

**View Point**

**Celebrity role models and their impact on mental health of children and adolescents:  
Implications and suggestions**

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**Abstract**

In tandem with increased exposure of children and adolescents to the media during the current digital age, it is also increasingly important to discuss about the influence of celebrity role models on this group. Glorified media portrayals of celebrity lifestyles and their choices may have a knock-on effect on mental health and trigger imitative behaviours by children and adolescents. In this report, we examine the impact of negative celebrity role models on young children and propose some recommendations, both from a public health as well as individual standpoint, to help mitigate this impact and, instead, promote healthy role modelling.

**Keywords:** Celebrity; Role model; Children; Werther effect, Psychiatry; Mental health

A role model refers to a person whose behaviour and actions are sought to be emulated or have the potential to shape other's behaviours. For many children, role modelling starts quite early in life, with parents being early role model figures. Children and adolescents may also try to model their appearance and behaviour by observing celebrities, such as movie stars, or characters from popular books, cartoon shows or comic strips (such as "doremon" or "little Singham") [1]. While having positive role models is desirable, there may also be negative effects; for instance, many celebrities may openly admit to alcohol or drug use, creating an

impression among young minds that such behaviour is acceptable. In this regard, it is also important to note that young children use more of observational learning to learn various cognitive and language-related skills as well as problem solving skills.

To compound matters, such impressions are accentuated by romanticized portrayals of celebrity 'rock-n-roll' lifestyles and their choices by the media. As an example, excessive emphasis on body image perceptions, hairstyle, and clothing choices of a celebrity can distort attitudes to each of these and negatively influence the self-esteem of children who feel they are out of shape. Similarly, positive framing of celebrity drug usage by the media can trigger imitative behaviours among young children through social learning and cognitive priming [2,3]. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been increasing instances of negative news related to celebrities in the media [4]; preserving and promoting mental health at this difficult time is of crucial significance as has been espoused previously [5]. Particularly, imbalanced and sensationalist media coverage of suicide is known to trigger further suicides among those vulnerable – the Werther effect, whereas the effect of some suicide reports, such as those that present non-suicidal alternatives to the crisis, was sometimes protective against further suicides – the Papageno effect [6].

It is often difficult for children to differentiate the role-play of a celebrity in a particular context (such as movies or sports), and their personal life. Often, the visible aspect of the celebrity is the role they play on-screen; this experience of distorted reality and biased perception by kids may result in idealization and internalization of the qualities of the celebrities. They experience excitement with the good performance of their celebrity, express anger on criticism of the celebrity, and mourn at their losses [7,8].

Given this scenario, we offer a few suggestions with the goal of harm reduction and assisting young children and adolescents in resisting celebrity pressure:

- Undertake value-based education in schools – This would include a focus on holistic development of children with a focus on imparting moral, ethical, spiritual, and culturally relevant values as well as positive psychology principles. Parents should encourage their children to participate in co-curricular activities that impart good values, such as volunteering for community activities, sports, or school choirs. This will enable children to identify role models that reflect their values and morals than idealizing negative behaviors such as drug use.
- Point out real-life role models – Parents should talk to the child about what constitutes a good role model. They may give examples of people in the family or immediate neighbourhood who have positive qualities; for instance, performing children who are a few years older or celebrities who give back to the community are a good influence on others. Parents should try to make children understand the difference between reel life and real life. Parents can also positively influence the child by becoming a good role model for all the attributes suggested. This can be done by first incorporating the desired skills in their behaviour; this will increase the chances of adoption of such behaviour by their children through observational learning and healthy discussion.
- Use a celebrity’s mistakes to initiate healthy discussions - When celebrities fall from grace, parents should use the opportunity to discuss with the child about how he/she evaluates the celebrities’ decision, what the child would have done differently, and give examples of how such situations can be handled. This is also a good time to make children understand that every individual has good and bad qualities and how it is important to learn from every mistake.
- Encourage kids to develop their own identity and values – Parents must encourage the child to identify the qualities that he/she admires in the role model, impress upon

them that it is not necessary to copy the role model in toto but can adopt what they like and continue to be himself or herself.

- Watch television/news together with children – At times, widely admired celebrity figures may make mistakes, and this may get highlighted in the media. If this is not pointed out to children, then they may think that such mistakes are acceptable and even a sign of heroism. Parents should point out events that do not align well with values that kids should pick up and help the child determine what constitutes a good celebrity role model; for instance, emphasize the fact that role models who indulge in reckless or inappropriate behaviour such as drunken driving are not to be looked up to. They may make use of modelling and role-playing, both of which draw upon principles of observational learning [9], to highlight positive ways of coping with stress and negative emotions.
- Impart training in essential life skills and other protective factors – These include skills such as resilience, stress management, constructive and critical thinking, emotional regulation, and social connectedness. These factors may have a more pronounced role in countries like India, where there exists a culture of celebrity idolization [10]. Hence, protective factors such as promoting family cohesion, spirituality, and effective mentoring, involving working with the child to identify more appropriate role models, may have a greater role in the Indian setting.

The digital and print media in the 21<sup>st</sup> century provides an overdose of information related to glamour, celebrity, sports, politics, and crime. This information, when fed on a daily basis, becomes the reality for kids and guides their choice of role models and lifestyle choices such as substance use; this may ultimately have transgenerational consequences [11]. The concurrent changes in family structure, including the increased proportion of nuclear families where both parents are working coupled with low levels of parental supervision, and

increased access to the internet and media implies that children are increasingly likely to adopt people other than parents as their role models. The above suggestions are likely to assist parents and kids in reducing the negative impact of celebrity role models and promote healthy role modelling.

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