

# **TALKING TO JOURNALISTS**

## ***A MediaWise Guide for Young People***

### **1. First things first**

- Always find out WHO you are talking to before you agree to an interview. Journalists should carry some form of identity. Ask for a copy of their 'card' which should have their contact details, who they work for, etc. This could be very important, especially if you want to find out how they have used the interview – or if you need to make a complaint about their behaviour.
- Journalists should seek permission from an appropriate adult (parent/guardian/teacher/supervisor) before interviewing OR taking pictures of a child or young person (under 16).
- The reporter's job is to ask questions, but you are NOT obliged to answer them, especially if it involves revealing personal information you would prefer to keep private.
- If at any time you feel uneasy about the person conducting the interview, or the questions they are asking, just say politely that you do not want to continue. That is your right.
- You may be able to make general comments about what you know about how other children think about things, but do not answer specific personal questions about other children.
- Do not give reporters your personal contact details; it is best to ask them to contact you through an adult (parent/guardian/teacher/youth worker, etc).

### **Some things to think about**

Today the media is global – newspapers, radio and TV programmes can be accessed anywhere in the world through the internet. When you talk to a journalist you have to understand that you are talking to the world. Your story may not reach everybody in every country, but you can be sure that it will reach further than you can imagine.

You may think you WANT to talk about your story NOW, but later you may regret it. Ask yourself:-

- How would your friends and family react if your story is published?
- Can you guarantee that your story will be not be seen by people whom you do not want to know about it?
- Are there people you need to protect when telling your story – friends, people who have been kind to you?
- Are there people who might want to harm you if they saw your story?
- Try to imagine how you would feel if your children were to read your story in a few years time.

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## **2. Be prepared**

If you are planning to share your ideas with the rest of the world, the best way is to do it is to get some sympathetic media coverage. But if you are going to talk to journalists, it is best to understand first what they want from you. Their job is to introduce and explain things to the public, NOT JUST TO GIVE YOU PUBLICITY.

Often they have a limited time in which to complete their work. Don't let them rush you, but do try to understand that they may be working to tight 'deadlines'.

Journalists work for all sorts of different media outlets – radio, television, and the internet as well as newspapers and magazine – and with different audiences in mind – young people, parents, politicians, special interest groups etc. It is a good idea to ask journalists who their audience will be, then you can try to talk about things that are likely to interest them.

- **Newspapers and magazines** want 'good stories' that will interest their readers, many of whom may be much older than you, and with different interests.
- **Radio** journalists want good clear voices, and **television** wants 'good pictures' as well as stories that will interest the viewers and listeners.
- If you are being interviewed for a **NEWS programme**, very little of what you say will be broadcast, so try and think of simple statements ('sound-bites') that make your main points. For example: 'Most adults don't seem to understand that children have rights, but we know we have rights. We are not asking much – just the same things that adults take for granted.'
- Before you talk to journalists, the first thing to do is to know what you want to say. Think about the two or three **MAIN POINTS** you want to make. Do not be afraid to repeat them in different ways.
- One of the best ways is to tell a little story that illustrates your point. This can conjure up an image in people's minds which they will remember (and it should give the journalists ideas about how to illustrate your contribution).

*For example: if there is no safe place for young people to meet up in your area, you could say just that, but it will be more powerful if you can describe an accident that happened because children were playing on unsafe waste ground or buildings, or how the police are called when young people meet up in a group on the street. Explain how it FEELS to be unwelcome in your own neighbourhood.*

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### **3. Talking about sensitive issues**

You may be asked for an interview about a sensitive issue – about family matters, your personal circumstances, sexual matters, about a crime, or about war.

You should not normally agree to be interviewed about such things unless and until you know exactly how the interview is to be used (for what newspaper, magazine or programme; in what country and for what audiences).

**Your well-being is more important than anything a journalist wants to ask you.**

It may be very important to ensure that your full identity is not revealed. Journalists will need to know that they are talking to someone who is genuine, so they will need some information (like your real name) to help them check facts and assure themselves that you are not just making things up. So you both have to build a relationship of trust.

If your identity is an issue, you **MUST** obtain an assurance from the journalist, preferably in the presence of, or through, an adult you trust that your identity will be protected. Do you want your picture to be published? If you are anxious about it, either say **NO** to being photographed, or seek an assurance that you cannot be identified from any picture that does appear. Obtain an agreement that the journalist will give you an 'assumed name' or just a set of initials (which need not be your own - in some countries it is the custom only to use a child's initials).

**Before you take part in the interview, discuss with a sympathetic adult and tell the journalist:**

- **what you are prepared to talk about;**
- **what you are NOT prepared to talk about;**
- **what YOU want to say;**
- **whether you want an appropriate adult to be with you for the interview.**

**If the journalist will not agree to your terms, do not take part in the interview.**

If you go ahead with the interview you must **TELL THE TRUTH**. Lying to journalists is very unwise. If they discover you are lying they may not believe other things that are true. You will have betrayed their trust so they might betray yours.

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#### **4. Press Conferences**

If you are taking part in a major event or campaign, you may be asked to take part in a Press Conference.

Usually the main speakers will be on a stage with the journalists, sitting in rows in front of them, and photographers and camera operators moving around the room to get the best pictures.

The most important part of a press conference is when the journalists start asking questions after the main speeches. They want good answers they can use in their reports. Try to work out what questions they are likely to ask YOU, and have some short, simple answers ready. The other (adult) speakers should have some ideas about this, so it is important to meet with them and discuss

If you are to be a main speaker, prepare a short speech in advance which makes all the main points you want to communicate. It should also explain who you are and why you are involved. Copies of your speech may be given to journalists so this is a very important document.

Sometimes journalists can be rather 'patronising' when dealing with young people at a press conference. Do not let this upset you, or trick you into giving 'cute' or 'childish' replies. You are there to speak your mind, just like the adults present. Say what YOU want to say.

If you are representing an organization your job is to communicate that organisation's message. That does not prevent you from expressing a personal viewpoint, but you should make clear when you are speaking for yourself rather than the organisation.

#### **TEN TOP TIPS**

- Dress smartly but comfortably, so you do not feel awkward when you get up to speak.
- Go to the toilet before you go on stage.
- Make sure a glass of water has been provided for you. If you are nervous your mouth might get dry, but only take sips of the water when you need to.
- Make sure you have a pad of paper and a pencil (as well as your speech). You might want to make notes about things that are said, figures that people quote, or questions that are asked. It could help you answer questions later.
- Use the microphone if one is provided, especially if the event is being recorded.
- Do not be distracted by your surroundings. Pay attention to what others are saying. It is a good idea to look at whoever is speaking at the time.
- Always be polite, but stand up for yourself if someone tries to put you down or get a laugh at your expense.
- If you are appearing in public before the press, you may be asked for an interview after the main business is over. Let the organisers know if you are willing to do this.
- Collect cards from any journalist who speaks to you – they might be useful later.
- Do not give out your personal details (home or email address or telephone number). Tell anyone who asks for them to contact you through the organisers.

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#### 5. Recorded radio interviews

Radio journalists may want to record an interview with you for use later, perhaps in several different ways (for a news broadcast or a 'magazine' programme).

The interview will be much longer than the material that is eventually broadcast. It will be edited later, that means you can make a few mistakes, ask for a question to be repeated, or stop for a break.

However it also means that what you say may not be used in its original context, or may even be edited to suggest things that you did not mean to say.

Always ask how the interview is going to be used, who the expected audience will be, and when it will be broadcast – so you can check that your words have been used correctly. Do not be afraid to complain if your interview is misused.

-  Before the interview starts ask what questions the reporter will begin with. A good interviewer will have some prepared questions, but will then ask questions that arise from what you have been saying.
-  When s/he is ready to start the reporter will ask you to say a few words into the 'mic' to check voice levels and make sure you can be heard distinctly and evenly.
-  Once any adjustments have been made try not to move away from the 'mic' and try to keep your voice level constant - don't suddenly shout or start whispering. This will make it easier to edit the tape later.
-  Be friendly in your responses and put a smile into your voice - think of it as a conversation with all the listeners, and no one likes to be lectured.
-  Try to avoid long and complicated answers - they may be edited **out**, or if only parts of your answer is left **in**, your message may be misrepresented.
-  Try to avoid jargon and abbreviations - if you do the interviewer may have to interrupt to ask you to explain what you are talking about, and then you could lose track of what you wanted to say.
-  If you make a mistake, or are unhappy about something you have said STOP - cough, laugh or simply say *"I'm sorry, can we do that again?"* The reporter will understand. S/he will want you to perform well, so s/he gets a good uninterrupted interview.
-  When the interview is over ask to hear some of the recording, or ask the reporter for some tips about how it went. Remind the reporter of the parts you thought were important. S/he may edit the tape but may not have full editorial control over how it will be used. S/he will let the editor or producer about the best bits.

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### **6. Live interviews in a radio studio**

Radio studios sometime feel strange. They are sound-proofed and may have no windows to the outside world.

The best way to deal with studio nerves is to be familiar with your surroundings. If you are hoping to do a lot of broadcasting, get to know your local radio station. Most local radio stations welcome visits from their listeners — arrange to go on a tour with friends, your school or youth club.

#### **If you are asked to go into the studio for an interview:**

-  Make sure you arrive on time (Some radio stations may even send a car for you if you do not have transport).
-  Go to the toilet before you get into the studio itself.
-  Ask for a drink of water if you are feeling nervous – but if your mouth gets dry, sip it.
-  Greet the presenter if s/he is not 'on air' but otherwise don't speak unless spoken to - the 'mic' might be on. You may be asked to wear headphones so that you can hear the programme as it is broadcast.
-  The presenter may have a chat about how s/he intends to handle the interview, so don't forget to ask what the first question will be.
-  S/he will have been given a brief note about who you are and why you are there, but may have no idea what you are going to say. If s/he says something about you that is not correct, do not be afraid to put it right if it is important to you.
-  When the interview starts, put a smile in your voice, take a deep breath and try to RELAX.
-  Most listeners are unlikely to know much about you – so try to explain things simply. Put lots of expression into your voice. If you use words (adult) listeners may not understand, your interviewer may interrupt to ask you to explain.
-  Try to keep talking, but watch for signals from the interviewer. S/he may interrupt you if you are going on too long and s/he wants to ask another question to keep listeners interested.
-  If you 'dry up' don't worry. The interviewer will take over – there is nothing worse than silence on the radio.
-  Try to remain calm and polite — in a way you are representing young people.
-  Do not use bad language, or be too rude about people. It can upset listeners and you may say things which could result in complaints, which may loose you support.

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#### **7. Going on television**

If are invited to appear on television, make sure you know what type of programme it will be. Ask the researcher or journalist what questions you are likely to be asked, and think carefully about the points you want to make or the messages you want to communicate.

- Television is all about images, so even what you wear and how you conduct yourself will convey a message to the audience. First impressions are very important, so dress to suit the occasion in comfortable clothes. If you want people to **listen** to you, remember that viewers are easily distracted by unusual fashions, clashing colours and jangling jewellery.
- Go to the toilet before the programme starts. You may be in the studio for some time. It may also be hot under the studio lights. If you are taking part in a formal interview ask for a glass of water to be provided and **sip it** only when you really need to.
- Take along some simple notes to remind you of numbers or addresses or documents you want to quote. Don't shuffle your papers. Glance at them when you need to.
- As the countdown starts, take a deep breath and try to be calm. Sit up, sit still, and adopt a friendly attitude. If you are sitting up at a table, place your arms on it and lean forward slightly. If you are in an easy chair, either sit yourself back in the chair and as upright as possible, or sit as comfortably as you can on the edge.
- Give a positive and confident 'hello' if the presenter welcomes you. S/he will want to make you feel at home. Try to keep a smile in your eyes and your voice.
- You know what you want to say, so be confident but not bossy. Remember you are in conversation with the audience through the presenter, whose job it is to ask the questions s/he thinks the public want answered. Direct your answers to the person who asks the questions, and try to ignore the cameras.
- Show other guests respect; watch them with interest when they are speaking. The audience at home will be watching your reactions, and you don't win arguments by being rude. If there is a studio audience, show pleasure if you get a laugh or applause, but remember that it is even more important to impress the audience at home.
- Don't be afraid to stand up for yourself if the questioning gets hostile, but don't lose your cool. The camera magnifies your mood – so avoid angry outbursts and bad language. Speak your mind, but be careful about what you say. Do not accuse people directly of lying or of criminal activity, for instance. Say things like 'I think you have got that wrong' or 'I don't agree', or just describe truthfully what happened to you. The laws about defamation (libel) and contempt of court which apply to you and the television company.
- **If you are taking part in a studio debate**, don't watch the monitors. Keep alert and take an interest in what others are saying even when you think you are not on camera. The people in the control room will be able to see you all the time, and the cameras may pick you out if you start yawning, or fiddling.
- Signal to the presenter when you want to speak, but watch out for the floor manager, who will be signal to the presenter when time is running out. Try to get in with a final point. Remember, **the last word always leaves a lasting impression.**