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# “That’s Too Scary for You”

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**How do children under five process frightening images differently from an older child or adult?**

Children under five do not understand the difference between real and pretend. This is hard for adults to imagine, especially because children this age do know how to pretend; they can “feed” a baby doll, they can pretend a row of chairs is a “train.” However, when children do these pretend things, the games feel real. If you, with a straight face, tell a young child that the “train” he is sitting on is on fire, he may be genuinely afraid. If you spank a baby doll in anger, a child may feel as shocked and afraid as if he had seen you do it to a real baby. If you put on a scary mask, a young child will not be completely sure that beneath the mask you are still you, that is until you take it off.

That children under five regularly confuse fantasy with reality is an accepted fact of early childhood development and is explored at length in many books about young children. Yet, it is a very hard concept for adults to understand. Perhaps there is a time in your own experience when you watched a scary slasher movie and then felt afraid as you walked along a lonely dark street.

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You knew that the movie was not real. You knew that there was no bogeyman lurking in the bushes. Still, you were afraid anyway. Then imagine how intense must be the feelings of a child who does not know that the movie wasn’t real, who believes in the bogeyman.

**My child loves scary movies – why would he want to watch something if it was too scary for him?**

Children, like adults, do their best to get control over the things they fear. People have developed countless ways of making themselves afraid as a

way of conquering fear: horror films, roller coasters, extreme sports, violent video games, haunted houses, and macabre reality shows like "Cops" and "America's Most Wanted." These things give people a chance to practice being afraid in situations that are more controlled than real life.

It is interesting that most adults have strong feelings about the kinds of activities and media listed above. They love roller coasters or hate them, love horror movies or hate them, love reality shows or hate them, etc. Some adults find these vehicles useful and interesting and cathartic; others find them stressful and nerve wracking. Many adults find scary movies disturbing even though they are not real; many adults find roller coasters terrifying even though they are proven safe; and many adults find reality shows too real for comfort even though they are heavily scripted and edited.

Some children who are exposed to scary media feel compelled to master their fears by forcing themselves to feel afraid. They beg for the same scary movies over and over. They ask you to buy every monster and skeleton toy in the store. They talk non-stop about ghosts, goblins, witches, guns, wolves, whatever they find most terrifying.

But this method of mastering fear backfires on the young child because each new monster toy, each new werewolf mask, each viewing of "The Sopranos" only makes him more afraid and, in turn, more compelled to keep watching. Because a young child cannot distinguish properly between real and pretend, he cannot "practice" fear the same way an adult can. Adult vehicles for mastering fear are not useful to a child because for him, they are not vehicles. They do not give him a sense of control over his fear; they do not make him feel stronger or more protected; they only make him more afraid.

**Some children feel compelled to master fears by forcing themselves to feel afraid, but this method backfires.**

### **What are the signs that a child feels scared?**

Children under five, and especially children under three, have a hard time articulating their feelings on their own. It is often left to the adult to interpret a child's emotions by watching his behavior. If you've spent a long day at the zoo and your child is acting cranky and willful, you can guess that he's tired and that it's time to go home. Your child probably won't

say, "I'm tired from my long day and I'd like to go home now," (in fact, he might insist he's ready for another three hours at the zoo), but you can interpret his behavior and know how he is really feeling.

Similarly, a child who is used to watching things that scare him might not even realize that he is scared. He might insist that he is not scared. This is a technique also used by adults – perhaps if I keep saying I'm not scared, then I won't be. He may or may not show the signs of being scared that we expect (e.g. crying, hiding). Children who feel overwhelmed by scary images often express their anxiety in indirect ways. Withdrawal, aggression, distractibility, hyper-vigilance, insomnia (or frequent wakings), regression, separation issues and learning difficulties can all be symptoms of anxiety. A child who is afraid may also be unusually obsessed with the very things that scare him, even to the exclusion of other more age-appropriate interests.

## **He might insist that he is not scared.**

### **What can an adult do to help a child who seems to want to be scared?**

A child who seems to want to be scared really just wants to feel not-scared. This seems contradictory, but it really isn't. The adult who rides the roller coaster wants to feel scared and then have the relief of being safe and sound (not-scared) when the ride is over. The child who begs for yet another scary toy or video is hoping against hope, although he can't articulate it, that this toy or this video will be the one which ultimately helps him master his fear and feel safer when it's over. But, of course, this never seems to work.

What will work is having an adult put a stop to a child's quest for feelings of safety and protection by keeping him safe and protected from the things that scare him. This includes protecting him from things that are real as well as things that are not.

Adults can make a child feel safe by shutting out the things that a child believes can hurt him. Imagine the child who believes that Frankenstein is real. Then imagine the relief that child feels when his parent says, "I will not allow Frankenstein in this house. I won't let you see him and I won't let him see you. I'm sending this video back to the store and we will never watch it again. I am taking every Frankenstein toy in this house and putting it in a box and closing it with tape and putting it in the basement." In another example, think of the child who stands petrified in a haunted

house filled with live ghouls and creepy ghost noises. Then think how good it must feel to that child to have a parent come in, scoop him up close and say, "This is much too scary for a little boy. I'll get you out of here and we'll go to the playground instead."

In the same way that you protect your child physically by forbidding him to play near the street, even if he wants to, you protect him emotionally by forbidding him to be exposed to things that are too scary for him, even if he wants to.

### **What are some appropriate ways of helping a child master fear?**

Children, like adults, do need to feel control over their fears, and there are techniques for doing this that are useful for children. These techniques work because they help the child stop feeling afraid; they give him resolution and a sense of security. Here are just a few:

1. Books written for young children which address the issue of fear: *Go Away Big Green Monster*, *Holes and Peeks*, *Gilberto and the Wind*, *Barney is Big*, *Flashlight*, *There's a Nightmare in My Closet*, *The Dreameater* (ages four and up), *The Quilt*, *Thunderstorm*, *Thundercake*, *Tales of Amanda Pig* (the monster chapter), *Brave Horace*, and many more.

2. Pretend play with age-appropriate toys. Children can use simple animal figures and playdough to work out many fears, using their own imaginations as guides. Useful dramatic play props are: un-threatening dress up clothes, "career" doll figures (police officers, doctors, family figures, etc.), and puppets. Older children can also begin using art materials to express and work through fears.

3. "Therapeutic" play with adults. There are many things adults and children can do together to help children resolve fears. They can make personalized "flap books" which allow children to hide and find the images that scare them. They can symbolically pack up scary toys or videos in boxes which can be taped up and put away "where they can't be scary anymore." They can play child-friendly games like hide-and-seek that involve a tolerable amount of sneaking around and surprising.

This issue of limiting the kinds of media content children are exposed to is a complicated one for adults. Children often insist that they are not scared, that they are old enough, that they do like this show or that movie. You might like the show or movie yourself or even remember liking it as a child (although probably, if you remember it well, you were older than five

when you first saw it). It is certainly easier just to let your child watch a video or program, especially if it's one you want to watch as well, than it is to say

**Imagine the relief that child feels when his parent says, "I will not allow Frankenstein in this house."**

no and find an alternative. And finally, limiting the content your child is exposed to does not always

feel good or rewarding, and often results in arguments and tantrums.

However, the benefits of setting these limits are their own rewards. Children who are free from unnecessary fear are more relaxed, more open to new things, more outgoing, more focused, more assertive, more creative, and more confident. They are able to spend more time and energy doing things young children should be doing: playing, interacting, talking, listening, thinking, exploring, and expressing and appreciating who they are.

*This article is a selection from NotesHome, a collection of notes written for parents and caregivers by Meredith Gary and Kate Delacorte, co-directors, The Downtown Little School in New York City.*