

'Momo challenge hoax' prompts parents to help children deal with scary media

12 March 2019, by Elena Merenda And Nikki Martyn



Check in with children about the themes and meanings of what they are watching. Credit: Shutterstock

Recently a [number of school boards](#) and [police services](#) issued statements advising parents of an alleged cyberbullying threat called [the Momo challenge](#).

It's unclear how many videos [actually exist of the creepy-looking mask apparently telling children to harm themselves, or to what extent they have circulated, among children or elsewhere](#).

While some experts suggest [anxious adults including celebrities](#) are driving fear through their uncritical [social media](#) sharing, police and school alerts have emphasized the importance of parents [being aware of the impact that technology has on children](#).

So, while the Momo challenge may not be as big an issue as it was made to be on social media, it has raised the issue of the role of technology in children's lives—from the very young to the older child. What is the impact on children when they are frightened by media, or when they view violence?

Adult supervision and interaction

Children understand and process more as they age. But they still require adult supervision and interaction with their [use of technology](#), both at home and in the classroom, in order to help them understand the themes and meanings and how stories relate to them or the lives of other children globally.

Adults need to [provide space](#) and time for children to talk and share openly about what they are engaging with, what their friends are saying or what they are watching when unsupervised.

Parents and teachers can also teach children the importance of breaks from technology to socialize in real life, play and explore. Children should be [supported and encouraged to go outside](#) and experience the wonders and silence of nature and to exercise to help keep their hearts healthy and minds happy.

Effects of frightening media

Fear is an emotional flight or fight response due to an actual or imagined threat. Children don't have the cognitive ability to separate fantasy from reality. It is not until five or six years of age that children gain a strong understanding of the [difference between real and pretend](#).

The effects of children being frightened by media can include:

- **Anxiety:** Children can develop symptoms of anxiety from watching a video that scares them. The experience is stored in the [amygdala](#), the part of the brain which stores emotions, causing memories of the video to elicit scared and anxious emotions. Young children do not have the life experiences to put videos that scare them into perspective.
- Media violence can introduce fears in

childhood that continue into adulthood. One study, "[Tales from the Screen: Enduring Fright Reactions to Scary Media](#)," found that more than 90 per cent of the study's participants, reported a fearful reaction to media during their childhood or adolescence. Over one-quarter of those students who had had fearful reactions continued to experience a "residual anxiety" years later.

- **Sleep disturbances:** There is [evidence suggesting that violent media exposure, as well as media-viewing at night](#), can be detrimental to a child's [quality of sleep](#). Sleep difficulties can create physiological issues for children including weight problems, cardiovascular issues, learning difficulties, behaviour problems and mental health issues.
- **Violent and aggressive behaviour:** Children who regularly view media violence are [more likely to display aggressive behaviour and have a decreased emotional response to violence](#) and injury. They may [become more forgiving of violence, view the world as a hostile place or have less empathy for victims](#).

Strategies for caregivers

- **Limit screentime for children:** [The Canadian Pediatrics Society recommends](#) children under two years old should have no screen time and children from ages two to five years old should have less than one hour a day.
- **Help your children pick media** that is age-appropriate, by using [parental rating guides](#). Understand your child's developmental level and how media may impact them: for example, preschoolers are more likely to be scared by visual images that [look quite frightening as opposed to things that could be actually harmful yet appear more neutral](#).
- **Provide safety guidelines for watching videos online** and explain the importance of reading the title and description of what the video is about. This is especially important for [children](#) aged around eight to 10 years of age, who want and can be

provided with some autonomy.

- **Keep internet use in common family spaces where you can easily monitor what children are watching** and if frightening or violent images are unexpectedly viewed discuss the content with your child and help them work through any fears or worries they may have.

If your child does see frightening content

- **Respect your child's feelings.** Communicate with your child and explain how what they are feeling is understandable.
- **Help them to manage the fear.** Teach simple meditation techniques for before bed such as counting breaths to stop fears from impacting their sleep.
- **Rationalize their fear.** A simple explanation such as "bugs will never grow larger than a human" can go a long way.

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