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Parental Mediation of Children’s Emotional Responses to a Violent News Event

Moniek Buijzen
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In a survey among 451 elementary school children (8 to 12 years old), the authors investigate (a) to what extent children’s exposure to news coverage of a violent news event is related to their feelings of fear, worry, anger, and sadness and (b) to what extent active (i.e., helping children understand what they see on the news) and restrictive (i.e., keeping children from watching the news) parental mediation strategies moderate the impact of the news. Findings show that children’s news exposure is significantly related to their emotional responses. Active mediation successfully reduces the relations between news exposure and fear, worry, and anger but only among the younger children in the sample. Restrictive mediation has no or even an opposite effect. However, findings also suggest that the effectiveness of the mediation may depend on the child’s level of news exposure.

Keywords: adult mediation; emotional responses; child survey; news; media violence

The past two decades have witnessed significant changes in children’s news media environments. Today’s children are exposed to an ever-increasing stream of news information via television news programs, radio, newspapers, and the Internet. Although children may get their news information from different resources (e.g., media, family, school, or peers), the media—and television in particular—are by far their main source of knowledge about human or political crises, fires and accidents, and crime and war (Ball-Rokeach, 2001; Children Now, 1994; Walma van der Molen & van der Voort, 2000). Even if children do not choose to watch the news themselves, they are still frequently confronted with it while looking for other programs or when their parents are watching (Cantor & Nathanson, 1996).

Moreover, a number of studies have observed an increasing trend to present more violent news topics and to supplement regular news items with progressively more sensational and graphic pictures (e.g., Slattery, Doremus, & Marcus, 2001). Apart from these general trends in the reporting of violence, the past few years have witnessed several major catastrophic terrorist and war-related events that were covered extensively by broadcast news programs throughout the world. Most notable, the
media coverage of the 9/11 attacks and of “Operation Iraqi Freedom” was unprecedented in terms of drama and of witnessing the complete sequence of violence (i.e., threat of violence, actual violent events, and harmful consequences) from one’s own living room (see also Walma van der Molen & de Vries, 2003).

In both the public and academic debates, the significant changes in children’s media environments have raised two important questions: (a) How do children react to this increasingly abundant and explicit news coverage? and (b) How can parents and other caregivers deal with their children’s responses to the news? This study investigated these questions in the context of a recent violent news event: the assassination of Dutch filmmaker and columnist Theo van Gogh.

On November 2, 2004, van Gogh was shot and stabbed to death as he cycled in broad daylight on a street in Amsterdam. The perpetrator was a Muslim extremist who claimed to have committed the murder because van Gogh had offended the Muslim culture. For weeks, the Dutch news media were flooded with photographs, reports, and analyses of the assassination. The dramatic incident had far-reaching societal consequences. It was followed by a series of attacks on Muslim institutions and caused a period of increased anti-Muslim and anti-immigration sentiment (Boomgaard & de Vreese, in press). The first aim of this study was to investigate how children responded to the explicit and detailed news coverage. Our second aim was to compare the effectiveness of different parental strategies in modifying children’s emotional responses to this particular news event.

Children’s Emotional Responses to the News

Although the lion’s share of the research on children’s emotional responses to media fare has focused on fictional content, a number of studies have investigated responses to real-life violence in television news (e.g., Smith & Wilson, 2000, 2002; Walma van der Molen, Valkenburg, & Peeters, 2002; Wilson, Martins, & Marske, 2005). Part of these studies investigated specific news events, including the explosion of the Challenger (Wright, Kunkel, Pinon, & Huston, 1989), the first and second Gulf War (Cantor, Mares, & Oliver, 1993; Hoffner & Heafner, 1994; Walma van der Molen & Konijn, in press), and the 9/11 attacks (Redleener & Grant, 2002; Saylor, Cowart, Lipovsky, Jackson, & Finch, 2003; Schuster et al., 2001). These studies suggest that the intense media coverage of dramatic and extraordinary events can lead to short-term as well as enduring fear responses in children. In addition, several studies have found relations between the amount of news exposure and the intensity of fright reactions to the events (Schuster et al., 2001; Wilson et al., 2005).

Valkenburg (2004) has identified three ways in which children become frightened by media content, including direct experience, observational learning, and negative information transfer. Thus, children can become frightened while watching the news (a) by experiencing direct fear, the same way as they become frightened by a danger in real life (Cantor, 2002; Gunter & Furnham, 1984); (b) by observing the emotional
responses of eye witnesses and surviving relatives of victims (Bandura, 1994; Valkenburg, 2004); and (c) through negative information transfer brought by, for instance, the newsreader or eyewitnesses (Valkenburg, 2004).

In addition to these general mechanisms of emotional responses to frightening media content, earlier studies give us reason to assume that the news coverage of van Gogh’s assassination was particularly intense for children. First, the murder happened in the capital of a small country, and incidents that occur geographically close to the viewer generally have a higher impact than incidents that happen far away (Smith & Wilson, 2000). Second, the news covered multiple aspects of the assassination that relate to the fears of children of different ages. More specifically, the explicit reporting and visual graphics of the murder particularly relate to the fears of children older than 8 (Hoffman, 2000; Walma van der Molen et al., 2002), whereas the more abstract discussions of its societal and political consequences affect the emotions of children older than 10 (Wilson et al., 2005).

Therefore, the first aim of this study was to investigate the emotional responses of 8- to 12-year-old children to the news coverage of Theo van Gogh’s assassination. Previous studies on children’s responses to violent news content have mainly focused on children’s fear responses. However, two recent studies suggest that, apart from direct fear, violent news may also lead to other types of emotional responses, including worry, anger, and sadness (Walma van der Molen & Bushman, 2006; Walma van der Molen & Konijn, in press). Therefore, we investigated the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Children who are more exposed to the news about Theo van Gogh’s assassination respond with more fear, worry, anger, and sadness than children who are less exposed to the news.

Control variables. Previous studies on television-induced feelings of fear and worry have identified a number of variables that may play a role in children’s emotional responses to news events, including children’s age, sex, and empathic concern. First, during childhood, children progressively learn to cope with news content, resulting in less intense emotional responses toward the news (Cantor, 2002). Second, girls have often been shown to report more media-induced fears and worries than boys (Peck, 1999; Walma van der Molen & Konijn, in press; Walma van der Molen et al., 2002). Third, studies have revealed that children who experience more empathic concern display more emotional responses to violence than people with lower levels of empathic concern (Eisenberg, 2000; Zillmann, 1991).

Parental Mediation of Children’s Emotional Responses to the News

The second aim of this study was to investigate how parents can modify children’s emotional responses to the news. Children usually watch television in a family context that is largely provided by their parents. Therefore, parental mediation is often
considered the most effective tool in the management of television’s influence on children (Buerkel-Rothfuss & Buerkel, 2001; Dorr, 1986). The literature on parental mediation has so far identified three strategies that parents can use to modify media effects: active mediation (i.e., talking to children about television), restrictive mediation (i.e., setting rules restricting children’s television viewing), and social coviewing (i.e., simply watching television with children) (Nathanson, 1999; Valkenburg, Krcmar, Peeters, & Marseille, 1999).

Most mediation studies have focused on children’s media-induced aggression and have shown that both active and restrictive strategies can reduce children’s vulnerability to violent media content (Nathanson, 1999; Nathanson & Cantor, 2000). However, findings from studies on social coviewing suggest that this kind of mediation is only effective when it is intentional and accompanied by parental comments (Austin, 2001; Buerkel-Rothfuss & Buerkel, 2001; Yang & Nathanson, 2005). Because the importance of using such intentional comments suggests that this type of mediation may in fact fall under the definition of active mediation, this study excluded social coviewing as a news mediation strategy. To make sure that we compared two distinct constructs, we only investigated the effectiveness of active and restrictive mediation strategies in reducing children’s emotional responses to the news.

Although parents’ crucial role in informing, guiding, and supporting children after a major news event is generally recognized (Saylor et al., 2003), only a handful of empirical studies have investigated parental mediation of children’s emotional responses to the news (Moyer-Gusé & Smith, in press; Schuster et al., 2001; Smith, Moyer, Boyson, & Pieper, 2002; Valkenburg, Walma van der Molen, & Peeters, 2001; Wilson et al., 2005). Three of these studies investigated the effectiveness of parental mediation in reducing children’s emotional responses (Schuster et al., 2001; Smith et al., 2002; Wilson et al., 2005). However, these studies all focused on active mediation and did not systematically compare the effectiveness of active versus restrictive mediation strategies. Furthermore, the findings were inconclusive: Smith et al. (2002) found a negative relation between parent talk and children’s emotional responses to the news coverage of terrorist attacks, whereas Schuster et al. (2001) and Wilson et al. (2005) did not find a significant relation.

We expected that active mediation strategies are more effective in reducing children’s emotional responses than restrictive strategies. Earlier studies on mediation of fictional content rather convincingly show that active mediation helps elementary school children cope with their media-induced fears (Cantor, Sparks, & Hoffner, 1984; Wilson, 1987, 1989; Wilson & Weiss, 1991). There are two reasons for investigating whether these findings also apply to children’s emotional responses to news violence. First, parental strategies dealing with realistic fear-arousing news content (Moyer-Gusé & Smith, in press; Valkenburg et al., 2001) may not be comparable to the strategies used to deal with fictional media content, which often emphasize the unrealistic nature of the content (Wilson & Weiss, 1991). Second, the fictional content under investigation in earlier studies was, in general, especially
frightening to children. In contrast, real-life violent news events also evoke emotional reactions in adults, which may in turn affect children’s emotional responses (Muris, Steerneman, Meclebach, & Meesters, 1996).

Many parents choose restrictive strategies to protect their children from frightening media content, especially in the case of high perceived threat for their children (Nathanson, Eveland, Park, & Paul, 2002; Valkenburg et al., 1999). As yet, there is no academic knowledge on the effectiveness of restrictive mediation strategies in modifying children’s emotional responses to the news. Although it is conceivable that, by reducing children’s news exposure, restrictive mediation effectively modifies children’s emotional responses, studies on restrictive mediation have repeatedly shown that rule making is often insufficient in reducing children’s media exposure (see Austin, 2001). Additionally, in the literature on children’s real-life fears, active parental strategies dealing with children’s fears are considered more effective than denying or ignoring these fears (Fraiberg, 1959; Sarafino, 1986). We therefore formulated the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 2:** Active parental mediation strategies are more effective than restrictive mediation strategies in reducing the relation between children’s exposure to the news and their emotional responses.

Finally, we also investigated the effectiveness of active and restrictive mediation strategies among younger and older children. We expected to find age differences because of the declining role of parents during the elementary school years (Austin, 2001). Although parents initially represent children’s most important source of information, as they get older, children have been shown to increasingly rely on other social influences, including the media and peers (Austin, 2001). In addition, older elementary school children are increasingly exposed to media outside the family context, for instance, when watching television in their own bedroom (Owens et al., 1999). We therefore expected the following:

**Hypothesis 3:** Younger elementary school children (Grades 3 to 4) benefit more from parental mediation than older elementary school children (Grades 5 to 6).

**Method**

**Sample and Procedure**

Mid-November 2004, 2 weeks after the assassination, a paper-and-pencil survey was administered at four primary schools located in different towns in the Netherlands. After the schools had agreed to participate in the survey, parents were informed about the nature of the study and asked to give their consent. Two children, whose parents did not give consent to take part in the study, were excluded from
participation. This resulted in a total sample of 451 children between the ages of 8 and 12. There were 218 boys and 233 girls. Although the majority (78%) of the children was born and raised in the Netherlands, children came from multiple cultural backgrounds: 6.2% indicated having a Moroccan background, 6.4% Surinam, 2.2% Turkish, and 7.1% of the children originated from other countries.

Children completed the questionnaire in their own classroom. After a short introduction by the researcher, each child completed the survey in his or her own tempo. If a child had difficulty understanding a particular survey item, the researcher provided individual feedback. After all children in the class had completed the questionnaire, children were debriefed and were given ample opportunity to ask questions about the nature and purpose of the study. In addition, children were given the opportunity to talk about their emotions, for example discussing ways in which to cope with their negative feelings, with both the researcher and their classroom teacher.

Measures

Apart from demographic questions, the questionnaire consisted of items that tapped children’s exposure to the news coverage, their emotional responses to the events, and parental mediation of their exposure to the news coverage. Table 1 provides the means and standard deviations of all measures used in the study.

*Exposure to the news.* Children were asked to indicate how much they had followed the news about the assassination via four different news media (i.e., the children’s television news broadcasts, the adult news broadcasts, the newspapers, and the radio news). To each of the four questions, children could respond on a 4-point scale (never, sometimes, often, and very often). A total score of children’s news exposure was calculated by averaging the scores of the four questions.

*Empathic concern.* Empathic concern was measured using the same 4-point scale, which consisted of four questions aimed at assessing children’s concern or compassion for the victim and his family and friends. The questions were based on previous research by Strayer (1989). The questions were as follows: (a) “Do you feel sorry for Theo van Gogh?” (b) “Do you feel sorry for Theo van Gogh’s friends and family?” (c) “Do you feel pity for Theo van Gogh?” and (d) “Do you feel pity for Theo van Gogh’s friends and family?” The scores from the four questions were averaged to form an index of empathic concern (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .81$).

*Emotional responses.* To measure children’s emotional responses to the news about Theo van Gogh’s assassination, we presented the children with 16 questions that were derived from previous research on children’s emotional responses to the news (Strayer, 1989; Walma van der Molen & Konijn, in press). Using the same 4-point scale as described previously, children were asked to identify how often they
experienced a certain emotion. In random order, the list of items measured children’s fear, worry, anger, and sadness. The four emotion scales are discussed later.

The fear scale consisted of four questions ($\alpha = .71$) that measured children’s fright responses to the news coverage. These questions were as follows: (a) “Do you feel scared about what happened to Theo van Gogh?” (b) “Did you have scary dreams about what happened to Theo van Gogh?” (c) “Do you feel scared when you watch the news about Theo van Gogh?” and (d) “Do you feel scared when you are walking in the street?”

The worry scale consisted of four questions ($\alpha = .75$) that assessed children’s worry responses to the news coverage: (a) “Do you feel worried about what happened to Theo van Gogh?” (b) “Do you have distressing thoughts about what happened?” (c) “Are you afraid that it might happen again?” and (d) “Are you afraid of the consequences of what happened to Theo van Gogh?”

The anger scale consisted of five questions ($\alpha = .86$) that measured the prevalence of children’s anger caused by the assassination: (a) “Do you feel angry about what happened to Theo van Gogh?” (b) “Do you feel aggravated about what happened?” (c) “Do you feel furious about what happened?” (d) “Are you angry at the man who killed Theo van Gogh?” and (e) “Are you furious at the man who killed Theo van Gogh?”

Finally, the sadness scale consisted of three questions ($\alpha = .71$): (a) “Do you feel sad about what happened to Theo van Gogh?” (b) “Did you get tears in your eyes when you heard about what happened?” and (c) “Do you feel sorrowful about what happened?”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>$M$</th>
<th>$SD$</th>
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<td>1.19</td>
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<tr>
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<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Restrictive mediation</td>
<td>1.75</td>
<td>0.76</td>
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</table>

a. 218 boys (48.3%), 233 girls (51.7%).
**Parental mediation strategies.** To determine parental mediation of children’s responses to the news coverage, we used a television mediation scale developed by Valkenburg et al. (1999). We adapted the items representing an active mediation style and a restrictive mediation style to reflect mediation strategies directly relevant to the news coverage of Van Gogh’s assassination. The five items dealt with the frequency (never, sometimes, often, and very often) of the various mediation strategies used by parents to deal with the news about the assassination. The active mediation scale consisted of three questions (α = .76): (a) “Did your parents explain to you what happened to Theo van Gogh?” (b) “Did your parents explain why it happened?” and (c) “Did your parents talk to you about what happened?” The restrictive mediation scale consisted of two questions (α = .60): (a) “Were you allowed to watch the TV news about what happened to Theo van Gogh?” and (b) “Were you allowed to read in the papers about what happened to Theo van Gogh?”

**Results**

**Hierarchical Regression of Children’s Emotional Responses to the News**

Our first hypothesis pertained to the relations between children’s exposure to news coverage of the assassination and their emotional responses to the event, while controlling for children’s age, sex, and empathic concern. We conducted four hierarchical regression analyses, with children’s fear, worry, anger, and sadness as the dependent variables. The three control variables were entered on the first step, and children’s news exposure was entered on the second step. Thus, the hypothesis test was performed on the second step of each equation.

The first step accounted for 19% of the variance in children’s fear, $F(3, 447) = 36.55, p < .001$, 26% of the variance in worry, $F(3, 447) = 51.34, p < .001$, 26% in anger, $F(3, 447) = 52.77, p < .001$, and 25% in sadness, $F(3, 447) = 48.30, p < .001$. Table 2 provides the summary of the hierarchical regression predictions for all four emotional responses. Children’s age was negatively related to their emotional responses, even though the relations for fear and worry were not significant. Girls tended to report more intense feelings of fear, worry, and sadness, but feelings of anger were similar among boys and girls. Finally, children’s empathic concerns were positively related to each of the four emotions.

The second step resulted in a significant increase in the variance explained for all four emotional responses (see Table 2). Children’s news exposure added 10% to the variance explained in fear, $F(4, 446) = 45.41, p < .001$, 6% to the variance in worry, $F(4, 446) = 51.44, p < .001$, 8% to the variance in anger, $F(4, 446) = 57.58, p < .001$, and 6% of the variance in sadness, $F(4, 446) = 49.78, p < .001$. As Table 2 demonstrates, children’s exposure to the news was significantly and positively related to
The second aim of this study was to investigate how active and restrictive parental mediation strategies modified the relations between children’s news exposure and their responses of fear, worry, anger, and sadness (Hypotheses 2 and 3). To do so, we followed the interaction analysis procedure described by Aiken and West (1991). We conducted two sets of regression analyses with children’s emotional responses as the dependent variables. In the first set of analyses, children’s news exposure, parental active mediation, and a News Exposure × Active Mediation interaction term were entered as independent variables. In the second set of analyses, news exposure, restrictive mediation, and a News Exposure × Restrictive Mediation interaction term were entered. To compare the effectiveness of the mediation strategies for younger and older children, the analyses were conducted among third and fourth graders (ages 8 to 10) and fifth and sixth graders (ages 10 to 12). Results of the interaction analyses are reported in Table 3.

If a parental mediation strategy indeed moderated the relation between news exposure and emotional responses, a significant two-way interaction between parental mediation and news exposure would be expected. The results of these analyses are presented in Table 3.
mediation and news exposure should occur (Aiken & West, 1991). Table 3 shows that among the younger children, active mediation negatively interacted with news exposure for the emotions of fear, worry, and anger. Restrictive mediation positively interacted with news exposure for the emotions fear and worry. Among the older children, none of the mediation strategies interacted with news exposure. To understand more thoroughly what the interactions among younger children mean, the significant interactions were plotted (cf., Aiken & West, 1991).

Figure 1 illustrates the impact of younger children’s news exposure and their feelings of fear, worry, and anger as conditional on active parental mediation. The solid regression lines in Figure 1 indicate the relations between news exposure and the three emotional responses for children from parents who often applied active mediation, and the broken lines indicate the same relations for children with parents who applied less or no active mediation. The slope of the regression line indicates the direction and strength of the relations. As all positive slopes show, overall, news exposure was positively related to children’s emotional responses. However, these relations were significantly weaker for children who often received active mediation than for children who received less or no active mediation.

### Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Fear β</th>
<th>Worry β</th>
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<td>.30***</td>
<td>.30***</td>
<td>.20*</td>
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<td>News × Restrictive Mediation</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>–.06</td>
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</table>

* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001.
Post hoc probing analyses for active mediation showed that (a) the relation between news exposure and fear was stronger for children who received few or no active mediation ($\beta = .67$, $p < .001$) than for children who often received such mediation ($\beta = .22$, $p < .05$) and (b) the relations between news exposure and worry and news exposure and anger held only for children who received few or no active mediation ($\beta = .45$, $p < .001$, and $\beta = .43$, $p < .001$, respectively). In other words, the relations between news exposure and emotional responses were significantly weaker for
children whose parents actively discussed and explained the news about Theo van Gogh’s assassination.

In addition, Table 3 and Figure 1 also show that overall, children from parents who often applied active mediation experienced more intense emotions than children from parents who applied less or no active mediation. As the interaction plots show, this difference only held for children who reported relatively low news exposure. In other words, among children who were exposed to the news relatively little, active mediation and emotional responses were related positively. It is uncertain whether the causal direction of this relation points from mediation to emotional responses or the other way around. We elaborate on this finding in the discussion section.

Finally, Figure 2 illustrates the impact of younger children’s news exposure on their feelings of fear and worry as conditional on restrictive parental mediation. The solid regression lines in Figure 2 represent the relations between news exposure and the two emotional responses for children who were confronted with restrictive mediation strategies, and the broken lines indicate the same relation for children who received less or no restrictive mediation. Figure 2 shows an opposite effect for restrictive mediation: The relations between news exposure and children’s fear and worry were significantly stronger for children who often received restrictive mediation than for children who received less or no restrictive mediation. More specifically, post hoc probing analyses showed that the relations between news exposure and fear and worry only held for children who often received restrictive mediation ($\beta = .63, p < .001$, and $\beta = .49, p < .001$, respectively).

Discussion

This study investigated children’s emotional responses to a violent event that was extensively covered by the news media: the assassination of filmmaker and columnist Theo van Gogh. The aim of the study was (a) to investigate the relations between children’s news exposure and their feelings of fear, worry, anger, and sadness and (b) to compare the effectiveness of active and restrictive parental mediation strategies in modifying these relations.

Children’s Emotional Responses to the News

In accordance with our first hypothesis, children’s exposure to the news was significantly related to their feelings of fear, worry, anger, and sadness, also when controlling for children’s age, sex, and empathic concern. Consistent with earlier research findings, children’s empathic concern in particular related to their emotional responses (Walma van der Molen & Konijn, in press).

Although with increasing age children reported less intense emotional responses, the effect of age was weaker than expected. A possible explanation for this finding...
might be that the different aspects of this news event affected younger as well as older children. On one hand, the news coverage involved explicit reports of the murder, eyewitness accounts, and even photographs of the victim. These kinds of explicit depictions of violence have been shown to particularly affect younger elementary school children’s emotions (Smith et al., 2002; Walma van der Molen et al., 2002; Wilson et al., 2005). On the other hand, the news also addressed the more abstract political and societal consequences of the assassination, such as the increase of anti-Muslim sentiment, which relate to older children’s emotions (Cantor, 2002; Cantor et al., 1993; Walma van der Molen et al., 2002; Wilson et al., 2005). Future research, therefore, should include the types of news information that predominantly induce emotions in children of different age groups. With such a procedure, it would also be possible to investigate more precisely what type of mediation works best with different aspects of news coverage.

Active and Restrictive Parental Mediation of Children’s Emotional Responses to the News

In agreement with our predictions, (a) active mediation effectively reduced the relations between children’s news exposure and their emotional responses, whereas
restrictive mediation had no or even an opposite effect (Hypothesis 2), and (b) this mediation effect only held for the younger children in our sample (Hypothesis 3). Thus, our results seem to be in line with our assumption that younger elementary school children benefit most from active parental mediation. However, our study also yielded a number of findings regarding active as well as restrictive mediation that deserve more attention.

Although active mediation modified the relations between children’s news exposure and their emotional responses, our analyses also yielded a positive relation between active mediation and children’s emotional responses. In other words, children who received active parental mediation generally reported more intense feelings of fear, worry, anger, and sadness about the assassination. The cross-sectional nature of our study permits two possible interpretations of this unexpected finding. First, it is conceivable that parents with children, who responded to the news in a more emotional manner, were more inclined to talk with them about the events. Following this line of reasoning, children’s emotional responses may have stimulated parental active mediation, which in turn moderated the relation between news exposure and emotional responses. This interpretation would confirm the assumption that active mediation makes children less responsive to the news.

However, it is also conceivable that the causal direction points from active mediation to children’s emotional responses. By talking with children about the events, parents may have served as an additional source of information (Wilson et al., 2005). Several studies have shown that parents’ reports of their own emotional responses to violent news events are related to their children’s emotional responses (Muris et al., 1996; Smith et al., 2002). As such, parental talk may have served as a source of fear, worry, and anger through the same processes of modeling and negative information transfer by which children are affected by media content (Valkenburg, 2004). The patterns observed in our study are in line with this interpretation. Figure 1 shows that the discrepancy in emotional responses between children who received high and low levels of active mediation was largest among children who were exposed to the news least often. For these children, parental talk might have served as a primary source of information and thus their emotional responses to the assassination.

It has been noted elsewhere that in the context of catastrophic news events, many professionals encourage parents to talk with their children about the events, even though there is little or no research in support of the assumption that talk will reassure children (Schuster et al., 2001; Wilson et al., 2005). Our findings suggest that, at least among children with low news media exposure, parental talk might even have an opposite effect and inadvertently enhance children’s emotional responses to a violent news event, because it may serve as an important substitute source of information. This would imply that great care has to be taken with active mediation strategies. However, to come to decisive conclusions about the antecedents and consequences of active parental mediation, there is need for causal-correlational research to determine the direction of the relation between parental mediation and children’s emotional responses.
In addition, more research is needed on the processes underlying active parental mediation. In the literature, a number of mediating constructs of the relation between adult active mediation and children’s media responses have been identified, including children’s expectancies, self-efficacy, and orientations toward antisocial television (Austin, 2001; Nathanson, 1999, 2002; Watkins, Howard-Barr, Moore, & Werch, 2006). As yet, the mechanisms through which active mediation influences children’s emotional responses to the news have not received any research attention. Future research could, for instance, draw from the literature on children’s coping (e.g., Cantor, 2002; Moyer-Gusé & Smith, in press; Valkenburg, Cantor, & Peeters, 2000; Wilson, Hoffner, & Cantor, 1987) and further explore how different mediation styles can lead to reduced emotional responses by enhancing children’s various coping strategies (e.g., cognitive vs. noncognitive strategies).

As for restrictive mediation, our findings showed that the relations between news exposure and fear and worry were stronger among children who received high levels of restrictive mediation. In the case of extremely violent or catastrophic events, information about the event is often ubiquitous and virtually impossible to avoid. Children may have learned about Van Gogh’s assassination from numerous resources, including not only the news media but also their peers and even discussions between parents. Thus, children who learned about the assassination in spite of parental efforts to shelter them experienced more intense fear and worry. One explanation for this finding might be that parental restrictive and protective behavior increased children’s emotional responses by enhancing their degree of vigilance and negative expectations about the situation (Busselle, 2003).

An alternative explanation might lie in parental style. Previous mediation research has shown that the extent to which parents apply restrictive mediation is negatively related to general family communication patterns (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2005; Fujioka & Austin, 2002). It is conceivable that children from restrictive parents who were nevertheless exposed to the news could not talk about their media-induced emotions with their parents and, as a consequence, remained more emotional than children who did talk with their parents.

Our results are in line with recent findings in mediation research that rule making is an ineffective tool in the management of television influence on children (e.g., Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2005; Nathanson, 2002) and support Austin’s (2001) hesitation to consider rule making as a mediation strategy at all. However, our findings do suggest that for some children, reducing their exposure to television may sometimes be the only effective way to counteract negative effects. It is conceivable that restrictive mediation may be more effective when accompanied by parental explanation (see Austin, 2001). If children understand why they are not allowed to watch certain programs, they may perhaps learn how to manage their own exposure to program content. Future research could investigate the effectiveness of restrictive mediation in combination with active mediation. For instance, instead of investigating active and restrictive mediation as two separate dimensions, they could be treated as orthogonal, such that four family mediation types are created.
Conclusion

In conclusion, our study demonstrated that (a) exposure to news coverage of a violent news event was strongly related to children’s feelings of fear, worry, anger, and sadness and (b) parents modified the emotional impact of news by applying active and restrictive mediation strategies. Our study was the first to compare the effectiveness of different types of mediation in reducing the emotional impact of a high profile and violent news event. As such, the study was unique in its high external validity. We were able to measure children’s emotional responses to an extremely violent news event that occurred shortly before our investigation. In addition, the study allowed us to compare emotional responses of children who had actually received different types of parental mediation.

For a full understanding of how parents can modify the emotional impact of violent news events, further research is needed. First, as noted previously, there is a need for causal-correlational research designs and for research that explores how different ways of talking with children can reduce the emotional impact of different types of news reporting. Future studies could draw from the more developed literature on parental mediation of children’s media-induced aggression, which suggests that the outcomes of parental mediation depend on (a) child and family characteristics (Abelman & Pettey, 1989; Nathanson et al., 2002) and (b) the content and form of the mediation (Nathanson & Yang, 2003). The findings from the present study, however, can provide a basis for future theoretical and empirical research on adult mediation of children’s emotional responses to different catastrophic news events.

References


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