“People Killing People on the News”: Young Children's Descriptions of Frightening Television News Content

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"People Killing People on the News": Young Children’s Descriptions of Frightening Television News Content

Karyn Riddle, Joanne Cantor, Sahara Byrne, & Emily Moyer-Gusé

This article investigated children’s fear responses to everyday exposure to the news in the absence of a recent crisis or major event. From March to May 2006, a survey was conducted of 218 kindergarten through 6th-grade children regarding their fright reactions to the news. Results showed that 35.3% of children reported being frightened by the news. Reporting on what frightened them in their own words, children most frequently mentioned natural disasters (24.7% of children frightened), followed by kidnappings (10.4% of children frightened), the Iraq War (7.8%), and burglaries (7.8%). A qualitative analysis suggests that some children have vivid memories of disturbing news content. The accessibility of television in children’s households was not related to news exposure or fear. Implications for parental guidance and research methods are discussed.

Keywords: Children and Media; Fright Reactions to the Media; Media Communication; News Content

The last 20 years have seen a surge in research exploring the effects of children’s exposure to television news, with much of that research centering on children’s fear responses. Many of these studies have focused on responses to specific news events or crises, such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks (Saylor, Cowart, Lipovsky, Jackson, & Finch, 2002).
2003), the space shuttle Challenger explosion (Terr et al., 1999), the first Gulf War (Cantor, Mares, & Oliver, 1993), the recent Iraq War (Moyer-Gusé & Smith, 2007; Walma van der Molen & Konijn, 2007), and high-profile crimes (Buijzen, Walma van der Molen, & Sondij, 2007). Taken together, these studies suggest that many children may experience both short- and long-term fear responses as a result of exposure to crises covered by the news.

The focus of this study, however, is children’s fear responses to everyday exposure to the news in the absence of a recent crisis or major event. The literature on this topic is quite sparse (see Table 1). One study has interviewed parents in the absence of a news crisis (Cantor & Nathanson, 1996). Only two known studies of children’s responses to news outside of crisis periods have interviewed children directly (Smith & Wilson, 2002; Walma van der Molen, Valkenburg, & Peeters, 2002).

In an era of around-the-clock news coverage, opportunities for children to be deliberately or accidentally exposed to disturbing news content are ever-increasing. Although this can occur via numerous media outlets (e.g., the Internet, newspapers, and radio), children’s exposure to news reports on television is especially problematic. As the 24-hr cable networks continue to grow in popularity and ratings (Dempsey, 2008), American households have the television turned on for 6 hr per day, on average (Anderson & Evans, 2001), and nearly one-third of children under the age of six live in a household where the television is turned on all or most of the time (Rideout & Hamel, 2006). As a result, there is a growing interest in the potential harmful effects of background television on children (Anderson & Pempek, 2005). Given the strong possibility for children to be exposed—perhaps accidentally—to television news reports at home, research is needed to gain a better understanding of the effects of this exposure.

In particular, it is important to understand the extent to which children become frightened due to news exposure. Thus far, research on children’s fright reactions to the media tends to focus on the effects of fictional media. The accumulated research reveals children experience severe symptoms after exposure to frightening fictional media, such as sleep disturbances, anxiety, and avoidance of depicted events (for a review, see Cantor, 2009). Moreover, many of these symptoms last long into adulthood (Harrison & Cantor, 1999). The research on children’s fear responses to the news is much more limited but, thus far, suggests that some children experience severe fright reactions after exposure to news stories about major crises, such as 9/11 or the space shuttle Challenger explosion (e.g., Saylor et al., 2003; Terr et al., 1999). Given that research on non-crisis news exposure is sparse, however, we still have much to learn about the level of fear and anxiety children experience due to everyday news exposure.

The goal of this study, therefore, is to update the non-crisis news effects literature by providing a further account of children’s fear responses to everyday news reports as they occur in today’s media environment. Furthermore, to generate a more comprehensive account of news topics that frighten children, this study consists of interviews with children in which they describe frightening news content in their own words.
Table 1  Surveys Measuring the Prevalence of Children’s Fear and Worry Responses to Crisis and Non-Crisis News

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author and year</th>
<th>News topic</th>
<th>Child’s age or grade</th>
<th>Operationalizations of fear and worry</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Crisis news research</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Children as participants</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walma van der Molen &amp; Konijn (2007)</td>
<td>War in Iraq</td>
<td>Grades 5 &amp; 6</td>
<td>Fear scale: 4 items ranging from 1 (never) to 4 (very often) (e.g., “When I see news about Iraq, I become frightened”). Worry scale: 4 items (e.g., “I have distressing thoughts about what I see in the news about Iraq”).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buijzen, Walma van der Molen, &amp; Sondij (2007)</td>
<td>The murder of a famous filmmaker</td>
<td>Ages 8–12 (Netherlands)</td>
<td>Fear scale: 4 items rated on 1–4 scale (e.g., “Do you feel scared about what happened to Theo van Gogh?”). Worry scale: 4 items rated on a 1–4 scale (e.g., “Do you feel worried about what happened to Theo van Gogh?”).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terr et al. (1999)</td>
<td>Challenger</td>
<td>Grades 3–10</td>
<td>Children indicated (yes or no) the presence or absence of several Challenger-related fears (e.g., dying and explosions).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hoffner &amp; Haefner (1994)</td>
<td>First Gulf War</td>
<td>Ages 8–12</td>
<td>Trouble sleeping (0–3 scale). Trouble getting the war off their minds (0–3 scale).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wright, Kunkel, Pinon, &amp; Huston (1989)</td>
<td>Challenger</td>
<td>Grades 4–6</td>
<td>Negative affect: eight 4-point questions (e.g., “How did you feel when you first saw the Challenger explosion?”).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monaco &amp; Gaier (1987)</td>
<td>Challenger</td>
<td>Grades K–10</td>
<td>Qualitative study collecting open-ended discussions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sigel (1965)</td>
<td>Kennedy assassination</td>
<td>Grades 4–12</td>
<td>Anxiety index (e.g., “worried how the U.S. would get along without its leader”).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Parents as participants</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smith &amp; Moyer-Gusé (2006)</td>
<td>War in Iraq</td>
<td>Ages 5–17</td>
<td>“Has your child expressed any concern, fear, or upset over anything seen or heard on TV news?” (yes/no).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilson, Martins, &amp; Marske (2005)*</td>
<td>War in Iraq</td>
<td>Ages 5–17</td>
<td>“Has any event in the news concerned, frightened, or upset your child recently?” (yes/no).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Continued)
Table 1 Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author and year</th>
<th>News topic</th>
<th>Child’s age or grade</th>
<th>Operationalizations of fear and worry</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Smith, Moyer, Boyson, &amp; Pieper (2002)</td>
<td>9/11</td>
<td>Ages 5–17</td>
<td>“Has your child expressed any concern, fear, or upset over the TV news coverage of the terrorist attacks in the United States?” (yes/no).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schuster et al. (2001)</td>
<td>9/11</td>
<td>Ages 5–18</td>
<td>Five questions assessing stress symptoms (e.g., “Since Tuesday, has your child been having nightmares?”).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cantor, Mares, &amp; Oliver (1993)</td>
<td>First Gulf War</td>
<td>Grades 1–11</td>
<td>Parents asked if anything on television had disturbed, upset, or frightened their child since the beginning of the year, followed by whether the Gulf War, specifically, had scared their child.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Parents and children as participants

| Van der Voort, van Lil, & Vooijs (1993) | First Gulf War | Ages 9–14 (Netherlands) | Eleven statements rated on a scale of 1–3 (e.g., “the coverage of the Gulf War”). |

Non-crisis news research

Children as participants


Parents as participants

| Cantor & Nathanson (1996) | All news (U.S.) | Grades K–6 | “Has any news story on television frightened or upset your child in the past year?” |

“Although this survey was designed as a non-crisis study to focus on child kidnappings, by coincidence it was fielded during the 2 weeks following the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Most open-ended answers regarding what had frightened the child dealt with the Iraq War.”
Research Questions and Hypotheses

Research has demonstrated that young children do, in fact, watch television news. A national poll in the 1990s found that 65% of children aged 11 to 16 had watched the news on the day prior to responding (Children Now, 1994). More recent research reveals a similar trend: Many children aged 5 through 17 watch the news on a weekly basis, and exposure increases with age (e.g., Smith & Moyer-Gusé, 2006; Walma van der Molen et al., 2002). Younger children are often accidentally exposed to the news, seeing or hearing news stories while their parents are watching (Cantor & Nathanson, 1996).

Children often experience negative emotions after news exposure. Again, most of the literature focuses on fear responses to major crises (see Table 1) and suggests that the prevalence of children’s fear responses to such crises may be widespread. The research on non-crisis news effects also suggests the possibility of children experiencing fear responses in the absence of a major news event or crisis. The prevalence of children’s fright reactions to non-crisis news, however, varies based on how the question is posed and to whom. Cantor and Nathanson (1996) found that 37% of parents reported that their child had ever been frightened by the news. When asking children directly, Walma van der Molen et al. (2002) found that 48.2% of children aged 7 to 12, who had watched the news, said they had ever been frightened. On the other hand, Smith and Wilson (2002) found that only 24% of older children (Grades 4–6) and 8% of younger children (kindergarten–Grade 3 [K–3]) spontaneously mentioned fear in response to the question, “How does the TV news usually make you feel?” To provide a more current assessment of children’s fear responses to non-crisis news, as reported by children themselves, the following research question was posed:

RQ1: What percentage of elementary school children report having ever been frightened by something they saw on the news?

Parents may find it helpful to have an updated account of the types of news stories that are most likely to cause fear. Research conducted in the 1990s surveying both parents (Cantor & Nathanson, 1996) and children (Walma van der Molen et al., 2002) indicated that interpersonal violence by strangers was the category of news content that frightened children the most. It is possible, however, that this is no longer the case in an era of ongoing threats from terrorism and war. To provide an updated account of what children say is the television news content that frightens them, the following research question was posed:

RQ2: What types of television news stories are mentioned as causing fear responses in children in Grades K–6?

Parental Mediation of News

Strategies undertaken by parents to reduce the potential harmful effects of children’s media use have typically been divided into three categories: restrictive mediation strategies, social co-viewing, and active mediation strategies (Nathanson, 1999). Restrictive mediation involves the setting of rules to limit children’s television use.
Social co-viewing refers to parents watching television with their children. Active mediation strategies involve talking to children about television. Although active mediation strategies have been shown to lead to a number of positive outcomes (Corder-Bolz, 1980; Nathanson, 1999; Nathanson & Cantor, 2000), the findings on restrictive mediation strategies and social co-viewing are mixed.

Within the context of the television news, however, the limited effectiveness of restrictive mediation strategies might be especially pronounced given the manner in which children are exposed to television news stories. After all, many children accidentally see the news because their parents are watching (Cantor & Nathanson, 1996); therefore, rules limiting a child’s television-viewing habits, in general, may have no impact on his or her television news exposure. Parents may not think to extend their child’s television-viewing rules to the news, perhaps assuming children are not paying attention to or comprehending news content. In addition, parents may think the news is “educational,” and may, consequently, reserve their restrictions for entertainment television. Therefore, there is reason to suspect that restrictive mediation strategies may be especially ineffective at preventing children’s exposure to the news. To explore this possibility, the following research question was posed:

RQ3: Will children’s exposure to the news be related to their families’ use of restrictive mediation strategies?

In the case of older children, restrictive mediation strategies could actually increase fear responses to the news. Although there is limited research exploring mediation strategies in the context of the news, one recent study (Buijzen et al., 2007) found that restricting third- and fourth-grade children’s exposure to a particular news story increased the relationship between news exposure and fear. Two explanations were suggested for this finding. First, it is possible that this restrictive mediation strategy enhanced negative expectations and attention to the particular news situation, leading to even greater anxiety and worry. Second, due to the negative relationship between restrictive mediation strategies and family communication patterns (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2005), perhaps restricted children who were inadvertently exposed to this news story felt they could not talk about their emotions with their parents. Therefore, restrictive mediation strategies may increase fear responses to the news for older children.

On the other hand, research into coping strategies suggests that avoidance techniques should be a successful means of helping younger children (i.e., under 8 years old) cope with their fears. Younger children, who have limited cognitive processing capacity, are more likely to use non-cognitive coping strategies, such as cuddling a blanket or turning off the television, to handle their fear reactions (Cantor, 2009). Given that restrictive mediation is an example of an avoidance technique, this might be an effective way to prevent fear responses to the news in younger children. Therefore, the following hypothesis was posed:

H1: Restrictive viewing strategies will be more successful in preventing fear responses from the television news for younger (Grades K–2) than older (Grades 3–6) children.
Method

Participants

A total of 218 children who attended one of two public elementary schools in California participated in the study between March and May 2006. The sample was nearly evenly divided by gender: 107 (49.1%) were boys, and 110 (50.5%) were girls. One student neglected to indicate his or her gender. Ninety children were in the “younger” group (i.e., K–2), and ranged in age from 5 to 8 years ($M = 6.5$); 128 children were in the “older” group (i.e., Grades 3–6), and ranged in age from 8 through 12 years ($M = 9.9$).

Because it can be difficult to collect demographic data from children, school-level statistics can be used to describe our sample in terms of ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Both schools had similar racial diversity, with just over 60% of the students identifying as Caucasian, about 20% identifying as Hispanic, and the remaining 20% identifying as “other.” One school reported economic makeup in terms of free lunch, with 21% of the students at the school qualifying for lunch benefits. The other school reported that 43% of the students would be considered socioeconomically disadvantaged by state standards.

Procedures

The study was approved by institutional review boards at the institutions where we were affiliated at the time of the study. Written parental permission was obtained for each child (with a 46.0% response rate). To accommodate the younger children’s lack of fluency with writing, children in Grades K–2 were individually interviewed by researchers who wrote down the child’s answers; children in third through sixth grades filled out the same questionnaire independently in small groups ($n = 20–35$) while a researcher read the questions aloud to the group. After the questionnaires were completed, all children participated in a media literacy lesson to reduce any fears that may have been reawakened by remembering frightening events.

The data presented here were part of a larger study exploring children’s fright reactions to the mass media, and some of the variables reported here were analyzed in an earlier publication (Cantor, Byrne, Moyer-Gusé, & Riddle, 2010). The questionnaire consisted of demographic questions, questions inquiring into family rules about television use, a series of closed- and open-ended questions probing children’s fright reactions to fictional entertainment media, and questions about children’s exposure to the news.

Measures

Television news exposure and fear responses. Exposure to the news was assessed through a yes or no question in which participants were asked, “Do you ever see the news on TV?” If participants answered “yes” to this question, they were next asked, “Have you ever seen anything on the news that made you scared?” (yes or
Participants who indicated having been scared by something seen on the news were next asked, “What did you see that scared you?” Participants then described, in their own words, the news content that scared them.

Answers to the open-ended questions were categorized by two coders who were trained in the coding schemes and worked independently. Intercoder agreement was 100% for all measures reported in this article. Some children referred to multiple news events; therefore, each coding category was coded as being present or absent in the child’s open-ended response.

*Rules about television use.* Children were asked three questions about their family’s rules regarding television use. All three questions were categorical, yes/no questions. The first asked, “At home, are there any rules about when you can watch TV (like what times of day you are allowed to watch)?” The second question asked, “At home, are there rules about how long you can watch TV (like how many hours you can watch)?” Finally, participants were asked, “Are there any TV shows that you are not allowed to watch?” To further assess parents’ restrictions of television use, children were asked how many TVs they have in their house and whether they have a TV in their bedroom (yes or no).

*Demographics.* Children were asked to report their genders and their current ages.

**Data Analysis**

Because we did not ask children what age they were when they saw the frightening news story, we analyzed developmental differences by dividing children according to their current age. Age groups were defined by grade groupings (K–2 vs. Grades 3–6), which separates the children based on developmental stage (i.e., pre-operational and concrete operational) and is consistent with prior news research that has made developmental comparisons using similar groupings (Moyer-Gusé & Smith, 2007; Wilson, Martins, & Marske, 2005).

**Results**

There were 218 children who answered the question, “Do you ever see the news on TV?” Of those, 182 (83.5%) answered in the affirmative. There was no difference between boys (83.2%) and girls (83.6%) in terms of exposure to the news.

*RQ1* asked for the percentage of children who reported ever being frightened by something they saw on the television news. Of the 182 children who said they watched the news, 77 (42.3%) said that something in the news had scared them. In total, 35.3% of all students who participated in this study (N = 218) indicated having been frightened by something they had seen on the news on television. When specifically focusing on the 7- through 12-year-old age group, to align with Walma van der Molen et al. (2002), 41.3% reported having fear responses, or 46.0% of those who had seen the news.
There were developmental differences in responses to the news. As Table 2 shows, a significantly smaller proportion of younger than older children said they ever saw the news. Furthermore, among children who said they saw the news, a significantly higher percentage of older than younger children said they had been scared by it. Overall, there were no gender differences in fear responses. Although girls (40.7% of all girls surveyed) were slightly more likely than boys (33.0% of all boys) to report fear responses, this difference was not statistically significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 208) = 1.33, p = .25$. When focusing on older children only, however, girls (56.1% of older girls) were more likely than boys (38.8% of older boys) to report fear responses to the news, $\chi^2(1, N = 124) = 3.72, p < .05$.

RQ2 asked what types of news stories had caused fear responses in children. Of the 77 children who said they had been frightened by the news, 92.2% described what it was that frightened them. Not surprisingly, a higher percentage of older than younger children were able to describe a specific news story that frightened them (see Table 2), but there were no differences by gender.

The news topic most frequently cited as causing fear was natural disasters, which was mentioned by 19 children (24.7% of the 77 students reporting fear responses). Because some children wrote about more than one type of natural disaster (e.g., “Hurricane Katrina and tsunami”), however, there were 24 total mentions of natural disasters. Of those 24 mentions of natural disasters, children were most likely to mention tsunamis (7 mentions), followed by tornadoes/twisters (6 mentions), hurricanes (5 mentions), fires (3 mentions), floods (2 mentions), and earthquakes (with only 1 mention). Consistent with prior research, younger children were more likely than older children to mention natural disasters as the news topic causing fear (see Table 2). Besides natural disasters, other news topics mentioned as causing fear were kidnappings (8 out of 77 children; 10.4%), the war/terrorists (6 children; 7.8%), and burglaries (6 children; 7.8%). Topics mentioned by fewer than five children included

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### Table 2 Developmental Differences in Responses to Television News

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Younger children (grades K–2)</th>
<th>Older children (grades 3–6)</th>
<th>$\chi^2$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exposed to news</td>
<td>74.4 (90)</td>
<td>89.8 (128)</td>
<td>9.10** (1, N = 218)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frightened by news (if exposed)</td>
<td>28.4 (67)</td>
<td>50.4 (115)</td>
<td>8.50** (1, N = 182)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Able to describe a news story causing fear (if frightened)</td>
<td>78.9 (19)</td>
<td>96.6 (58)</td>
<td>6.17* (1, N = 77)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural disasters</td>
<td>42.1 (19)</td>
<td>19.0 (58)</td>
<td>4.12* (1, N = 77)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crime</td>
<td>10.5 (19)</td>
<td>20.7 (58)</td>
<td>0.99 (1, N = 77)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>War in Iraq</td>
<td>5.3 (19)</td>
<td>8.6 (58)</td>
<td>0.23 (1, N = 77)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Values are percentages of children in each group. Ns in parentheses are for the group on which the percentage is based.

*p < .05. **p < .01.
fugitives (3 children; 3.9%) and man-made disasters, diseases, and animals (2 children each; 2.6%). Other than natural disasters, there were no developmental differences in topics causing fear.

Participants’ answers were also coded for the presence of a number of contextual factors. For example, responses were coded for whether children mentioned a person being hurt or killed, regardless of the content area. The data show that 26 children (33.8% of children frightened by the news) mentioned someone being hurt or killed in their response to the question, “What did you see that scared you?”

A qualitative analysis of children’s open-ended responses yielded several patterns. The first is children’s sensitivity to news events that occurred close to home. Table 3 provides examples of quotations that mention a proximate event. Children were clearly affected by news reports of events that occurred “in the local area.” In some cases, even events that occurred far from the child’s home state, such as Hurricane Katrina or tornadoes, were localized. One 10-year-old girl reported being frightened of hurricanes coming to “all of the states,” and an 8-year-old boy was scared of “twisters in Ventura,” a city close to the child’s town. Another pattern that emerged was children’s sensitivity to criminals or dangerous things that are “on the loose” (see Table 3). One child mentioned a murderer who was not caught, and another referenced when “bad people escape from jail.” Out of 71 children who described specific news stories that frightened them, 14 (20%) referenced either the proximity of the event or the fact that someone or something was “at large.” Thus, a concern for one’s own personal safety was a theme in the open-ended responses.

Furthermore, some children appeared to hold vivid memories for content seen on the news. One 9-year-old girl wrote, “I was watching a girl’s boyfriend shove her cell

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Child’s age</th>
<th>Child’s gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comments about proximate crime</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“On the corner of my house there was a big gang fight and someone died”</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“They said there was a robber that steals children down a couple blocks”</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“This one person armed was near our school”</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“A robbery near my old house”</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Kidnapping of little boys and girls in the local area”</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Twisters in Ventura”</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comments about criminals on the loose</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I saw a notice for a killer on the loose”</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“A murder and he was not caught yet”</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Bad people escape from jail”</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Kidnapping, sometimes when they can’t find the person and they are on the loose”</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
phone down her throat.” A 6-year-old boy said, “a guy with a gun and he shot a guy two times in the back.” One 10-year-old girl referenced interpersonal gun violence as the topic causing fear, writing, “people killing people on the news. Men shooting their girlfriends. Robbers murdering.” A 9-year-old boy reported “guys running over a kid with a semi truck when the kid was on a moped” as the news content causing fear. Thus, some children were able to remember vivid details, such as the number of times a person was shot, where a person was shot, and who shot whom.

RQ3 asked whether television news exposure would be related to the use of restrictive mediation strategies. Recall that there were three questions assessing rules about television use: rules regarding when children can watch TV, rules regarding how long they can watch TV, and rules preventing specific shows from being watched. Participants’ answers were coded for each question so that 1 = yes (presence of the rule in the household) and 0 = no (absence of the rule). A Television Rules Scale was created by adding together the number of rules in each child’s household. The resulting scale ranged from 0 to 3 (M = 1.97, SD = 0.95). To test RQ3, an independent-sample t test was performed. Children who had seen the television news (M = 1.97, SD = 0.96) did not differ from children who had never seen the news (M = 2.00, SD = 0.89) in terms of the number of rules pertaining to TV in their home, t(215) = 0.16, p = .87.

RQ3 was next analyzed using children’s access to television as a measure of restrictions, with two separate questions measuring access: the presence of a television set in the child’s bedroom (yes or no) and the number of TV sets in the house. Approximately one-half of the children in this sample had a television set in their bedroom (48.2% of all children surveyed), and the number of sets in the household ranged from one to eight (M = 3.09, SD = 1.33). Of all the children with a television set in their bedroom (n = 105), 83.8% had seen the television news, which was equal to children without television sets in their bedroom (n = 112; 83.0%), χ²(1, N = 217) = 0.02, p = .88. Furthermore, children who had seen the news had the same number of television sets in their household (M = 3.08, SD = 1.31) as those who had not seen the news (M = 3.17, SD = 1.46), t(216) = 0.37, p = .71.

H1 predicted that restrictive mediation strategies would be more successful for younger than older children at preventing fear responses. For younger children, those who had experienced fright reactions to the news had slightly more rules (M = 2.42, SD = 0.77) than children who had never been frightened by the news (M = 2.09, SD = 0.81), although the difference was not significant, t(81) = −1.56, p = .12. For older children, there was also no difference between people frightened by the news (M = 1.86, SD = 1.07) and those not frightened (M = 1.90, SD = 0.96) in terms of rules, t(123) = 0.19, p = .85.

Among younger children, those with a TV set in the bedroom were just as likely to have been frightened by the news as those without a TV set in the bedroom (23.8% and 21.4%, respectively), χ²(1, N = 84) = 0.07, p = .79. The same pattern occurred for older children. For younger children, those who had been frightened by the news had the same number of television sets in the household as those who had never been frightened, t(82) = −0.05, p = .96. For older children, the same pattern occurred. Thus, H1 was not supported.
Discussion

This study provides further evidence of children’s fear responses to non-crisis news stories in an era of continuous coverage of catastrophes and sensationalized portrayals of violence in the news. By providing both quantitative and qualitative analyses of children’s statements about frightening news content, this study contributes to a growing literature documenting children’s fright reactions to news reports. Although our data reflect one sample of elementary school children, the findings, nonetheless, have important ramifications for understanding children’s emotional responses to conflicts in the news, restrictive mediation strategies, and research methods used to study fear responses in children.

A majority of children in this sample of West Coast elementary school children reported being exposed to the news (83.5%), and 35.3% of all children reported fear responses to the news. The topic most frequently mentioned by children as causing fear responses was natural disasters. This contrasts with prior studies that found interpersonal or stranger violence as the news topic most likely to be mentioned as causing fear (Cantor & Nathanson, 1996; Walma van der Molen et al., 2002). Although some children in this study listed natural disasters that are likely to directly affect the child given their location in southern California (e.g., earthquakes and fires), most children referenced natural disasters that do not occur or have not occurred in recent California history (e.g., tsunamis, hurricanes, and tornadoes). This finding perhaps implies, therefore, that events such as the Asian tsunami (December 26, 2004) and Hurricane Katrina (August 29, 2005) may have had a long-lasting impact on children in this study. Furthermore, our findings suggest that young children’s tendency to localize events that take place far away renders them especially vulnerable when exposed to news stories about disturbing events, regardless of their distance.

The results of this study support prior research that has found restrictive mediation strategies to be unsuccessful in preventing both exposure to and negative outcomes from television content (Nathanson, 1999, 2002). In this study, children from families with strict rules about television use and little access to TV were just as likely to have been exposed to and frightened by the news as children from families with few rules and heavy access. Perhaps this is due to children’s accidental exposure to news stories, whereby they see news over their parents’ shoulders or on television sets turned on as background noise. To learn more about the circumstances in which children are exposed to the news, future research should explore the prevalence of children’s accidental news exposure, as well as familial rules governing children’s news exposure and the media in which children most frequently see news. Furthermore, future research should assess the degree to which parents engage in active mediation strategies with their children during or after news exposures. After all, watching the news has the potential to be an informative and educational experience for children, as understanding local and world events is an important part of growing up. Future research on this topic should try to help parents maximize children’s learning from the news and minimize children’s fear and discomfort.
This study also found that fear responses to TV news increase with age. It is worth noting that this is an extremely robust finding in the children’s fear literature, demonstrated when interviewing parents (Cantor & Nathanson, 1996) or children themselves (Smith & Wilson, 2002), in studies employing varied methods (e.g., mailed surveys, Saylor et al., 2003; face-to-face interviews, Smith & Wilson, 2002; and telephone interviews, Walma van der Molen et al., 2002). Furthermore, the effect has emerged for both crisis and non-crisis news exposure. This developmental effect is not surprising given that older children have mastered the distinction between fantasy and reality (Flavell, 1977), have increased empathy for victims (Wilson & Cantor, 1985), and can better understand abstract threats (Cantor, 1996) than younger children. Older children simply understand the reality and seriousness of news content better than younger children (Morison, Kelly, & Gardner, 1981). The accumulated research strongly suggests that care must be taken to protect older children from being frightened by news content.

One of the benefits of this study is that it allowed the children to describe, in their own words, the types of news content that caused fear responses. When asked yes or no questions, young children—who may be confused by the question—tend to bias their responses toward answering in the affirmative (Steffensen, 1978). Asking children to elaborate on their answers minimizes this problem. Furthermore, a qualitative analysis of the open-ended responses revealed a level of detail in children’s memories that might be especially alarming for parents, who may be surprised to learn that their children are retaining vivid, graphic details from the television news.

The open-ended questions also revealed children’s concern for their own personal safety. Kidnapping stories were the second most frequently cited news topic causing fear responses, and several children wrote about bad people who were “on the loose” or near their homes. Even natural disasters that cannot occur in the children’s area were referenced as proximate events. One girl wrote about when tornadoes are “shown coming” on the news, and another child wrote about hurricanes “coming to all the states.” Clearly, news events that are perceived as occurring close to home and those that suggest a bad person is “at large” are especially frightening for children. Given these findings, parents should take extra care when their children are exposed to stories of this nature, and parents may want to consider coping strategies that emphasize the child’s safety.

One limitation of asking children to describe frightening new stories in their own words is that we cannot test the veracity of their memories. Indeed, scholars from a wide variety of disciplines are interested in understanding the accuracy of children’s memories for past events: Doctors and nurses need accurate descriptions of pain and illness, and lawyers often rely on the eyewitness testimony of children. Across these disciplines, there is mounting evidence that children as young as 5 years old often have detailed and accurate memories for personally experienced events (Baker-Ward, Gordon, Ornstein, Larus, & Clubb, 1993; Merritt, Ornstein, & Spicker, 1994). Furthermore, research on autobiographical memories suggests that the veracity may not be relevant. Vivid memories—regardless of their authenticity—tend to be remembered better (Bradley, Greenwald, Petry, & Lang, 1992) and are highly accessible.
As a result, vivid memories can have a significant impact on people’s ongoing attitudes and beliefs, regardless of whether they are remembered with accurate detail. Thus, if a child thinks he or remembers seeing someone shove a cell phone down another’s throat on the news, that memory can have an impact on him or her even if the exact details of the news event are not correctly remembered.

A related issue, however, is the reliability of children’s self-reports in general. In this study, we did not use multiple measures to assess the reliability of children’s responses; rather, each question was assessed only once. Furthermore, we did not define the term news for children when we asked them about their exposure to the news. Thus, children’s reports of their news exposure may reflect an inaccurate understanding of what the news is, especially in the case of younger children. However, an examination of the open-ended responses suggests that children were, in fact, remembering news reports, rather than fictional media. Most of the topics cited as causing fear were topics one would expect to see on the news (e.g., robberies, natural disasters, and kidnappings), and differed from those in fictional media that cause fear in children (e.g., monsters and ghosts). This suggests that the children who offered up specific news events understood what was meant when we asked about “the news.”

Asking older children to write about frightening news content in their own words may have placed demands on these children that reduced our ability to extract information. This method differs from the two other studies that have directly interviewed children about fear responses to non-crisis news, both of which asked the children to orally describe the frightening content (Smith & Wilson, 2002; Walma van der Molen et al., 2002). This methodological difference may account for the lack of developmental differences found in this study in terms of the types of news stories that cause fear responses. For example, we did not find the developmental trend in fear of war previously found (Smith & Moyer- Guse, 2006). We also found no significant developmental trend in fear of interpersonal violence and crime, in contrast with prior research (Smith & Wilson, 2002; Walma van der Molen et al., 2002). Perhaps the writing requirement limited older children’s abilities to fully express the news topics that cause fear. It is also true that the low numbers of children citing these topics reduced the likelihood of finding significant differences.

In the end, this study has many implications for research methods used to study fear responses in children. Table 1 suggests that decisions, such as who should be interviewed (parents vs. children), type of questionnaire items employed (open- vs. forced-choice items), and mode of data collection (interviews vs. written surveys), significantly vary from study to study, and can have a significant impact on a study’s findings. Although we continue to argue that asking children to state their reactions to the news in their own words is the optimal method, these findings suggest that asking older children to write answers to open-ended questions may place too great a burden on them, reducing their abilities to express their feelings. On the other hand, given the enhanced privacy provided by writing about their fears, the written format may reduce social desirability biases.

Some additional limitations of this study are worth mentioning. Most notably, a representative sample was not obtained, limiting the generalizability of the results.
Although this is consistent with prior research exploring children’s fear responses to non-crisis news (e.g., Smith & Wilson, 2002), future research should continue to explore the subject of children and the news using national, representative samples. In terms of measurement, this study did not ask children to report how frequently they view the news. Furthermore, we did not assess the intensity of fear responses to the news but, rather, the presence or absence of fear responses. Given that prior studies have shown a relationship between the amount of news exposure and the intensity of fear reactions (e.g., Buijzen et al., 2007; Wilson et al., 2005), these types of measures may have better illuminated the relationship between news exposure and fear responses.

Finally, we did not ask participants to report the number of hours per day during which television sets are turned on in their households. Prior research suggests that one-third of young children live in households in which a television set is turned on nearly all day (Rideout & Hamel, 2006), and it would be interesting to know whether these are the children who reported fear responses to the news in this study. To our knowledge, there is no research revealing the types of television genres most likely to serve as background noise in households. However, given the format of most television news programs (e.g., emphasis on short story bites), as well as factors that distinguish news programs from fictional programming (e.g., lack of plot, narrative, and character development), it makes intuitive sense to suggest that television news programs might be good candidates to serve as background noise in households. Given growing concern about the effects of background television in general (e.g., Anderson & Pempek, 2005), future research should specifically explore this topic in the context of the news.

In conclusion, this study provides further evidence of children’s emotional reactions to a changing television news landscape. Children were most likely to be frightened by stories about natural disasters, kidnappings, and reports of people being killed or hurt in general. Older children, in particular, were likely to experience fear responses in reaction to the news. Parents need to be aware of their children’s exposure levels and fright reactions to the news, and future research should focus more on the strategies parents can use to protect their children from negative emotional reactions.

Notes

[1] A survey of parents by Wilson, Martins, and Marske (2005) found a high prevalence of children’s fear responses to news reports about the War in Iraq. This study, however, was not intended to be a crisis study focusing on the War in Iraq; it was only by chance that the data were collected in the first few weeks of the war. Thus, it is not included in this paragraph, which discusses studies focusing on a particular crisis.

[2] The data reported here refer to children’s exposure to the “adult” news. In the Netherlands, there are news programs specifically targeting children in addition to the general news targeting adults.

[3] The original sample included 231 children. However, data from 12 children were eliminated when we discovered that their teacher had read them a book about reducing reactions to frightening media during the week preceding the assessment. In addition, one student left early and did not complete the questions regarding responses to the news.
References


