

Voices: A scary media climate for children

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(Photo: iStockphoto, Getty Images)

The other night, a friend's daughter came tearing into her parents' bedroom — she'd had a nightmare that the Islamic State was hunting her down. Though only 10 years old, this child's reality had been shaken by headlines that have become inescapable. Images and fears that saturate today's media landscape were finding her as she slept.



Whether the story is terrorism, economic turmoil, global warming or racial tensions, children today are being raised in fear and are having an increasingly difficult time remaining, well, children. Fold in a world of bullying and the constant pin pricks of social media, and you begin to get the disturbing picture.

This alone should be enough to keep parents up at night, yet our troubles don't end there. The problem is exacerbated by a programming gap for tweens, or kids 7 to 12. At the critical age when they are forming their ideas of who they are, how the world works and how they should behave in it, tweens have no developmentally appropriate, empathetic and humane content just for them. One would think that in the sea of TV, gaming and social media content, every age group would become a niche audience. But tweens have fewer tools and outlets than their younger counterparts or the budding adolescents above them, experts tell us. Today's tweens are being neglected.

I wanted to find out how kids are supposed to navigate this world. So I reached out to Michael Levine, an educator who runs the Joan Ganz Cooney Center at Sesame Workshop that focuses on children's learning and all things digital. He explained that tweens today are experiencing an adult world without the life experience or cognitive abilities to process it or make sense of it. This exposure creates a "modeling crisis" in which children race toward adulthood unprepared and, in many cases, damaged. This isn't just a parenting problem, he says, but a societal one.

This all takes me back to a different time, well before smartphones and a media clock that never stops ticking. In the 1970s, some of you may remember *Free To Be ... You and Me*, a project I started with a group of friends. That, too, was also a time of tumult, as American society was struggling with issues of race, gender equality, violence and sometimes-apocalyptic fears. Children, we knew, were catching whiffs of this in their daily lives. We wanted to help them grow up in a different kind of world.

So we set about to empower and inform these pillars of the next generation. A record, a book and a TV special were aimed at just that. And Grammy- and Emmy award-winning songs, words and images helped cultivate better role models while fueling a national conversation. Sexism and racism were out. Compassion and acceptance were in. Stars including Michael Jackson, Mel Brooks, Alan Alda, Carol Channing and Diana Ross sang, told stories, played in funny sketches in a bold campaign to lay the groundwork for a more accepting and loving society.

Today, the angry impulse toward division is inescapable for adults and children alike. The young no longer inhale just whiffs of it as many of us did in our childhoods. These kids are getting it in large doses — most dramatically in this election cycle.

These "always-connected" youth, as Levine puts it, devour a swamp of low quality, stereotypical offerings that too often promote gender bias, lack diverse role models, glorify conflict and may compromise children's social relations and identity needs. These trends represent a "quiet crisis" in the United States, he says.

I took these concerns to Michael Rich, a pediatrician who founded Harvard's Center on Media and Child Health. He points out that our society really can't even comprehend how this cocktail of media immersion and programming

vacuum will play out in this generation of tweens. Echoing Levine, Rich tells me that the narrowcasting websites popular among tweens appeal to the lowest common denominator and are populated by snarky, mindless and values-free content.

I'm someone who believes in the power of media to change the culture. And it's hard to sit passively and watch children suffer, especially when the suffering is playing out often violently in school hallways or in the recesses of a child's mind.

In my work at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, I see the indescribable and captivating kindness and empathy that children are wired to offer. I see children comforting peers who are also fighting cancer. I see siblings facing the battle alongside their cancer-stricken sister or brother. All of them show remarkable strength, courage and otherworldly compassion. Yet life's lessons, and deep human kindness, should surround all children, and not just when tragedy is at their family's doorstep.

We as a society need to take stock of how today's messages and programming are affecting children. What kind of world will be created by a generation of Americans seared by anger and numbed to hate?

Do we really want to find out?

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