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Panel suggests reality check on children's shows

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in New Delhi

REALITY television shows featuring children are all set to be reined in. The National Commission for Protection of Child Rights has recommended that children below the age of 16 should be barred from participating in such shows.

Though the commission has suggested the minimum age limit of 16 years for participants, the age bar could be brought down to 12 later. It also wants that interviewing parents of prospective minor participants on such shows should be made mandatory.

The commission has also suggested that no cash awards be given to the winners. Instead, they should be given educational bonds or fixed deposit amounts. It has recommended that a counselor be present during every episode of these shows and strict action be taken against the broadcasters and show producers if a child participant is mentally harassed with rude comments or foul behaviour on the part of judges or mentors.

TV channels and show producers are naturally not happy with the guidelines. Children-oriented shows such as *Sa Re Ga Ma Pa Li'l Champs*, *Voice of India: Chhote Ustaad*, *Boogie Woogie*, *Chak De Bachche*, *Waar Parivaar* and *Rock N Roll Family* have been TRP grabbers.

"It's surprising news for us because our show *Li'l Champs* has always been very popular," says Devyani Ogle, assistant vice-president (content and promotion), Zee TV. "Shows featuring kids are always watched by viewers across the board and make for family viewing. We have not received the guidelines officially, but we will have to find a way through it."

The ruling could hit the TRPs of Zee TV particularly, considering *Li'l Champs*, a music show featuring children, has been one of its most popular shows.

"*Li'l Champs* apart, we are wor-



SHOW MUST NOT GO ON? Kids on the set of TV show *Chak De Bachche*.

ried about our upcoming show *Chota Packet Bada Dhamaka*, because most of the kids in this show are under 16. If the guidelines come into force, we might have to cancel the show," adds Ogle.

But there are many who have welcomed the commission's decision. Child psychologists feel the ruling was necessary. "When kids partici-

naturally. Such shows might damage their growth process," he says.

Playback singer Sunidhi Chauhan, who herself was discovered on such a show having won *Meri Awaaz Suno* on Star Plus as a child, however, feels it should be a personal decision, best left to children and their parents. She favours the suggestion to quiz the parents of interested participants, though. "I believe in the idiom 'to each his own'. But this decision will be good for those kids who drop their education to pursue a career through reality shows," Sunidhi says.

Agrees Sanjay Upadhyay, programming head of Sony: "Ideally, it is the prerogative of the child and his or her family to decide whether to participate in such shows. But the bright side is that this ruling will sensitise the producers of such shows. It will bring more awareness among the judges, mentors and hosts on how to treat children."

The commission's ruling is being seen an outcome of the Shinjini Sengupta episode that rocked the country sometime ago. On May 19, Shinjini, 16, collapsed on the set of a dance competition that was being aired on ETV Bangla, after being rebuked by the judges for her poor performance. Her family alleged that the judges' outburst left her depressed and lost her power of speech and subsequently became paralysed.

'Counsellors should be present at shows'

pate in reality shows, they are being susceptible and vulnerable. Negative feedback at an early age can curb growth. Children are not supposed to be exposed to harsh comments at such a tender age. It might lead to problems in personality identification as they grow up," says Dr Megha Hazuria, clinical psychologist, Max Healthcare.

Among those in the music industry who support the decision include composer Vishal Dadlani, who was a judge on last season's *Sa Re Ga Ma Pa Challenge*. "I totally favour this decision because kids should not be put under the pressure of such competition. They look very out of place, especially in dance shows where they look more like a part of a circus troupe. Innocence should be allowed to bloom