

Our sources are closer to the ground

What makes editors choose CE stories ahead of the work of other journalists? The Observer's Home News Editor offers his perspective.

What makes editors choose CE stories ahead of the work of other journalists? To help answer this question, Children's Express interviewed Paul Dunn, Home News Editor of The Observer.

A grand total of 10 stories have been published in The Observer so far this year, so it came as no surprise that Dunn had plenty to say on children in general, and Children's Express in particular.

Kids are either portrayed as demons who are running riot, taking drugs and having underage sex, he said, or they're pictures of innocence being threatened by the nasty outside world. That's the image you get of children in the media, and I don't think it's a very genuine image at all.

We have run quite a few Children's Express stories in The Observer and I think it's very useful because it gives us a direct line to what children think. The Children's Express idea of children talking and working things out for themselves is a good one. A lot of things are said on behalf of children, by adults, but one doesn't really know if they're true or not. We don't often hear children's voices.

In the worst sense, children are there to be exploited. 'Tragic child has terrible illness' is a mainstay of many local papers and quite a lot of national ones as well. It sells papers, so in that sense children are exploited by the media. That's why I think it's important to try and redress that balance by getting their real voices heard as well.

In August The Observer ran a CE story about morality in the classroom. The article was in response to calls from the Government's School Curriculum and Assessment Authority for pupils to do community service and 'study' moral issues. The Children's Express members involved in the article were as dismissive of the ideas as the teachers' unions were when they rejected the proposals.

The Children's Express story we ran about morality in the classroom was quite interesting, said Dunn, because it's all very well for bishops and vicars and heads of government to go on about it, but what's really interesting is what children of 14 think about the whole affair. They're the ones who aren't supposed to know the difference between right and wrong unless they're taught it. But is that true?

It's important for newspapers to get young people on their side. Newspapers are doing more to help young people get into journalism in a slightly more formal way. The more younger people there are writing, the more that voice will come across. There is a problem that newspapers, like other institutions, tend to be run by 40-year-old people whose memory of teen life is but a distant memory. And that colours their perceptions.

Dunn himself got into journalism almost by accident at the age of 21. He said, I studied English Literature at university. I wanted to do something that involved language and words and writing, so I thought I'd give journalism a shot. In those days if things didn't work out after a year or two you could always go and do something else. It wouldn't be fair to say I drifted into it. It was an option that I fancied trying out.

Above all, Dunn was keen to emphasise the rewarding aspects of the profession. It's not like working for a living, he said. You get to meet some of the most interesting and important people in the country. The one thing that you can be certain of is that it'll never be the same as it was last week. As life changes, as current affairs move on, the job moves on with it. It's a chance to influence the way people think about things that you feel strongly about. Someone called journalism the rough first draft of history.

I do love working on The Observer, but if I won the Lottery tomorrow I probably wouldn't be too bothered about packing it all in. As jobs go I think it's fabulous, given that we all have to earn a living. It would be great to be editor, but that's not going to happen. Not yet, anyway.

About the team

This interview was conducted by editors Erica Rutherford, 14, and Jack Stevens, 14, and reporter Selina Gibson, 13. The article was published in a Children's Express publication, Inside Track.

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