

Supernova: when stars explode

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Imagine watching "Full House" without the Tanner sisters saying their one-liners or movies like "Home Alone" or "The Parent Trap" with their lead characters replaced by fully-grown adult actors. It is clear to see that child stars are an important part of popular culture; the worlds of cinema, television, and music would not be the same without their contributions. Child-stardom has become a lucrative goal for many children, but fame often comes at a cost. Actors from all of the aforementioned media texts, as well as numerous others, have had trouble throughout their lives as children and adolescents in the spotlight. "E.T." star Drew Barrymore had smoked cigarettes, drank alcohol, and used cocaine all before she turned 14. Before he died of a drug overdose at age 38, eighties teen star Corey Haim claimed to have regularly taken 85 valium pills a day. Sitcom star Mackenzie Phillips has abused substances for much of her life and admitted to having decade-long consensual sexual relationship with her father.

Many people wonder why so many young celebrities engage in such irresponsible and dangerous behaviors. Countless experts have examined these cases to increase understanding of this phenomenon. Dr. Mercedes McCormick, a psychology professor at the University, believes that "[child stars] don't have consistent supervision from authority figures. No boundaries have been set up in their early development, [and] they are reinforced through material goods, not other values that are important." She also explains that, because there are such large groups of fans following their every move, they are under much more pressure than those who are not in the public sphere.

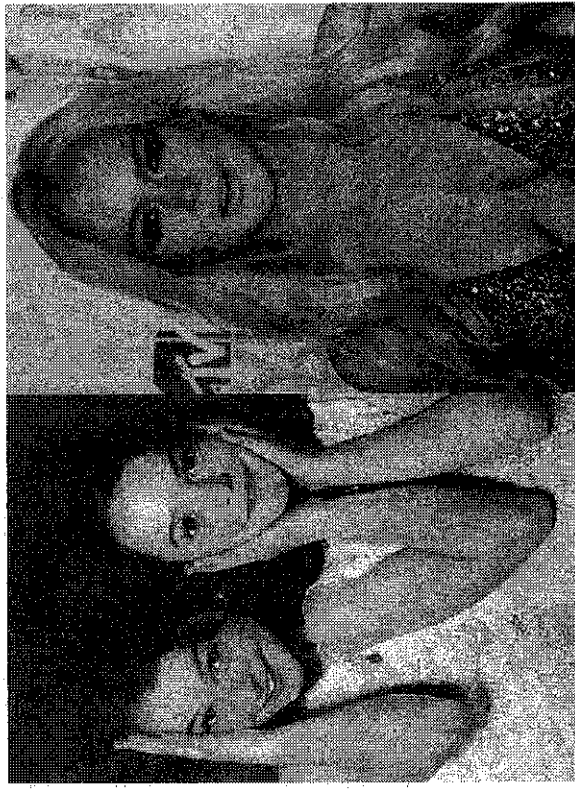
Psychologist Ginger Clark offers another perspective, saying that the responsibilities a child star faces are too great. In an article for *USA Today*, Clark claims, "If [child stars] don't have a really stable parental unit that's setting limits ahead of time, then the roles get flipped easily and the child becomes the parent. They're not ready for the responsibility. And you see kids spin out a little bit." In the same article, fellow psychologist Eileen Kennedy-Moore explains the consequences growing up in the spotlight can have on

one's childhood: "Childhood is about finding out who you are and being able to relate to others, and those things are harder to learn when you're famous. That amount of public scrutiny makes it hard on kids to do that. They can't mess up. So they have to adopt a very self-assured, precocious identity very quickly."

Still, perhaps people who have been child celebrities themselves can best explain the reasons for these difficulties. Writing for *Cracked.com*, "Mrs. Doubtfire" and "Matilda" star Mara Wilson explains that the most affected children are those whose parents are unwilling or unable to help and protect them, those who cannot adjust to a sudden lack of attention after their fame lessens, or those who have been sexually exploited. She also cites that feelings of rebellion, suffocation, and even boredom can lead these children down dangerous paths. The most important factor, according to Wilson, is that the child is working in entertainment because it is something they want to do, not because their parents are forcing them to.

Tia Mowry, co-star of nineties sitcom "Sister, Sister," blames the immense pressures placed on child stars the great amount of breakdowns they experience, as she states in a *USA Today* article: "Everybody thinks being a child star is glamorous. But when you're on a show, you are often carrying a whole show and you know that." This supposed glamour is what initially attracted "Sabrina the Teenage Witch" star Melissa Joan Hart to the business when she was a child, and for her, it really did not seem to fade; she managed to transition from child actress to adult actress without any major incidents. Above all, she credits her parents' open-mindedness with helping her make a steady transition.

Cases like Mowry's and Hart's may have appeared seamless, but even those who make it to adulthood without public scandal are not without private struggles. Famous or not, transitioning to adulthood is not always easy. Dr. McCormick offers advice to ease the burden: "[People] need a healthy ally or healthy friend, and to form a really good relationship with parents or primary guardians." She believes this is key for any child to transition to adulthood healthily, and that it could make a world of difference. "So many [child stars] come from broken homes, and they can't develop their identity." Hopefully, future child stars and their families heed McCormick's advice.



Lohan, then and now

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