

Screens and Soothing

By Dott Kelly, Clinical Director

Nina was puzzled by her three-year-old son, Jason's, efforts to describe something that had deeply frightened him. "Mick Junior" was the name of an invisible creature that Jason was convinced lived in the dark toy cupboard or in the walls of his room at night. Some nights, Jason woke up screaming, terrified that Mick Junior was in his dreams but too young to articulate why he was afraid.

It was several weeks before Nina discovered the source of Jason's fear. Jason's older sister was watching Blue's Clues, a TV show developed for young children, on the television network Nick Jr. Every episode begins with a disembodied smiley face announcing the name of the show and network. As the square yellow face danced across the screen, Jason went running from the room.

That night, Nina also found the family cat rustling around in a spot between Jason's bed and the wall. Together with the screen image, this explained the origin of the terrifying Mick Junior and how he might "live in the walls" at night.

At age three, Jason was still fully dependent on his image-driven right brain. The logical left brain—which would tell Jason that the image was only a cartoon created for TV and that the noise was made by the cat—did not yet have that capability. His mother held this responsibility for him.

Understanding what is happening on a screen requires skills that are still developing in young children, so they often are unable to discern between the screen and reality. What is felt and heard is held in feelings and images rather than employing the logic and explanation of the later-developing left brain. In the first vital years, it is a parent's calm acceptance and mostly predictable responses that "stand in" for the child's undeveloped thinking.

Jason needed consistent reassurance that Mick Junior was not real and that Cleo the cat was the source of the noise. He depended on Nina's interpretation of reality while he built his own soothing capacities over time and his thinking and reasoning evolved.

Screen imagery can have an even greater effect on children who are already coping with stress. Lately, a number of our young children at Jumping Mouse have expressed a real fear of zombies, which have become widely present in mainstream media. One four-year-old, "Ben," was afraid to go into the therapy room because he was certain that three dolls were zombies who would wake up. While adults can censor what is and isn't real, children have not yet developed that filter. When hurt and anxiety are common features in a child's life, zombies may take on even greater meaning, becoming a horrifying representative of all of their fears.



Understanding what is happening on a screen requires skills that are still developing in young children, so they often are unable to discern between the screen and reality.

These emotional responses might seem harmless. However, when a child has experienced trauma, the parent or caregiver who might allay fear often is absent—or may even be the creator of the fear. The young child’s feelings and images become overwhelming. Without an interpreter—as Nina became for Jason—it is difficult for a child to learn to think about her emotions. It is confusing on several personal levels when only the right, nonverbal brain absorbs an image of people who are shot on a screen and then return, alive, for the next level of the game. How do we die and come back? What then makes us safe? Who exactly are these images? Are they human? Are they nearby? What makes them appear?

While monitoring screen time is important, mentoring a child as he or she builds her thinking and reasoning also is essential. Too little sympathy and help from a caregiver creates overwhelming anxiety and a distorted reality for the child. Yet, with safe support, children can solve their own dilemmas and fears in original ways that may seem wise and make us smile.

Four-year-old Ben’s therapist silently wondered if the “zombie” dolls held Ben’s big, unsafe feelings about a new person and place—the therapist and therapy room. The therapist slowly took a blanket, covered the dolls in the therapy room, and asked whether that helped. Ben decided that the dolls needed to be outside the room for just one session. What had made them potentially safe was the therapist’s serious, gentle, and clear response to Ben’s concerns.

Children absorb and understand much more than we often realize. If we meet their fears with compassion and respect, we may be surprised at what we can learn.

HELPING A CHILD COPE WITH
MEDIA-INDUCED FEARS

There are several different ways to address a child’s fear, that depend on a child’s age and maturity level. Here are a few:

- **Respect their fear:** Don’t tell kids that they are being silly, unreasonable or “babies” if they are frightened. Responses like this give kids the message that they will have to hide their fears from you.
- **Help them deal with fear:** Adults can help young children manage their fear by preparing them for potentially frightening events or images. If you are watching a TV show or movie where a character is in danger, don’t worry about spoiling the suspense if your child asks if the character will be all right. It’s more important to defuse their fear by reassuring them.
- **Parent co-viewing:** Watching television and movies *with* your kids is a great way to be proactive. If frightening, disturbing or violent images come across the screen, don’t just change the channel. Instead, take the opportunity to discuss the content with your child and help them work through any fears or worries they might have.

* Excerpted and adapted from “Dealing with Fear and Media” (<http://mediasmarts.ca/tipsheet/dealing-fear-and-media>)

**Jumping Mouse
Children’s Center**

1809 Sheridan Street
Port Townsend, WA 98368
(360) 379-5109

www.jumpingmouse.org
info@jumpingmouse.org

Staff

FOUNDER AND CLINICAL DIRECTOR

Dott Kelly

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Kris Becker

OFFICE SPECIALIST

Candy Carter

DEVELOPMENT DIRECTOR

Jenny Manza

Jumping Mouse is inspired by a Native American legend of a small creature who dreams of a new way. He journeys into the world beyond the familiar, with compassion and awareness. He grows, discovers his strengths, and transforms into Eagle. Like the myth, our children’s center is about offering the tools that will assist each child in meeting the challenges of daily life.

THERAPISTS

Eric Johnston

Brigid Mosher

Catharine Robinson

Steve Roe

Selena Sena-Hopkins

Llory Wilson

SOCIAL WORKER

Lianne Perron

VOLUNTEER THERAPISTS

Mike Smith

Arielle Wortman

Board

PRESIDENT: Kitty Knapp

TREASURER: Coe Hutchison

SECRETARY: Jan Garing

MEMBERS

Juelie Dalzell

Dunia Faulx

Craig Isenberg

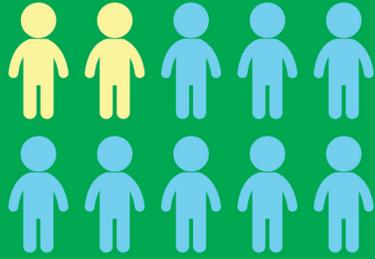
Joe Mattern

John Nowak

Bev Schaaf

Patti Smith

**Many children in the United States
lack access to mental health care**



Only **2 out of 10**
children in need receive
mental health services

**In Jefferson County, children can come to
Jumping Mouse for as long as they need to heal**



Accessibility
No financial barriers
to therapy



Open-ended care
Therapy lasts for
as long as needed



Child focus
Therapy proceeds at
the child's own pace

***“Jumping Mouse makes my body
feel happy!” ~ Eight-year-old***



**You help kids heal
when you donate today!**

“I am in a cocoon right now. But I’m going to come out soon.”

~ Seven-year-old at Jumping Mouse



Book Drive Success!

Once again, this community demonstrated its generosity. You donated **more than fifty** books to build up our parenting library! Therapists lend and give books out to our parents to help them address their child's unique needs. Thank you to all who participated by donating books from our Amazon Wish List.

We keep our Amazon Wish Lists updated with needed toys, books, and supplies for our therapy rooms. You can link to our wish lists from the donate page of our website: jumpingmouse.org/donate-ways-to-give

Jumping Mouse Children's Center is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization and all contributions are tax deductible to the full extent of the law. Donations are accepted directly to Jumping Mouse.

Tax ID# 94-3096216

Jumping Mouse Children's Center is a member agency of United Good Neighbors.

Newsletter editing donated by Manza Editorial.



1809 Sheridan Street
Port Townsend, WA 98368
(360) 379-5109
www.jumpingmouse.org
info@jumpingmouse.org

