

# The agony and the Ecstasy

**T**HE tragic events in Soham dominated all forms of media at the time of writing, leading to a raft of articles penned by psychologists of various types.

Psychologists' interest began in the days following the girls' disappearance. Psychological profiles offered a range of optimisms with one conclusion: the children are frightened but alive. In an article in *The Scotsman* on 12 August forensic psychologist Ian Stephen said that it was unlikely that the girls had been picked off the street at random, 'a woman could even have been involved – remember Ian Brady was reliant on Myra Hindley'.

After the dreadful outcome was confirmed, profiling was replaced by extensive articles addressing the perplexing issue: How do parents balance the equation of reassurance and terror? Advice was far-ranging. The hysteria was perhaps best reflected in an article in the *Evening Chronicle* (Newcastle), which revealed that a mother was so terrified that her children might be abducted that she planned to have them electronically tagged. Marion Faulkner, a child psychologist at Northumbria University, expressed reservations about the use of the device. If you are a nervous parent, this tends to rub off on the child, so they may miss out on doing things that could prove life-enhancing and stimulating for them. However, in an article in *The Herald* (Glasgow) Geoff Scobie, a psychologist at the University of Glasgow, suggested that children should be told never to enter someone's home, even someone they know well, without telling their parents and getting permission.

In an article in *The Scotsman* Sally Anderson advised parents to assess their child's maturity and common sense. She says: 'We can't change our behaviour because of one event.' Statistics do show that abductions run at around one child per million per year, so we need to keep our feelings in proportion – perhaps not so easy to do at a time like this. Media articles

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seemed to reflect this uncertainty: 'How do we protect our children?' (*Daily Record*), 'Children must trust their instincts and

people they know' (*The Herald*), 'Learning from the tragedy' (*Sunday Tribune*).

In the longer term what do we tell our children? Perhaps we should tell them about pity, sorrow, loss. Tell them the truth when we know it. Tell them they must be vigilant but not afraid. Tell them there are no answers. Of the many lessons that may be learnt from Soham, the hardest is the reality of adult helplessness.

Boffins in drug safety storm  
September saw *The Psychologist* creating plenty of column inches of its own, with Jon Cole's target article about the long-term effects of Ecstasy. The stack of cuttings serves as a fascinating case study of how newspapers work. There's the search for the 'human angle' – comments from Paul Betts, whose daughter Leah died after taking the drug in 1995, leading to front-page headlines such as 'Fury as doctors declare Ecstasy harmless' (*Daily Express*). There's the gradual evolution of the story through the day, so that some locals (e.g. *Aberdeen Press and Journal*) later carried Mr Betts's comments that a joint interview with Jon Cole on *Sky News* had helped defuse the situation. There's the absence of the 'traditional' split between 'serious broadsheet' and 'silly tabloid' journalism: *The Guardian* admitted in print that their headline 'Ecstasy not dangerous,

say scientists' was not justified by their story.

But all things considered, *The Psychologist* got some very sensible, balanced coverage (*The Independent*, *The Economist*, *New Scientist*) in spite of the more 'sensationalist' stuff – and in the case of TV and radio, possibly even as a result of it. The main lesson seems to be that we can never predict or control the media reaction to psychology. All we can do is prepare as well as possible, and this is where the Society's Press Committee hopes it can help.

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## Press Committee

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Monday 29 September

Monday 1 December

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The days will include:

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For a registration form and further details contact:

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