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# “I had nightmares for ages”

## What overwhelms children when they watch television with the family

**In this IZI study, children were asked what frightened and overwhelmed them emotionally when watching TV with the family, and students described their memories of fears related to television in their childhood.**

I am still afraid of swimming in murky waters even though I'm a good swimmer" – 24-year-old Markus cannot forget the shark attacks in the film *Jaws* even though he watched the film 18 years ago. Television experiences can trigger fears that result in prolonged reactions. In student surveys in the USA, 90 % of the participants claimed that at least once in their lives they had become so frightened whilst watching television that they had had physical reactions that in part lasted for a longer period of time. 52 % of the students documented sleeping or eating disorders, and a third of the students found that their television-induced fears had transferred over into real contexts (cf. Harrison/Cantor 1999). While children from about 8 years old tend to be frightened by the depiction of real dangers and violence, such as on the news (cf. e.g. Walma van der Molen/Bushman 2008), younger children develop fears around fictional subject matter too. These are fears which adults cannot always comprehend, such as the fear of supernatural and fantastical beings, figures with a threatening appearance, evil facial expressions, loud noises or darkness (cf. e.g. Cantor 2003). However, it is certainly not the case

that children are only unable to cope emotionally when viewing content that is not age-appropriate. A survey of parents conducted in Finland shows that preschoolers' fear of content in children's television programmes has increased over a period of ten years, and that fewer adult programmes are causing television-induced fears (cf. Korhonen/Lahikainen 2008).

For children, parents play an important role in how they deal with frightening content. In a survey of children in the USA, children refer to their strategies for overcoming fear. The children said that the most effective processes of overcoming fear during and after watching television were those in which their parents were involved (cf. Cantor et al. 2007).

To what extent, though, does the presence of parents protect children from frightening television experiences, and at what point is a child overtaxed when watching television with his/her family? In summer 2008, 63 nursery and primary school children between the ages of 5 and 11 drew pictures of a frightening television experience in the family and were interviewed individually.

Under the same remit, 135 adult students across Germany<sup>1</sup> were asked to complete a questionnaire on their retrospective impression of earlier television experiences. The children's and students' statements and drawings were evaluated in combination with an analysis of the actual programme and film sequences that were mentioned by the respondents (cf. Holler/Bachmann 2009).

### When do children watch frightening content?

At least one third of those surveyed were frightened when watching scenes from age-appropriate programmes (i.e. broadcast in Germany without an age-limit or rated suitable for audiences under 12 years of age), however the majority said their fears were caused by non-age-appropriate content (i.e. rated suitable by German authorities for ages 12 and older) like the aforementioned *Jaws*.

In general, children described situations in which they were with adults significantly more often than situations in which they were only with their siblings. There are a number of possible reasons why children are experiencing emotional strain even when watching television under the supervision of adults. On the one hand, parents or grandparents are not well enough informed about the content of films, and so they assess the programme wrongly:

“Grandpa said it was a film about animals. It was *Jaws*” (Markus, 24 years old, watched the film at the age of 6). On the other hand, there were cases of children watching television secretly while parents were watching, or coming into the room unexpectedly: “I was already in bed, and then I went to my mummy because my nose was really running. And then I saw this monster doing something on this mountain, and after that I couldn't get to sleep again” (Martin, 10 years old, on Gollum in *Lord of the Rings*).

In most cases, however, parents



Ill. 1: The Yip-Yips from *Sesame Street*, drawn by Jana, 21 years old (left), screenshot (right)

consciously chose to watch the programmes with their children that the children in our study remembered as being fear-inducing. This shows that when watching television together, programmes are often not chosen according to the needs of the youngest viewers.

### What is frightening?

#### Threatening characters

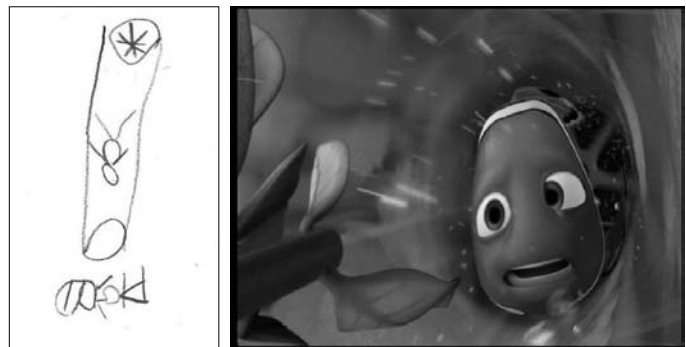
Children are afraid of creatures that represent danger in a filmic context, have supernatural powers and often have a threatening appearance: “This face, it’s really stupid. I think it’s really stupid. The teeth and the eyes,” says 5-year-old Paul, who is drawing a ghost he still has nightmares about, “Then he looked at me.” 7-year-old Nils had a similar reaction when watching Voldemort in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*: “One of them has a headscarf on like this, and he had a face on the back of his head too. It looked really creepy. Then I cried out for my mummy in the night.” In particular, it is creatures with supernatural and fantastical powers, such as the witches in the feature film *The Witches*, the “lizard in *Monsters Inc* who can make himself invisible” (Tim, 6 years old) or a metal statue in the cartoon series *Nils Holgersson* which “just came to life like that” (Finn, 7 years old) that often make a great impression on children and are perceived as disturbing. It is mainly younger children who

are affected by these characters, because their egocentric-magical way of thinking (cf. Neuß 1999) blurs the boundary between the fictional and the real: “I had trouble getting to sleep at night because I was afraid my soft toys would turn into ugly gremlins. Then I put the toys away,” remembers 24-year-old Sandra (watched the film *Gremlins* when she was 8 years old). In addition, children are even afraid of creatures that are actually harmless yet have particular features which make them appear threatening. For example, 8-year-old Max was frightened by a Chinese New Year dragon in a television documentary: “First they showed us really nice things about China – beautiful temples and things like that – and then suddenly this strange ghost came.” *Edward Scissorhands* is also considered disturbing because of his appearance, even though he is by no means evil. Even characters from preschool television can disturb children, e.g. the Yip Yips, two aliens in *Sesame Street*: “They could make themselves invisible at will and appear again elsewhere. I was always afraid that they would disappear in the televisi-

on and appear again in my room,” recalls 21-year-old Jana (watched *Sesame Street* at 5 years old, see ill. 1).

#### Scenes full of suspense

Tension is mostly created when the viewer connects to a character he/she perceives to be in a threatening situation with an uncertain outcome: “And then lots of ships came up and tried to shoot him. He was nearly shot. It came really close to the boy and the fish as it passed them, and he just managed to dive under in time,” says 9-year-old Fiona about the chase at the end of the feature film *The Water Horse*. As well as chase scenes, children also describe scenes in which the hero or heroine find themselves in a precarious situation, for instance the fish Nemo in the animated film *Finding Nemo*: “There was a kind of a saw, and then the fish slipped in there, and I was afraid he would go right up to the saw in there, and that it would turn and that his friends would have to try and hold on to him. I nearly started



Ill. 2: Nemo in a tight spot, drawn by Lena, 7 years old (left), screenshot from *Finding Nemo* (right)

crying, but his friend saved him in the end,” says Lena, 7 years old. The girl’s drawing emphasizes just how far children can even identify with non-human characters in moments of tension (see ill. 2). The figure in the pipe looks much more like a human than a fish. Even scenes in which there is no threat of concrete danger can frighten children just because of the atmosphere they create. 5-year-old Martina talks about an episode of the pre-school programme *Jasper the Penguin*: “It’s night, and Jasper walks around the tent, and that’s when I get scared.” This very scene makes it pretty evident that there is no lurking danger. Jasper is camping with his friend Emma; he starts to feel too hot, so he tiptoes around the tent and inadvertently makes a noise. In the meantime, Emma is shown looking frightened by the noises – not knowing that it is Jasper who is causing them – trembling and pulling the blanket over her head. Preschool children are not yet able to process comprehensive storylines, they react strongly to individual images. It is the clearly visible fear of the trembling Emma that is in the foreground of their reception. A further instance of tension arises when confronted with the themes of “loneliness and abandonment”: the death of Bambi’s mother, Dumbo’s separation from his mother, who is imprisoned, or the capture of Nemo, which his father is powerless to prevent. These scenes deeply affect younger children in particular, for they awaken primal fears of losing their closest attachment person, inducing a feeling of defenselessness and helplessness.

### Physical injury

Images of murder, blood, injury and agony are particularly shocking and alarming to children. These kinds of scenes were almost exclusively only

to be found in adult programmes. 10-year-old Martina, for example, shows in her drawing what she saw in a trailer during the adverts: “There’s a man with a big flesh wound on his arm, and he was murdered. ... And there was a lot of blood and also lots of dead people.” Depictions which also show how the injury is inflicted leave a particularly deep impression. 22-year-old Ben still today remembers a television experience when he was 8 years old when “a man in *James Bond – Licence to Kill* is impaled on a forklift truck and rammed through the wall of a factory hall”, just as the



Ill. 3: The “birth” of an alien, drawn by Peter, 25 years old (left), screenshot from *Alien* (right)

now 20-year-old Natalie remembers the following images from the science fiction thriller *Starship Troopers*: “Someone stabs someone else in the hand with a knife. I cried. It scared me that they would show how one man can do something like that to another. Lots of blood and screaming.” 25-year-old Peter cannot get the images of burst open ribcages in *Alien* out of his head (he watched the film when he was 10 years old; see ill. 3). Images of corpses, too, remain in the long-term memory: “A woman found a hanged corpse hanging from a tree. Its disgusting, blue facial expression really horrified me,” says 26-year-old Jelena, describing a scene that frightened her so much as a 9-year-old child that for a long time she no longer wanted to go into the woods. The only examples given from children’s television were those in which animals were injured. 5-year-old Lilli was frightened by a docu-

mentary in which a penguin is eaten by a seal, and two children talk about the ending of the film *The Fox & the Child*: “A fox fell out of the window and ripped one of its sides right open, and it bled really badly” (Philipp, 7 years old).

### Realistically possible dangers

It is mostly older children who are frightened by representations of realistic kinds of threat. This is not surprising, for as children grow older and able to differentiate more clearly between reality and fiction, they become more aware of real and existing dangers, and they become more afraid of situations they could end up in themselves. Cognitive coping strategies (cf. e.g. Cantor, 2003), which older children with increasing media competence develop, such as telling oneself that this is all just a film, do not work with depictions of realistically possible dangers.

This is what 20-year-old Sarah remembers of a television experience when she was 10: “I was watching the news with my parents, and there was a report on the Belgian child abusers. ... I became afraid of going anywhere alone.”

### The magical and supernatural

Scenes with magical and supernatural elements – often in combination with the themes of death and transformation – are difficult for children to appreciate, and that is why they often seem scary. 10-year-old Luisa talks about the children’s film *Gilles* in which a boy is repeatedly visited by the ghost of his dead father. In one scene the boy stands with his father in the sports stadium while famous dead footballers come onto the pitch. Apart from the fact it is nighttime, the scene is not aesthetically threatening – the undead look like living people – but it does seem “creepy when he went with



him into the ghost town in the middle of the night. There were all these dead people. ... I don't like anything with dead people" (Luisa, 10 years old). 9-year-old Alicia feels similarly uncomfortable when she sees the transformation of the protagonist in the feature film *Catwoman*: "A human can't become a cat, but it looked so real. And actually I'm getting a cat soon, and I'm already afraid that it will breathe on me and then I'll become a cat and turn evil." In this case, in contrast to the threatening beings, it is not the fear of a character that is in the foreground, rather a situation that blurs the boundary between the realistically possible and the unreal, and thereby leaves children feeling unable to cope.

### Conclusion

The results show that children actually are sometimes afraid of scenes that are apparently harmless, and that even the presence of parents often does not protect them from frightening impressions.

The accurate detail in the students'

against the norm can become the impetus for development, overcoming fear and inducing reflexion, especially when well embedded in stories of coming to terms with particular issues (cf. e.g. Rogge 2007). Some accounts by the students and children show that fear can accompany ambivalent feelings. 23-year-old Katrin talks about the film *Watership Down*: "I found the black rabbit – death – uncanny and comforting at the same time. I was simultaneously fascinated and frightened, and at the end I was close to tears." Michael, now 30 years old, recalls how as a child he secretly crept into the room while his parents were watching crime thrillers: "I always found it exciting to get to a point where I couldn't bear it anymore. I enjoyed putting myself to the test and trying to do it again and again."

### Pleasant creepy or pretty scary?

Yet a clear distinction must be made between an appetite for fear, which children can cope with well, and traumatic television experiences, which children do not adequately come to terms with, and which can result in

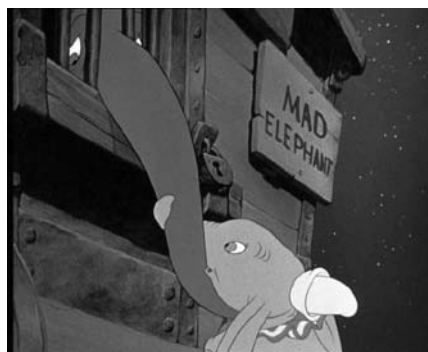
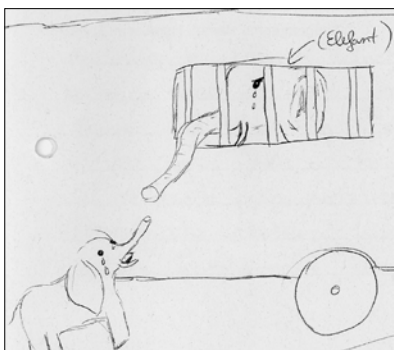
of their role in this. 6-year-old Paula, as well as some other children, say that they have not told their fathers that they are afraid: "No, he just always says, Sssh, be quiet."

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> 106 questionnaires were analyzed. The remaining students could not recall any frightening experience, or they described scenes they had not watched with their families.

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Ill. 4: *Dumbo* loses his mother, drawn by Tanja, 19 years old (left), reception at 4 to 5 years, screenshot from *Dumbo* (right)

drawings shows that these scenes are often remembered for a long time, and that some are often memorized and can still be recalled with great precision years later (see ill. 4).

We should not, however, always regard fear induced by television as wholly negative. A pleasant, creepy feeling or a thrilling transgression

long-lasting fright reactions. It is vital that the children's feelings are handled sensitively. The study shows that the involvement of parents is important in the process of coming to terms with problematic content, both during, as well as after, the reception of the programme. It is even more important that parents are actually aware

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