# WARNING

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# "But It's Only Make-Believe"

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*Fantasy, Fiction, and Fear*

*An example that I will never forget is when I watched the
movie Pinocchio. I saw this movie with my mother
when I was about four or five years old. I really thought
that what was happening in the movie was real. In the
movie, if a child misbehaved, he or she was turned into
a donkey. Also, if a child lied, their nose would grow. I
really believed that this would happen to me if I was bad.
I remember being extremely scared even a few weeks after
I had seen the movie because I thought that the same
thing would happen to me if I misbehaved.*

This description serves as a vivid reminder that children
often fully believe stories that we adults are quick to
dismiss as fantastic or impossible. Developmental psychol-
ogists have noted that children only gradually come to

understand the difference between reality and fantasy. And children learn to say that some things are real and others are make-believe long before they understand what it means to be make-believe. They will tell you that *Peter Pan's* Captain Hook is make-believe long before they stop worrying that he will capture them and feed them to the crocodile! This lack of understanding plays a key role in the things that frighten young children. Until children understand that something that is not real cannot pose a threat, they will be just as scared by TV shows and movies portraying fantasy outcomes as by those portraying real dangers. Indeed, often the young child will be more frightened by fantasy characters, because fantasy villains are usually ugly and grotesque. As children come to understand the distinction between fantasy and reality, they better appreciate that only real threats and dangers can harm them.

## Why Learning What's Make-Believe Is So Difficult

As adults, we seem to take the distinction between fantasy and reality for granted. But put yourself in the situation of the very young child, and you will realize that differentiating between what's real and what's make-believe is not an easy task. At first, maybe it does seem simple. The newborn or infant believes what he sees, feels, hears, smells, and tastes to be true—and, for the most part, it generally is. But soon the young child is exposed to things that are beyond his immediate experience. One way in which this

happens is through language. Beyond seeing and feeling and hearing a dog, for example, a child can hear someone talk about a dog or have a book about a dog read to him. Through language and pictures, he learns about things that he doesn't experience directly. Over time, he comes to know that everything anyone says isn't necessarily true in the same way that something he witnesses himself is usually true. But it takes a long time to come to this realization.

Although parents often make a concerted effort to teach their children the difference between real and make-believe, we also have a few customs that undermine these efforts. Most parents make it a point to communicate the value of telling the truth, especially within the family. And yet most of us promote elaborate stories about Santa Claus, the tooth fairy, or the Easter Bunny. I'm not saying that the enjoyment of these cultural myths is inappropriate or wrong, but it does complicate the child's task of sorting out what's real and what's make-believe.

Piaget's take on this situation was to say that preschool, or preoperational, children do not distinguish play and reality as two distinct realms with different ground rules. My own family brought this issue home, so to speak, one Christmas a few years ago. We were visiting my husband's relatives, and as in millions of other families, all the young children hung their stockings on the mantel, leaving milk and cookies for Santa Claus. And like many parents, the adults warned the children to go right to bed

because Santa wouldn't want to see them awake when he came to deliver their presents. By morning, of course, Santa had left presents and even drunk the milk and eaten one of the cookies. When the .children were applauded for having gone right to sleep, one bright four-year-old among them replied, "I saw Santa last night! I stayed up and watched him, but he didn't see me!"

Now, how can you argue with a response like that? Was he telling an out-and-out lie? If so, he could hardly be blamed for imitating his parents' attitude toward the truth. Was he talking about a dream he had that he thought was true? Or was he playing by the ground rules he observed regarding Santa Claus? We'll never know for sure because we adults were too embarrassed to question him. But this incident illustrates one of the ways in which the border between what's real and what's make-believe becomes fuzzy.

## Reality vs. Fantasy

Television is another factor that makes the distinction between fantasy and reality especially complicated. Many of the images on television and in movies are so similar to real life that it is tempting to believe, at first, that what is shown there is real. It takes a very long time for children to sort out this paradox.

The distinction, for television, is not simply one of "real" vs. "pretend." Children must learn many variations of the difference between real and make-believe. At first

children believe that the things they are seeing are actually inside the television set—that if they look inside, they'll find those things and that what's in there might actually be able to come out. Research suggests that by about the age of four or so, they understand that the things they are seeing are not actually in the box, but that is just the first step toward understanding television's many realities.

By about the age of seven or eight, according to research, children come to distinguish between things that are real and those that are make-believe on television. At first they judge what is make-believe by its format, concluding that all cartoons are make-believe and all live-action shows are real. But over time, they become conscious of the fact that certain things that they see in fantasy shows are physically impossible, whether they are shown through animation or live action. They understand, for example, that people don't fly the way Peter Pan and Superman do on television and in movies. They come to judge whether something on television is real on the basis of whether the things they see in a story actually exist in the real world. A police story is real, they will say, because there are police in the real world, but stories with certain types of villains, such as witches and monsters, are not real because these characters are not found in real life.

And how do children learn to distinguish between people, animals, and events that exist in the real world and those that do not? Surprisingly, there's no simple rule.

Children just have to learn this by experience. There is no obvious distinguishing characteristic for what is plausible and what is fantastic. What is it about dragons that causes them to be make-believe, while dinosaurs are real? There's nothing in the way they look in pictures that could tip a child off. There are many things that are real that seem downright outrageous when you think about them: the fact that the pictures you see on television can come to your home invisibly through the air or the fact that planes can fly or, for that matter, the way babies are made. None of these ideas seems very realistic on the surface. Over time, we come to accept some very weird things as real, while we learn that other things are impossible. It's no wonder that children take a long time to understand what can and cannot happen.

In choosing programs for preschool children, then, you should not be reassured when a story contains scary elements that are physically impossible, such as a prince turning into a frog, a sorcerer casting evil spells, or a monster devouring a city. These outlandish happenings will not make the story any less compelling or frightening. Focus your attention on the elements of the story that were discussed in the previous two chapters: Are there dangerous-looking animals or grotesque characters? Do they make intense and disturbing sounds or threaten physical harm? Do normal-looking beings transform into hideous monsters?

Similarly, with realistic shows, what you need to look for when screening them for preschoolers is how disturbing they are in terms of these surface features, not whether they present realistic threats. By the time children reach the age of eight or so, however, it will matter to them whether programs are based on reality or not, and the real ones will be scarier.

Research confirms that as children get older, they become less and less scared by fantasy programs and movies, but they continue to be frightened—and sometimes become *more* frightened—by realistic portrayals. In the survey we conducted in the early eighties, in which we asked parents of children from kindergarten through fourth grade which programs and movies had frightened their child, we categorized the content as either fantasy (showing impossible events, as in *The Wizard of Oz)* or fiction (showing things that could possibly occur, as in *Jaws).* In the parents' responses, mentions of fantasy fare decreased as the child's age increased, and mentions of fictional offerings actually increased with age. Our more recent survey of parents of children in kindergarten, second, fourth, and sixth grade reconfirmed the importance of the fantasy-reality distinction in what frightens children. Although children in all grades were scared by such realistic offerings as *Rescue 911,* only children in the younger two groups had problems with such obviously fantastic offerings as *Peter Pan, Batman,* and *The Wizard of Oz.* When children themselves name the TV shows and movies that frighten them, we see the same trends. Evil witches and

monsters recede in the nightmares of older elementary-school children and are replaced by dangerous animals and vicious criminals. The following two examples are typical of what frightens this older group:

> One night my Girl Scout troop had a slumber party. We all got ready for bed in our sleeping bags in front of the TV and watched Creepshow. It was a collection of short thrillers. Some were stupid, and a couple have stuck with me the rest of my life. One short story was about a man in his apartment. He had a few cockroaches; then they started to multiply. They were coming out of the drains and out of the light fixtures. Eventually they overwhelmed the man and killed him. They were all over him coming out of his nose and mouth. I believe that I have more than normal feelings of disgust when it comes to all sorts of bugs. It could be due to seeing these past images. Even today I can't sleep unless my mouth is shut. Who knows, a bug could crawl in when I was sleeping.

> One of the few television programs that I can still clearly remember as having frightened me for a long time was the show Hunter. I was probably nine or ten years old at the time and my older brother was baby-sitting. He wanted to watch it, so I remember sitting down to watch it with him. It was an episode about a man who would kidnap little girls and then bury them alive. He had killed a number of them already when the show started

> and the two police detectives on the show caught him just as he was about to bury another one. They had already found the bodies of a few of the others. This was the first time that I had ever seen kidnapping on television or anywhere for that matter. I was scared for many nights after seeing the program that I would be kidnapped and buried alive by some psychopath.

## Fiction: That Frightening Middle Ground

According to research, children by about the age of ten come to grasp more than simply what's possible and impossible in the media. They come to appreciate that some programs are scripted and acted for the purpose of telling a story. Before that time, they are likely to think that a family drama shows the real activities of a real family and that a realistic adventure story shows events that actually transpired.

Once children know that dramas and comedies contain actors speaking lines that were written for them, does this knowledge prevent them from being unduly scared by most entertainment offerings? If only this were the case! Unfortunately, fiction can be very scary.

When children come to understand that most programs and almost all movies are scripted and performed by actors, they at first think that all scripted stories are untrue. But over time, they learn that there is an important category between the programs that show real events that actually happened (such as the news and documentaries)

and fantasies, which portray unreal, impossible events that could never happen in the real world. That intermediate category is fiction, which is the product of someone's imagination but is based on events that can and do occur.

There are several reasons why we respond so intensely to television shows and movies, even when we know that what we're seeing is fiction. First of all, we automatically fear certain dangerous things in real Me, and we have an immediate fear reaction even when we see these things on the screen. Over time, and as we grow older, we may still have that initial reaction, but it is less intense as we distinguish between the scary things that are really present and can harm us and those that are only being represented to us on video or in film. We are also naturally inclined to empathize with other people's emotions, and as we become attached to characters in a movie, we often feel emotions similar to the ones they are feeling. Again, we can keep reminding ourselves that these are not real people, but for many of us, our emotions become strongly intertwined with those of the characters we view, and we sometimes care deeply about what happens to them. We also watch TV and movies for entertainment, and often we purposely throw ourselves into the story, adopting an attitude that is sometimes referred to as "the willing suspension of disbelief."

As adults, though, it seems that we ought to be able to leave our emotions in the theater after the movie is over. Even if we cared about the fictional heroine who was stalked by the psychopathic killer, we should not still be worrying days later if we saw her escape unharmed, should we? But we often continue to feel anxious, and for good reason. Because fiction is based on things that can and do happen, watching a scary program heightens our fears of real events like those in the program. A fictional story about the kidnapping of a young child may be entirely made up by the dramatist, and yet the elements of the story are real. Watching a program about a kidnapped young child intensifies our awareness of this risk. If we feel that it could happen to us (or our child) we will feel more threatened by that possibility, and this feeling of vulnerability is likely to last as long as our memory of the program. The more a fictionalized threat is similar to things that threaten us in our own lives, the more scared we will be, not just while watching, but afterward as well. This applies to children, too.

After the movie *Jaws* came out, it was children at the beach who suffered the most obvious spillover effects. I have received dozens of reports of ruined seaside vacations:

> When the film Jaws *arrived at the movie theaters, everyone considered it a "must-see" movie. Naturally, my friends and I attended this feature. This was the first "scary" movie my parents had allowed me to see. While I was quite aware of the immediate fright reaction induced by viewing this movie, I was naive to the possibility of any long-term or lingering effect.*

*About a year later, a vacation to the Florida coast caused the dreaded sensation to resurface. As we approached the shoreline, an alarm rifled through my body. I knew* Jaws *was circling just beyond the swimming markers. Consequently, I refused to enter the water. Subsequent vacations have yielded the same reaction. I think I was the only person in Hawaii who would not step into the ocean. I considered the surfers suicidal maniacs. Weren't they aware of the eminent risks?*

It also seems that young girls just starting out on their baby-sitting careers were the most frightened by the movie *When a Stranger Calls,* which showed a baby-sitter being stalked by a psychopathic killer. The *Friday the Thirteenth* series did not make it any easier for teenagers going camping. The list goes on. You don't have to believe that any of these specific events ever really happened to feel threatened when engaging in activities similar to those of the victims in these movies. These movies heighten our awareness of dreadful possibilities.

*When I was in (about) the third grade my friends and I had a slumber party, and we decided to watch a horror movie. In this movie a group of teenage girls were having a slumber party, and one by one throughout the movie they disappeared and were gruesomely murdered. The movie showed explicit details of their deaths, and one aspect that particularly affected me were the scenes of*

*them pleading for their lives. I remember seeing the terror in their eyes as they begged to be spared, and I remember hoping each time that they would get away, and how awful I felt when they were murdered anyway. That night none of us could sleep, and every sound that we heard scared all of us to a point where we would scream, and we eventually ended up huddled together for the entire night to protect each other. We were so scared that none of us would even get up and go to the bathroom. Even after that night the images of the young girls begging for mercy stuck in my head. For many nights after that I had nightmares and difficulty sleeping, every sound I heard scared me, and I thought that some killer was coming to get me.*

Children who find themselves in the same situation as the fictional victim become especially frightened by a plot that makes them acutely aware of what might happen to them. But scary programs do more than that. These movies contain all sorts of devices that engage our emotions more strongly than a simple reminder about possible risks. Scary movies and TV shows include a variety of elements that usually are not there when we face real threats in our own lives.

First, there's suspense. In the real world, when a vicious attack, major tragedy, or accident occurs, we usually have no forewarning. These things often happen very quickly, before the victim even realizes what is happening.

However, the television or movie producer rarely lets things occur that way. Most scary programs and movies let us know what is going to happen or what might happen, and we become anxious well in advance of the horrifying outcome. Research shows that it's much more frightening this way. Because these shows are meant to be scary, the producer dramatizes the events to evoke the most intense emotions from the audience.

*The movie was* Friday the Thirteenth. *This particular movie was very uncomfortable because it was suspense-filled. The reason I was scared was because I knew the people were going to die, yet I did not know the exact moment it was going to happen. The actual horror of the movie did not scare me (ex.: blood, people having their heads cut off). But when I was unable to know when the person was going to be killed, or where the killer Jason was, this is what bothered me.*

Another element of frightening films that is absent when real threats occur is the musical score and other sound effects. It seems that music and sound effects dramatically affect our emotional reactions. Sudden loud noises shock and arouse us, and we automatically respond with fear to the shrieks and cries of victims.

Many retrospective reports of movie-induced fright refer to the power of sound effects and music. Here are a few examples:

*. . . And the suspenseful music that accompanied the shark attacks is forever imprinted in my mind. I just have to play the* [Jaws] *music in my head when I'm swimming and I can really scare myself.*

*In the movie* [Friday the Thirteenth] *the sound was high and loud, and the music was scary. While I was watching the movie, I knew I did not like the music and the sound because it was the signal of killing. Every time I heard this kind of sound, I would know that more people would be killed, and they could not do anything to protect themselves.*

*One particular scene from the movie* [Piranha] *that had a great effect on me took place at a summer camp for kids. The children in the scene were participating in various summertime activities, including swimming in the lake. There were underwater camera shots of the swimmers' feet and of the killer fish approaching for the attack. Along with these shots were terrible spine-chilling sound effects supposedly coming from the fish and a scary type of music used to create suspense. At the moment of the attack people were screaming and frantically swimming to escape from the killer fish.*

By using these dramatic devices, movies and TV shows aim to intensify our response and etch the scary scenes indelibly in our minds in a way that many real events do not.

Remember, most vicious and brutal attacks are not witnessed by anyone; even the victim may be taken by surprise. Loved ones of the victim usually only hear about the attack and are left to imagine what it must have been like. But television and movies enact these attacks in lurid detail, exposing us to horrid scenes we might never experience in our entire lives. These images will be especially riveting for children and teenagers, who have less experience with such fictional stories and a less mature understanding of how movies and TV programs use special features to manipulate their emotions. Because these elements are so vivid, children are especially susceptible to their terror-intensifying effects.

## The Vulnerable Female

If there is any fictional theme that repeats and repeats itself in the horror stories I receive from college students, it's the theme of the violent victimization of young women, usually by men. Often the theme involves sexual assault, and as you would expect, the most intense reactions to these plots come from female viewers. Content analyses have shown that in horror movies, attacks against men are usually over and done with quickly, but attacks against women are longer and more drawn out, making the viewer see the female victims suffer more and show more fear. This is one theme that has an intense impact not only on young teenage girls but on women in college as well. The following example is typical:

> *The action that sparked my fear response was a violent, very graphic portrayal of an attempted rape with a young girl as the victim. The scene used fast cutting, close-ups, suspenseful music, and the sound of the girl crying to aid in its intensity. During the entire scene I felt tense. It was as though I didn't notice the other things around me. I was truly frightened. I experienced empathy for the victim and uncomfortable thoughts that these acts occur every day in the real world. I tried to imagine what must have been running through the young girl's head. All I could say over and over again was "That's so horrible, how awful!" The imagery of the rape scene seemed to haunt me as I sat down to begin studying. I couldn't get the scene out of my head,*

This description shows that the woman who wrote it had an awareness of the various production techniques that were used to intensify her response. But she was also aware of the importance of the theme of female victimization:

> *The intensity of my response has to do with my close identification with the subject matter at hand. Forced sexual acts are a major concern and fear of many women in the real world. My fear response was more intense in this case because I could relate to and identify with the underlying implications of the scene. To me this was not a random act of violence; it was an issue that hit close to home.*

The fact that television dramas and movies play on women's fears of victimization comes up over and over again in women's memories of their media traumas. For example:

> *One of the scariest things I have ever seen was on* Beverly Hills, 90210 *sophomore year in college. Now, I know that this sounds like the silliest thing that you have ever heard—a twenty-year-old girl being afraid of a show as bad as* 90210, *but it is true. Let me explain. Two years ago there was a plot about Donna and a stalker. Being that she was the only virgin on the show, this news was particularly surprising. Anyway, the point is that the whole episode that week revolved around this guy breaking into Donna's beautiful beachfront apartment, sneaking around in the dark, and then getting very close to raping her. Obviously, he did not get the chance to rape her since Donna's boyfriend, David, arrived in the nick of time. But he got pretty damn close—way too close for my comfort. This somewhat-normal-appearing man was walking around in her apartment with a crowbar waiting for her to come into her room on a night that he knew she was all alone. Granted, I was sitting in a room with the five other girls I lived with, but they were still all girls and at some point I knew I would be alone in the apartment.*
>
> *Now this was not the most frightening experience I have ever had, but it has stuck with me. When I am walking alone at night sometimes or I am in the house by*

*myself; I am that little bit more nervous. I am no lunatic; I just have memories of that episode and wonder what would happen if my David did not come to the door at that precise moment.*

The prevalence of the theme of sexual assault in young women's traumatic responses to fictional programs and movies is striking. Maybe it is due to the fact that all women are potential victims of sexual assault; in fictional plots women do not have to be involved in risky activities to become a victim. In contrast, it seems that men who are victims in fiction are typically involved in activities that make violence more likely: They are criminals, police officers, vigilantes, or soldiers. Truly random assaults seem much more rare for the male fictional character. Of course it's true that women are more vulnerable than men to sexual assault in real life, but many movies and television programs play on this fear to an extent that can cause obsessive fear reactions, particularly among younger girls who are not well equipped to put the disturbing images in context.

## The Supernatural: The Gray Area between Fantasy and Fiction

A second theme that comes up over and over again in the media-induced fears of older elementary-school children and teenagers is that of the supernatural and the occult. This area is hard to define because it seems to occupy the

border between fantasy and fiction. As I said earlier, by the time children reach the age of seven or eight, they are aware that certain fantasy happenings are impossible. However, many people never seem to fully reject the possibility of such supernatural events as alien attacks and demonic possession. *The Exorcist* is a film about demonic possession that has powerful effects, even on adults. Similarly, a film like *Poltergeist,* which shows supernatural attacks on a family whose house was built over a graveyard, plays on viewers' superstitions and the ambiguous lines between what's possible and impossible. Many movies and programs play on that ambiguity. In addition, they often contain elements of real threats that even the most skeptical adults can fear. Michael Myers, the homicidal maniac in *Halloween,* keeps coming back from the dead. As adults, we know that can't happen. However, we do know that homicidal maniacs exist, so we can still feel vulnerable even if we don't believe that aspect of the plot.

Stories of the supernatural defy the reassuring laws of physics that adults and older children rely on in evaluating risks. For example, it does no good to lock all the doors if the villain can penetrate the walls. Supernatural plots are much less predictable. The older child cannot rely on his knowledge of what is real and what is make-believe. Anything can happen.

*I've suffered from nightmares after watching* Aliens
*(around the age of twelve). The creatures themselves are*

*what scared me: both their gruesome appearance and their apparent intelligence. In the movie they outsmart the humans, who are no match for the aliens, even with their weapons. My room makes strange sounds at night (at least I perceive strange sounds in my room, particularly in my attic). In one scene from the movie, the humans could tell the aliens were near but had no idea where they were. It turned out the aliens were directly above them, in the ceiling. Lying awake in my bed, I could hear odd noises coming (seemingly) from my attic right above me, and I imagined an alien shifting around up there. The situation where the aliens were above the humans and came through the ceiling created an image of the same thing happening in my room. This occurred pretty frequently for about a month after viewing the movie. A couple times I even had nightmares about the creatures.*

Another problem is that the credibility of occult happenings is reinforced by frequent reports of unexplained supernatural events in reality-based programs:

*The film I viewed was* The Exorcist. *It contained graphic scenes of a young girl possessed by the devil. I was approximately twelve years old at the time and was in a slumber-party situation. I vividly remember the stress this film caused me. I was not only extremely afraid of the devil and evil, but I became obsessed with*

*the possibility of becoming possessed myself: To make matters worse, later on in the same week I came home from school and turned on some afternoon talk show with the subject matter consisting of "real" stories of "real" people who were at one time possessed. That program and the movie were enough to keep me from sleeping for two nights straight and finally when I did fall asleep I had terrible nightmares. I slept with my parents for the next few weeks.*

Just as parents sometimes make it harder for preschoolers to distinguish fantasy and reality by promoting the tooth fairy, our mass media make the distinction more ambiguous for all of us by overplaying the credibility of supernatural forces. By the teen years, most kids have learned that certain things can't happen, but can they be absolutely sure? And, they might well wonder, what if they're wrong?

We turn next to a domain where there's no ambiguity about real vs. make-believe: the news and other reports of real events that actually happened.