



## **Choosing Appropriate Video Media**

Parents can better choose appropriate visual media, which we will refer to collectively as videos, when they understand the emotional issues that are at involved for their children. We will review some important emotional issues and then explain how parents can use their understanding of these issues to inform their choices of visual media. The guidelines are for children six years of age and younger, although parents can adapt these principles for their decisions on behalf of their older children.

**Children need a sense of safety:** Children will develop in an emotionally healthy way when they feel that their world is reasonably safe and predictable. Of course, adults understand that life is not always safe and predictable. Adults can cope well with life's difficult realities if, in childhood, they successfully developed an inner confidence in the world's basic safety and predictability.

Children develop such a confidence when their relationships are loving and dependable, their basic needs and desires are consistently understood and met, and their lives are reasonably predictable and understandable rather than overwhelming and frightening. If at all possible, the safety and predictability that parents create for their children should be sustained until children's basic confidence in the world has been securely developed. The maintenance of childhood innocence throughout the kindergarten years strongly supports children's subsequent ability to deal with harsh realities.

**Children must distinguish reality from fantasy:** Young children must learn the difference between "real" and "pretend." Children must learn many different things about the world in order to be able to distinguish real and

pretend. For example, children must discover that thinking does not cause real things to happen and that dreams occur only inside the mind.

Children must distinguish between reality and fantasy both cognitively and emotionally. Children usually achieve cognitive understanding of this distinction before they achieve emotional understanding. The following examples illustrate common situations in which children's words, indicating their cognitive understanding of the difference between reality and fantasy, are accompanied by actions and concerns that suggest that they do not yet emotionally understand the difference.

- A 4-year-old tells her mother that monsters are not real but insists that she leave on the night-light.
- A 5-year-old informs his younger sibling that dreams are not real but requires the comfort of his parent's bed after a scary dream.
- A 3-year-old indicates that a mask "its just a mask," but insists that no one, most of all herself, put the mask on.
- A 4-year-old has some angry feelings about a parent and seeks extra reassurance, comfort, or attention because he has become worried that his private feelings have affected his parent's love for him.

**Types of videos:** There is an important relationship between the developmental achievements of learning to differentiate real and pretend, and learning to feel safe. Children can only feel safe if they do not misinterpret pretend events as real, or experience inner thoughts and feelings as dangerous. Videos are appropriate when they do not interfere with children's efforts to learn the difference between real and pretend, and thereby feel safer in the world. With these considerations in mind, we can group videos into three categories.

**Videos realistically portraying scary or confusing topics:** Children six years and under should never view videos that contain, in any realistic, forceful, or dramatic way, the following problematic subject matter: bad guys, mean villains, monsters, scary or threatening situations, violence, sexualized relationships, or sexually seductive or explicit scenes. This type of imagery interferes with children's efforts to understand what is real and what

is safe. Too much reality, too soon, interferes with children's ability to establish the building blocks that enable them to successfully address the difficult realities of life. Children should only be offered material that they can readily comprehend. Children may feel that they are unable to figure out their world if they are overwhelmed by themes or complex plots that they cannot understand.

Some parents note that a child repeatedly asks to see certain scary or violent videos and assume that these requests are on the basis of enjoyment. However, it is more likely that the child is attempting to master through repeated exposure something that he or she finds overwhelming or frightening.

**Videos presented as pretend but felt to be real by children:** Some videos present problematic subject matter in a clearly pretend format, such as a cartoon, yet children respond as if the story is realistic. This situation may occur if the problematic subject matter is presented strongly or realistically, or if the story is emotionally real. These videos are also not appropriate for children. An illustration of such a situation occurs when an animal family is portrayed as if it were a human family. Young children often identify closely with animals. Cartoons that deal with the loss of parents, abandonment, mean behavior of adults, dangerous weapons, and sexualized relationships may be understood by children as a direct commentary upon what they might experience or should strive for.

**Appropriate videos:** Appropriate videos for young children do not contain mean villains or monsters, scary or threatening situations, violence, sexualized relationships, or sexually seductive or explicit scenes. Monsters and aggression are acceptable as long as they are presented in a very mild form that is clearly pretend and even silly, such as in old style cartoons. Mr. Roger's Neighborhood is an example of a very appropriate show. Mr. Rogers was responsive to young children's limited understanding and need to feel safe. A video is probably not suitable for young children if you cannot envision how Mr. Rogers would explain and make it completely comfortable for young children. Could he possibly do that with outer space battles, laser guns, car crashes, bank robberies, or unmarried people fondling each other's bodies? Science shows oriented for young children are usually fine, but adult

science shows may disturb children as they often contain images and information beyond the comprehension of children.

**Play it safe:** We encourage parents to limit the use of the video screen as a temporary "baby sitter." Young children need their parents when they are watching any videos, even seemingly appropriate ones, because children may become disturbed and confused. At those moments, a parent's comforting presence and explanations maintain the essential sense of safety and understanding of the distinction between real and pretend.

We also recommend that parents proceed on the side of caution if unsure whether a video will be appropriate for their child. This is a good time to use the Lucy Daniels Center's 90% rule: Present a challenge to your child only if you are at least 90% sure that your child will succeed. With such careful parental judgment, videos can be a tool that adds a modest enrichment to a child's life.