



Nightmares

Watching some forms of media content, or watching TV right up to bedtime, can be a contributor to sleep problems and nightmares, especially in young children.

Young children are particularly susceptible to being scared by images in films and on TV.

Joanne Cantor, author of the most helpful *Mommy, I'm scared: How TV and Movies Frighten Children and What We Can Do to Protect Them*, has found that children under age eight are especially vulnerable, for the following reasons:

- they have difficulty with fantasy-reality distinction. What they see is real to them.
- they are extremely responsive to visual images, especially those that are graphic, grotesque and gory—even those shown only for a few seconds
- they have relatively little real world sophistication with which they might put what they see in perspective
- they have great difficulty using information provided to them to cast what they are seeing in a different light (i.e. less threatening or something that shouldn't be copied).

Recent research shows that children's anxiety levels have been steadily increasing since the 1950s (Twenge, 2000), and that children's level of anxieties (Singer, Slovak, Frierson and York, 1998) and their frequency of sleep disturbances (Owens, Maxim, McGuinn, Nobile, Msall and Alario, 1999) are significantly related to the amount of television they watch.

Children who have been scared by something they've seen on TV may need a lot of reassurance. (See related topic [Dealing with harms that have already occurred](#)).

Watching TV right up to bedtime is not a good idea. Children watching TV or a video have been through an emotional experience, and may need time to "work it off".

Time for a bath, reading a story, or a chat with Mum or Dad, will more effectively prepare children for a good night's sleep.

References

Cantor, J. (1998) *Mommy, I'm scared: How TV and Movies Frighten Children and What We Can Do to Protect Them* (US: Harcourt Brace)

Owens, J., Maxim, R., McGuinn, M., Nobile, C., Msall, M and Alario, A (1999). Television-viewing habits and sleep disturbance in school children, *Pediatrics*, 104 (3), 552, e27

Singer, M. I., Slovak, K., Frierson, T., and York, P. (1998). Viewing preferences, symptoms of psychological trauma, and violent behaviors among children who watch television. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 37 (10), 1041–1048

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