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# Common Sense on Scary Movies

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## Are they ready for brain-eating zombies?

Your 9-year-old is clambering for a scary movie at the video store. Not just any scary movie, but one where people are cut up with a hacksaw. Is it OK for her to be scared silly by something so gory? Or will she have nightmares for a month? (Will you?) It's good to know what works for kids by age, so you can keep the frights within the fun zone.

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### Some facts

The younger kids are when they see a scary movie or TV show, the longer-lasting the effects will be.

Kids who watch scary material often have nightmares or anxiety.

Kids ages 2 to 7 often can't distinguish between fantasy and reality.

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## What are scary movies?

Kids love scary films. The trick is finding movies with age-appropriate thrills. Something that terrifies kids at 5 (ghosts, evil characters, major peril) will be a non-issue at 15. Scariness comes from fear of the unknown, from surprise, and from fears about the loss of a loved one. Depending on where your kids are in their emotional development, different things will affect them differently. Young kids are frightened more by creatures that older children know don't exist. Abrupt noises, eerie sounds, and music create tension in both younger and older children. Psychological suspense, with its threats of impending doom, can terrify your middle-school kids.

### Why they matter

Movies with scary images, intense danger, loud noises, and — above all — blood and gore, can create all sorts of disturbances. Among them are anxiety, sleep disruption, and fears about possible situations. Children younger than 7 can't easily distinguish between fantasy and reality — even if you tell them “it's not real.” You will know if your kids have become too frightened when they start having sleep problems, irrational fears, and obsessions with things like zombies. Scary and disturbing images and sounds can affect vulnerable kids for years.

## Parent tips for all kids

- » **Know what they're watching — and whether it's appropriate.** Check out Common Sense Media reviews, which offer age recommendations and provide age-appropriate selections.
- » **Practice your poker face.** Some research suggests that kids will become more scared if they see that you are scared by something in a movie or on TV.

## Parent tips for elementary kids

- » **Choose media with care.** Kids under 7 will believe what they see. When picking media, nothing should be more startling than “Boo!” Kids over 5 may like haunted houses, mysteries, and things popping out everywhere, but stick to animation, which helps them realize that it's fantasy. Be careful with monsters, skeletons, aliens, and zombies. Avoid any dangerous material involving characters near their age.
- » **Be prepared for when things do go bump in the night.** If your child is frightened, give him physical comfort, a glass of water, or a distraction. Kids 2 to 7 respond well to magical remedies and nightly rituals, such as cleaning the monsters out of the closet.
- » **Don't be surprised if your kids suddenly like a little scary stuff.** Kids who are 8-to-10 years old can handle being scared for longer periods of time — in fact, they love it. Bring on the phantoms and ghoulish faces, but continue to choose films without gore or physical harm. Some intense moments are fun as long as the resolution involves a happy ending.

## Parent tips for middle school kids

- » **Pushing boundaries may be OK.** Some kids of this age are ready to be scared silly. You still should be mindful of blood and gore, but in general skeletons, monsters, and aliens are okay. Even so, stick to movies that have humor mixed in, or those with safe-and-sound endings.
- » **Give reassurance when necessary.** Other kids still scare easily. Middle school is when scary movies start being a big part of sleepovers and movie outings with friends. Even if your child isn't ready for the scarier stuff, it can be hard for her to tell that to friends who want to see the latest zombie flick. Let your children know that it's ok to be scared and to tell their friends they'd rather watch something else.

## Parent tips for high school teens

- » **They may be ready for more than you think.** Developmentally, teens can handle dramatic and psychological suspense, but kids under 16 still shouldn't see slasher horrors, especially those that feature kids in dire danger or that have lots of gore.
- » **Mind the messages.** Many scary movies now pair horrific graphic violence with sexual situations — not a great combination for kids exploring newfound sexuality. Be sure to talk with them about the content of the movie they're seeing and the messages it may convey. Check Common Sense Media's reviews for conversation starters.
- » **Dig into the vault.** If you like scary movies too, try introducing your teens to some of the horror and suspense classics. Just make sure that any younger siblings are already tucked in bed.