

A Parent's Guide to Safety for Child Performers in Theatre

Recent technological advancements have brought about some new and challenging situations that parents of young performers participating in live theatre need to be aware of. The anonymity and global reach of the internet has greatly increased the ability of those with ill intentions to prey on children. What would have remained a small local event published in a newspaper ten years ago now has the potential to be accessible on the internet forever. Curbing the risk to your child actor is a joint effort between family and theater. Some important areas to consider are as follows:

- **Bios** – Although your child is a newcomer to the theatre environment, it is important to lay the groundwork for future safety. Not every child will achieve a level of recognizability or fame; however, any one of these kids has the potential to be at risk. In order to maintain a private life, specific personal information in bios should be carefully worded and kept to a minimum. For example, instead of specifically naming a hometown or the school attended; be more vague. Consider the difference in the following bios:

#1 - Susan Mahoney is a 4th grade student at Sims Elementary School in Appleton. Susan and her 4 siblings – Jim, Kerry, Alice and Tony have lived in Appleton their entire lives and have been in many Apple-way Theatre productions. Susan is also a member of the Apple-flip gymnastics team and an ice skater competing with the Glides. She is thrilled to be playing Marta and sends her love to her parents, Wallace and Kathy Mahoney and her supportive teacher, Mrs. Sims.

#2 - Susan M., playing the role of Marta, is a life-long local resident now in 4th grade. You may recognize her, as she and many of her family members have been in previous productions at the theatre. Susan's other interests include ice skating and gymnastics. She would like to thank her parents and her teacher for their support.

Both bios convey the same information – but with a significant difference in details. What makes a bio interesting isn't the specific details; it's the additional glimpse into the actor's life. Their other interests, their previous roles, and something that shows their personality is all that is needed. The specific names of who, what, and where are totally unnecessary. Leaving out these details significantly decreases the personal risk. Stage names should also be given consideration.

- **Local Press** -- Local news articles about a production or an individual can be so much fun – and a cause for great excitement. In the past, a local newspaper did not generally expose personal information to the world, leaving a short-term impact on the general public. Now, more and more publications are going online – including years of archive material—thus parents must change their mindset about the information they are willing to potentially provide to strangers all over the world. While this would seem like a situation similar to the bio, there are some different considerations. A bio is meant to be brief and additional 'take-it-or-leave-it' information. A news article, specifically for a local paper, is by definition more interesting and typically gives greater details – especially about ties to the local community. This presents a special problem.

If we look to adult stars and their interviews in publications, we see they seldom reveal intimate details of their lives – their interviews usually are to support their current project. They value their privacy. Keeping that in mind is a good start at some guidelines. A family should have clear boundaries about the information they wish to have published, and ask to see and approve the article in its entirety prior to being published.

- **Websites** – even if you don't intend to put up a website, you should buy the child's domain name (i.e. www.johnnyjones.com). This ensures that someone else won't buy it and 'squat' on it for the purpose of extorting money from you in the future or simply exploiting your child's name for the purpose of redirecting to more profitable sites (such as porn). When you buy the domain name, it is well worth it to have 'private registration' for privacy protection, or otherwise use a P.O. Box for the registration information.
- **Fans** – there may be legitimate fans of your child's work and/or the production they are appearing in. Those fans should be appreciated. Common sense should prevail, however, in dealing with strangers (also known as fans) - which includes accepting gifts, and the sharing of personal contact information (cell phone numbers, email addresses, etc.). Of course the inevitable in-person contact that theatre makes available has always existed and all families should be constantly mindful of their children's physical safety, especially arriving/departing the theater.
- **Photographs** - industry standard headshots should be used where possible. Any photo placed on the internet is generally hard to control and protect. The photo will be copied, shared, and often appear in places you would wish it wouldn't. You can, however, minimize the risks that come with the posting of photos by carefully selecting the type of photos you post in the first place. It is surprising to learn that certain photos are sought after by pedophiles—and collected and traded in a very bold fashion. For all children, you should avoid providing photos with bare shoulders, bare feet, and those that are taken from above the child – looking down at them. For boys, an additional concern is a shirtless photo. If you are not a pedophile, you will generally think these types of photos are harmless and sweet. To pedophiles, however, they can be stimulating and desirable.

These guidelines may seem unnecessary in light of your child's current situation and level of fame but putting in this foundation and working with theaters to increase the safety of child performers at the beginning of a career/hobby is both wise and necessary in this connected world. And, above all, explain to your child the importance of keeping cellphone, home address, screen name and email address information private. The actor child is the first line of defense.