

Media stereotypes of young people

Jack O'Sullivan of The Independent highlights a Children's Express investigation into media stereotypes of children

Young journalists at Children's Express are involved in a campaign to raise awareness of the way children are portrayed by the press.

Research conducted by the organisation has identified seven broad media stereotypes of children. Based on more than 400 newspaper cuttings from one week last September, they found that nearly a third presented children as victims.

The other image categories were: cute kids who sell newspapers (27 per cent), little devils (11), brilliant kids (10), kids as accessories (8), kids these days (7.5) and brave little angels (5). Half the stereotyping was judged negative.

"If I'm on a train and there are one or two other people, I can see they're wary of me", says Delwar Hussain, 18, an editor at Children's Express. It's because the representation of young people in the media suggests that they are criminals.

The organisation is part news agency, part youth club, says Rowena Young, London bureau chief. Its members, aged 8-18, aim to reach policy-makers by getting their views into the media. With the support of staff, these kids remind adults that there's nearly a quarter of the population they routinely forget.

Since its launch in May 1995, children have travelled to the bureau in Clerkenwell, central London, after school, on Saturdays and during holidays, to work on stories. In three years, 250 young people have been trained and a further 1,000 are expected to be recruited by 2000. A second bureau opened in Newcastle last year.

The London bureau's first big scoop was published in May 1995 by The Independent. It involved an investigation into how easy it is for children to buy lottery tickets. Reporters covered the Labour Party Conference for Channel 4's First Edition, and contribute to The Times Educational Supplement, The Big Issue, national dailies and local newspapers. Topics have included teenage suicide, trouble on the football pitch, bullying, banking and the European Community.

Children's Express says that, since joining, three-quarters of members report increased self-esteem; 60 per cent say they are more independent, and are more interested in social and political issues.

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