



# Children in programmes

An independent research report for Ofcom by  
Sherbert Research



Research Document

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## Section 1

# Introduction

As part of the Ofcom Broadcasting Code (“the Code”), broadcasters are required to ensure that anyone under the age of 18 who participates in programmes is not caused unnecessary physical or emotional distress during or as a result of their participation and that due care is taken over the welfare of that person.

Specifically, Rules 1.26 and 1.27 of the Code state:

*Rule 1.26: Due care must be taken over the physical and emotional welfare and the dignity of people under eighteen who take part or are otherwise involved in programmes. This is irrespective of any consent given by the participant or by a parent, guardian or other person over the age of eighteen in loco parentis.*

*Rule 1.27: People under eighteen must not be caused unnecessary distress or anxiety by their involvement in programmes or by the broadcast of those programmes.*

Following an increasing trend in the broadcast of non-fiction programmes involving children and a number of complaints related to children appearing in programmes, Ofcom undertook to review the issues involved in the participation of children in programmes. Ofcom also considered the need for guidance to accompany Rules 1.26 and 1.27 of the Code. Many other sections of the Code are supported by guidance of this kind.

As part of the process to assess the need for guidance and to gather views on suggestions for its content, Ofcom discussed children’s participation with broadcasters, programme makers and PACT (Producers Alliance for Cinema and Television), as well as national and regional children’s interest groups, and academic child experts.

Ofcom also commissioned Sherbert Research to undertake an independent qualitative research study to explore the views of children and parents on children participating in non-fiction programmes. This report lays out the findings from this independent research study.

## Section 2

# Executive Summary

The qualitative research study identified the following key findings regarding the views of parents, teenagers and children on children taking part in non-fiction programmes.

The treatment and representation of children in non-fiction programmes was not a spontaneous concern for the majority of parents, teenagers and children spoken to. They had rarely thought about or discussed the involvement of children in non-fiction programmes and generally were immersed in programmes for their entertainment value.

When discussing the inclusion of children in non-fiction television with respondents, it was often felt to enhance their viewing experience. Benefits included:

- learning about how other children live;
- insights into alternative ways of behaving and parenting;
- watching other children 'have a go' inspired children and teenagers to think they could try something new too;
- children brought an element of humour to programmes;
- many children appreciated that children on television were giving a voice to children's opinions; and
- many parents felt empowered to instigate change at home, particularly regarding their parenting skills and developing better relationships with their children.

There was clear support from respondents for children taking part in television, with the proviso that their emotional and physical well-being was safeguarded. Most respondents expected that the children who took part were protected.

Respondents thought that children were represented and treated differently depending on the programme type and their support of children participation varied accordingly.

The participation of children in children's non-fiction television tended to be strongly valued by respondents. This was considered a relatively safe territory, where children were perceived to be depicted positively as a whole; for example having fun, learning and being empowered.

In contrast, the way in which children were represented in adult non-fiction television was felt to have both positive and negative elements. Respondents thought that the needs and interests of the child were not always prioritised. The programme types which prompted most concern were talk shows, and what respondents referred to as 'social experiment documentaries' covering 'contentious' subjects.

When discussing different programme types, respondents voiced the following concerns:

- It was felt that children were, in some instances, depicted as 'problems' and appeared to respondents to be experiencing emotional or physical distress. Some respondents felt uncomfortable about this and thought it was inappropriate;

- The desire for ratings was often thought to be a priority over the best interests of the children taking part;
- Child participants may have been forced to take part or may not have been asked if they wanted to take part; and
- A high level of concern about the risk of the child participants being bullied after the programme was shown on television.

Parents, teenagers and children made their evaluations based on what they could see on the screen and were aware that they did not know what could be happening behind the scenes to safeguard or protect the child participant's interests.

When presented with the sections of the Ofcom Broadcasting Code that relate to people under the age of 18, parents were very positive about its content. It was felt to cover all major aspects relating to a child's emotional and physical needs when taking part in a non-fiction programme. The references to 'dignity', as well as the fact that the Code included children up to the age of 18 were particularly well received. Respondents thought the Code addressed their concerns about the potentially negative impact on the child participant of broadcasting the programme, such as teasing or bullying from the child's peer group.

Respondents expected broadcasters to have a 'duty of care' and a responsibility to protect the rights of child participants. However, they felt that this duty of care could be at odds with the broadcasters' need to drive up ratings and the programme makers' need to create popular programme formats.

Respondents voiced concerns about children participation in what they saw to be the more 'sensational' talk shows and documentaries, particularly as they felt the risks of negative after-effects on the child participants were difficult to manage.

Some respondents felt the Code was open to wide interpretation. There were widespread calls for additional guidelines to steer broadcasters on how to safeguard children during the different stages of programme making. Respondents made suggestions for pre-, during and post-broadcast stages.

Pre-broadcast, to enable participants to make informed decisions about participation and understand fully the potential impact of taking part, the following suggestions were made:

- Programme makers should 'information gather' to determine whether the family or child was suitable to participate or was too vulnerable/ at risk and to check the parents' and child's motivations for taking part;
- Participants should be informed about the consequences of taking part, including the possible impact the programme could have after it has been shown on television;
- Parental and child consent<sup>1</sup> were not always felt to be sufficient safeguards in themselves to protect children's welfare, especially in the context of adult non-fiction television or when the child's parents were also participating in the programme.

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<sup>1</sup> Respondents often used the term 'consent' to describe a child participant's agreement to take part in a non-fiction programme. The Code requires that in the case of those under the age of 16, consent should normally be obtained from a parent, guardian or someone in loco parentis. However, where such consent is obtained, respondents suggested that this should not be to the exclusion of the child's own views about participating. It was felt that under 16s are able to indicate their assent or agreement to take part in a programme and this should be taken into account.

Parents concluded that providing additional checks within the consent process could help to safeguard children. The involvement of external child experts was felt to be one way that this could be achieved; and

- Parents, teenagers and children believed that involving children in the decision-making process to take part was important and that children would be able to make an informed and independent decision around the ages of 11 to 13 years. They felt that children of all ages should be asked their views on taking part and that if the child participant disagreed with their parents, an external child expert should be consulted to safeguard the interests of the child.

Respondents made the following suggestions regarding the production process in order to safeguard the emotional and physical well-being of participants:

- Interviewers should be trained in how to interview children in a sensitive and supportive way and to avoid humiliating and labelling children; and
- An adult known to the child or a child expert should be present to support the child at all times and ensure that they are not at risk.

With regard to the editing and post-broadcast stages, the following suggestions were made:

- Ideally, the child participant and their parents should be shown and given the opportunity to approve the final edit;
- Aftercare and support should be offered to the child and family where necessary;
- Schools should be informed of when the programme is to be broadcast, to ensure that the child is supported at school and that the risk of bullying is managed; and
- 'Contentious' programmes could be screened by an independent panel prior to broadcast to ensure they comply with the Code.

## Section 3

# Research objectives and methodology

Ofcom commissioned independent research agency, Sherbert Research, to carry out the qualitative research study. The aim was to explore the views of parents, teenagers and children and understand their attitudes towards non-professional children taking part in non-fiction programmes.

## 3.1 Research objectives

The research contained a set of objectives that applied to parents, teenagers and children and then specific objectives for each audience. The objectives for all respondents were to:

- Explore levels of interest in seeing children take part in non-fiction television;
- Explore the relationship between children's participation and children's voices being heard;
- Establish what parents and children thought children's rights were in relation to appearing in non-fiction television programmes;
- Ascertain if respondents' interest in seeing children take part, and their perceptions of how children are represented on-screen, varied by programme type;
- Gain views on the provisions made in the existing Code; and
- Establish if and how respondents would like to see the Code changed or supported with guidance.

The specific objectives when speaking to teenagers and children were to:

- Explore what they gain from seeing other children on television;
- Understand whether children appearing on television provides a platform for their opinions to be heard;
- Explore similarities and differences between children's and adult television in the representation and treatment of children;
- Explore how respondents would expect/want to be treated if they agreed to take part in non-fiction programmes;
- Explore potential issues for child participants in relation to possible peer group reactions; and
- Establish whether teenagers and children think that parental consent is enough.

The specific objectives when speaking to parents were to:

- Establish attitudes towards existing provisions in the Code;
- Explore their understanding of 'parental consent' and how sufficient a measure this is when allowing children to take part;

- Gain the parents' views on what informed consent is and who else could give consent;
- Gain perspectives on whose responsibility it is to protect the welfare of children in non-fiction television; and
- Explore views on how much responsibility parents should take versus broadcasters in allowing children to take part in non-fiction television programmes.

### **3.2 Research sample**

Discussion groups were carried out with parents, teenagers and children. Respondents were recruited by age of child and by socio economic group. In total, the discussions were carried out with 66 families. The sample was structured as follows:

- Four large groups with parents. Each group included a mix of parents with children aged 0 to 9 years and children aged 10 to 16 years;
- Two small groups with parents, one group was with parents of 0 to 9 year olds, and one with parents of 0 to 16 year olds; and
- Eight small groups of children aged 10-12 and teenagers aged 13 to 16 years, split by age and gender.

Respondents were also recruited on the basis that they watched television regularly, watched a range of channels and a range of non-fiction programmes.

The research took place in the four nations: England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Within each nation a variety of neighbourhoods, from rural to urban, were visited.

### **3.3 Research process**

The research comprised of three stages. Firstly, before attending the discussion groups, parents and children were asked to watch a DVD of clips from programmes which featured child participants. The programme clips were from a range of television channels and programme types (including documentary, talk show, children's and reality programmes). The aim was to provide the respondents with an overview of programmes which featured children. Parents and children were not alerted to the specific focus of the project in order to avoid sensitizing them to the issues. They were then asked to complete a questionnaire on what they liked and did not like about the programmes they had watched.

Secondly, parents and children attended the discussion groups. At the start of the discussions respondents talked spontaneously about programmes they liked. The topic of children participating in programmes was then introduced and respondents spontaneously talked about programmes that came to mind and elements they liked and disliked. During the discussion groups respondents were shown programme clips from a range of programme types.

Finally, at the end of the groups, parents were asked to reflect on the discussion at home, watch some non-fiction television and then fill in a questionnaire. In addition, four parents from the discussion groups took part in follow-up telephone interviews.

A pilot stage was carried out at the outset of the project, which allowed for minor modifications to be made to the approach for the rest of the study. No significant changes were made to the structure of the research.

## Section 4

# Importance and benefits of children participation

## 4.1 Initial discussions with parents, teenagers and children

In the initial discussions, many respondents cited a range of programme types that they enjoyed watching regularly. Non-fiction programmes with children were included within this range.

Parents thought that children appeared on television more today than in the past. They said they noticed a difference from when they were children, and perceived there to be an increase in the number of children appearing in all types of non-fiction programmes, including talent and talk shows, and not just programmes aimed purely at young viewers.

This research found that the majority of parents, teenagers and children spoken to had rarely thought about or discussed the involvement of children in non-fiction programmes and generally were immersed in programmes for their entertainment value. However, some respondents spontaneously mentioned concerns about children taking part in adult non-fiction programmes, particularly talk shows and 'social experiment' documentaries. These concerns included:

- The apparent emotional distress of some child participants, which felt uncomfortable and inappropriate for some respondents;
- The belief that children are vulnerable in general, and taking part in television shows could be emotionally upsetting for them;
- Television may not be the ideal way to support children who have emotional problems and that participation could leave them in an even worse predicament. Exposing children's emotional problems on national television made some respondents uncomfortable;
- The perception that broadcasters and programme makers can appear to be more concerned with ratings and programme objectives, than with the emotional (and physical) welfare of the children taking part;
- Some respondents felt children may not have given consent to take part; and
- High levels of concern among respondents about the risk of bullying post-broadcast. This was a spontaneous concern among children, teenagers and some parents. It was also a key concern for all respondents during group discussions.

Parents tended to have stronger concerns about children's participation compared to children, who tended to focus on the entertainment value of the programme. Teenagers in this study tended to reflect the views of parents more closely than children. This could be due to the wider range of programmes that they viewed, which included a variety of adult programmes, and their ability to appreciate the role and impact of television beyond their own world.

## 4.2 Levels of interest in seeing children take part in non-fiction programmes

This research revealed that, in principle, parents, teenagers and children supported the idea of children taking part in non-fiction television. Respondents claimed that if it was handled well, children could bring a lot to the viewing experience and that if they were not featured in programmes, they would be missed.

*“Well. If it was all adults I don’t think I would watch half of them.”* 15 to 16 year old girl, Scotland

*“Children are more funny than grown ups and make you laugh with the things that they do.”* 13 to 14 year old girl, Northern Ireland

*“You would be only getting part of the story if you only included adults; children have another point of view.”* 15 to 16 year old boy, Northern Ireland

## 4.3 Perceived benefits of children taking part

Parents, teenagers and children thought that watching children participate in non-fiction programmes brought a range of rich and varied perceived benefits. These benefits can be grouped into the following three categories:

- behaviour and learning;
- empowerment; and
- entertainment.

## 4.4 Behaviour and learning

When children and teenagers watched non-fiction programmes which featured child participants, they felt it often gave them an insight into their own behaviour and values. It also provided a chance to reflect on their own lives and to empathise with others.

*“It is interesting to see how different people are reacting.”* 15 to 16 year old girl, Scotland

*“It is amazing how other people live and sometimes it makes you feel lucky about what you have.”* 14 to 15 year old boy, Wales

Many children and teenagers also believed that seeing other children’s experiences gave them an interesting insight into a world beyond their own, which they appreciated and enjoyed. This was particularly important for teenagers, who felt inquisitive about other teenagers’ lives and experiences but felt they had had little exposure to anything other than their local environment. Two specific programme types, ‘social experiment’ documentaries and talk shows, were felt to deliver these types of insights.

*“It helps us understand what children think as well.”* 14 to 15 year old girl, England

By witnessing the lives and behaviour of other children and teenagers, younger viewers felt they were not only developing skills and knowledge around empathy, but also gaining practical insights into how to resolve issues and conflicts in their own lives. Television, for many of them, was an important window on the world.

Many parents found that watching reality shows or documentaries involving parenting gave them an insight into their own parenting styles and an understanding of their own children's behaviour. Some television programmes could provide an understanding of how to do things differently when it came to disciplining their children, which they appreciated.

*"It is interesting to see how people cope with children and compare this to how we have done."* Dad, Wales

Furthermore, many parents believed that there was educational value in watching programmes featuring children and teenagers, as it gave them the opportunity to see issues from the children's and teenagers' perspectives. In particular, it gave them a chance to reflect on their children's and their own behaviour within the family environment.

*"They often lead to discussion and debates within the house."* Mum, England

## **4.5 Empowerment**

Children and teenagers reported a sense of empowerment from watching other children participate in non-fiction programmes. Watching other children 'have a go' inspired them to think they could try something new, whether it was singing in a talent contest or taking part in a challenge.

*"It inspires you."* 10 to 11 year old boy, England

*"If you have seen a club that you want to join it might help give you the confidence to join."* 14 to 15 year old boy, Wales

Watching other children on television also empowered children and teenagers to 'have their say.' Many respondents claimed they felt boosted by what they watched and appreciated that children on television were giving a voice to many children's opinions. Some teenagers felt that even on programmes that raised concerns, it was better to have teenagers on a programme than not at all, because at least teenagers' perspectives were being represented.

*"It makes it fair... because when adults say children should be seen and not heard; well, it's the opposite of that."* 12 to 13 year old boy, Scotland

Some parents also felt that watching children rise to challenges and take part in competitions was inspiring. Some parents said they sometimes felt encouraged to do something they had been thinking about but had not yet committed to, for example 'a diet' or 'fitness programme'.

*"It might inspire others to do it."* Mum, England

*"It does encourage you to spend time with your children and talk to them and see what they think on subjects."* Dad, Northern Ireland

Many parents also reported that they felt empowered to instigate change at home, particularly regarding their parenting skills and developing better relationships with their children. They felt that watching other families struggle and tease out dilemmas gave them helpful advice and support and could potentially help them to resolve their own issues at home. This was particularly the case in relation to programmes which focused on children's behaviour and offered solutions, as illustrated in the quote below:

*“Programmes give you insight on how other families function, i.e. adults’ behaviour, children’s behaviour and you can pick up both the good points as well as the bad.”* Dad, Wales

#### **4.6 Entertainment**

As well as being a source of learning and empowerment, children, teenagers and parents said they enjoyed watching children taking part in programmes as it provided a source of entertainment. Children, in particular, enjoyed the raw childish humour and emotions portrayed by child participants, which they felt was spontaneous and honest and something to which they could relate. This was particularly felt to be the case in talent show programmes and in programmes which respondents referred to as ‘social experiment’ documentaries.

*“Sometimes they do the stupidest stuff... it’s funny.”* 10 to 11 year old boy, England

*“Children watched it because they thought they were going to be naughty.”* Dad, Wales

*“Adults know how to control their emotions and stuff whereas children just kind of let it go, and I think if it was more adults, there would be a lot less emotion on the telly.”* 14 to 15 year old girl, England

Parents also enjoyed the childish humour, finding pleasure in ‘children being children’ and sometimes children simply being ‘cute’.

*“They’re not worried to say what they think.”* Mum, England

*“There was a slight comical aspect to some of their incompetence. It was quite entertaining and a bit of an eye opener.”* Mum, England

#### **4.7 The prospect of taking part in programmes**

Parents were asked whether they would like their own child or children to take part in non-fiction programmes, whereas children and teenagers were asked if they would like to participate themselves. Whilst recognising the benefits of children’s participation in non-fiction television, respondents reported that there would be drawbacks as well. This consequently made respondents less enthusiastic about the idea of their children taking part or taking part themselves. In all cases, respondents were quite particular about the type of adult non-fiction programmes they would be happy to allow their children to be in or to be in themselves.

*“I would avoid anything about fighting or problems.”* 15 to 16 year old girl, Scotland

When considering the prospect of appearing on non-fiction programmes, many children said they feared being teased or bullied afterwards by people at school. The reaction from peer groups generally was a major source of anxiety. Therefore, respondents preferred programmes that had kudos among their friends and presented children in interesting and positive ways.

Teenagers and children, including the youngest children spoken to (10 to 12 year olds), also worried about reactions from adults, such as teachers or other parents they saw at the school gates. They said they feared their families would be gossiped about and judged by acquaintances. This was especially the case in relation to talk shows.

*“All the mums at the gates would be gossiping.”* 11 to 12 year old boy, England

*“... like their friends’ mums, what would they think of it?”* 15 to 16 year old girl, Scotland

For those children and teenagers who were willing to engage with the idea of being on television, they tended to prefer the idea of being on programmes that offered excitement, such as the chance to win great prizes or opportunities to travel. This was possibly because they knew that they would benefit personally and that it would give them leverage if they needed to justify taking part to their peer group or adults in their lives.

Many children and teenagers claimed they found the idea of being the focus of a television programme and having to share their ideas and opinions quite disconcerting. All children and teenage respondents said that they were happier with the idea of taking part as a team member or in the background.

The majority of children tended to be more enthusiastic about participating in children’s programmes than adult programmes. Children’s programmes were seen as safer territory and the children they saw represented in them seemed more like them. Also the issues children’s programmes tackled (if any) were seen to be less controversial.

Many parents expressed reservations about their own children taking part in adult non-fiction television. Like the children, they were also worried about the risk of bullying and teasing, whatever the age of their child. Mums seemed more worried about this than Dads, although some Dads also raised this as an issue.

Mirroring the views expressed by the children and teenagers, parents felt slightly more comfortable about their children taking part in children’s programmes because this was felt to be a safer, more positive experience than adult programmes. They also believed that programme makers would have more rules to follow regarding the treatment of children and that the child participant’s physical and emotional well-being would be a priority.

In principle, there was support among respondents for children taking part in non-fiction programmes. However, there were concerns about the risk of presenting a distorted picture of a child’s life and that a programme may not, for example, show the full extent of the child’s problem or provide enough details on their background. Many respondents believed that, in the editing process, footage could be selected which suited the aim of a programme and that this may not truly represent the life of the child taking part. In addition to this concern, many respondents also worried about the risk of bullying after the programme had been shown on television.

## Section 5

# Reactions by programme type

## 5.1 Children's and adult non-fiction programmes

Parents, teenagers and children were asked to compare the depiction of children in children's and adult non-fiction programmes. Respondents of all ages said they were able to discern clear differences in children's participation in each of these programme types.

Children's programming was viewed as safe and relatively positive, both as a viewing experience and in terms of participation and representation of children. Respondents believed that programme makers for children's programmes had children's best interests in mind, and that the focus was on participants having fun, learning, and doing interesting challenges and activities.

*"[Participants are] happy and enjoying being on the shows ... willing to do things."* 14 to 15 year old girl, England

*"They are normal children having a bit of fun and learning good life skills."* Dad, Northern Ireland

Conversely, it was claimed by parents, teenagers and children that the balance begins to tip when children were portrayed on adult non-fiction television. Here, respondents mentioned spontaneously that they were not sure whether programme makers always had the participants' best interests at heart and this felt uncomfortable to many. Parents and teenagers spoke quite negatively about programmes which focused solely on a child's problems. They felt that such programmes did nothing but to serve the more sensationalist desires of programme makers, rather than looking after the child participant's well-being. Respondents also felt that emotional and behavioural extremes tended to be the focus of some of these programmes, rather than more realistic portrayals of children.

*"I don't think the children are taken into account... it's more about the adults."* 12 to 13 year old girl, England

*"You want to learn about people's problems, but not if it makes their life miserable."* 14 to 15 year old boy, Wales

## 5.2 Reactions by programme type

An analysis of respondents' views on children participation revealed some clear differences in their attitudes that related to different programme types. Based on how comfortable respondents felt about children participation in each programme type, analysis showed that the different programme types could be divided into the following 'territories':

- 'Broadly comfortable' territory: This was where the treatment of children was considered 'generally fine' and included mostly children's and news-based programmes;
- 'Mixed' territory: This included programmes which had both positive and negative content relating to how respondents perceived children to be represented and treated. For all the programmes mentioned in this territory there were parts of their broadcasts that caused discomfort to viewers and other aspects which were praised.

Programmes tended to be from the following types: documentaries, family/home-focused reality shows, magazine programmes and talent shows; and

- 'Uncomfortable' territory: Elements of programmes that fell into this category were perceived by respondents to have gone 'too far' in their treatment of child participants and it was felt that the programme makers were not necessarily taking due care of the children. Respondents cited instances where they felt children seemed to be caused or experiencing emotional or physical distress on screen, or there was a perceived risk of emotional distress post-broadcast. Respondents also cited instances where they felt the child's dignity appeared compromised. Parents felt real concern that television was not the most appropriate environment in which to tackle some children's emotional issues, as it further exposed their vulnerability and could compromise their dignity. It was felt by most respondents that such instances, as outlined above, occurred more regularly within talk shows and what respondents referred to as 'social experiment' and 'contentious'/ 'sensational' documentaries.

It is important to note that respondents' views were based on what they could see happening 'on the screen' and they were aware that they did not know what was happening off-screen and that child participants could be receiving support behind the scenes. Some parents were also aware of the impact that the editing process could have on the final tone of the programme and appreciated that the treatment of children on screen could appear exaggerated or not reflect the reality of the experience for the child.

The research found that none of the three territories were perceived as completely clear-cut. There seemed to be positive and negative responses to programmes and different programme types within each territory. Children, teenagers and adults cited many examples of when children's participation worked and they felt comfortable, as well as conversely, when, in their view, it did not work and they felt uncomfortable. Findings are presented in more detail in the sections below.

### **5.3 Comfortable territory**

Within the 'comfortable' territory, according to respondents, the emotional and physical welfare of the child appeared to be paramount, their dignity respected and the negative impact of taking part minimal. In particular, respondents said they were comfortable when a programme depicted some or all of the following:

- Children learning new skills, including teamwork and performance skills;
- Children looking (and feeling) empowered and confident;
- Children having fun and meeting new people; and
- Children voicing their opinion in a safe environment.

The 'comfortable' territory occasionally generated concerns among respondents, which included:

- Children's physical safety appearing to be at risk from the viewer's perspective;
- Children appearing to be pressurised or bullied on programmes by peers and/or the hosts; and

- Respondents also worried about the child participant being bullied by peers after the programme was aired. This risk related to how the child was depicted on the programme, e.g. if they were perceived to have failed at a task.

#### **5.4 Mixed territory**

In the 'mixed' territory, there were several themes that elicited positive feelings in parents, teenagers and children. These were similar to the points raised in the 'comfortable' territory and included instances when a programme could:

- Boost the confidence of the participant, e.g. through taking part in a talent show;
- Inspire children to take up a particular hobby or consider a certain career;
- Educate families in how to bring up children and have transformational and positive outcomes, such as improving behaviour and communication in the family (both for the participant and viewers);
- Focus on the whole family and not just the 'problem' child and this may lead to improvements in the lives of the child participants and their parents;
- Take place in familiar surroundings, especially for participants under 10 years old;
- Highlight diverse lifestyles; and
- Have the clear agreement of the child to participate.

There were also moments that aroused discomfort in respondents. These centred on concerns about the long-term impact of the broadcast, and happened when:

- The programme maker's desire for sensation or increased viewing figures appeared, according to respondents, to supersede the child's welfare;
- Child participants were thought to be at increased physical risk by taking part, for example when children are put in unfamiliar home environments. This was a particular concern among parents.
- The participants 'failed', e.g. at a competition or a challenge, and their confidence could be damaged;
- The child could be labelled for the long term. This was mostly a concern for teenagers, who indicated they were already self-conscious without additionally gaining a social label on national television; and
- Situations such as when the child's dignity appeared to be compromised, which could lead to a negative after-effect on the child's relationship with his/her peers, such as bullying.

#### **5.5 Uncomfortable territory**

In the 'uncomfortable' category there were some areas which were seen to be less harmful than others by respondents. These included:

- Instances where a programme depicted problems that were then resolved, for example on follow-up programmes. Children said they were especially reassured by this, as they got very upset when the initial problem was aired;
- When the child participants were given a 'voice' without adult interruption. This was important to children and teenagers, because they did not feel they were always given this opportunity in real life;
- When an interviewer in a talk show was empathetic and sincere. Respondents claimed this was reflected in the interviewer's questioning style, e.g. by making sure the child spoke before the parents, positioning the interviewer well in relation to the child, and protecting the child from inappropriate adult behaviour;
- When the respondents felt empathy towards the child participants and were encouraged to reflect on their own behaviour; and
- When aftercare was clearly provided to participants. (For example, respondents said that the programme provided information that aftercare was provided.) This was valued, although many respondents questioned its effectiveness.

The 'uncomfortable' territory provoked more negative reactions than positive.

*"Is there really any need for anyone under 18 to appear on them [talk shows]?" Mum, England*

Respondents voiced concerns which related to before, during, and after the production of the programme.

Many respondents said it appeared to them that the child participant had either been forced to take part or had not been asked at all. Respondents felt this may happen if participation was driven by the parents' rather than the child's desire to take part. Also respondents were concerned about the level of understanding that participants and their parents may have about what the experience would be like when agreeing to take part. Respondents also suspected that there may not be sufficient time given in talk shows to allow the presenter/interviewer to bond with the participant. They were also concerned that there may not be sufficient research undertaken by the programme maker into the child's family or background when assessing the appropriateness of participating.

*"To put your children in that is very, very voyeuristic; the adults just disregard the children's feelings." Mum, Scotland*

Some teenagers and parents thought that instances in some programme formats, particularly talk shows and 'sensational' documentaries, were designed almost solely to capture ratings. They were not happy about the way in which children could be depicted as 'problems' and could be humiliated or ridiculed. They saw children with emotional problems to be very vulnerable. Respondents felt that some extreme cases could have been exaggerated to create sensational television to capture ratings and may not actually reflect real life. In their view, 'inappropriate' questioning and 'pressure from the interviewer' further compromised the child participant's well-being.

*"They just want the viewers, and how awful these people's lives are the better, yeah, the shock value." Mum, England*

Parents and teenagers reported concerns about the treatment of children in some instances, such as surprising a child with an extreme emotional event; leaving a child alone or isolated

on the stage; putting a child in unfamiliar and potentially intimidating surroundings with apparently little or no emotional support; and children being treated inappropriately with their voice not really being heard or valued.

Respondents, especially older children and teenagers, said they were very concerned about what may happen to child participants on non-fiction programmes after the programme is broadcast. They worried about the level of care or counselling given to the participants after the show. They also expressed concerns that the child participants could be vulnerable to teasing or bullying at school and anger from their parents as a result of what happened on the programme.

Some parents and older teenagers even questioned whether programmes in the 'uncomfortable' territory would ever be appropriate for child participation, especially in the case of talk shows where children were not felt to be integral to the programme's format.

Finally, a particular concern for parents was the impact of programming on child viewers. Parents worried that programmes featuring real children indicated to children that the programme was for them, resulting in them viewing content that could be inappropriate in behaviour and attitudes.

## Section 6

# Views on informed consent

Parents and teenagers were asked whether they thought parental and child consent were needed for a child to take part in a non-fiction programme. All agreed that it probably was, as this tends to be standard practice across many aspects of their/their children's lives. Many respondents also questioned whether parental and child consent were sufficient.

### 6.1 Parental consent

Gaining parental consent was not felt to be sufficient in safeguarding the protection of children participating in non-fiction television programmes. Respondents expressed reservations about relying on this alone, despite the fact that parent respondents themselves could not imagine coercing their children into taking part and teenagers could not imagine being forced to participate.

*"In some circumstances I am not sure it [consent] is enough."* Mum, Scotland

Parents felt that parental consent alone was insufficient for adult non-fiction television programmes because it seemed that parents may not be able to separate their own needs from those of their children. It was thought they may prioritise their own needs first and foremost. This was felt to be particularly true if the child's parents were participating in the non-fiction programme themselves.

*"Clearly, some of those people on these shows shouldn't be on them. They're enjoying it for the minibar and the hotels, because that's what they talk about. And you think, 'What?'"* Mum, England

Owing to this, there was a call for child experts to work on adult non-fiction programmes to assess whether it was in the long-term interests of the child to take part. They could also represent the views of the child participants and have the power to "overrule" parental consent. Respondents expressed a preference for child experts to be independent in order that they were detached from the programme. Overall, whether independent or a member of the programme team, respondents felt that child experts could provide valuable support for child participants.

Furthermore, respondents believed that in addition to the child participant's parents, broadcasters should take responsibility for protecting the welfare of children, as they were seen to occupy a position of trust and expertise. Whilst programmes from some broadcasters were perceived to take these responsibilities seriously and prioritise the needs of children who participated, others received some criticism based on the perception that they were not effectively managing the tension between child protection and creative programming and ratings.

### 6.2 Child consent

Parents, teenagers and children in every discussion group spontaneously raised the issues of whether children were truly given a choice regarding their participation in non-fiction programmes and whether or not they fully understood what they had agreed to.

*"I think only the people who are willing to do it should take part."* 12 to 13 year old boy, Scotland

Respondents claimed that by around the ages of 11 to 13, children were better able to make independent choices and know whether or not they would want to be involved in a programme. The move to secondary school was felt to be an important watershed in their lives and a time when children were given increased responsibility. This age range was thought to be a suitable age for asking children to make an informed decision about taking part, since this is when children are becoming both physically and emotionally more independent.

It was felt that children under the age of ten might struggle to make judgements about the long-term impact of taking part in a non-fiction programme. Respondents felt that developmentally, children of this age were less able to think beyond the present and evaluate consequences, such as how they would feel about their peers at school seeing them on television or how the programme might upset or disturb them. However, despite this there was still a strong desire on the part of respondents to involve them in the decision-making process in some way.

All respondents believed that the child's agreement to take part should always be sought, irrespective of the child's age.

Respondents also discussed the kind of information that would be useful to share with potential participants in order to help them understand what was involved in taking part in the programme. This included explaining to participants that peers at school would see them on television and offering them the chance to meet with ex-participants to understand the process from their perspective. Further suggestions are included in Section 8.

## Section 7

# Views on the Ofcom Broadcasting Code

## 7.1 Discussion of the Code

Parents and teenagers were presented with the following sections of the Code which refer to the involvement of people under 18 in programmes, as detailed below. (This was not an issue deemed appropriate or relevant to discuss with younger children, under the age of thirteen.)

*Rule 1.26: Due care must be taken over the physical and emotional welfare and the dignity of people under eighteen who take part or are otherwise involved in programmes. This is irrespective of any consent given by the participant or by a parent, guardian or other person over the age of eighteen in loco parentis.*

*Rule 1.27: People under eighteen must not be caused unnecessary distress or anxiety by their involvement in programmes or by the broadcast of those programmes.*

Respondents agreed that there should be 'rules' that broadcasters have to follow to protect non-professional children who participate in non-fiction programmes. Respondents believed 'rules' were necessary and they referred to other parts of children's lives where provisions were made for parental consent to safeguard children's interests, for example if children go on school trips or are photographed.

On reading and discussing the Code, respondents found no obvious gaps in it and generally found it to be comprehensive regarding children's welfare. Respondents were impressed that the Code applied to children up to 18 years old, as they expected it to stop at 16.

The protection of a child's dignity was felt to be important and a key strength of the Code, particularly because this was irrespective of the child's or parent's consent and therefore suggested that programme makers were obliged to take some responsibility for the child's welfare.

*"I like the use of the word dignity; it suggests they are really thinking of the child's welfare, it is a serious word."* Dad, Northern Ireland

Parents and teenagers also said they appreciated that the Code gave consideration to the potential impact of the broadcast, as it theoretically addressed key concerns about the risk of bullying or teasing from peers.

*"It is right to consider what happens after it has been on the TV, for me that is when the real problems can begin."* Dad, Wales

Whilst respondents thought that the Code itself felt comprehensive, they believed that it seemed open to interpretation by broadcasters based on what they could see on screen. Respondents were particularly concerned in cases where children who were already vulnerable, were, in their view, exposed by appearing publicly on television.

*"It is all well and good to have a code, but not all TV executives seem to be upholding the rules, I suppose it is open to interpretation."* Mum, England

Some parents and teenagers suspected that the Code would only be referred to once complaints had been made.

*“People complain to the regulatory bodies after the damage is done.”* Mum, England

Consequently, many respondents, when asked, thought that clear guidelines to support the Code would be welcome. They also thought there was potentially a need for policing and even legislation.

*“The only way that you can stop this from happening is to make sure that they follow the rules and don’t compromise the dignity of children.”* Dad, Northern Ireland

## Section 8

# Suggestions for guidelines to support the Code

Parents and teenagers suggested that the Code could be supported with guidelines<sup>2</sup> that covered all phases of programme making, in order that children could be better protected when participating in non-fiction programmes. Parents, in particular, discussed ideas from their points of view as parents and as citizens in society. The suggestions are outlined below and divided into before, during and after the programme is made.

### 8.1 Before production

With regard to the period before production, respondents suggested ideas to enable programme makers to make more informed decisions about the participants on their programmes and to check whether they should allow that child/ family to take part.

Respondents felt that programme makers should 'information gather' to determine whether the family or child was suitable to participate or was too vulnerable/ at risk. This could include seeking expert opinions or discussion with teachers and social workers. They would also need to establish whether the desire to take part was really a cry for help, which could indicate that the child was too vulnerable for exposure on national television and could need to be referred elsewhere for support.

*"I think they should try and find out their strengths and weaknesses a bit more before they dip them into a show... make sure you know what their boundaries are... what they are happy talking about."* 14 to 15 year old girl, England

Related to the above point, it was believed by respondents that the production team should also check the child's and parents' motivations for taking part. For example, they would need to establish whether a parent's or child's desire to be a celebrity or to make money from appearing on the show was clouding their rational judgement.

Parents and teenagers felt that before participating, children needed to be fully informed about what would happen during the programme and have their expectations set about the possible consequences of taking part. They suggested that this could be achieved by talking to other children who had taken part in the show or by watching footage of past episodes.

*"The children should be told by a specially trained advisor and understand the consequences of failing on these shows..."* Dad, Wales

Respondents also stressed the need to take into account the child's and parents' background and degree of understanding when deciding if a child could give informed consent to take part. In particular, they felt that any explanation to children and their parents would need to be in a language that they understood, and given by trained interviewers.

*"It's way more easy to persuade a child than it is an adult."* 14 to 15 year old girl, England

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<sup>2</sup> As well as speaking to parents and teenagers, Ofcom sought the views of broadcasters, programme makers, PACT, child interest groups and academic child experts on suggestions for guidance to support the Code.

Respondents felt that the child's consent should always be sought and refusal to take part should not be overridden by any adult, including their parents. Furthermore, respondents wanted the child's consent to be independently confirmed, away from their parent or guardian, to safeguard children from being pushed into something unwillingly by their parents.

*"They should never force children in front of the camera, especially if they have a problem."*  
Dad, England

In the event of disagreement between the child and parent about the child taking part, respondents suggested that child experts could be on hand to provide support and information for the child.

*"I think that the children should have an advisor with them at all times. A properly trained person who tells the children the down side as well as the fame side. I think that children should have the last say on if the clip should be shown."* Dad, Wales

## **8.2 During production**

Parents suggested a range of ideas to minimise stress on the child while participating in the programme.

First, parents suggested consulting with child experts about the best way of interviewing children to prevent emotional and physical distress. Suggestions included evaluating the appropriateness of having a live studio audience; considering concealing the identity of the child; reviewing the interviewer's questioning style; and thinking about how best to support vulnerable children to minimise embarrassment and potential humiliation.

Respondents also suggested that programme makers and interviewers should be trained in dealing with children, in order that they would be able to really understand what was going on for the child taking part and think beyond the life of the programme.

*"There should be an agreement from the producer's point of view. If they think the child is unhappy, they should have a say in whether they carry on with it, not just the parents."* Mum, England

It was felt that having a third party present during production who was familiar to the child and could safeguard their interests, such as an independent child chaperone and/or supportive adult like a parent or grandparent, would be beneficial. Parents were especially keen for this to happen if the child's environment or routine was changed. Some respondents suggested it might be worth communicating this to viewers at the end of the programme to reassure the audience that the child was not put at any unnecessary risk.

*"Their mediator or buddy should be with them all the time."* Mum, England

Respondents wanted to make sure that the child would not be caused any emotional distress during the programme. This meant no bullying or harassment from any member of a studio audience, other participants, or interviewers. According to respondents, this would, for example, require the programme makers to state this to the studio audience and other participants prior to the programme being filmed.

### 8.3 After production

Respondents suggested that the participants (both children and parents) should ideally view and approve the final edit of the programme. Whilst recognising this was a big request to ask of the programme makers, it was seen as something that would help participants to feel happier about what was being broadcast and prepare them for potential embarrassment/harm.

*"I think they should get a chance to watch it and approve it before it goes on air."* 14 to 15 year old boy, England

It was also suggested that 'contentious' programmes or specific programme types could be screened by an independent panel before being broadcast to check the programme makers had complied with the Code.

In relation to the programming being shown on television, respondents made some suggestions in order to protect the child participant by safeguarding their dignity and reducing any negative impact (such as bullying from peers) the broadcast may have on them. Respondents wanted to ensure that children and parents understood the potential implications of any unplanned or controversial contribution during the making of the programme. Respondents suggested that programme makers needed to consider the ramifications of embarrassing or sensitive footage on the child/family's life, for example by informing the child's school of the child's involvement and any potential impact, in order that the school staff could support the child in their day-to-day environment.

*"A 15 year old boy crying on national telly would probably think beforehand, 'Oh, I won't cry, I'm hard.' But after the event he would not want his mates seeing him cry on telly."* Mum, England

*"Make sure they're fully aware of the publicity, what will happen at school and that people will recognise you and mums will make comments. They need to be totally aware of that aspect."* Mum, Scotland

Finally, there were calls for aftercare and support to be provided for the child and family immediately after the show, and on an ongoing basis, if required. Furthermore, some respondents suggested that, as viewers, they would want to know this was happening to reassure them that care was being taken of the child.

*"Access to a professional adult? Yes definitely, if there was a family problem."* 12 to 13 year old boy, Scotland