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# TERROR IN THE WOODS

## Discussion Guide

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# Introduction

Many of us worry about what our kids are doing online. Parents often start to feel left in the dark as children mature, and developing intense interests and relationships can be part of growing up. Thanks to social media and the internet, many of these concerns might feel heightened. When kids are online they can get information that they might not be developmentally mature enough to handle. When they have problems, they might turn to peers or search engines before their parents. And because of texting and social media, they can feel hyper-connected to their friends, with positive and negative effects.

In many ways, Terror in the Woods presents a worst-case scenario for parents. In the movie, Rachel and Kaitlyn discovered something online that they weren't able to handle in a healthy way. They both would have benefited from mental health treatment, but they didn't get it, and the consequences were tragic.

The kind of violence that happens in Terror in the Woods is extremely rare. In fact, research shows that people with mental health disorders are more likely to be the victims of violence than perpetrators of it. But parents can still learn some important lessons from the story. In partnership with Lifetime, the Child Mind Institute has prepared this discussion guide to give families information about keeping kids safe online and fill in some of the blanks about mental health care, including signs that a child might have a problem and how to speak up if you think someone needs help.

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# Keeping Kids Safe Online

Parent should know what kids are doing online and set limits about what healthy internet consumption looks like. Here are some tips for keeping screen time healthy:

**Show interest in what your kids are doing online**

Kids shouldn't be using the internet in isolation. Talk about the websites your child visits, what she is interested in, and any questions she might have. If you think she might not be developmentally ready for some of the things she is seeing, don't be afraid to set boundaries. If you think she might not be understanding some of the things that she is seeing, provide some context. This is also a good idea if you see kids looking at media that promotes unrealistic beauty standards or unhealthy relationships. Besides reinforcing your values, talking to kids about what they see online helps them become more thoughtful media consumers.

For younger kids, it is also a good idea to use parental monitoring software to keep tabs on what your children are looking at. Don't feel like you need to be secretive about this, either. Parents should be honest about the tools they are using and why — your goal isn't to spy, but to keep your kids safe.

**Limit screen time**

Parents should set sensible boundaries on how much screen time is appropriate for a child. Screen time shouldn't interfere with getting homework done, and it shouldn't monopolize your child's free time, either. Kids benefit from developing offline interests, like playing sports, joining clubs, and learning new skills that build their self-confidence. It is also important to designate media-free spaces in your home, like bedrooms and the dinner table. Screens in particular can interfere with sleep, and we all know how difficult it is to stop scrolling through social media and go to sleep. It's also good to ask kids to use their tablets, computers and phones in a public room, like the living room, around family members (and not in isolation).

**Model good tech behavior**

Try to be mindful of when you are reaching for your phone. You don't want your kids to feel like they are competing with a screen for your attention. Respect the spaces in your home that you have designated to be media-free. This sets a good example for your children, but it also shows them that you care and are interested, which makes them more likely to open up. Even when they're getting older, your kids still need to talk to you, not just their friends.

# Looking Out for Signs of
# Mental Health Disorders

Young children can have serious mental health problems. If you have concerns, it is important not to brush them aside. In Terror in the Woods, there were many signs that Rachel and Kaitlyn needed help. While young kids might not be able to clearly distinguish between reality and fantasy, by 12 years old (the age of the characters in the movie) a child generally has a clear understanding of what is real and what isn't. Typically developing 12-year-olds don't have imaginary friends or struggle with intrusive thoughts and images. The girls in the movie were truly afraid and obsessed with the idea of the Suzerain. They weren't violent because they didn't have a conscience, but because they needed help and, tragically, they didn't get it.

- Withdrawing from friends and family
- Changes in sleeping or eating patterns
- Emotions that are unwanted and uncontrollable
- Less concern with appearance, clothes or hygiene
- Difficulty organizing thoughts or speech
- Loss of usual interest in activities or of motivation and energy
- Development of unusual ideas or behaviors
- Unusual perceptions, such as visions or hearing voices (or even seeing shadows)
- Feeling like things are not real
- Change in personality
- Feelings of grandiosity (belief she has a superpower, is receiving special messages, etc.)

If you feel that something might be wrong, or you are noticing issues that aren't going away and are interfering with your child's ability to be happy and comfortable, share your concerns with a professional. It might feel scary, but getting an evaluation to see if your child is struggling is very important. There are many effective, evidence-based treatments for mental health disorders these days, and we know that getting kids help as soon as possible is better for them in the long run. This is particularly true for children struggling with psychosis.

Talking to your pediatrician can be a good first step to getting help since she knows your child and can probably recommend a specialist. You might also find it helpful to download the Child Mind Institute's Parents Guide to Getting Good Care, which walks parents through the steps of getting treatment.

# The Importance of Community

We have to look out for each other. Often, parents are distracted and need help, and the proverb "it takes a village to raise a child" still rings very true.

That is why it is important to know your child's friends, and share concerns if you have them. Pay attention to what teachers are saying. Teachers see a wide range of kids, and they are in a good position to assess how typical a child's behavior is for her age range. If a child is decidedly out of the norm, it's worth looking at why, and if she needs help.

## Learn More at the Child Mind Institute

Parents Guide to Getting Good Care
**childmind.org/guide/parents-guide-getting-good-care-2/**

Child Mind Institute Symptom Checker
**childmind.org/symptomchecker/**

Watching for Signs of Psychosis in Teens
**childmind.org/article/watching-for-signs-of-psychosis-in-teens/**

Media Guidelines for Kids of All Ages
**childmind.org/article/media-guidelines-for-kids-of-all-ages/**

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