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Media Release

REPLAYING DISASTER FOOTAGE CAN REGENERATE CHILDREN'S FEARS

"Parents would be wise to avoid exposing children to replays of footage of disasters such as last year's floods, hurricanes and tsunamis", said Australian Council on Children and the Media Vice-President and child psychologist Dr C Glenn Cupit. He said "Repeated exposure to such footage can suggest to young children that such disasters are occurring again and again, and raises their anxiety levels about such events happening to them. Echoes of past events can regenerate fears".

But even more worryingly, Dr Cupit pointed to new research by University of South Australia researcher Toni Deer which showed that children can be deeply affected by such exposure, but that they may not talk about it to their parents.

Ms Deer's study was conducted with five to seven year old SA children to investigate the potential impact that a range of natural and other disastrous events had on their fears. In the top eight most fearful responses were 4 disasters covered in the media a year ago. The Christchurch earthquake ranked second, the tsunami ranked fifth, the cyclone ranked seventh and the flood ranked eighth most frightening. The nuclear bomb was deemed the most frightening phenomenon and it is possible that this reaction by the children could have resulted from televised coverage of the Japanese tsunami and nuclear meltdown where news footage showed nuclear symbols and nuclear explosions as well as live crosses to the power plant.

Ms Deer said "Although children were significantly frightened of natural disaster phenomena recently telecast as well as other such phenomena (e.g. plane crash, nuclear bomb, bushfire) these fears were only reported when children were reminded of the event through picture card representation and not when children were asked to recall fears."

She continued "This suggests that although children find natural disasters they have been exposed to through media coverage particularly frightening, these fears lie within the deeper recesses of a child's mind and are not easily expressed unless re-exposure to the imagery/event occurs. Because these fears could surface unpredictably and possess a greater intensity than normal childhood fears. it is imperative that adults engage children in conversation about media content to assist children's ability to cope with these fears."

Dr Cupit urged parents not to interpret children's silence or apparent lack of reaction after exposure to scary footage, be it news or movies, as indicating that such exposure had not affected them. Discussion was most important to allow children to express unspoken fears.

ACCM is a national not-for-profit community organization whose core business is the collection of research about children's relationship with media. ACCM provides the free *Know before you Go* movie review service to assist parents in choosing healthy viewing. www.childrenandmedia.org.au

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