

HEADLINERS

The seven deadly stereotypes

Youngsters give their views on the way that they are portrayed in the media based on an analysis of a week's worth of national newspapers.

The report below outlines young reporters' views on the way young people are portrayed in the media based on an analysis of a week's worth of national newspapers. The full results were presented at 'Kids These Days' in April 1998, and summarised in an [article in The Guardian](#).

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Children as victims

The most common stereotyping portrayed children as victims. Nearly a third (31.5%) of all the stories about children - 117 cuttings - presented children this way.

"All their good assets are brought up to light and maybe even exaggerated a bit," explained Mehrak. "Nothing's wrong with them and it's someone else's fault. The blame is always thrown on someone else. 'Oh, they didn't start the fight, they were just an innocent onlooker. They didn't, you know, pressure the person into having a fight. They didn't stir anything up.'"

Juanita suggested this is because adults are reluctant to accept that children can initiate these scenarios: "No adult, no parent could actually think that a boy of fifteen could be capable of stabbing someone else. They could be capable of, let's say, stealing a couple of penny sweets. But if you said to a mother, 'oh, your son's stabbed a boy, what do you think about it?', it's 'my son didn't do that, my son's a good boy really. It's his friends, it's his bad friends.' The whole children as victims thing is just ignorance."

"This treatment makes it too clear cut," remarked Delwar. "It makes it so that either a child is good and is good throughout their life or they're bad and they're completely bad. It doesn't say that actually a good child does have bad points and a bad person has good points. And we don't get told why things happen."

Moynul Mustafa, 17, added, "Because victimised children are shown to be angelic, it makes it seem that only this sort of child can be a victim. It's never someone who hasn't done well at school or who isn't as perfect."

Sharon pointed out how the language of a story is also used to develop the stereotype: "Journalists use the word 'playground' in headlines to make teenagers look really young. 15 year-olds don't play in the playground. Did you play in the playground when you were fifteen? We didn't even have playgrounds in my school. At fifteen, you're virtually grown up. You can be parents."

Mehrak said the context of the child as victim is often designed to reinforce the stereotype. "When you look at stories like this, you usually find there are two young people. There's the good, innocent, angel child and there's the bad, evil, demon child. The good child is living in a little house on the prairie surrounded by The Waltons, the family that has straight A's."

"The demon child is the one growing up on a council estate with twenty brothers and divorced parents who are alcoholics or druggies. This is not the reality, but the media has separated children into two stereotypes. The number of stories you see about children as victims has escalated because plainly they make for a really good story. The media tries to portray the world as being black and white, when it's really different shades of grey."

"Adults present children as victims because of a protective instinct," concluded Sharon. "It's like, 'kids are so sweet, we have to look after them', but that attitude reinforces the idea that children need to be controlled. It highlights the whole adult stereotype of children being weak. In the media's mind, it justifies their not taking them seriously and seeing them as human beings who still need to be looked after, rather than going and doing stuff on their own. Because papers show children as small, vulnerable members of society, they say they're not responsible enough to need any sort of stake in society."

Just because they're kids

Over a quarter (26.7%) of the stories cut fell into this category. At 99 cuttings, this represented the second most predominant stereotype.

"Look at the newspapers and you see, completely out of the blue, slap bang wallop in the middle of nowhere - a kid story!" explained Mehrak. "I was reading an article where some Native Americans wanted to start exhibitions in museums and somehow there was this picture of a cute little boy, the ten-year-old son of Mr Green Wolf, wearing a Red Indian outfit and going wah wah wah wah wah. It was just being used for publicity, to make the cause seem bigger."

"Putting a group of kids in a story makes it much more interesting," commented Delwar. "For a training at our Newcastle bureau, I was looking at an article where kids were asked to go to a Tesco building site in hard hats. The whole reason they were there was to publicise Tesco in that area."

Sharon said, "It's like, they're building a new Tesco, ooh, thrill. And then suddenly a group of kids go to visit Tesco. I saw a story in The Times the other day about a boy who joined a lot of arty types campaigning to save a theatre. The only reason the editors put that article in was because they had this cute ten year-old-boy. It's all very nice but I think it's pathetic."

"It's disgusting to be used in this way," said Pete Campbell, 17. "Kids have more to offer than being an add-on. We have our own views and our own opinions."

Curtis Anderson, 15, agreed: "Kids in these stories are just being used by the papers - if they weren't there, these stories couldn't be published. The kids aren't benefiting from it. They aren't getting anything out of it."

Little devils

Just over a tenth (10.8%) of the cuttings demonised children. At 40 cuttings, this represents approximately a third as many stories as those presenting children as victims.

"Children are meant to be these really cute, sweet little things like the babies and toddlers you see in adverts," said Sharon. "When it all goes wrong, it's really bad and journalists want them to be like a devil. They know it's a formula that works. They know it sells. 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. Adults commit crimes all the time. I don't see why children should be treated more harshly."

Mehrak also believed adults exaggerate children's behaviour when it doesn't live up to expectations. He said, "If a kid slaps someone in the playground, it can be passed off as abuse, bullying, beating up. Bully beats up kids, steals lunch money, pocket money, lah di dah di dah. The media portrays these kids as miniature versions of football fans who go wild. They are so blatantly portrayed as Cockney kids, living on council estates with lager swilling parents."

"I know these kids are bad," admitted Delwar, "I know they've done something wrong, but sometimes they have reasons for it. The reasons are never looked at, they're never investigated."

Juanita added, "Journalists are only looking at what they see. They don't dig deep. They have the attitude why should I care? Children should be judged or praised and that's the end of the story. They don't find out the background and say, maybe a child doesn't do this just because they feel like it. They only tell people what sells newspapers."

Mehrak blamed commercial pressure for this simplicity: "The newspapers delude themselves by saying, 'hey, we're setting an example'. But the reality is completely different. The reality is they don't have time. They hear a story about bad children, get out the bare facts and then it's a stereotypical image. They don't give it a second thought. They take the easy way out instead of going into detail to try and find out the motive. The kids aren't given a chance to explain themselves."

"Of course journalists shouldn't say they're not really bad kids, but they should try to tell both sides of the story. Stereotyped stories weigh down on one side. It's never, this kid's done a really heinous crime but we think it's because of his upbringing, or maybe because he was abused."

Sharon suggested that demonising children is partly the result of the same retrospective comparison that happens in the 'kids these days' stereotype. She said, "The media fails to realise this isn't Enid Blyton's world. We don't all hang around in fields with people called George and Charlie and drink ginger beer and say everything is wizard, because it isn't."

"We are no longer the people we used to be. Children today have problems, just like adults. Young people have things to worry about and that's why they turn to crime. It's escapism. It's problems at home. It's all sorts of things. I don't see why it should be that the media blames young people for the ills of society."

Exceptional children

With 36 examples, this stereotype accounted for 9.7% of the sample.

"These are stories about the kid who rides down Everest on a unicycle while simultaneously discovering a cure for cancer. It's the kid who does a triple backflip on the back of a donkey. These articles say 'look, this kid is brilliant - and you're not'," said Mehrak, who had experienced how selective this treatment could be.

"Once I told a teacher about what I do at Children's Express and the local paper wrote it up as 'Mehrak Golestani, age 11, has already sold stories to The Guardian and The Times'. They had it like I was sitting typing stories into my computer at home and faxing them direct to the newsdesks. There was no mention of the teamwork and CE."

The majority felt these stories are patronising because they contain no real news value. "They're like the 'and finally...' items on television news. They're there to make you feel good," said Moynul.

Curtis agreed: "They're there because they're not about bad children. Not everyone wants to hear about the 10-year-old who kills other children or the children who die in a gun blaze. If someone gets straight A's, everyone wants to know because it's good news, but it's not as though they're the first to do it."

Pete was equally dismissive. "They're silly stories, they're not news stories," he said.

Mehrak added, "It's like the happy B-side of the tape. Journalists can say children are all really, really bad, but there are one or two individuals who are okay. I'm not sure why they're news. I'm baffled by it."

Delwar suggested why adults so like to run stories that fit this mould. "You're always proud of children aren't you?" he said. "The smallest thing they do tends to make you proud of them."

Property of parents

This treatment appeared in 31 cuttings, 8.4% of the total.

"This is a story about parents with two lines thrown in about the kids. There might be a picture of a smiley, happy kid and the parents with fake, cheesy grins. They're like, look at my kid. My kid's very clever," observed Mehrak.

"But children are not the property of anyone. Noone owns anyone. Children think, though adults never believe it, so we are our own people. Noone can take that away. This stereotype talks about us like slaves, yet we're supposed to have made progress. We're discriminated against like ethnic minorities."

Curtis thought this treatment revealed how routinely adults discount children. "It's outrageous," he said. "The children aren't taking part in the story. Adults don't want to hear about them. They only want to read what's really good or really bad. Writing children up like this encourages other adults to not want to know about kids."

"Until we're 18, we're not seen as individuals in the eyes of the media," added Pete. "Why do we have to be grouped as children en masse? Why do we have to think the same thing? We don't."

'Kids these days'

This stereotype accounted for 28 cuttings, 7.5% of the total.

"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, trousers down, and that'd stop any of these naughty things going on today'," explained Mehrak. "It's kids should be seen and not heard, which is really out of order and ageist. It's adults reminiscing about the past golden days, which never really were."

Sharon was critical of adults' reluctance to face up to reality. She said, "Adults that do this don't actually realise kids are different now. They look back in the past and say the world isn't as great as it used to be and we should all get back to an Enid Blyton world of children. It's always 'kids are so bad these days. When it was my day, it was done like this.' But we have to deal with different social experiences and journalists don't put those into context."

She added, "The biggest issue they deal with in this way is teenage pregnancy. It's like, 'kids these days go and have sex at the age of twelve and get pregnant and nobody says anything. But in my day, if that ever happened ...' The reason this has happened is because people, especially women, have had much more freedom but newspapers just don't look at things like that."

"I think people always look back romantically at their childhood and sometimes don't see what was bad about it," added Juanita. "Young people have always got pregnant, but it was never heard of, it was hushed up. It was this big shame on the family and why don't you disappear for six months?"

"It's all so 'back in my day, schools weren't like this'. But back then everyone left school at fifteen with no qualifications - it was a trade-off. Okay, there are bad kids at school today, but there were always bad kids at school. They used to put them in a school which was full of bad kids, whereas now, they're everywhere."

Little angels

This stereotype was found in 20 cuttings, 5.4% of the total, and formed the smallest category overall.

"The media and society as a whole believe children are perfect and the only thing that makes them imperfect is society," said Sharon. "This stereotype reinforces the idea that children are intrinsically brilliant. Children can be wonderful and anyone who isn't is obviously very bad indeed. 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. They were normal children until the point when they died. It's the fact that they died in such an horrific incident that turned them into martyrs."

Others saw the idealisation of children as a smokescreen for other issues. "Sixteen kids got shot in Scotland, but what do we know of the thousands of kids who die in Africa every year?" asked Delwar.

"That's a really big point," responded Mehrak. "I think the newspapers are racist. They let the Diana thing drag on so, so long, yet every two seconds a child in a third world country dies of malnutrition. Isn't that more major than some rich person?"

"Why is it that children in Africa are always portrayed as being poor?" added Juanita. "I come from Africa. I was born in Africa. I'm not poor."

Pete simply thought this approach was symptomatic of a lack of journalistic rigour. He said, "It might be hyped in the paper, but in secondary school, through primary school, you have got kids thinking of violence. You've got kids thinking of sex. You've got big kids thinking of raping a nine-year-old girl. You can't tell me that everyone is sweet and innocent, because it's just not happening. A stereotype that shows a child in this light means the real depth of the story is not attacked."

About the team

This article was produced by editors Sharon O'Dea, 17, Delwar Hussain, 17, Rachel Bulford, 17, Pete Campbell, 17, Moynul Mustafa, 16, Curtis Anderson, 15, and Mehrak Golestani, 14, with reporters Juanita Rosenior, 13, Sinead Kirwan, 12, and Genk Ceki, 10.

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