Do children ever belong on reality TV?

With 'Toddlers' controversy and Gosselin kids' lives on TV, some worry youth are exploited.

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Few topics can get heated faster than discussing how parents raise their children. Want to start a full-out conflagration? Try discussing how parents raise their children on reality TV.

Recently, viewers have seen tots dressed up like a prostitute and primped like Dolly Parton on "Toddlers & Tiaras," which ends its season on Sept. 21. Ever-present cameras captured spotlight-loving mom Kate Gosselin and her eight children's last hurrah on "Kate Plus 8," which had its series finale on Sept. 12. The public even had to consider how a 5-year-old girl's appearance on reality TV might impact her after her father, the husband of "Real Housewives of Beverly Hills" star Taylor Armstrong, committed suicide.

5 most outrageous moments from 'Toddlers'

Calling the shots

What's striking is how wide the pendulum swings in opinion over having children featured on reality TV at all. Those on the outside tend to react with outright horror at some of the more outrageous moments. But those on the inside insist they — being the parents — have the best interests of their children in mind.

Alexis Bellino, one of the "Real Housewives of Orange County," introduced her three children to reality TV when the oldest was 3 and the twins weren't yet 1. She said she and her husband, Jim, decided it was OK to do the show with their kids after undergoing "grueling therapy."

"They're busy, active children," said Bellino. "Their lives don't revolve around the camera. Bravo is willing to listen to the parent. If (the children) are cranky, I tell the crew we should do it another day."

'Toddlers' mom: 'Pretty Woman' outfit harmless

Bravo did not respond to a request for comment.

Candi Wingate, owner of Nannies4Hire.com, helped Kate Gosselin find a part-time caretaker in 2007, and said she saw nothing worrying on set of “Jon & Kate Plus 8.” (The show’s title changed to “Kate Plus 8” after the Gosselins separated.) "The kids were so natural with the camera crew. They didn't act any different; it wasn't a set-up thing. I think it's a great way for the kids to look back on their childhood."

Kate would put kids on TV again

The main thing, said Annette Hill, owner of Universal Royalty Beauty Pageant — which "Toddlers & Tiaras" has visited for six shows — is that the parents call the shots.

"The parents are parenting the children," she said. " 'Toddlers & Tiaras' is not the parents. What better way to showcase your child than in a child beauty pageant? What is wrong with being onstage and having family bonding?"

'Toddlers & Tiaras' are here for boobs, too

Train wrecks in the making?

It seems the decision to give young children a role on a reality TV show is a reasoned choice based on good parenting skills and a complete comprehension of what being filmed regularly does to young minds and emotions. But while the first part may be true, the second is harder to believe. Those on the outside may feel that watching reality TV series starring children can be like being witness to a slow-moving train wreck.

"Reality TV can be a good thing for children, but we don't see it often," said educational consultant and psychotherapist Russell Hyken of St. Louis. "Kids overcoming difficult circumstances that role models success, means kids can benefit. But when children are showered with attention because they're on TV, that creates behavioral problems because they become more attention-seeking."

Bellino has noticed it with her son, but finds it amusing: To keep him happy during filming, cameramen know to put a mic on him even if he's not in a scene. "My son is definitely a big ham," she said with a chuckle.

But whether cameras create the ham or not, their departure can create as much chaos as their presence, said Robert Galinsky, founder of The New York Reality TV School. He added that the eight Gosselin children will now have to fill their days without cameras following them for the first time in years, and that may be a jarring experience.

Story: Kate Gosselin 'freaking out' over 'Kate Plus 8' cancelation

"The children are so accustomed to the camera that they're going to need affirmation," he said. "The camera will no longer be there to shine a light on them, and that light was never authentic

anyway — it was just there to suck the life from these children. They're going to seek other ways to be fulfilled."

TLC, which airs both “Toddlers & Tiaras” and “Kate Plus 8,” declined to comment for this story.

Jon Gosselin 'relieved' 'Kate Plus 8' is ending

In scripted television, that spotlight withdrawal hasn't always gone so well. Former child actor Paul Petersen said the withdrawal of showbiz adoration from children can shape the rest of their lives. But what riles him up most is that he sees these children as working without any authority to look out for them other than a parent or guardian.

"What is the concept of child labor?" asked Peterson, who is the president of A Minor Consideration, a non-profit group that lobbies for the rights of child actors. "Children being filmed for commercial purposes are working. The effects will come home to roost."

And as Petersen pointed out, there is no guild or union representation specifically for child reality-TV stars. That leaves everything up to the parents — who may not be equipped to understand the wider repercussions of their contracts. (Child actors do have the Screen Actors Guild and the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists.)

"Kids who grew up on television supposedly had a guild keeping them safe. And even on sets of TV shows with rules to protect those kids, many of those child stars still wound up going to jail, getting stuck on drugs or alcohol or having destroyed relationships," said Galinsky.

Little guinea pigs

Ultimately, no one is sure whether the Gosselin kids will miss the cameras beyond a surface level, whether the beauty pageant toddlers are changed by their experiences, or if what is cute, hammy 4-year-old behavior now will turn into a vortex of destructive attention-seeking later on. Today's reality TV children are de facto guinea pigs.

"Reality TV took the entertainment industry by surprise," said Galinsky. "No one could have predicted that it would last this long, with no end in sight. Guidelines have to be drawn up at some point to protect these kids, because there's nothing now."

Petersen is working on it, though it's a slow slog to get change put into effect. "No one seems to be looking 20 years down the line," he said. "If people think there are no consequences to being a child in this business, they should look at Brooke Shields or Jodie Foster, both of whom had stalkers. The permutations of this kind of early fame are beyond our ability to imagine."

Family to investigate 'Housewives' suicide

He pointed to the recent suicide of "Real Housewives' " Russell Armstrong: "If adults can't handle (the fame and attention), how do you expect children — especially children who have

no training in the performing arts or character to cope with rejection — to? This is not an endeavor without consequences. And that's what slays me, because people know it."