

Children know how to cope with Osama the Bogeyman

There is no need to queue up for the latest Halloween chiller thriller this year.

Real life is proving sufficiently scary, thank you. In the past seven days there have been enough disturbing images to feed the deranged fantasies of a convention of sociopaths. We have seen everything from allegations of serious sexual offences against a daytime television presenter to the bodies of hostages dragged from a Moscow theatre and the face of a sniper who has killed 10 people at random in less than a month. Who needs vampires when you have the unedifying spectacle of female celebrities sinking their fangs into the throats, and other anatomical features, of the men they once professed to love. It's the tabloid version of *The Vagina Monologues*.

The picture that troubled me most, however, was the artwork of Lindsey Martin, an 11-year-old pupil at Caol primary school in Fort William. Her work has been shortlisted for the Barbie prize, a children's art prize sponsored by Mattel, the toy maker. It is a photographic piece in which Lindsey invokes the terrorist events of September 11 by posing under white sheets, her face obscured by bandages, her hands encased in white surgical gloves. Were you to view the picture out of context, you would assume it depicted a dead child in a body bag, the victim of some terrible atrocity. The schoolgirl says she was trying to convey the feeling of being trapped under dust "as it turns into a shroud".

There is no report of what Lindsey's mother thought when she saw her daughter's art project. We don't know if she recoiled in horror at this image of her child as bandaged corpse or whether she said "That's nice, dear" and pinned it to the fridge door. She could be forgiven some bemusement, death by dust asphyxiation being about as common in Fort William as five consecutive days of sunshine.

The day after the Caol primary pupils' work graced the newspapers came a report into what gives children nightmares. Kids today are apparently no longer afraid of shadows under the bed or fantasy bogeymen. They are now scared of the same things as the rest of us: kidnapping, terrorism and war. The Soham murders and the deaths of Milly Dowler and Sarah Payne have replaced ghouls and goblins as the most terrifying images in children's minds. The worst nightmare for children involves being kidnapped.

We should not be surprised by this. As the boundaries between childhood and adulthood become increasingly blurred, the two worlds have merged. Children are exposed to the same media as their parents. They read Harry Potter together, watch soap operas together, visit Disney World together and view the news

together. Adults collude in their own infantilism. Grown-ups play computer games, refuse to leave their parents' homes and dress in play clothes. They would rather lose themselves in *Madness the Musical* than watch a challenging piece of adult theatre. The bestseller lists are dominated by books that can be appreciated by readers whose IQs are lower than their shoe size. Why struggle with Solzhenitsyn when you can canter through *About a Boy*?

Children, unsurprisingly, cannot wait to join this world of adult babies. Fashion houses bring out junior versions of adult clothes and make-up. Argos stocks padded bras and thongs for nine-year-olds. Alcohol manufacturers target their product



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at the teen market. It sometimes seems as if childhood these days is discarded along with the disposable nappies. If the concept of the age of innocence came to maturity, so to speak, in the 18th century — championed by Rousseau and the romantics — the loss of innocence was a 20th-century preoccupation. Freud kicked it into play and writers as diverse as Salinger, Nabokov and Ian McEwan have run with the ball.

In the 21st century despite, or perhaps because of, our unprecedented awareness of "the child" as a complex being, our idea of innocence is confused. Should we applaud Lindsey's precocious artwork or book her a session with the child psychologist? Is it healthy that our children fear war more than Fungus the Bogeyman or is it a symptom of early neurosis?

Childhood has become loaded with all sorts of adult preoccupations. The problem adults have is that, at a fundamental level, they equate innocence with ignorance. For generations we have believed that if we can protect children from reality, we can preserve their purity. But in our muddled way, we are in danger of denying them experience of the wider world with all its wonders and horrors. In the name of safeguarding them, we constrain them and censor their imaginations.

Anybody who has watched a three-year-old prod a dead pigeon with a stick knows that children have a fascination with the morbid. I may feel uncomfortable with Lindsey's picture and, were she my child, I would want to reassure myself about the context in which the art was being created. But at the end of the day it is just a modern take on that age-old preoccupation with death and dying that children often express in drawings. The big dinosaur eats the little dinosaur, the prince slays the dragon, the soldiers fire at each other with machine guns.

While the panicky adult in me feels more comfortable when these images are rendered in crayon or fruit-scented gel pen, the rational adult in me knows that the medium really is not the message. Lindsey, through an innovative education project at Caol school, has been introduced to more challenging art than many of her contemporaries. Her work reflects that. Education, especially art and literature, does not rob children of their innocence. It is the tool by which children make sense of the disturbing events they encounter.

In this therapy-driven age, when the worried-well are encouraged to view themselves as the victims of some syndrome, adults frequently over-interpret children's behaviour. One in 10 children is now said, by the World Health Organisation, to suffer some form of mental illness. Behaviour that does not immediately fit our perception of the norm is labelled and treated. Children once fondly known by teachers as "little originals" are now seen as problems.

With the threat of war and terrorist attacks, these feel like dark days. But British children have survived worse. The current generation of pensioners endured war, bombing, rationing, separation from parents and the prospect of imminent death. Nobody thought to offer them counselling. With the amazing resilience that children possess, they overcame loss and disrupted education. Bomb sites became adventure playgrounds, pieces of shrapnel were prized trophies.

We clearly should not give children unfettered access to the whole panoply of human misery but nor should we deny reality when it intrudes. Children are adept at seeking reassurance when they need it and at blanking out anything that is too complicated, boring or traumatic for them to understand.

Parents have to decide for themselves, according to their own values, how much exposure is suitable for their children. Those looking for some kind of blanket guidance miss the point. You cannot parent by numbers. Children have always been spooked by the products of their imaginations. The scary thing nowadays is that the adults no longer know how to cope.