

HEADLINERS

Kids: what the papers say

Children's Express uncovers widespread evidence that the media perpetuate crude stereotypes of young people

*Victims, angels or devils. Children's Express trustee **Angela Neustatter** looks at the stereotyping of children in the media while below, youngsters give their views on the way they're portrayed.*

Do the children we see in our newspapers bear any resemblance to those in our own families? Take a look at the following headlines: Boy stabbed in back after argument in playground; Girl gangs rival boys in battle to rule the streets; Scandal of teenage yobs luxury jail-house, and Rich kids get legacy of fear and failure.

These, if we relied exclusively on the media for our impressions, are today's youngsters a mad, bad, dangerous lot - and the above is just a tiny taster of the way our children are represented in a constant display of titillation by the media.

At Children's Express, a charity where children spend their free time training in journalistic skills and reporting on children's issues, members are so concerned about the effects of misleading media representation of children that they are biting back. They have organised a conference called Kids these Days to be held later this month to discuss research they have carried out which demonstrates, they say, how thoroughly children are stereotyped in the press.

Twenty-seven children of the 130-strong membership of Children's Express, which has bases in London and Newcastle, monitored more than 400 stories in the national newspapers - both tabloids and broadsheets the Evening Standard, and Sheffield Star, to see how their generation was represented.

Stephanie Williams, executive chairman of Children's Express, and mother of two teenage children who also take a keen interest in media representation, explains: The children were shocked at how in just about every article they were stereotyped, and it started a big discussion about how the press creates a picture of children that suits their purposes.

What struck the team most was that children appear over and over again in very specific categories. The most common stereotype was the 'kid as victim, usually sanctified no matter how they have previously behaved, closely followed by the cute kid who has little news value but provides the feel-good factor and often an engaging photograph.

More than 10 per cent of the stories the team examined demonised children - tales of evil children, young hooligans, bad parents put on the line by their kids. Mehrak Golestani, 14, is particularly angered by this. The press hears a story about bad children, they get out the bare facts and they don't give it a second thought. The kids aren't given a chance to explain themselves, he says.

Less prevalent but still very evident are the kids are brilliant stories in which children excel in some way, getting into Oxbridge at 10 or donating their pocket money to the Third World. These stories were judged as very patronising. There are also the kids as accessories stories, where children are used to somehow enhance their parents; and the kids these days' category, which includes stories of children being corrupted by computers and pretty pupils getting off with a choir master with adults commenting that it didn't used to happen in their day.

And finally there are the brave little angels, children who endure terrible illnesses with a smile, or risk their lives by hauling a toddler back from a cliff edge.

But how serious is this stereotyping, and does it ultimately affect the lives of ordinary children? Garrison Lansdown, director of the Children's Rights Development Unit, says: The role the media plays in constructing stereotypes is hugely influential in the way we see the world. For example, on Channel 4's Look Who's Talking programmes featuring children, one lad of about 16, of very big build, said that even though he is a pacifist, people look at him, assume he's a thug and cross the road because he fits an image of thugs as presented in the press.

Peter Wilson, director of Young Minds, the children's mental health charity, thinks the demonising of children is especially worrying. There can certainly be a mental health risk for children when things are presented in such simplistic terms, very often with no understanding of what maybe going on in the life of this apparently demonic child. I recall the case of a child from the Ridings school who was vilified for his behaviour and it turned out he had just lost a sibling in a car accident. But his mental health needs weren't addressed, his parents weren't offered support, he was just a sensational story.

Wilson also worries that this kind of reporting may backfire into family life. Parents who see their child written about publicly as a bad lot may blame the child for exposing them like this. And on the other side, parents of the kind of child who is seen as an innocent, an angel, may feed off the glory they feel that brings them and become over-protective.

Film-maker Roger Graef, whose documentaries often feature children, always takes care to involve them, to tell them precisely what he is doing and include their own voices. Recently Graef, a father himself, dropped a film because it upset the child who featured in it. He says: Children are parodied in the media as far less complicated than they really are and this allows us to ignore their sensitivity.

But if this is the problem, what is the solution? Parents need to be there to talk with their children about the way their generation is represented and help them understand how and why it is being done, Lansdown says. Jane Russell, mother of Sabine, 11, and Jonathan, nine, is a teacher and is acutely aware of the media's misrepresentation of children. I can't bear the distortion of truth that I see when I read about kids, so I talk to my own two about it, she says. I ask if they know anyone like the children in the story, what they think of a child's behaviour and we discuss why they might be behaving in a certain way, whether it's knifing someone or refusing to eat and becoming anorexic. There's a lot in the press about body image and I'm very keen Sabine should question that, and I want Jonathan to think about why boys are so often shown as bad in some way.

Children's Express is part of a growing lobby that believes it is time the press included the voices and views of the children they write about. As Stephanie Williams says: Children, when they are interviewed, say things we do not expect and they help us to

The seven deadly stereotypes

Kids as victims

This is the good, innocent child living in a little house on the prairie surrounded by The Waltons, the family that has straight As, says Mehrak Golestani, aged 14.

All their assets are brought to light and it's someone else's fault. Juanita Rosenior, aged 13, adds: No adult could think that, say, a boy of 15 could be capable of stabbing someone else. The mother will say: My son didn't do that, my son's a good boy. It's his bad friends.

Kids are brilliant

These are stories about the kid who rides down Everest on a unicycle while simultaneously discovering a cure for cancer, Mehrak says. These articles say: look, this kid is brilliant - and you're not'.

Moynul Mustafa, 17, comments: They're like the and finally... items on television news. They're there to make you feel good.

Cute kids who sell newspapers

Look at the newspapers and you see, completely out of the blue, slap-bang-wallop in the middle of nowhere a kid story! says Mehrak.

Curtis Anderson, aged 15, adds: Kids in these

understand who and what they are. But this might not suit a media that has so much invested in its simplistic and sensational stereotypes."

About the team

This analysis of the ways children are portrayed was developed through discussions with Sharon ODea, 17, Delwar Hussain, 17, Rachel Bulford, 17, Pete Campbell, 17, Moynul Mustafa, 16, Curtis Anderson, 15, Mehrak Golestani, 14, Juanita Rosenior, 13, Sinead Kirwan, 12, and Cenk Ceki, 10. [Read their full presentation](#). It was published in [The Guardian](#).

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stories are just being used. If they weren't there, the stories couldn't be published. The kids aren't getting anything out of it.

Kids these days

This type of story is like, well, back in my day, old boy, we weren't like this. We had the cane, heh, heh, heh. Old schoolmaster Jonathan used to whack us, six of the best, and that'd stop any of these naughty things going on today, Mehrak explains.

Kids as accessories

Kids are used to heighten their parents' status and make them look good, suggests Sinead Kirwan, aged 12. Papers use phrases such as: She's a world famous fashion designer and she has two beautiful children. The kids are like a hat you bring out on special occasions and put back in the closet when you've finished showing it off.

Brave little angels

"The media and society as a whole believe children are perfect and the only thing that makes them imperfect is society, Sharon ODea, 17, says. When the Dunblane massacre happened, those children appeared on the front pages of newspapers as little angels who'd never done anything wrong in their lives. I'm not taking away from them in any way, but they were normal children until the point when they died.

Little devils

Sharon observes: When it all goes wrong, when a kid tries to rob a bank, they roll out Sir Rhodes Boyson and say we should bring back the cane. They wouldn't do that if it was an adult.