

Why I believe X factor is guilty of child abuse

Daily Mail by CAROL SARLER

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Now he tells us. Now, after he has taken Simon Cowell's shilling and driven teenagers to tears in the name of 'entertainment', finally X Factor judge Gary Barlow says what he must have known all along: 'Sixteen is just too young to be in a competition with this kind of pressure.'

Luke Lucas, one of the 16-year-olds in question, was distraught after being axed from the show; pushed aside at a tender age and left feeling like a total, irreparable failure.

Meanwhile, another 16-year-old contestant, Holly Repton, who was also given the boot after singing her heart out, was last seen in floods of tears... clinging to her teddy bear.



Sixteen is just too young to be in a competition with this kind of pressure: Gary Barlow tells Luke Lucas, 16, that he has not made it to his final four selection.

Her namesake, Hollie Steel, still haunts those of us who watched her break down two years ago, tiny and alone on the huge stage of Britain's Got Talent mid-way through her performance of Edelweiss. She was just ten at the time.

Little Miss Steel's meltdown marked the end for me; since then, I have not followed any of the raft of Cowell's creations that dominate our evening screens.

But there is no shortage of those with stronger stomachs than mine, and no doubt Cowell has privately found a way to reconcile his conscience with what he calls family viewing — and I call child abuse.

And this is, to be clear, a form of child abuse unique to reality TV.

The glittering film industry doesn't do it; there, children are scripted, schooled on set, chaperoned, and exposed only to the gaze of a small professional crew — and only within their own particular scenes.

Children in adult-rated films are not even allowed to attend premieres, lest they see the whole of the film in which they starred.

Similarly, press regulators have strict codes governing any newspaper or magazine coverage of children, and our courts uphold their rules with vigour when it comes to anonymity for children, the better to protect their privacy.

But switch on a television set, and any under-age soul — the more vulnerable the better — may be stripped to the core in front of millions of prurient eyes.

There are, in fact, legal restrictions on what may or not be done with children in the broadcast media. The trouble is, the legislation has not been updated since 1968.

Which is to say, not since the advent of the grotesque spectacle of reality TV. So, for instance, producers need a licence for children to appear on screen if they are in an entertainment show such as a soap opera.

But reality producers get around that by calling their shows documentaries — you remember those: traditionally, the classier end of viewing — where, in law, anything goes.

And go they do, with children routinely reduced to the status of performing animals: gawped at with the same oohs and ahhs we used to reserve for an organ-grinder's monkey.

We have had Channel 4's Boys And Girls Alone, a 2009 show in which children aged from eight to 12 were filmed fighting and crying while left unsupervised in isolated cottages.

In the guise of educating parents, we've seen toddlers publicly humiliated on the naughty step, under the stern watch of Channel 4's Supernanny Jo Frost (who, if she really does know anything about children, should know better than to subject them to this).



Switch on a television set, and any under-age soul – the more vulnerable the better – may be stripped to the core in front of millions of prurient eyes: Holly Repton is told that she will not be part of her final four for the live show.

The four-part 2007 show *Bringing Up Baby*, which showed six families trying out radically different parenting styles on their newborns, was similarly justified as ‘educational’.

Yet it brought more than 750 complaints about the treatment of children under five — accusations endorsed by the NSPCC, who branded it ‘outdated and potentially harmful’.

We’ve seen children progress through TV ‘fat camps’; miserable young porkers who, left to themselves, would surely rather die than draw attention to their waistlines.

And we’ve ached at the bewildered tears of the child victims of *Wife Swap*, the show in which mothers are left in charge of another family — experiments played through to the bitter end, regardless of the distress of the children involved.

Still, never mind the kids: look at the ratings! A few tears before bedtime never did the viewing figures any harm, did they?

The feelings of the children behind the scenes of reality talent shows is almost irrelevant, as pre-pubescent voices crack through the language peculiar to the genre.

‘I really, really want this,’ they parrot. ‘I’ve wanted it all my life.’
(That long, huh?)

And hovering, beaming, always happy to catch the camera’s waiting eye, are the parents who offer up their babies as human sacrifices to the monster that can never quite get enough of them.

What motivates these parents? Probably the purest motive would be money; enough, say, to stash away for future university tuition fees.

But my bet is this applies to only a minority; that most are in it for the vicarious thrill of a fame that might rub off, second-hand, onto them.

Either way, they ignore all the evidence that fame corrodes childhood. Showbusiness has taken a terrible toll among the young, and not just in Hollywood, either.

Remember Seventies star Lena Zavaroni?

At ten, the youngest person ever to have a UK top ten album, she later died from anorexia, which she'd blamed on the pressure to fit into tiny costumes when she was developing into a woman.



Former child star Lena Zavaroni who died of anorexia, which she blamed on her childhood in the spotlight.

No doubt her parents said what the current crop always says: that the child 'wanted' his or her 15 minutes of fame and they couldn't bear to stand in their way.

Such tosh. Children might also 'want' to play in the road, but we don't let them.

Still, with their consciences apparently clean, parents sign on the dotted line for cameras to come into their homes and document their children's lives. They find it perfectly acceptable for their son or daughter to be seen by friends and neighbours sobbing as they are kicked off entertainment shows, or writhing in embarrassment over wetted bedsheets.

And they continue to drive them to ruthless auditions for talent contests, where the potential for pain caused by losing is eclipsed only by the potential for damage caused by winning.

Make no mistake: success in this game really can do as much harm to young people as failure. Success means fame — and fame is hard. A great many adults find it difficult to handle fame with ease, that odd

mixture of being absurdly indulged, while at the same time feeling that everyone wants a piece of you.

I have several grown-up friends who are properly famous, and even the most level-headed and intelligent among them admit that it takes a lot of practice to become comfortable with being constantly recognised by — and approached by — strangers.

For a child? The extraordinary thing is that any child stars survive at all.

None of this is to let television producers off the hook; the people who make these programmes have good reason to feel ashamed of themselves.

Nevertheless, their first priority is the bottom line, and that is the interest they will serve.

Parents, on the other hand, should have their children as their first — indeed, their only — priority, and those children's interests should be paramount.

To which end, it might be a good starting point for the star-struck, fame-junkie parents among us to remember this: in a society that dares to call itself civilised, it is the adults' job to educate, entertain, inspire and captivate children.

Not the other way around.

Read more: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2044915/Why-I-believe-X-factor-guilty-child-abuse.html#ixzz1ZtxSLE9W>