

Children and Reality Shows – the good, the bad and the ugly

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The talent that children have need to be harnessed in every way that is possible. As a psychiatrist and a father I have often been asked whether if children working in films, reality shows and various other social platforms, does any good for them. The answer lies in the rationality with which the child is subjected to these media. The key purpose of this write up is to elucidate and garner whether children and reality shows are a good mix. Children need friendly environments and supporting families to help them blossom to the fullest. I believe that children must exhibit their talent and show the prowess that they have in various areas like dancing, singing and acting. The same holds true for chess, sports and music. The key factor in all these activities is that the child must enjoy these activities and must not be under the duress of performing and winning. The onus is on parents and elders to make sure that nervousness and fear of losing does not creep in. Many reality shows while they help to make a child open and fearless with stage performance, often involve hours of shoots and hard work with the child missing days and weeks of school and moving to another city based on the location of the show. The show may help some children catapult to fame while there is also a chance that an early exit may riddle the child with shame and guilt. Parents should never impose goals and expectations when children take part in these shows and there is to psychologically equip the child to deal with failure and success in an equipoient manner.

There is an ongoing debate on whether reality shows are good or bad for children. Children may love the fame and popularity they get from these shows. It gives them a stage that was never probably available to us as children. While all this is very nice, the child should never get bogged down with the pressure of performing in a reality show and neither should the sweet savor of success let his head swell with pride. There is need for psychological support to all children that work in reality shows especially those that involve long days and months of being on the shows and where ups and downs may occur. The developing mind of a child has not yet seen the maladies that come with life and may not be strong to bear the brunt of emotional and psychological losses that the show may entail. This is even more so when they may have to exit a show after having reached nearly the end and not coming in the first three places.

This could be a fatal blow to the confidence of the child who may at times never be able to recover from this defeat unless helped and supported psychologically. I have luckily handled different cases of children affected by these reality some good, some bad and some ugly. I met a child in a school that had won a very famous reality show. The child was on cloud nine post the win and so were his parents. The child who was actually a shy and introvert child had bloomed into an extrovert and free child courtesy the show. This was the positive aspect. The negative aspect started surfacing when the child began to back answer the teachers, used to talk rudely and exhibited conduct problems in school.

The parents based on the success of the child refused to seek psychological counseling for the problem and began to feel that the school was jealous as the child was doing well without any help from the school. It was only when a psychiatrist intervened (someone who they knew personally as well), that they sought help and the child's behavior issues were resolved.

I remember another case where a child was eliminated in the first few episodes and everyone in the building made fun of him and even relatives told him that he achieved nothing. The child stopped eating and went into depression. We had to treat the child using medication and counseling and it took a good 8 months for the child to come out of the depression.

There was a 14 year old girl that was eliminated in the final stages of a reality show. Though the family and parents were supportive, she developed crying spells, depressed mood and anger towards herself at the failure. She began to cope with the anger using self injurious behavior by cutting herself with a blade and resulting in her needing psychiatric treatment. It was only after 6 months of medical treatment and counseling that the situation improved.

I have nothing against children working in reality shows. But I firmly believe that children must thoroughly enjoy the experience and must not be subjected to work like bonded labor along with their parents who also get worked up with regard to eliminations and results of the show. Children's reality shows must have an on call mental health professional that interacts with children on a regular basis and alleviates any anxiety and psychological distress they may go through. Parents of these children also need to be counseled about how to deal with these problems when they arise. Screening from a psychological point of view is essential whenever the child shows signs of any disturbance. Parents must realize that their child participating in the show is the joy and not winning that matters. It is also important that talent while being harnessed must not become a burden to the child where his talent does not determine his life course. Rather he must orchestrate his life based on all the talents he has in a steady manner. Children are like blank slates and all that matters is what we write on them. We must fill the child's bucket of self esteem so high that the world may not be able to poke holes to drain it dry.

RECOMMENDED READING AND REFERENCES

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