

Kids + Reality TV = Bad Combination

by Diane on June 21, 2010

Happy Father's Day to all the Dads out there! I hope it's a day when both you and your children stop to realize how lucky you are.

Now, to a not so pretty picture of fatherhood – fathers who exploit their children in the hopes that they'll make it big in reality TV. It's gotten to be an awful trend and I don't know who to blame first – the parents or the TV executives who buy only the most outrageous plots.

The world was mesmerized when 16 year old Abby Sunderland recently set sail to try to become the youngest person to circumnavigate the globe alone.



Out At Sea At Only 16 Years Old

Her older brother, 17 year old Zac currently holds the record. Abby's solo adventure came to an end when a massive storm with three-story-tall waves swept over her and snapped off her mast in a remote area of the Indian Ocean. Abby was adrift for three terrifying days until a French fishing crew located her and took her to safety. Then came the shocking news that as Abby was literally risking her life her father, Laurence, had been shopping for a reality TV show featuring his two oldest children! The Sunderland's have seven children with one on the way and a lucrative TV contract would certainly have helped support the family.

This certainly isn't the first instance of a parent tossing out the well-being of their child for a shot at one of those mind-numbing reality shows.



Six Year Old Falcon - Forced to Lie by Parents

In Colorado, Falcon Heene will forever be known as the "Balloon Boy" whose father put him at the center of a hoax that ultimately resulted in both parents being jailed for filing a false police report. The out-of-work acting couple had tasted reality TV life as part of the program Wife Swap and were convinced their tale of a runaway weather balloon with their 6 year old trapped inside would be just the ticket to procure their own show.

The Pennsylvania brood known as the Gosselin Gang (a set of twin girls along with their sextuplet siblings) has made millions but the kids will likely never live down their public exposure on The Learning Channel series that bears their name. Their Uncle and Aunt have said they believe the children have suffered "physiological damage" from irrational TV producer's

demands such as potty-training caught on tape and forcing the kids to pretend it was Christmas Day when it wasn't.

I'm thinking it's time for an updated version of the Coogan Act.



Jackie Coogan As Child Star, circa 1920

For those who don't know what I'm talking about – remember the guy who played Uncle Fester in the old Addam's Family TV series? That was Jackie Coogan, a legendary child star, discovered in the 1920's by Charlie Chaplin. While he was hard at work his mother and step-father spent as much as 4 million dollars of his earnings. At age 23 Coogan sued his parents and won, but by then there was little money left. The resulting legislation, first passed in 1939 and amended over the years, protectively sets aside a percentage of money in the actor child's name so thieving adult can't touch it.

It's been way too long since lawmakers tackled the problem of stage-struck parents who exploit their kids. Today, only California, New York, Louisiana and New Mexico protect child actors with Coogan requirements. But, really, this is about more than just money. These days it's shameful the way kids are deliberately put into physical or emotionally dangerous situations by parents who are supposed to love and protect. So much of reality TV today is demeaning and simply not suitable for children to participate in.



Gosselin Gang - All Ten of Them!

In Pennsylvania, where the Gosselin Gang lives, film and TV production is growing by leaps and bounds yet there is no Coogan-type law. That's why Representative Thomas Murt says he decided to introduce a bill to better protect kids whose parents are blinded by the white hot lights of potential celebrity.

Murt's legislation would restrict a child's hours in front of the camera, make sure their educational, supervision, moral and health care needs are met. A 'set teacher' would be required to be on hand at all times to make sure what producers ask of the child is appropriate for their age and stamina. And, it includes a Coogan type requirement that at least 15% of the minor's gross earnings be put into a protected trust.

In many states a teenager like Abby Sunderland isn't legally able to go on a solo drive in a car let alone sail around the world by herself. Tiny boys of six shouldn't be forced to lie on national television about their parent hoax to get a show. And, small children photographed in intimate situations like the Gosselin's are considered victims in any other situation.

As a country we are hesitant to legislate how parents raise their kids but certainly we can legislate how television treats our children, can't we?