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Kids need help understanding scary world

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The generally accepted list of "things kids worry about" usually includes school and time commitments, appearance and fitting in with friends, peer pressure, family and other expectations.

Like it or not, Mom and Dad, for teenagers you can add love and sex as topics that dominate at least some percentage of a teen's waking hours.

All fairly inconsequential stuff, but the reality is that we live in an age of 24/7 news, available at the click of a button. An analysis of the vocabulary and most frequently used words of news readers and commentators will almost certainly place "terrorism" at the top of the list with "Islamic terrorism" and travel bans affecting Islamic countries as a close second.

Dangerous liaisons with foreign powers fill up the news time still available.

It would be easy enough, without much life experience, for kids to view their world as a scary place inhabited by a limited number of people whose purpose it is to wreak as much havoc and harm as possible.

That naïve belief even seems to drive populist political agendas.

News stories, based on the maxim "if it bleeds it leads," usually provide no further information beyond what happened. The quick and easy stories tell the who, where and when of the latest terrorist story with no elaboration.

The problem is, for kids just learning about the world around them, especially when it comes to this daily diet of virtual terrorism, the "who" and "why" is the background stuff necessary but too often absent from any understanding of the various kinds of terrorism posing threats around the world.

The FBI defines terrorism as "the unlawful use of force and violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives."

So is it helpful for our kids to be growing up on a diet of "fake" or heavily politicized news that aligns terrorism with refugees of one belief, ethnicity or religion?

In Canada, for example, using that definition, terrorist actors have include Quebec nationalists, the Sons of Freedom anarchists, environmentalists, objectors to the Vietnam war, anti-abortionists, Sikh and Islamist extremists, anti-feminists and youthful wannabes such as John Stewart Nuttall and the crazed loner Michael Zehaf-Bibeau who once tried to hold up a McDonald's with a sharp stick and who fatally shot Cpl. Nathan Cirillo at the Canadian National War Memorial in Ottawa before being shot dead himself.

Bibeau was not a terrorist, even though most news stories labelled him as such. He was a homegrown, crack-addicted murderer.

According to an analysis of terrorism risks by the Cato Institute, a public-policy research organization, no person accepted to the United States as a refugee, Syrian or otherwise, has been implicated in a major fatal terrorist attack since the Refugee Act of 1980 set up systematic procedures for accepting refugees into the United States.

In Europe, the vast majority of terrorist attacks had nothing to do with religion.

In 2013, there were 152 terrorist attacks in Europe, but only two of them were "religiously motivated," while 84 others were predicated upon ethno-nationalist or separatist beliefs such as those of France's FLNC, which advocates an independent nation for the island of Corsica.

But there is much more for today's kids to be concerned about beyond religious terrorism.

The U.S. Homeland Security News Wire is the homeland security industry's largest online daily news publication. According to the wire service, the number of Americans killed in "acts of terrorism" between 2001 and 2014 both on U.S. soil and abroad is 3,412, including the victims of 9/11.

During the same period, nearly 400,000 people died by firearms on U.S. soil, including homicides, accidents and suicides.

According to a StatCan report from 2012 — the most recent comparative year available — the U.S. suffered a total of 8,813 murders involving the use of firearms that year. Canada, in the same year, recorded just 172 firearms-related homicides.

This might be a good time, even a critical time, for a serious course in current affairs based on accessible research and facts.

Such a course would focus on more immediate and relevant issues beyond the heavily politicized and easily digestible news stories about fears of religiously based terrorism and politically based travel bans.

The kids of 2017 should be learning to question what to be realistically concerned about now, if they are the ones expected to tackle those concerns rationally when their turn comes to take charge.