

Fear and Nightmares from TV Lack of Knowledge among Parents

In a series of studies about fear and nightmares from TV the International Central Institute for Youth and Educational TV (IZI) conducted qualitative and quantitative studies in Germany and 16 further countries.¹ The results show: Children experience fear from watching TV and sometimes are not able to cope with the experiences even years after the TV event. In Germany, 6 out of 10 8- to 9-year-olds have experienced fear from TV, one third has had nightmares, especially from shows that were not rated for their age.

Munich, November 27th 2014 – In media education and research it is an established knowledge that children can experience fear and nightmares from TV. However, there is little research on the concrete triggers of fear and nightmares. In cooperation with partners worldwide, the IZI examined this question in a series of studies.

Fear and nightmares from TV: especially common in childhood, with a peak among the 8- to 9-years-olds

Study 1: The inquiry of 1,458 representatively selected children and adolescents in Germany (6 to 19 years) showed: It is especially the children who experience fear from watching TV. 6 out of 10 8- to 9-year-olds have experienced fear from TV, every third child in this age group has had nightmares from TV. Every fifth pre-teen has had nightmares from TV, adolescents only rarely state having experienced fear and nightmares from TV. The international comparison reveals a positive trend: Compared to the 4,184 6- to 15-year-old children and adolescents from 16 countries that participated in the international IZI study, German children and adolescents experience fear and nightmares from TV least often.

What causes fear?

In **study 2** („Fear and Thrill from TV“) nearly all 631 students from eight countries remember experiences of fear from TV which they had had in their childhood. They drew pictures of and reported about the frightening scenes and explained how they had dealt with the frightening experience. Following this, the scenes were identified in the original program and were analyzed in order to ascertain the especially frightening moments.

Very often it is threatening creatures and their appearance (e.g. the green skin color of the witch in *The Wizard of Oz* or the one-eyed baby face with metal spider legs from *Toy Story*) that activate the body's alarm system. Parts of the body that symbolize a destructive power (e.g. Freddy Krueger's blade hand or the huge jaws of the white shark) scare children. Especially pictures of injuries combined with fake blood and pain can cause fears.

But not only the clearly age inappropriate shows cause lasting experiences of fear. Among preschool children, for example, the programs most frequently mentioned (internationally and in Germany) belong, among others, to the brand *Disney Classics* which in most cases have no age limit. The witches in Disney's classical animation movies *Snow White* or *Little Mermaid* (both age rating 0) frighten many children because of their dramatic setting. Scenes like *Bambi* or *Dumbo* losing their mothers can trigger fears that bring children to the limits of what they can bear. Presumably, the extent to which children get emotionally involved is often underestimated by adults. Children's sensitivity differs a lot and parents are not provided with enough helpful information.

What makes a nightmare?

For **study 3** („Fun and Fear from TV“) 510 children aged between 7 and 13 from five countries were asked about their nightmares. 8 out of 10 children were able to identify a nightmare that had clearly come from TV and to draw it. Again, the programs were identified and the scenes analyzed. The result: Nightmares occur when children see unimaginable acts of what people or creatures can do to each other. Images about how people torture other beings with pleasure, blood shedding or suffering and dying people exceed the children´s world view that is based on everyday experiences. Children restage those acts of physical violence in their dreams. They are the victims or observers of what is done to others.

Which programs trigger experiences of fear and nightmares among children?

In the representative study (study 1) 1,458 children and adolescents who had experienced fear from TV were asked about the titles of the shows. The series that frightened children most frequently was *The Walking Dead* (23 namings). It is followed by *Grimm* (18 namings) and the German crime series *Tatort* (15 namings). With adolescents as well, *The Walking Dead* (18 namings) is the most frequently named TV show that causes fear. It is followed by *Saw* where, for example, a woman gets cut alive by a chainsaw. About half of the TV shows which cause fear and nightmares among the under 12-year-olds are rated (by FSK² or FSF) “12 years and older”.

There is a structural problem regarding the protection of minors against harmful media because in Germany, from 8 pm onwards broadcasters are allowed to broadcast shows rated “12 years and older”. Yet on the weekend, around 1 million children under 12 years watch TV at this time.

	6 to 12 years	13 to 19 years
1	<i>The Walking Dead</i>	<i>The Walking Dead</i>
2	<i>Grimm</i>	<i>Saw</i>
3	<i>Tatort</i> [Crime Scene]	<i>Tatort</i> [Crime Scene], <i>Criminal Minds</i>
4	<i>X-Factor</i>	<i>Tagesschau</i> [German news magazine]
5	<i>Harry Potter</i> , Adult News, <i>Galileo</i> [adults knowledge show]	<i>Jaws</i>

Most frequently named programs that cause fear

What parents know about age limits

For **study 4**, the IZI inquired 1,019 representatively selected parents. Less than half of them knew that the German FSK-labelling is not a recommendation but an age restriction. Especially in the East of Germany this is little known; in Thuringia, for example, only every third mother knew this fact. Asked about the 8 pm broadcasting restriction, most of the parents (88 %) assumed that TV shows at this time are rated “12 years and older” or even “14 years and older”. Nevertheless, the parents allow their children to watch these programs.

The results of the studies will be presented in German language at the IZI Annual Conference “The Dark Side of Television” in Munich on December 10th 2014. A registration for expert audience is still possible (mail to: izi@br.de).

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Images are available on request (e.g. children´s and students´ drawings).

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¹ Malaysia, Ukraine, Bosnia, Afghanistan, Slovenia, China, Iran, Cuba, Canada, Australia, Spain, Netherlands, Italy, Denmark, Argentina and Thailand.

² FSK means German voluntary self-regulation of the movie industry