



## Scary stuff: what scares children?

It's important for parents and caregivers to remember that television and movies, by their very nature, can expose children to frightening images, events and ideas, many of which they would never experience in their whole lives, without such exposure.

Children see and interpret film and TV content differently from adults, and the impact of scary content can have a quite powerful and lasting impact on children. Exposure to scary content can result in short term effects such as intense fear and crying, and longer term effects such as sleep disturbance, refusal to be alone, concern about being hurt or killed, and dependence on unusual bedtime rituals. Long term disabling fears (for example, of dogs, cats and spiders) can emerge.

So what scares most and at what age, and what really matters?

### What is scary in early childhood (under 7 or 8 years)

- scary visual images. For example, vicious animals, monsters, grotesque, mutilated or deformed characters.
- physical transformations of character, particularly when a normal character becomes abnormal or grotesque. For example, "The Incredible Hulk".
- stories involving the death of a parent
- stories involving natural disasters, shown vividly.

### What is scary in the primary years (7-12 years)

- more realistic threats and dangers, especially those which could really happen to a child
- violence, or the threat of violence
- stories in which children are hurt or threatened.

### What is scary in early adolescence (13 years and up)

- realistic physical harm or threats of intense harm
- molestation or sexual assault
- threats from aliens or the occult.

Source: Cantor, Joanne (1998)

### What parents can do

#### Avoid programs with scary stuff

Choose programs or films that are classified as suitable for the age group of your child. On TV, choose P for Preschool, C for Children of primary school age or G for General exhibition. At the movies, choose films classified G.

However, with both media, you need to be aware that not all programs classified G will necessarily be entirely appropriate for a child under 7. You may need to ask friends or check reviews to see if the program or film contains some of the scary images listed above. (See related topics: *Choosing the best—reviews*)

Avoid programs classified PG or above, and "The News". (See related topic: *Watching the TV news*)

Keep the TV or VCR out of the child's bedroom

#### What parents can do after the event

##### For preschoolers

- take them away from the scary situation
- be sympathetic about the fear
- be with them and provide comfort and attention
- divert them with a drink or a snack
- remember that explanations won't help much.

##### For older children

- if the program is a fantasy, help them to understand that fantasy things don't happen
- for real threats: tell children that "it's never happened here".
- be sympathetic to their fears
- seek your child's cooperation in avoiding similar exposure
- seek professional help if fears become uncontrollable.

### Related topic

How to debrief after harm is done

### Further reading

Cantor, J. (1998) *Mommy, I'm scared: How TV and Movies Frighten Children and What We Can Do to Protect Them* (US: Harcourt Brace)



### For more information about Children and the Media, call the Young Media Australia Helpline

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