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# Child Actors

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By Gary Michael Smith

Many parents would like to have their children become movie stars, in pursuit of a future of fame and glory, or to help them realize their own lost dreams. But in some cases, a parent may just want to have the child be an extra in a movie just for the fun of it and to give them experience in handling their own money. Whatever the reason, parents need to understand what's involved in having their children become performers, and what's expected.

First, a couple definitions are in order. The term "child actor" refers to an actor under the age of 18 in motion pictures or television, although the age may vary among states as discussed below. A "former child actor" applies to an adult who began his or her acting career as a child.

Children may find background acting exciting and financially rewarding, and it can teach them the value of responsibility. But before you list them with a casting company, make sure your child has both the stamina and the ability to take instructions from a director.

By no means should you pressure your child into show business. Only encourage and support them if they have the interest. You do not want to ruin a potentially good experience by being forceful and overbearing. Also, keep in mind that if your child is a minor, you will have to be present (within sight and sound) to supervise them for the entire time they are on the set.

The Irving Texas Film Commission outlines in its "State Law and the FilmMaker" guidelines, as reprinted from the Texas Production Manual, that "No child actor under 14 years of age may be employed where the parent, guardian, or person having custody of the child is prevented from being within sight and sound of the child at any time during employment." Moreover, as a general rule parents or adult guardians must have no other roles for the production such as actor, extra, or crew member.

So what restrictions can there be for child actors, other than having to have a babysitter while on location or on the set? In some countries, child actors are prohibited from doing certain things such as:



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- Risking his or her physical well being as in performing physical stunts
- Being exposed to morally compromising situations
- Being nude or partially nude
- Engaging in overt sexual acts

Compulsory education laws mandate that the education of child actor not be disrupted while the child is working. Consequently, the child does schoolwork under the supervision of a set teacher while on the set. Also, understand that the hours a child actor may work are limited; a very young infant might be allowed under the lights only a few minutes a day. Moreover, it's common for the role of a young child to be portrayed by identical twins to reduce a child's time on set.

For instance, Arkansas child labor laws, as they apply to the entertainment industry, state that no child under sixteen years of age may be employed in the entertainment industry:

- In a role or in an environment deemed to be hazardous or detrimental to the health, morals, education, or welfare of the child as determined by the Director of the Arkansas Department of Labor
- Where the child is required to use a dressing room which simultaneously occupied by an adult or by other children of the opposite sex
- Where the child is not provided with a suitable place to rest or play
- Where the parent or guardian of the child is prevented from being present at the scene of employment during all the times the child is working
- Where the parent or guardian of the child is prevented from being within sight and sound of the child
- Without a permit issued by the Director and the written consent of the child's parent or guardian for the issuance of the permit

The governing labor union, if any, and state and federal laws regulate the activities of child actors. However, limitations imposed by laws are not uniform across the states or beyond national boundaries. For instance, longer work hours or risky stunts, prohibited in



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California, might be permitted to a project filming elsewhere. Be aware that some projects film in remote locations specifically to evade regulations intended to protect the child actor.

The Vermont Film Commission states, “. . . while a child under sixteen cannot be employed more than eight hours in any day, nor more than six days a week, and only between six a.m. and seven p.m., “in the case of a child employed as an actor or performer in motion pictures, theatrical productions, radio or television, the child may be employed until midnight.” Specific exemption from the midnight curfew is allowed when written consent is obtained from the parents or guardian of the child and the commissioner of labor.”

Using children in motion pictures has been criticized as exploitation by parents or guardians since some prominent child actors never got to see the money they earned. However, some defend this saying that the child directly benefited from the lifestyle the earnings made possible or that the child would not have achieved stardom without the significant investment of time and effort by the parents.

Others argue that it is unfair for the child to have to support the family, and that this inverts the parent-child relationship. In 1939, California enacted the original Coogan Law, which requires a portion of the earnings of a child actor to be diverted into a special savings account called a “blocked trust.” Blocked trust accounts usually are set up as a time certificate of deposit or may be opened as a savings account but not as a demand deposit account. Funds may be withdrawn only by an order of the court that authorized the opening of the account or by certification of that same court that the beneficiary has reached the age of eighteen, at which time the guardian must close the account and distribute the money to the beneficiary.

Should you feel guilty about allowing your children to work instead of enjoying normal childhood years? Only if you truly feel that your child is being deprived, and definitely if your child is not enjoying the experience. During a recent shoot for a feature film in New Orleans twins were used to avoid using one toddler for long hours at a time. The parent used the other, less skilled twin to give him more experience but he screamed and cried the entire time he was on the set because he simply didn't like the experience. In such cases, it's your responsibility as a parent to look out for the emotional welfare of your child.

On the other hand, if your child seems to enjoy being the center of attention, you may feel that the competitive field of acting is an introduction to the competition that is present in all areas of a child's life—whether it's from sports, band, the chess club, or, ironically, school plays. However, you should understand as a parent that your child, as an actor, might experience unique and negative pressures when working under tight production schedules. And some projects depend, for their success, on the ability of the child to deliver an award-winning performance, which can add to the pressure.

What about the belief that child actors are more likely to develop into troubled adults? Experts say that this should be regarded as a myth. For instance, many child actors have had successful careers into adulthood. A few include Ron Howard, Roddy McDowall, Tommy Rettig, Bill Mummy, Alyssa Milano, Jodie Foster, Kurt Russell, Van Dyke Parks, Dean Stockwell, Mickey Dolenz, Christian Bale, and Brooke Shields.

While some examples do exist where a child actor exhibits self-destructive behavior, scientific studies show that child actors are at no greater risk than the average population of growing into unhappy or dysfunctional adults. Just remember that good parenting is crucial for everyday life stress.

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