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Suffer the children

Journalists are guilty of child misuse

The more journalists want a story, the more willing they are to exploit children.

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News columns and programs drip with indignation when reporters find stories about the misuse of children. It's an interesting irony that journalists allow themselves to mistreat children.

A case in point is The Des Moines Register's lynching of Jody Collins, a 14 year-old boy who inadvertently caused the death of a schoolmate.

Journalistic wisdom decreed that readers needed to know Jody's history of sexual abuse (see Richard Paxson's story) so that they could understand how two boys got into a fight. Never mind that boys who haven't been sexually abused have been known to fight.

Editors also decided that Jody needed to be identified. And, by printing his name in the newspaper, they made sure that the other youth's death could follow Jody the rest of his life.



We saw the same faulty justification used last year by news organizations that named and pictured juveniles who might have been charged in the Central Park rape case. Some of the youths, of course, weren't ever charged with anything.

The *Register* decided early on not to take Jody's age into account. Jody, we're told, understood the consequences of being interviewed and, if he should have been protected, it was up to his stepfather to do that, not the reporter.

In a similar manner, readers of the Lawrence (MA) Eagle-Tribune were told last summer that a five-year-old girl "spoke freely, assertively" as she told a reporter her reactions after witnessing her parents' arrest for drug possession. One assumes that the child gave equally "informed" consent for the multiple photographs of her that accompanied the story.

Developmental psychology and anecdotal evidence show us that even the smartest child is not as capable as the most limited adult at understanding long-term consequences. So, we need to protect children from themselves.

Children who commit crimes are "rehabilitated" rather than punished and the records of juveniles' misdeeds are sealed. We don't trust the child-patient to give consent for medical care. We ask the parents.

And, courts appoint guardians to watch over children's interests in custody cases or when people might disagree about just what is in the best interest of the child.

A juvenile who would not otherwise carry a paper trail from a childhood misdeed should not be stigmatized because journalists decide that the crime is "serious" enough. Only when the courts, after careful professional examination, decide to treat the juvenile as an adult, can journalists be sure that they are not causing additional harm. It's competition or a vigilante mentality that compels news media to name child suspects early in a case.

It's true that journalists have no special obligation to protect children, but they don't have a special license to misuse them either.

My concern is that the more journalists value a piece of information, the less they value or protect the child.

I wanted to ask Jody what he thought about how the news media covered his case. But, I restrained my impulse to track him down. Jody has probably had his fill of journalists.

At 17, he should be planning a life free from reminders of a fateful playground fight. The courts, after a year of supervision, gave him a chance to do just that. If only journalists had had as much heart.



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