



Illustrations by Dale Newman

Viewing our media from a child's perspective can be alarming, writes **Wayne Warburton**.

SCARY Screen Time

Since the start of the year, we have witnessed a series of natural disasters, both here and overseas. Most adults I know find media footage of these disasters upsetting and hard to watch. Alongside them (and sometimes alone), many Australian children have watched the same events on news programs and news updates that air throughout the day. More and more parents have been asking me of late if this can harm their child. Typically, their common-sense notion is that watching too much upsetting media must have some negative impact on children. But they would like to know what the scientific research indicates.

The common-sense approach is the one that research also suggests makes sense. In this case, there is a lot of research showing that children who are exposed to upsetting media can become more fearful in the short and long term, that they can develop enduring attitudes whereby they see the world as more threatening than it really is, and that they tend to think that other people want to hurt them.

Across 30 years of research, Professor Joanne Cantor, a research psychologist specialising in media and communications, and director of the Center for Communication Research at the University of Wisconsin, has amassed an impressive and consistent array of findings that have linked exposure to upsetting media with short and long-term fears, and described changes in children's responses to media as they grow older. I have found her work to be particularly relevant to my family. My wife and I have a three-year-old son and an eight-year-old daughter. Both have been upset by things they have seen in the media in recent months, but each has been upset by different aspects. This accords with Cantor's research, which shows that responses to upsetting media depend on a child's cognitive and emotional development.

Younger children are 'concrete' thinkers and make judgements based on the obvious characteristics of a situation. They are afraid of media portrayals of creatures with obviously frightening characteristics, such as monsters and witches, despite the low likelihood of encountering such creatures in real life. This is the way my son responds – he will run and hide when the giant robot appears in *Here Comes The Bride*. In addition, younger children might think that an event seen repeatedly on television is actually a series of new events of a similar type occurring again and again. This means that repeated coverage of natural disasters can have a particularly traumatic effect on younger children.

Research suggests that as children develop the capacity to empathise with others (at about the age of four) and to understand abstract concepts (at about the ages of seven or eight), they start to become less afraid of creatures and situations that cannot realistically harm them. However, they become more afraid in response to media portrayals

of situations that they can imagine resulting in personal harm to them or their family and friends. This is the way my daughter often responds. She has been upset by the plight of children and families in the recent disasters, and has also been concerned that events such as cyclones and earthquakes could affect our family.

Even though the aspects of media that upset children differ according to a child's age, the types of media subject matter that children find upsetting and frightening are similar across ages. In particular, children are scared by interpersonal violence, war and suffering, fires and accidents, and fantasy characters and distortions of natural forms. In the long term, exposure to this sort of media has two types of effect: the first is fears and phobias; the second is stable changes to the ways in which children view the world. About 25 to 33 per cent of adults

and aggressive, and can have negative effects on mental health and relationships.

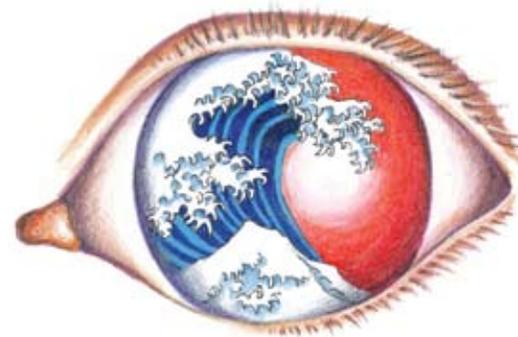
For this reason, I am concerned about children having too much exposure to violent, frightening and upsetting media. I tend to prefer a strategy of limiting access for young children, and encouraging older children to learn to self-regulate their media exposure, to watch purpose-made children's news programs such as the ABC's *Behind The News*, and to avoid the adult news programs.

Sometimes though, kids do see scary media, and the research suggests that a number of strategies are helpful. For younger children, taking them away from the upsetting media, giving them a cuddle, and engaging in physical activities such as holding onto a blanket or toy or getting something to eat or drink, have been shown to be helpful. Older children also like a cuddle, but are more able to talk things

through. When my wife and I talk to our daughter about upsetting things she has seen, we like to find out exactly what it was that she found upsetting, so that we can talk directly about that aspect of the media. Talking through her experience often involves putting an event into a broader context, and letting her know that the adults involved have things in hand. We also talk about the nature of media (the way that 'sensational' events are prioritised in media coverage and tend to seem more common than they really are) and discuss the likelihood of scary things actually happening to our family.

My wife has also encouraged our daughter to take positive action with regard to the scary stuff she has seen. For example, after seeing coverage of a recent disaster, our daughter sent money to a charity to help. This sort of positive response seems to restore a sense of agency and control, and can be helpful in reducing fears.

In the end, I think of media as being like food for the brain. Some food is good for us daily, some food should be eaten only occasionally, and some things should never be eaten. To achieve a balanced media diet for our children, we need to understand the effects of scary media and manage their exposure to it. ●



Children who are exposed to upsetting media can... see the world as more threatening than it really is...

have an enduring fear or phobia stemming from something they experienced in the media as a child. I am one of them. As a teenager I heard a media report of an alleged incident where a razor blade had been inserted into a water slide with chewing gum. I have never been able to bring myself to use a water slide since, despite discovering that this was an urban myth.

As a parent, the effect I find most worrying is that children can also develop enduring changes in the way they think about the world. It is well documented that higher levels of media exposure are linked to the belief that the world is a frightening place, a sense of being in danger in the real world, and a greater tendency to interpret others' behaviours as deliberately hurtful, even when this is not the intention. These beliefs, in turn, can lead to children being more hostile

Dr Wayne Warburton is deputy director of the Children and Families Research Centre at Macquarie University.