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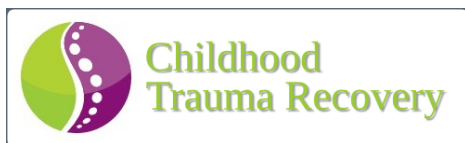
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CHILDHOOD FAME : THE DOWNSIDE.

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negative effects of childhood fame

'I think every child star suffers through this period because you're not the cute and charming child that you were. You start to grow, and they want to keep you little forever.'

-Michael Jackson on the perils of getting older.

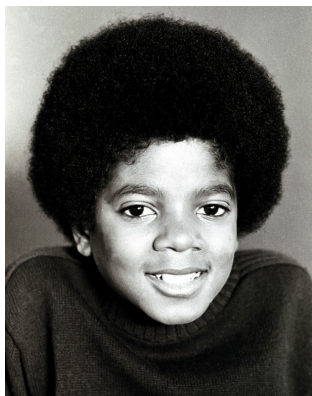
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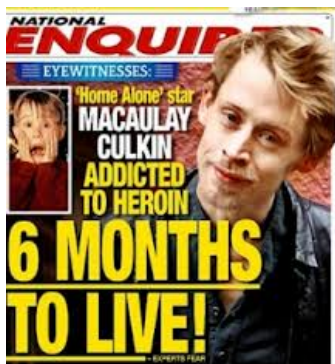
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In the era of X-Factor and Britain's Got Talent, more and more young people are being lured into developing an insatiable lust for fame. Whilst fame can bring enormous rewards, it is likely that just about every famous person would acknowledge that there is also a downside. To some, of course, the negative side of fame is more damaging than to others. However, young people are likely to be especially vulnerable to this negative side, and, in this post, I want to explore the adverse effects the experience of early fame can have on child stars.

Of course, some child stars cope with their fame very well and can enjoy it. An example of someone who fitted this category is Leonardo DiCaprio (for those who have not seen films in which he starred as a child, I recommend the film 'What's Eating Gilbert Grape?') who made an extraordinarily successful transition into adult stardom.

Stars who did not cope so well with early fame include Michael Jackson (indeed, he attributed many of his adult difficulties to the effect of his childhood). In interviews, Jackson described his childhood as being lonely and unhappy. It has also been alleged that his father used, sometimes, to beat him if he made mistakes during the arduous rehearsals he was forced to undertake. He also stated that he would often see happy children playing together through the window of his rehearsal room and cry because he could not join them and felt left out. As an adult, he felt his childhood had, in a very real sense, been stolen from him. In response to this, he tried to relive his childhood as an adult which is, of course, extremely well documented.



problems of childhood fame

There is also the case of McCaulay Culkin. He attributes the fact that he turned to drink and drugs, at least in part, to the enormous pressure he was under as the world's most famous child. Also, as soon as he was able, he cut off all contact and communication with his father.

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justin beiber, the stresses of fame

To bring things up to date, there are also YouTube clips of Justin Bieber losing his world famous cool with paparazzi.

FACTORS RELEVANT TO HOW EARLY FAME MAY AFFECT YOUNG PEOPLE :

The main factors include :

- the degree to which the child is being manipulated for financial gain
- the degree of unwanted pressure exerted by so-called 'pushy parents'
- the age at which the child has to contend with the pressures of fame
- the level of emotional support the child receives from parents, friends, management etc
- the length of time spent in the limelight, and, if relevant, how this ends (eg by choice or due to no longer being offered work)
- the environment in which the child works (eg the influence of older stars)
- degree to which the child feels able to exercise choice in relation to whether s/he works
- to what degree the parents want their child to be famous in order to derive a vicarious experience of fame (ie to live out their own unfulfilled dreams through their child).
- degree to which they are exposed to 'showbiz style' drink and drug taking
- degree to which they are isolated from 'normal' society

On top of the above, child stars will also need to cope with jealousy (not only from their peers and siblings, but by some adults too (eg relatively unsuccessful older actors, and, even, in some cases, from their own parents), intense public scrutiny, loss of privacy, unwanted attention (eg by obsessed fans), pressure to maintain an image which may well be at odds with their true personality, fear of work drying up (eg being a 'has been' at 17 years of age with the best part of his/her career over), fear of re-adjustment to non-stardom (if it happens), becoming overly self-important and arrogant. Finally, too, it is worth remembering the phrase that : 'It's lonely at the top.'

SYMPTOMS OF STRESS YOUNG PEOPLE MAY EXHIBIT IN RESPONSE TO THE PRESSURES OF EARLY FAME :

For those 12 years of age and younger, stress symptoms might include :

- REGRESSION : ie reverting to behaviour more commonly displayed by younger children
- DEPRESSION/EXCESSIVE CRYING
- ANXIETY ATTACKS/CLINGING BEHAVIOUR

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For those in their teens :

– POOR ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

– DRUG AND ALCOHOL ABUSE

– SELF-HARM

– EATING DISORDERS (a well known example of a child star from the UK who later developed an eating disorder – in this case anorexia – is Lena Zavaroni, who tragically died from the condition).

THE PROBLEM OF ACHIEVING ICONIC STATUS :

It has been suggested that another problem which may arise from being a child star is that the public has a tendency to psychologically project their ideas of what is good, beautiful and innocent onto the famous child, so that the child becomes a symbol, or icon, representing these qualities. In other words, the child is idealized and romanticized and placed on a pedestal – an image which is clearly impossible to live up to.

FINANCES :

The highly successful child star is likely to become his/her family's chief bread-winner, earning in a year, possibly, more than his/her parents, combined, will earn in a life-time. In terms of who is the family financial provider, then, there is a reversal of ordinary roles. It is possible that unscrupulous parents will exploit this, pushing the child to do work that s/he does not want to do (eg the case of Michael Jackson, referred to briefly above).

Also, if the young star is a teenager with access to his/her money and becomes involved with drugs, s/he is more likely to take them in very large quantities as s/he can afford to do so.

'I JUST WANT TO BE NORMAL!'

This is a common refrain of children, who, universally, want to fit in with their peers. The child star, however, is set apart, by definition of being famous, which deprives him/her of a fundamental psychological need.

NB To read how 'pushy parents' may develop 'Achievement By Proxy Disorder', and, as a result, emotionally harm their child, [click here](#).

David Hosier BSc Hons; MSc; PGDE(FAHE)

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