

Children in front of the camera

The secret of producing good live action

There is probably hardly anything that requires more sensitivity than creating and producing live-action formats with children. Successful directors talk about their experiences, their concrete approaches to shooting on the set, and their secret recipes.

World adventures with kids

J.J. Johnson (Canada)

Founder/partner, Sinking Ship Entertainment

(e.g. This is Daniel Cook, Are we there yet?, Dino Dan)

September 2005 – Maya Pyramid at Chichen Itza, Mexico: Pilot shoot for *Are we there yet?: World Adventure*. It's a global adventure series that takes sibling pairs (5- to 8-year-olds) around the world.

Me: Alright guys, on the count of three, turn around, open your eyes and tell me what you see.

Kid Host #1 and #2: <excited giggles>

Me: Okay ready, 1...2...3, turn around!

Kid Host #1: Wow! A pyramid!

Kid Host #2: Awesome! Hey wait, look... a lizard!

Kid Host #1: Let's get it!

Kid Host #2: Hurry, it's running away from that old building!

Me: <defeated>

If there is one constant in my 5-year career of working with kids, it's that I cannot possibly anticipate what's going to catch their interest. Oh, I have a vague sense, I'm sometimes

right but more often than not, they will surprise me and inevitably rip to shreds whatever "episode plan" I presumptuously thought they'd enjoy. I have had the great fortune of standing at some of the Wonders of the World, expensive and hard fought over filming permits in hand, as my spectacular little hosts neglect the Taj Mahal or the Great Wall in favour of a cool-coloured beetle or to join in a stick game some local kids are playing. Ultimately, I'm given a choice; I could freak out, tell them how costly it is to shoot in the Red Square, how we got held up by Russian guards the day before, how our equipment's been confiscated and that they may not let us leave the country and so please, for the love of all that is holy, please say something wonderfully kid-like and poignant about St. Basil's Cathedral. Or, I can let go, forget that a soldier has my passport, because in the end, we're here to see how these kids authentically react to these adventures. And you know, truthfully, more often than not, that coloured beetle will lead us to an interesting observation about the Taj Mahal's marble inlay decorations, that stick game will lead to a chance encounter with a local kid who wants to share with our hosts a special part of the Great Wall and that lizard ... well, he kind of looks like the snake head carvings at the base of the pyramid.

Put simply, I would say that the two most important things that are underestimated when working with kids are that they're by nature entirely unpre-



J. J. Johnson on a world adventure with kids in China

dictable and that they're an absolute soul fulfilling joy to work with.

Kids will be kids. Try as we might to think of them as young professional actors or wunderkind performers, at the end of the day, you're working with someone who hasn't been on the planet for a heck of a long time. So when asked what my "secret recipe" for achieving the best quality from our young casts is, I would have to say it's 2 parts patience and 1 part vodka. Kidding of course – patience isn't all that important.

No, in truth, if I presume to have a "secret recipe", it would be the acute understanding that though I have control over all of the ingredients, that in the end, the kid must feel like the chef. The best quality for me comes when I know my dynamic host or talented actor has felt comfortable enough on set and with me to put on the "chef's



On the set of *Dino Dan*

hat” themselves. They’ve taken over, they ask their own questions, they don’t need me to prompt, they ask a camera operator if “they caught that on tape?” They ask to write a script or send me an episode idea. They’ve become an intrinsic part of the process, a partner in a working family. This moment coincides, oddly enough, with my favourite part of the production, when I suddenly have a quirky little personality by my side, one who will remind me in no uncertain terms, how they and, in turn, their peers see their world. Authentic reflection of a kid’s worldview is, for me, the highest level of quality one can hope to achieve and the greatest reward of working with children.

Casting the right children and allow them to show their talent

Simone van Dusseldorp
(*The Netherlands*)
Director (e.g. *Abi*, *Frogs & toads*)

To me, casting is the most important thing. You have to find a child who has the same energy as the character in the film. For example, for the film *Frogs & toads* we were looking

for a 6-year-old boy and had a casting with 200 boys. In my opinion, Nino ten Brave was the only one who could play the leading role. He had just a little experience and he was distracted quickly in the first audition, but he was the only one who dared to put all his energy in his role. During the several casting sessions he grew into his role. Nevertheless, working with children is a risky business. When they don’t feel like it anymore, there is a problem: You don’t have a film; a lot of money went down the drain. Therefore, good preparation is very important.

When shooting we prepare the whole scene without the kids. One person takes care of them and s/he has to be really good with kids. For example it is very important that crew members

don’t bother the children with small talk. They have to either concentrate or relax. Children don’t relax when they have to have conversations with grown-ups. They feel relaxed in a space where they can play freely, so for me it is important to have a separate playing room.

Then we put them into the situation and they start playing, sometimes even without knowing the exact words beforehand. They have to feel and play the scene. Sometimes that means you get only very short segments, and they are not exactly in the way you had planned it. That is challenging but also very exciting, as you have to have a clear vision of what you are looking for and at the same time be open to what the situation offers.

We treat our child actors as full members of the cast, which means we pay them normally, we don’t use diminutives and we are straightforward with them.

Only give compliments when he or she really deserves it! Everyone likes to have some responsibility, and children are very aware of being taken seriously. If you don’t give them too much praise, they will be extra proud if you do compliment them sometime. So, my “secret recipe” is good casting, good coaching and: don’t give the children too many technical instructions. Adjust the camera to the children. Give



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Simone van Dusseldorp with child actors outdoors



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On the set of *Frogs & toads*

children a certain freedom, and choose a crew who can work with them.

If you trust children, they will trust you

Naomi Kubo (Japan)

Japan Broadcasting Corporation (NHK)

(e.g. Fun with Japanese, Peek-A-Boo!)

I truly believe children can think for themselves and have an ability to express themselves much better than we imagine if you direct appropriately. It was when I had 2 children (a boy and a girl, both 5 years old) recite a poem. The poem was about a poet's sister who had passed away. During the rehearsal, I asked them whether there are people who had already passed away around them. They didn't know anyone, not even pets. They didn't seem to understand the concept of "death", so I tried as well as possible to explain what "death" means. Once we started to record their recitations, I was amazed how expressively they recited. And suddenly they started to quarrel, because their expressions were a little different from each other. The boy suggested that the girl read softly and quietly, but the girl was so determined that she never changed her sharp and dignified tone. I thought both ways were really impressive and each expressed grief, so I let the boy and the girl recite in their own way. This was quite an experience for me because I was being convinced that even 5-year-olds think about how to play quite seriously, and clearly express their opinions.

I let children call me "Kubo-San" instead of "Sensei" on the set in order to build up trustful relations with them. "San" means "Ms", and "Sensei" means "teacher". On Japanese sets, children usually tend to call programme makers "Sensei" without the directors' names. I think "Kubo-San" is better because it includes my family name and in that way allows children to feel close to me.

When shooting with them I try to keep my eye level in line with children and treat them as equal persons with full respect for their individuality, because that allows them to develop their talents. When they have worries about shootings etc., they talk about it to me directly, not through their parents. If you trust children, they will trust you.

Children's comprehension develops much faster than their verbalisation. They are quite observant, so that if you treat them as children, they will act as children. Once you treat them as professional actors or actresses, even a 2-year-old child is able to act very well.

My "secret recipe" is that I try to create an environment where children can perform best in front of the camera because I want to say "OK" to their first take. Children's liveliness will fade if they have to act again and again. I make children understand how to act when we do a rehearsal the day before the shooting. And on the day, I ask adults to fill in for children in camera rehearsals. Then, I let children play in front of the cameras.

Create your film together!

Andrzej Maleszka (Poland)

Director, AM Film (e.g. Telejulia, The Magic Tree trilogy)

10-year-old Madeline, who acted in *The magic tree*, always wanted to sit in my armchair. The director's armchair! She wanted to test her limits and me. I said: "Okay, you can sit here, but only when you feel that you played well". It was fascinating to observe that she knew very well when she was being authentic in front of the camera. Sometimes I said to her "you may sit" – which means: "you played excellent". It was our way of communication.

I think that working with children in a film will never be successful if either side dominates the other. My greatest mistakes as a director occurred when I felt I knew everything better than the



Naomi Kubo and her young actors



Andrzej Maleszka with his main actress



Sallyann Keizer assumes the perspective of her young presenters

children, or when I thought that children knew everything better than me. We often underestimate that kids are very sensitive to falseness. They very strongly sense pretence and lack of authenticity. If I want to be "authentic", my actor will play authentically. My "secret recipe" for achieving the best quality: Do not expect a child to be himself or herself in front of the camera. Do not expect him to play himself. But try to create your film together with your actors. Creating the screenplay is a process in which I try

to take account of the actors who take part in my film, particularly the child actors. It should be clearly stated: It's not the children who write the screenplay, they don't develop the main idea and the structure of the film. Yet, the children have some influence on the episodes, the characters, and the dialogues. After writing an initial version of the screenplay, I begin to work with the actors, making improvisations around the scenes. It's amazing to witness how they perceive my ideas in a different way. And then I often make changes in the script. With children, nothing is obvious, everything is wide open. This is something extremely inspiring.

Allow them to be themselves

Sallyann Keizer (UK)

Managing Director, Sixth Sense Media Ltd. (e.g. Make it big, Hospital)

All of my series are about allowing children to really be themselves and in some way or another to tell their own story. I have worked in many sensitive situations, particularly on my series *Hospital*, which followed young people with a diversity of illnesses – from everyday to critical conditions. Our series differed from previous programming because the stories were told completely from the young people's perspective, not the doctors', nurses', or parents'. Key to our success is always the relationship we build up with our contributors, getting to know them, their families, and what is dear to them. Because of this, we were privileged to gain access to numerous sensitive situations, including the filming of a liver transplant and all that surrounded it. For me the most important thing when working with children has always been allowing them to have their own voice and say what *they* want to say rather than what *programme makers* want them to say. Additionally, maintaining an ethical approach at all times towards the programme-making process is essential, being clear

with children what the programme is about and how their contribution will be used within it.

My "secret recipe" for working with children has always been to approach them with honesty and respect. If you are truthful with the children that you work with, never try to deceive them, manipulate them or put words into their mouths, young people will flourish and be open, giving their time, their passion, and their words. On the same note if you treat them with respect at all times, in a way you would choose to be treated yourself, they will deliver their best. I never patronise young people or look down upon them, nor try to be "on their level", but remain true to myself – it has never failed me!

Reassure them that you will not embarrass them

Mick Robertson (UK)

Producer, WisedUp (e.g. MySay, Scary sleepover, Up2U)

I recently interviewed an 11-year-old girl for a series called *MyWish* being made for CBBC. Her particular wish was to live in a street populated by some of her favourite celebrities. She would see them every day and they would become her friends. We talked and recorded her story for half an hour. As she developed her *MyWish* theme, the girl began to realise her dream had drawbacks. The celebrities might not be so attractive as neighbours as they were on television. They might turn out to be self-centred and unfriendly. They would attract fans and photographers. The street would get very crowded. Her dad might not be able to park his van!



Presenter Khem with producer Mick Robertson

Making television is a pressured situation. But don't rush children. Every child has a lot to say if you give them the encouragement of time and patience, and in the end they will reward you.

(a) Spend as much time as possible and practical with children who are going to appear on camera to get to know them. Explain in detail what the production is about, what you want from them, and who the people are whom they will meet while making the programme. Make them feel secure.

(b) Unless you're working on a drama where the script is sacrosanct, allow children to put things into their own words or at least relax into the words you want.

My "secret recipe": Treating children with respect means also reassuring them that nothing they record with you will be shown without their approval. That you will not embarrass them or edit them to change what they have said or done. ■