

Is Big Brother bad for kids?

Unbelievably, people I normally respect and admire admit to watching Big Brother. Through choked-back sniggers, they tell me of the shenanigans in the house. They casually name-drop the house-mates' nicknames as if talking about old school friends. They analyse the emotional chemistry that apparently crackles through the house. They even like Davina McColl.

Have I died and gone to hell?

I listen in blank-faced disbelief, reach for another glass of wine, and wonder how friends of mine – friends of mine, dammit – can be so easily duped.

Perhaps I'm not a natural when it comes to watching 'edgy' television. But then this debate isn't about whether Big Brother is any good. We know that lots of people like it and that the programme - fuelled by a summer tabloid frenzy - worms itself insidiously into people's viewing habits and lifestyles. That's all taken as read. The question is: should our children be watching it?

And that's where we get to the slippery heart of the matter. Can we ever accept that the values of Big Brother could be deemed acceptable as part of their viewing diet of youngsters. Isn't it the televisual equivalent of feeding chicken waste to chickens and then being surprised at the way they develop?

For BB refuseniks out there, let's consider the format of the show which resembles the underworld tour of the Victorian freak show in the film The Elephant Man. Remember Michael Elphick sauntering through the labyrinths of London, pointing out the wretches who will entertain the paying punters later that day. There's the Incredible Wind Man, the Bearded Lady and, most enticingly of all, the Elephant Man.

In this year's Big Brother fourteen contestants – one of whom wins a place in the house by finding a golden ticket in their Kit Kat – entered the house. Four models, two gay men (Shazbaz boasts that he's a “wacky Paki puff” which shows a knowing way with both assonance and alliteration), socialites (whatever that means), a stockbroker and a singer with Tourettes Syndrome.

All life is here, but it's not life as we know it. It isn't a representative world. Rather, it's a cynically assembled and voyeuristic one in which

you throw together a wacky mix of people who are keen to grab their 15 minutes of fame. Thus Nikki aged 24 flaunts her false breasts and dreams of marrying a premiership footballer. Bonnie says she “wants to be more famous than Madonna”.

Channel 4 producers say the programme will be “more twisted than ever” and – ho ho ho – they have deliberately included several glass walls and mirrors so contestants feel exposed and insecure while they are together. Oh, and there aren’t enough beds for them all.

It’s like those sink groups we used to create by mixing together all the kids who couldn’t cope with exams, except we didn’t deliberately provoke them to misbehave, ply them with alcohol, pen them into a garden that even Laurence Llewellyn-Bowen has described as “the seventh circle of hell” (and he should know), and then offer £50,000 if they can endure it.

What you get isn’t far removed from the values of any middle England town on a Saturday night captured on CCTV. The housemates talk, laugh, sit around. They smoke. They swear. They drink and then pontificate with intense concentration about favourite types of chocolate or the person they would most like to sleep with.

And in a move that seems cynically calculated to increase young viewers, within 60 seconds of the 9pm watershed our pupils can watch all this, just as the Kit Kat marketing campaign nudges the show deeper into their consciousness. It further blurs the boundaries of what's for adults and what's for children, serving up the values of a 2am nightclub as if they were the moral norm.

So what do our pupils learn from all of this? They see the parading of lowest common denominator values, a celebration of our most unseemly belching, farting, swearing, lusting and bullying instincts. It teaches them that nothing matters more than wanting to be famous and craving to be popular.

It goes against everything we know about good education where people rise to high expectations and slump to low ones. It's lazy depressing television that sets viewers up with a new gang of Little Britain type friends whilst doing nothing to challenge us, to develop us, to inspire us to better ourselves.

And if such values seem old fashioned, then we shouldn't be teachers.

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