

Performing a vital role

Kairen Cullen on a silver lining from the cloud of *Boys and Girls Alone*

When the series *Boys and Girls Alone*, commissioned by Channel 4 and produced by Love Productions, arrived on our television screens in 2009, it was greeted with widespread concern and disapproval amongst viewers, professionals and the government alike. A fierce debate ensued about this series, which was described by Tim Loughton, the Children's Minister, as 'a kind of engineered Lord of the Flies type of scenario'. *The Psychologist* featured a number of letters expressing concern (April, May and October 2009), all stressing the need for ethical professional psychologists' input and more stringent safeguarding measures for child performers.

I recall, ruefully, telephone calls in the summer of 2007, from researchers on the prospective programme. I have since learnt that many others were approached about the series, which involved separating children from their families and homes and setting them up in a contrived independent living situation with other children. I had anticipated many difficulties which, I later heard, were also expressed by many others approached. These included challenges arising from individual children's developmental levels, group dynamics, complex parental motivations, gender stereotypes and children's awareness of the programme's remit. Funnily enough, I was not asked to be involved in any subsequent developments.

Over the years I, like many other Society members involved in media and press work, have been contacted at the very early stages of numerous productions involving children, on subjects as diverse as psychic children to 'social experiment' type productions entailing minor corrective surgery carried out to 'enhance' child self-esteem, sex education, school, family life, junior

entrepreneurs, gifted children and celebrity children. At least 95 per cent do not go further than an initial conversation. Few professional psychologists have any editorial control. It can be galling to realise that one's brief comments at the programme's conception have been 'cherry-picked' to suit the commercial interests involved.

So why volunteer the time and energy that the conversations with programme researchers take up? Largely, because television and children, although a difficult combination, is one that is intrinsic to and inevitable in today's society. The Department for Education's (DfE's) 'Every Child Matters' agenda states that all children should have the support they need to be healthy, stay safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution and achieve economic well-being. It is hard to argue that a social phenomenon as core as television does not have its place in this, and it is a place that needs the input of professional psychologists working within the Society's Code of Ethics and Conduct. As an educational psychologist, I experience daily the potential of television for encouraging children to respect others' human rights and their own and other cultures, and for helping them to learn to live peacefully, protect the environment and respect other people.

Following the screening of *Boys and Girls Alone*, Ofcom received 180

complaints from viewers and organisations such as the NSPCC and the International Association for the Study of Attachment. Most of the concerns related to the safety and well-being of child participants who exhibited signs of distress, some of which arose from bullying incidents. The media regulator cleared Channel 4 of harming children who took part, but criticised the broadcaster for not doing enough to tell viewers of the safeguards it had put in place. Children's Minister Tim Loughton commented that the principles of 'basic child psychology' had to inform safeguarding children and young people involved in TV programmes, and he initiated a review of outdated child performance laws.

The working parties Loughton established have now completed their work, and members of the Society's Media Ethics Advisory Group were centrally involved in this activity. I was a member of the 'safeguarding children' working party, facilitated by John Oates (Open

University). John is well known for his work with the long running *Child of Our Time* BBC series, and he is particularly involved in considering the feasibility of risk-based assessment and the ways in which 'expert advice' to productions involving children can be quality-assured. He is a member of the Minister's advisory group on this

topic, and further

involvement is expected as this work moves forward. Cynthia McVey (Glasgow Caledonian University), expert psychologist for the BBC's *Castaway 2000*, was a member of the 'defining performances' working party. John and Cynthia previously participated in the Thane review that led to this recent initiative.

This review, along with clinical psychologist Tanya Byron's review of internet safety and children's TV academic David Buckingham's review on the commercialisation of childhood, all highlight the increasing awareness of the importance of actively ensuring the well-being and safety of children and of psychology's central place within this work. Keep an eye on the DfE and BPS websites for further information.



contribute

The Media page is coordinated by the Society's Media and Press Committee, with the aim of

promoting and discussing psychology in the media. If you would like to contribute, please contact the 'Media'

page coordinating editor, Ceri Parsons (Chair, Media and Press Committee), on ceri.parsons@staffs.ac.uk