

# Empowering Parents and Teachers to Protect Children

by Joanne Cantor

Parents across the country are feeling powerless to control the impact of our increasingly intrusive and disturbing media culture. They have concerns that certain images are unhealthy for children, but many of them are unaware of what the research says about the risks of exposure to inappropriate content. Child care providers and teachers also often wonder what their policies should be about showing television and movies to the children under their care. In spite of the fact that many people in the entertainment industry still deny that harm occurs, there is a wealth of scientific evidence that can be very helpful to parents, schools, and child care centers in making decisions about children's viewing.

Much public discussion has focused on the important issue of how viewing violence contributes to our children becoming more aggressive. Research has made it very clear that repeated exposure to glamorized and trivialized media violence contributes to children's adoption of violence-prone attitudes and to their emotional desensitization. But in addition to these risks, our frenzied and violent media culture often traumatizes our children, producing severe anxieties and often long-lasting psychological scars.

Joanne Cantor, PhD, a professor of communication arts at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, has been conducting research on the effects of the mass media on children for more than 20 years. Her recent book, *"Mommy, I'm Scared": How TV and Movies Frighten Children and What We Can Do to Protect Them*, gives advice to parents, teachers, and child care staff on these issues. Dr. Cantor has been a consultant to the American



Medical Association and the National PTA, and her research was influential in the public efforts to improve the television rating system. She has appeared on "The Oprah Winfrey Show" and her research has been featured on ABC's "20/20." She is the mother of a ten year old son.

What can parents do — and what can child care programs do — to protect children from the very real risk of extreme and disabling anxieties? The first step is to be educated about the problem. Although many parents are aware that the media can be disturbing to children, most don't realize how widespread and severe the problem is, and most don't know how to predict what will frighten their child or what they can do about it.

## ► Enduring Fear Reactions

The problem is widespread. In a random phone survey of parents of elementary school children, 43% said their child had had a fright reaction that had endured beyond the time of viewing a television program or movie. Of these, almost half said their child could not get to sleep, refused to sleep alone, or was beset by nightmares as a result. Parents cited a wide diversity of content as scaring their children — some children reacted to programs and movies that most parents would expect to be frightening, but others were frightened by programming parents had no idea would be scary. The offending television shows ranged from "Are You Afraid of the Dark?" to "Rescue 911" to "The X-Files," and the movies ranged from "Dumbo" to "Ghostbusters" to "Silence of the Lambs."

Research asking adults to look back on their earlier experiences paints an even more distressing picture of these fright effects. In one study, college students on two different campuses were asked whether or not they had ever been so frightened by a television program or movie that the fear had lasted beyond the time of viewing. The results were astonishing. Of 153 students, 90% had such a story to tell. Many of them wrote vivid, detailed descriptions of a program or movie that had frightened them years earlier, and heart-wrenching details of the repeated nightmares,

obsessive thoughts, and long-term aversions that their exposure had brought on.

Among these students, over half reported disturbances in eating or sleeping, and 35% said they subsequently avoided or dreaded the situation depicted in the program or movie. For example, many reported refusing to swim in the ocean after seeing “Jaws” (some reported giving up swimming altogether!), or fearing dogs, cats, or bugs after seeing a variety of movies featuring these creatures in scary contexts. Even more remarkably, more than one-fourth of these students said the effects had lasted more than a year and that they were still bothered by that program or movie — even though they had seen it an average of six years earlier!

A recently reported vivid anecdote has come from a young woman who saw the PG-rated movie “Poltergeist” at the age of seven at a community run after school program and who is still struggling with panic attacks and a sleeping disorder ten years later.

In short, fear effects from mass media exposure are not to be taken lightly. It is extremely important to be careful about which television programs and movies children view. Many children are frightened even by brief images that they see in promotions for upcoming movies and television shows.

But the picture is not all bleak: Research has also shown how to predict the types of programs and movies that are most likely to frighten children at different ages and how to choose fear-reducing strategies that are effective for different-aged children. An understanding of a few principles of child development helps.

## ➤ What Frightens Children of Different Ages?

When trying to predict the types of media messages that are most likely to frighten young children (approximately two to seven year olds), it is helpful to keep in mind the phrase, “seeing is believing.” First, because this age group is most sensitive to appearances, how things look is of paramount importance. Younger children are more likely to be frightened by something that looks scary but is actually harmless — a friendly mutant or a benevolent monster, for example — than by something threatening with a benign exterior — a handsome villain or a beautiful yet evil witch.

Secondly, because this age group has not fully

grasped the fantasy-reality distinction, they are just as likely to be frightened by something that’s totally impossible — a sorcerer casting an evil spell — as by something that’s realistic and can actually harm them — a kidnapper or burglar. The fact that something could never happen in the real world does not make it any less frightening to this age group.

By the later elementary school years (around ages eight to twelve), children become more sensitive to media stories about things that are dangerous but may not look scary, and those that are realistic as opposed to fantastic or impossible. Children in this age group become increasingly sensitive to threats conveyed by the news — events they understand actually happened and could well happen again — this time, to them.

Younger children are not immune to the news, however. They respond most strongly to real disasters that are conveyed visually, such as vivid video clips of tornadoes, earthquakes, and house fires. Older children are more frightened by news stories of kidnapping, murder, and molestation, especially if the victim is a child.

## ➤ Reassuring Frightened Children

But we cannot effectively protect children from all frightening content. What can be done to calm a frightened child? Again, age makes a big difference. In general, for two to seven year olds, explanations are less effective than nonverbal solutions: a hug, a glass of water, or a distracting activity might help. Older children are more responsive to reasoning.

A reminder that what they are seeing is make-believe can help, but only if the scary events are impossible, as in a fairy tale. If what they have seen can happen in the real world, it can help to give older children truthful, reassuring information, especially information on why the horrible thing can’t happen to them or how they can prevent it from happening.

For all ages, the sympathetic attention of a concerned adult is probably the best medicine for a frightened child. Certainly, the worst thing to do is to ignore, belittle, or criticize a child for being frightened. It is also important to recognize that many children are drawn to the very images that can harm them — so parents need to learn to talk to their children about their media choices in ways that enlist their child’s cooperation, rather than increasing the allure of the “forbidden fruit.”

## ➤ New Means of Parental Empowerment

Parents and other caregivers need accurate information

about the content of shows before making decisions about what's appropriate for children to view. We've had the Motion Picture Association of America's (MPAA) movie rating system for 30 years, which can be helpful in ruling out the most obviously inappropriate content. However, many PG-rated movies have traumatized children, and even a G-rated movie is not necessarily safe for preschoolers. What's more helpful than these vague age recommendations is information about the content of programs.

Some recent happenings on the public policy scene are providing us with better information and more sophisticated ways of protecting our children. Thanks to the "Parental Choice" section of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, we now have television ratings to help parents predict the content of television programs. The ratings are composed of a series of age-guidelines, such as TVY7, and TV14, plus content indicators, such as V for violence and S for sex (see box). In addition to being presented briefly at the beginning of most programs, these ratings work with the v-chip, a device that will soon be manufactured in all television sets that are 13 inches or larger. With a v-chip, parents can decide which ratings are inappropriate, and use the v-chip to automatically block programs with those ratings. Those programs will not be accessible unless the parent chooses to undo the blocking.

One loophole in the television rating system is that news programs — many of which are so traumatic to children — are exempt from ratings. The v-chip is not mandated to allow parents to block unrated programs — although some manufacturers of television sets will provide this option. There are also set-top boxes on the market to retro-fit an old set to the v-chip.

Parents should explore which v-chip features are offered when selecting their next set or a v-chip set-top box. Both television ratings and the v-chip are new, and it will take some time before parents find the most effective ways to use them for their family. But these innovations are indeed a step in the right direction.

### ► Making Sure Our Voices Are Heard

Beyond learning about the research and the strategies that may be effective in our own homes and child care venues, the second step we can take is to speak out and be sure our opinions are heard. Both television ratings and the v-chip have come about as a result of pressure from parents to give us tools to help us protect our children. Not only did Congress listen to parents' desires in passing the Telecommunications Act, they heard our complaints about an earlier version of the television

## A Guide to the Amended TV Rating System

### Children's Programs

- TVY** For All Children
- TVY7** Directed to Older Children
- FV** Fantasy Violence

### General Programming

- TVG** General Audience
- TVPG** Parental Guidance Suggested
- V** Moderate Violence
- S** Sexual Situations
- L** Infrequent Coarse Language
- D** Some Suggestive Dialog
- TV14** Parents Strongly Cautioned
- V** Intense Violence
- S** Intense Sexual Situations
- L** Strong Coarse Language
- D** Intensely Suggestive Dialog
- TVMA** Mature Audience Only
- V** Graphic Violence
- S** Explicit Sexual Activity
- L** Crude Indecent Language

industry's rating system — a system that was so vague and counterproductive that the television industry was pressured to amend it. As a result, a compromise system was developed, which added the letters that specify the content that prompted a particular rating.

What we have learned from the controversy over the rating system is that parents do have a voice in these matters; and when the chorus is large, it is heard with resounding clarity. Parents can speak out and make their feelings known to other parents, to schools and child care centers, to their local news media, to the producers of entertainment, to television stations and movie houses, to the oversight boards for the television and movie ratings systems, to electronics manufacturers who are designing television blocking devices, to child advocacy groups, and to politicians — their congressional representatives, senators, and the Federal Communications Commission.

In an increasingly disturbing media culture, we need

both the knowledge and the power to protect our children from unnecessary psychological harm. The stakes have never been higher.

## ► References

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Paik, H., & Comstock, G. (1994). The effects of television violence on antisocial behavior: A meta-analysis. *Communication Research, 21*(4), 516-539.

## ► Useful Contacts for Ratings and the V-Chip

### **Television Ratings:**

TV Parental Guidelines Monitoring Board  
PO Box 14097  
Washington, DC 20004  
tvomb@usa.net  
www.tvguidelines.org

### **Movie Ratings:**

Classification and Rating Administration  
Motion Picture Association of America, Inc.  
15503 Ventura Blvd.  
Encino, CA 91436  
www.mpa.org

### **Television Policy and the V-Chip:**

Federal Communications Commission  
1919 M Street NW  
Washington, DC 20554  
www.fcc.gov/vchip