threatening appearance, or acting in a threatening way;

- Characters they identify with being threatened and helpless;

- Parents or other caregivers dying or disappearing;

- Dangerous or frightening real-life situations, whether or not they have experienced these themselves;

- Danger intruding on safe spaces, such as a doll coming to life or a child being threatened in their bedroom;

- Music and sounds that signify danger; and

- Death and injury, even if the situation is ultimately a positive one (for instance, one seven-year-old girl was very frightened by an episode of the TV series *Arthur* in which the title character had a cut that became infected, even though he was fine in the end.[1]

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. Characters which older kids would simply see as looking weird, like the humanoid bananas in *Bananas in Pyjamas*, may be frightening to younger children because of that weirdness. Kids at this age also do not understand most of the media cues that are used to show that something should not be taken literally, such as a blurred screen before a dream sequence, so they may be scared by scenes that older kids can distance themselves from and they are as likely to be frightened by animation as by live-action media.

- **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. Kids at this age are better at understanding cause-and-effect, so they are more likely to be scared by anticipating something frightening before it happens. 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.

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[1] Götz, M., Lemish, D., & Holler, A. (2019). Fear in Front of the Screen: Children's Fears, Nightmares, and Thrills from TV. Rowman & Littlefield.

- **9-12-year-olds:** Pre-teens or "tweens" 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, especially slow-burning suspense where they can predict the outcome of a character's bad decisions.

- **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.[2] 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.)[3]

- Tweens and teens are strongly drawn to media experiences that are *thrilling*, both for pleasure and as a way of testing themselves and their boundaries. A thrilling experience is one that has some qualities of fear but ultimately feels safe, such as seeing a character in danger when you know they will prevail in the end. Younger children are less likely to feel thrill because they don't have the context and the media literacy to make them feel safe, but older kids can also sometimes overestimate their ability to deal with frightening content.

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:

- **Let your kids know they can talk to you.** Kids often say they didn't turn to their parents for help after seeing something scary because they were afraid of getting in trouble—either for watching something their parents didn't approve or for getting around parental controls on online content. While it may make sense to impose some consequences for breaking your household rules, that should only come after you've helped your child deal with what they've seen. In general, if they came to you about something upsetting that

2   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.
3   Champagne-Buckley, L. (2019) Media Influence on Perceptions of Crime. Master's Project, University of Houston-Clear Lake.

they saw, a better approach than punishment will be to work with them to help them avoid something like that happening in the future.

- **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, and ask them again if they'd like you to turn it off any time scary content occurs. Any media content can be scary to some kids, even gentle shows like *Arthur* or *Pingu*.

- **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.

- **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. Even if media has some

frightening content, if it has humour it is much more likely to be thrilling than scary for kids in middle childhood and later. (*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. This recognition of *genre conventions* is an early media literacy skill.)[4]

- **Parent co-viewing:** Pointing out media and genre conventions, like the fact that the monsters in *Scooby-Doo* are never real, can also help kids manage fear. You can highlight how music, lightning and camera angles can make something scary, and say things like "Of course Harry Potter will be all right, he's in six more movies." 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.

- **Coping mechanisms:** Physical coping mechanisms such as holding hands or cuddling are effective ways to help kids get over a scary experience. You can also help them distract themselves, such as by reading a familiar book, and reassure them that you will be there if they need you.

- **Help them deal with fear:** Adults can help kids learn *mental strategies* for dealing with scary content in media. These are most effective with

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

older children, but most kids can start to develop them around age eight. These include:

- learning more about a frightening topic, such as snakes, to gain context and feel more in control;

- re-watching the content in a safer context, such as together with parents or with the sound turned off;

- creatively engaging with the scary content, such as drawing a scene where a scary character is defeated or imagining your blanket is an invulnerable shield; and

- reminding yourself that what you saw isn't real. (However, older kids may still be scared of the realistic elements of a scene: they may know that a ghost won't come into their room in the night, for instance, but could still be scared of *someone* coming into their room.)

- **Sibling and friend 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. Having friends and family around also helps remind the child that they are watching something, and is a major factor in whether something will be scary or thrilling.

- **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. (Don't push them to keep doing it, however, if they become scared or agitated.) 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.