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A frazzled teenager drags a toddler by the arm, shrilling in disgust upon seeing that the tyke has pooped. Meanwhile, out of reach, the child's parents watch horrified on closed-circuit TV, saying:

"You can't drag him by the arm! No, no, no, no, no! That's *not* good."

In real life, such a scene might quickly result in caregivers upbraided, lawyers called and accusations of abuse.

On television, it becomes a hit new show.

The program in question is NBC's "The Baby Borrowers," on which teenagers play parent and care consecutively for infants, toddlers, tweens, teens and senior citizens.

But perhaps the biggest surprise surrounding this surprise hit is that it's got plenty of company along the dial this summer. Hollywood has long exploited, and sometimes endangered, child actors; now critics contend that the industry is courting controversy by doing the same to "real-life" kids -- that is, children who lack both [Screen Actors Guild](#) cards and, it seems, overprotective parents.

As millions of viewers watch these reality shows, a central question about the casting emerges: Is reality TV too real for real-life kids?

"It is a hard ethical line which nobody has quite drawn yet," says Anne Henry, co-founder of BizParentz, an advocacy group for parents of children in entertainment. "Society hasn't drawn it. Everybody pushes the envelope one more time."

Another new reality show pushing the ethical envelope is "The N's Student Body," which debuted this month on [Nickelodeon](#)'s teen-programming network. Viewers follow Chaz, a 332-pound high-schooler, as he visits his mother in intensive care, not long before she dies of complications from morbid obesity, we are told. Later, looking at a computer screen, Chaz takes in an image of what he'll look like in 25 years -- *if* he doesn't change his diet and lifestyle. "I look just like my mom," a crying Chaz says. As he breaks down, the camera is right there.

The question again rears its head: Is a child's deepest grief ready for its close-up? This is a crucial point of debate among TV executives, child advocates, lawyers and the participating families themselves. They also address the related question: Is

this programming exploitation, or edutainment?

"A lot of what happens in producing a reality show is in the hands of the producers," says Sarah Tomassi Lindman, senior vice president and general manager of the N, which produces "Student Body." "If you know that your intent is not to be exploitative, then it won't be."

Children on non-scripted television are nothing new, of course, from performing tots on "The [Ed Sullivan Show](#)" a half-century ago to the Loud family on PBS's seminal 1973 series "An American Family" to the potty-mouthed brood on MTV's "The Osbournes" several years ago. But as the current trend in reality TV has morphed, Hollywood is finding new ways to devise shows that capture children's rawest emotions -- potentially putting them at risk physically and psychologically, some advocates say.

A third reality show that aired this summer, A&E's "Psychic Kids: Children of the Paranormal," features young people who, according to the show, receive professional help to cope with "their gifts." Viewers see Faith, 8 -- who says, "Ghosts try to talk to me" -- and two other children taken to a "haunted house" where, aided by

an adult medium, they learn how to handle seeing dead people. For the cameras.

Those shows come on the heels of CBS's 2007 "summer camp" reality show "Kid Nation" (billed as "40 children, 40 days, no adults"), which drew fire and headlines after one child reportedly burned her face and four children drank bleach from an unmarked bottle. The show was accused of violating child-labor laws, after parents -- who were not allowed on the New Mexico set -- signed a 22-page contract containing controversial liability waivers.

Some Hollywood insiders, however, make a distinction between story-driven reality TV shows such as "Kid Nation" and documentary shows such as "Psychic Kids."

Reality TV shows are "an opportunity for networks and producers to exploit kids' weaknesses, their frailties, their vulnerabilities, by putting them in unknown, shocking and often very embarrassing situations," says entertainment lawyer Robert Pafundi, who has represented reality-TV youths and child actors. "They're making the mistake of assuming that children are adults in little bodies and that they can handle all these things. And it simply isn't true."

Former child actors such as Paul Petersen (TV's "The Donna Reed Show") and Alison Arngrim ("Little House on the Prairie") worry that children whose lives are open for public consumption will suffer from the exposure as they grow up. Young children, they say, cannot differentiate between playing a role and playing themselves. Then, too, they point out, reality kids don't typically enjoy the legal protection -- or paychecks -- that child actors do.

"Yes, we are seeing more kids on reality TV," says Petersen, who says he created the organization A Minor Consideration in 1990 to advocate for child actors through legislation and intervention. "These are the signs and portents of a culture in collapse. We no longer protect children. We market to them. Gleefully."

"Networks are extremely invested in making reality TV," Arngrim says. "You have the 'Can you top this?' phenomenon." She says that reality TV stars such as [Heidi Montag](#) and [Lauren Conrad](#) of MTV's "The Hills" are now stars in their own right, gracing the cover of [Us Weekly](#), launching their own clothing lines and demanding higher and higher fees.

"Networks need fresh blood. . . So what do you do then? You get children," Arngrim says.

Shortly after "The Baby Borrowers" debuted last month, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry lobbied NBC to pull the show from the air, contending that the program could cause the on-camera babies and toddlers "distress and anxiety."

"You could take a quick look at it and say that's a good learning experience for teenagers," says the academy's president, Robert Hendren. "And it is. But it's a very poor idea for infants."

As the show's creator, executive director Richard McKerrow, sees it, "Baby Borrowers" is an educational tool designed to prevent teen pregnancy -- one that borrows from reality TV to keep folks engaged while it makes its point: Parenting isn't for the faint of heart and is best left to grown-

ups. What better way to educate, he says, than to entertain?

"As long as it's done incredibly responsibly and with ethics, and as long as it has a good purpose, I think it can be a really, really good thing," says McKerrow, who has two young children.

McKerrow has no patience for the show's critics, saying, "Basically, television is easy to take a pop at."

Natalie Nichols, who became a mother as a teen, is one of the parents who consented to let their children be cared for by the teenage couples on "The Baby Borrowers." She says that she sees the show as educational and that it can teach young women not to make the same mistakes she did -- though she first had to persuade her husband to let their then-6-month-old and 18-month-old children participate.

Nichols says she was impressed by the level of professional baby-proofing, the professional on-site nanny, the psychological testing, the background checks and the psychologist on hand. "It was safer than any kind of child care that I've ever been a part of," she says.

"People might be negative and say, 'Oh my gosh, you left them,' " Nichols says. "But they were left in very good circumstances. And it was for a very good cause."