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Helping children live emotionally healthy lives

Movies that are OK for Children

We live in a world that confronts children with more than they can understand. The following provides some ways to think about how to provide guidance and limits for appropriate movies for children of different ages.

Real or pretend?: Children are busy learning the difference between what is real and what is pretend. Distinguishing between these is difficult, especially in today's media-rich world with various virtual-reality experiences.

Some things are real that children don't often see, such as deep-sea squids, while others are not real, even though children do see them, like Dracula. Yes, children can visit squids in aquariums, but they also can see Dracula during a Halloween celebration.

There is another subtler component of a child's task in determining what is real or pretend: learning to distinguish shades of grey and establishing probabilistic assessments. Children have to learn to make judgments about the likelihood of events. The more likely that a worrisome event might occur, the more children - and adults - worry.

For example, children may worry about their house burning down or bad guys or robbers breaking into their home. Fires and bad guys exist, so the worry is not like a Dracula worry. However, because the likelihood of these events occurring usually is remote (tragically not for all children), we would expect a child to make this assessment on the basis of the reality, not exaggerate the danger, and put this concern out of mind.

A safe and predictable worldview: The essential point is that children's healthy emotional development requires their confidence that their world is

safe and predictable. In fact, it is best if their judgment about the safety of the world is a bit rosy, believing "everything will be all right." Of course, adults understand the unpredictability and unsafe aspects of life. But children are not yet adults, and healthy emotional development is best supported by a gradual exposure to life's difficulties, as children's personality strengths and confidence in their abilities to cope and manage are established.

Of course, children are confronted with events that potentially shake their sense of safety, in which case adults help them face these experiences. But although unavoidable in some situations, such exposure is not desirable, and parents should control what they can.

Inappropriate movie content: Children's assessment of their safety is impacted with each exposure to a scary or violent scenario. Their basic sense of reality might be shaken as they become less sure whether or not they are at risk from mean people from another planet with astounding destructive powers. The erosion in their sense of safety is likely to be subtle, especially if their judgments about the likelihood of danger are affected.

Visual media, much more than the written word, conveys an intrinsic reality. Every time children see a violent event in visual media, their judgment about the extent to which their world is filled with potential violence changes.

Some children show anxiety through obvious worries. Often, they reveal their worries through behavior such as "tough guy" activities--such as playing more violent games--or distractibility, inattention and overactivity, which often meets behavioral descriptive criteria for ADHD.

Adult relationship issues represent the other common inappropriate movie content. This includes sexual situations, nudity and complex adult relationships.

Psychoanalysis revealed long ago that children, even in preschool years, have sexual feelings and thoughts and are beginning to sort out the basics of adult relationships. Excessive information (and stimulation) interferes with this natural and growth-promoting curiosity. Overexposure leads to premature knowledge, and sometimes premature interests, without the foundation to support truly healthy relationships and sexuality.

Age-appropriate guidelines: Our guidelines are a bit different for children of different ages.

Children five or six and younger should be protected from videos with 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.

Children age seven and up could tolerate occasional movies that present such content in a mild way, particularly if they are in another time and far away. Anything that seems more fantastical will be better, because it will give more distance, than something that takes place in a neighborhood like their own.

If parents begin to tread in movie territory that makes them feel a bit uncomfortable, they can mitigate the situation by watching the movie at home rather than in the theater. At home, a child has more control over the pace, and parents can watch and talk children through any confusing or distressing moments. If they are troubled, they can watch the video again to help them gain mastery (often presented by children as their excitement about the movie rather than their anxiety).

Parents should keep in mind that protecting children does not mean shielding them from a gradual introduction to life's less-happy realities. It is all about timing and pacing.

Most of all, parents should remember that they are the parent. We know of very few grown-ups, raised in loving homes, who nurture life-long resentments because their parents protected them from inappropriate content – despite their vociferous protests as children about what their friends saw! In fact, our experience is that parents earn their mature children's gratitude when they teach them that it is more important to do what is right than what is expedient.