

Good morning, and thank you for the opportunity to speak with you about the involvement of children in reality television shows. I am a Licensed Psychologist in the state of Pennsylvania with my masters and doctoral degrees in Clinical Psychology and a specialization in children and families. I am currently an Assistant Professor of Psychology in the Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences at Gwynedd-Mercy College. Prior to my current position, I was a research fellow at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, with a grant from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development to design an intervention to promote positive identity development in high-risk youth. I am here today to speak about the developmental needs of children, with the hope that understanding these needs will inform decision-making as it relates to children's participation in television, and reality shows, in particular.

As those of you who are parents, grandparents, teachers or coaches know, physical, cognitive, social and emotional capabilities are rapidly changing from the point of birth into adulthood. As such, developmental needs also change as children age. To this point, I will be framing my discussion around the basic developmental tasks at different ages and then connect these tasks with the "realities," if you will, of reality television.

### **Infancy and Early Childhood (birth – 3)**

In the first few years of life, small children are learning to explore and interact with the world around them. Critical to this task are the social relationships children form with their primary caretakers. Specifically, children develop early attachment to their parents that allow them to safely and comfortably explore their world. Securely attached children are those who have learned that their primary caregiver will be there consistently; a securely attached child can trust that even when mom leaves the room or is out of sight, she will reliably be there to respond to his needs. Children whose caregivers are unreliable, inconsistent or abusive develop early problems with attachment that relate to a number of negative long-term outcomes. As such, stable and reliable care is critical to the development of strong emotional bonds that can form the basis for future success.

In addition to forming emotional bonds with their caretakers, small children also learn how to communicate and regulate their emotions through referencing their caretakers. For example, a child who is trying to understand how to act in a situation that is new or ambiguous will look to those around her to learn how she should respond. Indeed, this is why experienced parents know not to scream, "Oh no!" and look panicked when a child falls down!

Finally, young children are beginning to learn how to control their own behavior. Over time, parental expectations are internalized and even when the primary caregivers are not around children will follow the rules established in the home. Critical to this learning is the interaction between parent and child. Just as with attachment and emotional development, rule-based learning requires consistent parental feedback and ongoing, mutual interactions between parent and child.

Given the developmental need for consistent and reliable parent-child interaction during the early years, how might taking part in reality television shows relate to child development?

First, one often hears parents of children in reality television shows indicating that the purpose of their participation is to support the family in a way that allows the parents to stay home with the children vs. working outside of the home. Parents might also feel that the show provides opportunities for children to explore the world in a way that the family would not have been able to afford before, such as family vacations and other child-friendly activities. Indeed, this might be a very real and notable benefit of such a lifestyle.

On the other hand, the quality and format of the increases in “family time” must also be considered. For example, a parent’s ability to form a stable attachment with his child might be challenged by the realities of a family life made public. Increased demands from the general public, the need to travel for the show, and the general disruption in everyday activities related to the television show can interfere with the caregivers’ ability to provide consistent, reliable and responsive care. Of course this is a concern of any family with parents that might travel for work or otherwise have a career that is outside of typical work parameters. However, the all-encompassing nature of reality television and the constant public demands of celebrity families can blur the line between work and home and make these concerns more acute and pervasive for families featured in reality television.

Further blurring this line is the presence of cameras, microphones, and production people into the family home. This necessity of reality television has the potential to create an atmosphere that challenges the child’s need for consistency both in terms of parents’ time as well as routine, rules and expectations. Although reality television show families are depicted as going about “life as usual,” those who make decisions related to production (e.g., taping schedules, number of cameras, rules regarding when cameras will be turned on/off) must recognize that these factors also become aspects of the children’s daily lives and can interfere greatly with the normal routine and expectations of a household, particularly if not closely regulated.

On a related note, the role of the individuals behind the camera can be confusing to children and provide them with inconsistent feedback on their own behavior as well as their general schema of appropriate social interactions. For example: Do cameramen laugh with children when something is funny? Correct incorrect grammar? Pick them up when they fall? One must also take care to determine how inappropriate behaviors that might make “better television” are encouraged or discouraged by either parents or the individuals involved in producing the show.

### **School Age (4-10)**

Children enter another rapid stage of growth when they start school. Significant changes in physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development during this time are strongly impacted by children’s relationships with their parents and peers. Self-esteem and efficacy across domains also take on new importance, as children expand their experience, knowledge and relationships in the world outside of their immediate family.

Peers take on heightened importance during the school-age years. Children begin to have real friends (vs. mere playmates) and interactions with peers can influence all aspects of development. Through both friendships and conflict with peers, children learn leadership, communication, cooperation, and

problem-solving skills. They learn how to read social situations and develop a repertoire of appropriate responses. Although adults are critical during this period, children's own negotiations of group and relationship issues (from deciding who gets to go first to choosing how to respond when a classmate says: "you're not my friend anymore!") facilitate the development of information processing skills and behavioral repertoires that form the basis for future relationships.

One cannot discuss peer influence without highlighting the increase in aggression and bullying that occurs during middle-childhood and continues into the teenage years. Indeed, most children are involved at some time in some type of physical, verbal, or social aggression, with a portion of these children experiencing these things to an extreme degree. Advances in modern technology have also brought concerns about bullying and aggression to a whole new level, as children can now communicate immediately and even anonymously with hundreds if not thousands of other youth at a time. Subsequent surges in rumor-spreading, name-calling, insults, and other aspects of cyber-bullying have led to grave concerns about the mental health of children who are the victims of these activities, including a number of suicides that have been directly linked to these behaviors.

Outside of social networking, the setting where most children experience intensive socialization experiences is school. As we all know, schools are not simply for "reading, writing and arithmetic," but actually serve as a major formative experience in life. In addition to social development, school is a setting where children begin to develop a sense of themselves as valuable and valued contributors with a range of competencies. It is critical that parents support this development by establishing a home environment that promotes the importance of learning, and continually engaging their child in discussion about school life.

Given the developmental need for self-efficacy, friendship and affiliation, and social and emotional processing skills during the school-age years, how might taking part in reality television shows relate to development during this life stage?

Unlike situations with child actors and performers who often receive their schooling from an on-set tutor, children in reality television shows spend much of their time at the family home (which is now also the "workplace") and continue to attend their local school. However, this might not be true in the case where children travel to take part in reality shows centered on competitions, take trips related to the television show during the academic year, or are removed from public school due to social problems or concerns about safety, stemming from the increasingly public nature of their lives.

In general, it is critical that children maintain a consistent routine that minimizes any disruption in school attendance and related activities. Even if a child is maintaining their academic achievement, if they are not experiencing the other social-emotional benefits of the school-setting (such as learning to interact with peers, participating in a range of activities, developing a sense of their relative strengths and achievements) then their developmental needs can be compromised. If this cannot be met through traditional schooling, care must be taken to meet these varied needs elsewhere, for example through enrolling students in community clubs or sports teams.

In addition to ensuring that the range of physical, cognitive, and social experiences typically provided in the school setting are met, school should continue to serve as a major factor in the lives of children in television. Although children on reality shows might be distracted by the myriad of people and activities in their household and related to the show in general, it is critical that they have established study times, clear bedtimes on school nights, and encouragement and emphasis on the value and importance of school.

Normative social development might also be compromised for children on reality television shows due to the lack of privacy related to family life. Home for children should serve as a "safe haven" where children can process their experiences in the outside world, enjoy one-on-one time with parents and siblings, and rest and rejuvenate for the next day. While children on reality television shows might be able to achieve this, it would seem that this could only be done through a strong commitment to have the cameras around only for limited and structured time periods, with sufficient time for the family to interact in private and for children to do homework, bathe and sleep without disruption. In other words, a clear delineation should be made between "house as home" and "house as workplace."

Ironically, as the lives of reality show participants become more public, they might actually become or feel more isolated. Thus, as family outings to the grocery store become an event featured on the evening entertainment news and personal conversations with friends and family members end up on the covers of magazines, these families can find themselves increasingly isolated from friends, family, and even the ordinary activities of daily living. Thus, just when children are exploring the outside world and learning how to form new relationships, they can be bombarded with experiences that betray their trust and stymie their growth as individuals in society.

A final issue related to this lack of privacy is that of cyberspace. We live in an increasingly public world where blogs, celebrity gossip sites and other electronic venues for commentary, speculation, and judgment are prolific. Even mainstream online news publications often have a section after each article where readers can anonymously post their opinions and views of the story and the people in it. Thus, not only are children in the public eye subject to the same pressures and situations of their non-public peers, they are also subject to the constant commentary and views of a society where sharing your opinions is the norm and where strangers might feel justified in sharing their views on issues related to family members or the family's choice to be in the public eye. The public might also view the family as distant, unreal, and even immune to their scrutiny, thus increasing their willingness to say whatever is on their minds, regardless of the impact on the family. This problem can become even more profound during the adolescent years, which I will discuss now.

### **Adolescence (>10)**

Mere mention of the term "teenager" can conjure up images of youth and families in turmoil. Thus, dramatic physical, cognitive, and social changes can lead to an increase in high-risk behavior, mental health problems, and family conflict. First, the onset of sexual maturation puts adolescents at a critical stage of life physically. Physical changes combined with a peak in the importance of peer judgment and

acceptance can then set the stage for distress over personal attributes, such as body image, which can lead to the development of eating disorders or steroid use.

Cognitively, the part of the brain related to higher-order thinking and planning is continuing to develop during adolescence. Consequently, teenagers who desire or are given greater responsibility and independence are not yet fully equipped to make optimal decisions on their own. As such, it is critical that adults help adolescents think through life choices and experiences, while not stripping them of their autonomy.

Finally, adolescence is considered a critical time for identity development where youth must develop a sense of themselves both as individuals and in relation to others, as well as a larger understanding of their “place in the world.” While most youth remain connected to the values and beliefs of their parents throughout adolescence, the striving for independence and the increase in peer influence requires a delicate balancing act on the part of both parents and teens.

Given the many changes that take place during adolescence and the developmental need to form a sense of oneself, one’s relationships with others and one’s place in the world, how might taking part in reality television shows relate to adolescent developmental needs?

When considering the roles, rules, and responsibilities related to children in reality television, we often put teenagers in a category more in line with adults. Thus, we tend to place decision-making authority in the hands of the teen and parental involvement becomes less paramount. This is parallel to other aspects of life, my own field included, where circumstances can allow for teens to make decisions about their own medical care, for example. Although parents are often involved, it is generally believed that teenagers are more advanced than younger children in terms of their abilities, rights, and responsibilities. However, the developmental needs and capabilities of adolescence highlights the need to carefully consider this approach.

First, our knowledge of cognitive development tells us that adolescents make better decisions in collaboration with adults than they do on their own. This might be particularly relevant in the case of reality television, where a teenager might be enamored by the idea of being in the public eye, while not having the foresight to recognize the potential long-term consequences. For example, the increased public scrutiny discussed earlier can be even more pronounced and more devastating during the teenage years. Thus, not only do these teens live with the pressure and judgment of their friends and classmates, but they also receive judgment and commentary from complete strangers across the nation, or even the world. In such an environment, important areas of vulnerability during adolescence—such as self-esteem and body image—can be exponentially magnified.

Even if teens on television are able to escape negative attention from the public, they might be impacted in other ways by the reality that fame brings them and their family. Increased narcissism (“Everybody cares about me and what I’m doing.”; already a common characteristic of adolescence), difficulty with trust (“Is she my friend because I’m on TV or because she really likes me?”), and a confused sense of one’s place in the world (“Who am I outside of this show and what do I do when the show ends?”) might each be outcomes for adolescents living in the public eye.

In conclusion, it is clear that the cognitive, social and emotional needs across the different phases of childhood require that we as adults take great care in establishing an environment that helps promote positive development and prevent negative outcomes in all children. In terms of reality television, specifically, children do not have the experience or skills to deal with the additional decisions and repercussions of living in the public eye that we as adults do (or should). Further, the nature of television—to entertain—is such that the families that are chosen to appear in reality television programs are often from high risk groups to begin with, e.g., families with children who are exhibiting significant behavior problems, homes with a parent who is a celebrity prior to the show, or families with a large number of children. Thus, it is imperative that we build protective factors – including mechanisms to promote close family relationships, positive peer interactions, and a strong education – into the structure of these children’s lives, so as to minimize risk and optimize positive development.

Although one might not say conclusively that children should or should not participate in reality shows or television in general, if these shows are to take place, great care should be taken to produce them in such a way that puts the developmental needs of children and adolescents first.