

Are we ever going to be heard?



2015 Children's media coverage: South Africa

Written by Musa Rikhotso

Edited by Lister Namumba Rikhotso

1. Introduction

Reporting on children is arguably one of the most challenging aspects of journalism. However, as the providers of the information, the media has the responsibility to protect children’s rights and promote their views.

As per tradition, in 2015 Media Monitoring Africa (MMA) conducted an analysis in South Africa to provide an understanding on media’s coverage of children and their issues in order to hold the media accountable and to also help them perform better going forward. The analysis was conducted from 1 May until 30 September, 2015. During the process, 15 media houses were monitored and analysed. A total of 76,026 stories were published by these media over the period and eight per cent (5,730) were children’s stories. The overall findings demonstrate that the media is still struggling with issues of children’s rights in their reporting.

This report provides a holistic analysis of children’s coverage in the media. Aspects such as where the stories came from; what they were about; how children were accessed; how they were portrayed; whether their rights were respected and whether the information provided in the stories was informative will be highlighted. The findings and recommendations are detailed below.

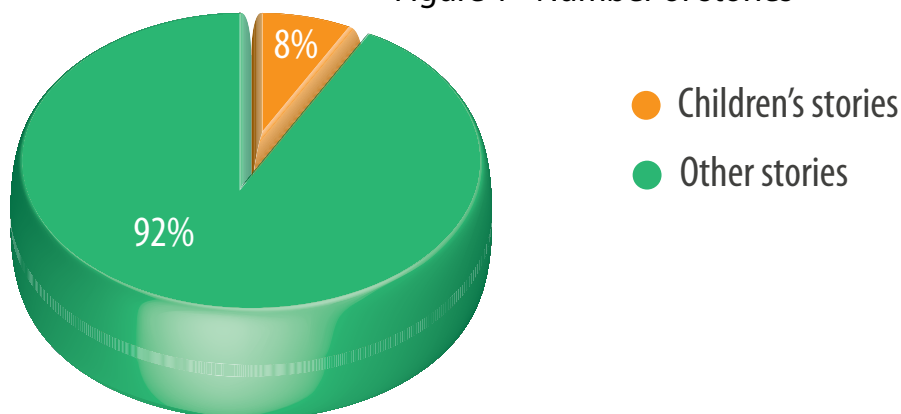
2. Stories about children

“Children in South Africa face serious problems but they also achieve great things everyday therefore the 8% is not enough to address our problems or showcase the good things we do in our communities and in our nation”

Miguel Subrumuny, 13 Years Old, Male
Park Senior Primary

Children in South Africa constitute 40 per cent of the population¹. However, the media coverage does not even come close to fittingly representing this demographic. The 2015 results as seen in the figure below show that children only constituted eight per cent coverage across all media. This brings to light media’s failure to adequately report on issues that are affecting the children population. It must be noted though that while the percentage is low, it is slightly higher than the 6.9 per cent recorded in 2014².

Figure 1 - Number of stories



Despite the overall low representation of children, some media houses have done better than others. *The New Age* for instance continues to give more coverage to the children at 15 per cent and although this could be improved, they should be commended for their consistency. Meanwhile, *SABC 3 News* coverage has increased from two per cent in 2014 to seven per cent in 2015³. This increase is commendable as it indicates progress in their reporting.

¹ Statistics South Africa - Mid-year population estimates 2015

² MMA 2014 Children’s Report

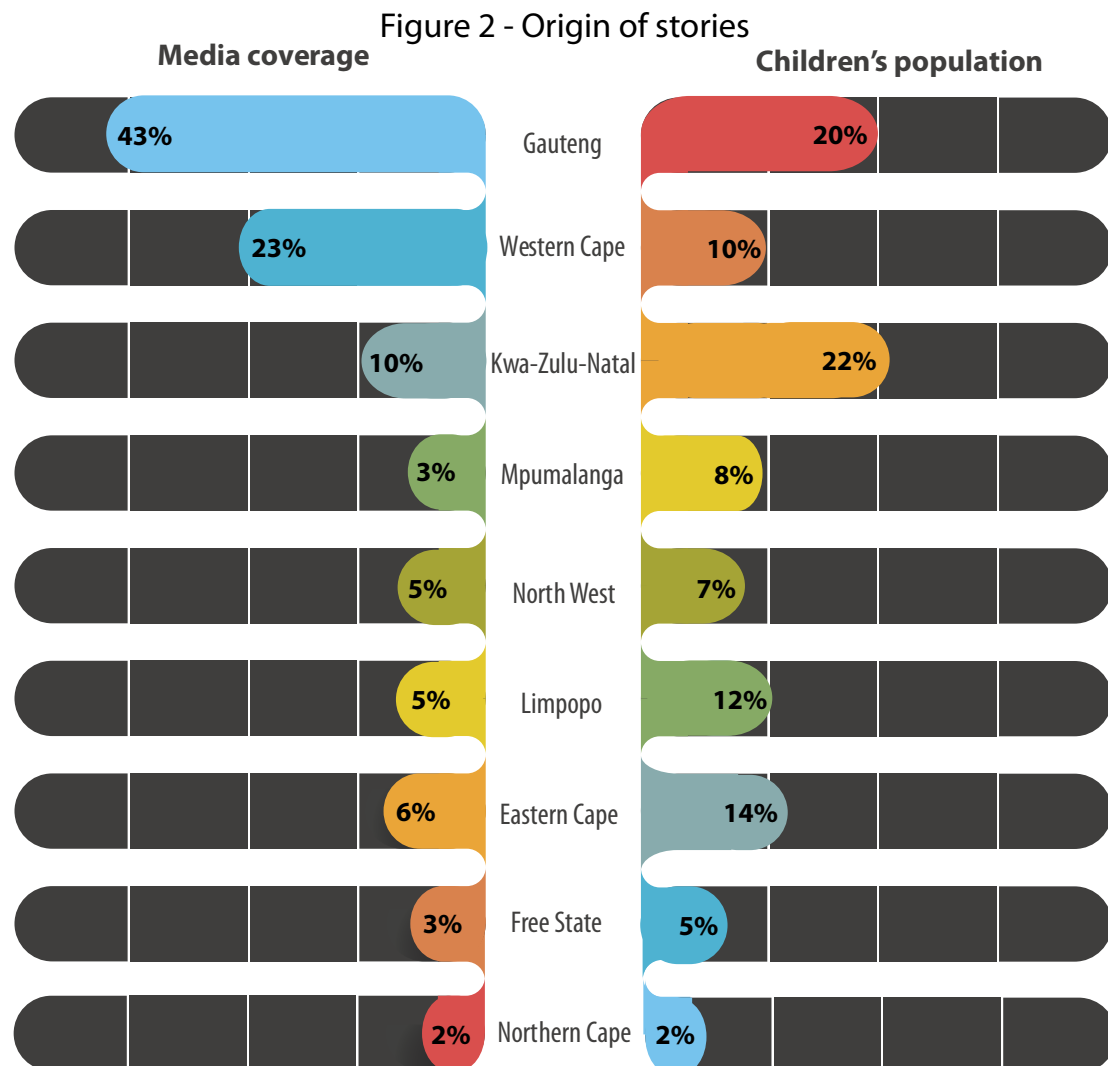
³ Ibid

3. Origin of stories

“We demand that media focus on children from all provinces especially in the rural areas”

Emmanuel Ngoie, 12 Years old, Male
Troyeville Primary

From the figure below, it can be seen that Gauteng continues to have a greater proportion of the coverage at 43 per cent, followed by Western Cape at 23 per cent and Kwa-Zulu natal (KZN) at 10 per cent when compared to other provinces such as Free State, Mpumalanga and Northern Cape which receive lower coverage. The urban bias in coverage shown by these findings could be attributed to the fact that most media houses are located in urban areas with minimum access to or interest in rural areas.



The media coverage percentages in the figure above are calculated from the overall number of stories recorded in the analysis and in the particular province against the population. That said, the results for Gauteng show that the children in the province were over-represented in the media at 43 per cent against the 20 per cent of the children's population. Contrary to Gauteng, children in KZN were under-represented in the media. The population of children in KZN constitutes 22 per cent of the entire population of SA but received 10 per cent of the media coverage⁴.

The media should be commended though for ensuring that the children living in Northern Cape were well represented in their coverage, at two per cent which is equal to the children's population in the province⁵.

⁴ Statistics South Africa - Mid-year population estimates 2015

⁵ Ibid

4. Top 10 topics covered

“How the media reports on education is also important to us. Many of the stories that are reported about education are about negative things that happen to children in schools for example, child abuse, strikes and racism. We would like to see more positive topics such sports, arts and achievements”

Cedella Kasinahama, 12 years old, Female
Parkhurst Primary

The diversity of topics covered in the media is very important as it clearly highlights the challenges children face as well as where they are excelling. The figure below highlights the top 10 most covered topics.

Figure 3 - Top ten topics



The most common topics covered by the media have largely remained unchanged over the years with Education continuing to lead at 18 per cent followed by Child Abuse at 10 per cent. This is followed by Accident and Crime at nine per cent each. It is not surprising that Education and Child Abuse continue to be the most prevalent topics covered by the media. This could be attributed to the fact that the education sector in the country is besieged with many challenges such as schools closing due to protests. This is evident in the case of Malamulele in Limpopo as well as protests by community members against alleged racial discrimination at Curro and Roodepoort Primary schools in Gauteng. These protests received wide media coverage. Despite the percentages for other topics being low, the media should be commended for diversifying the coverage of children’s issues. However, it should be noted that the top 10 issues in the media formed 69 per cent of the total coverage⁶.

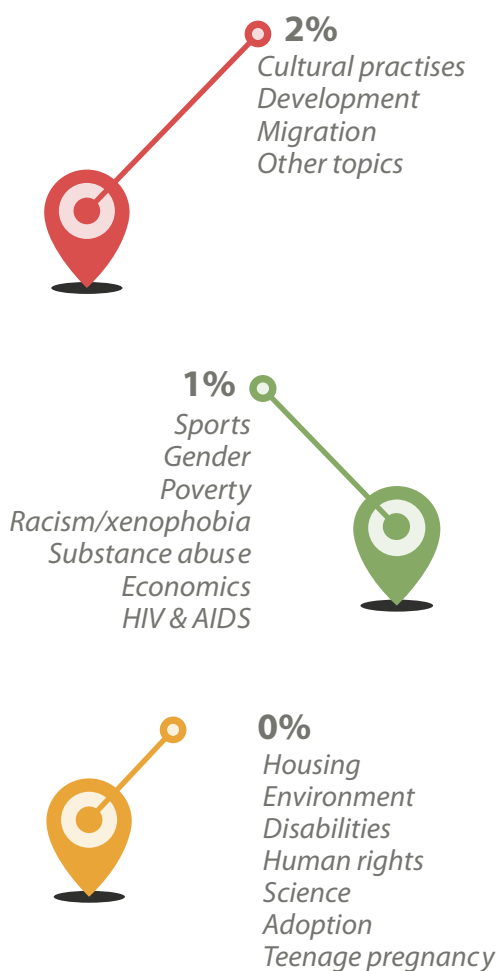
5. Topics less covered

“We want to see more positive stories about education, sports, health, culture, arts, and fewer stories about negative topics such as rape, abuse, crime and murder.”

Realeboga Nemurura 13 yrs old, Female
Naturena Primary

While media has prioritised some of the crucial issues, it has neglected other vital ones such as HIV and Aids and poverty. The fact that HIV and AIDS received one per cent coverage is disappointing especially considering that South Africa is one of the hardest hit countries in the world with the pandemic where statistics show overall HIV prevalence rate is approximately 11.2⁷ per cent. Reflecting the results in 2014, Poverty once again received one per cent of the coverage⁸. Regardless of the consistency in coverage percentages, it is important that the media start reporting more on these issues as they greatly affect South Africa’s children.

Figure 4 - Less covered topics



7 Statistics South Africa - Mid-year population estimates 2015

8 MMA 2014 Children’s Report

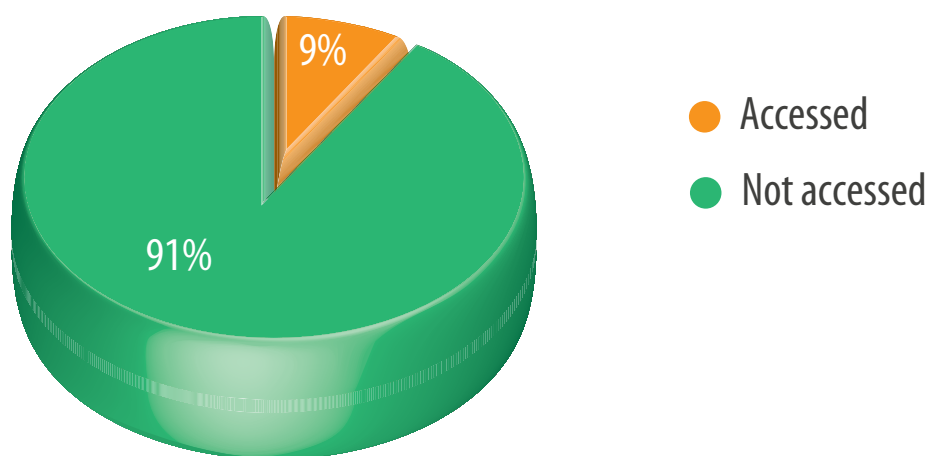
6. Children's voices

"We don't have money or power like business people or politicians but our voices still matter! Although we are young we can speak for ourselves."

Cedella Kasinahama, 12 years old, Female
Parkhurst Primary

Children's participation on issues that affect them is very important. Children are affected by all the decisions made by adults. It is vital that they are afforded an opportunity to participate in dialogue. This does not only enhance their decision-making skills but also ensures that their right to be heard is promoted. When it comes to their voices in the media, participation should be done in accordance with the Journalism Ethical Guidelines which seeks to promote the best interests of children.

Figure 5 - Children's voices



The results above indicate that only nine per cent of the children's stories accessed or quoted children. This is a decrease from the 11 per cent in 2014. The fact that education received the most coverage should have meant more children's voices in the media. The decrease could be attributed to the unwillingness by media practitioners to afford children a platform to give their own views in positive stories about them.



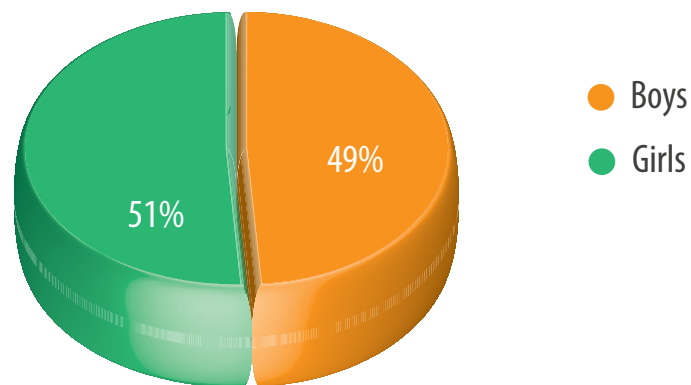
7. Boys versus Girls coverage

“We encourage media to continue reporting on boys and girls equally- we are all human beings”

Emmanuel Ngoie, 12 Years Old, Male
Troyeville Primary

According to Commission for Gender Equality, gender inequality is still a challenge in present South Africa⁹. The media has a responsibility to help address these issues in their reporting especially in stories about children. This must be done under a human rights principle of equal participation and non-discrimination.

Figure 6 - Children's voices



Contrary to the prevalent gender inequality in society, media has done well to ensure an almost equitable coverage of boys and girls. Boys constituted 49 per cent whilst girls were 51 per cent. This is very commendable.



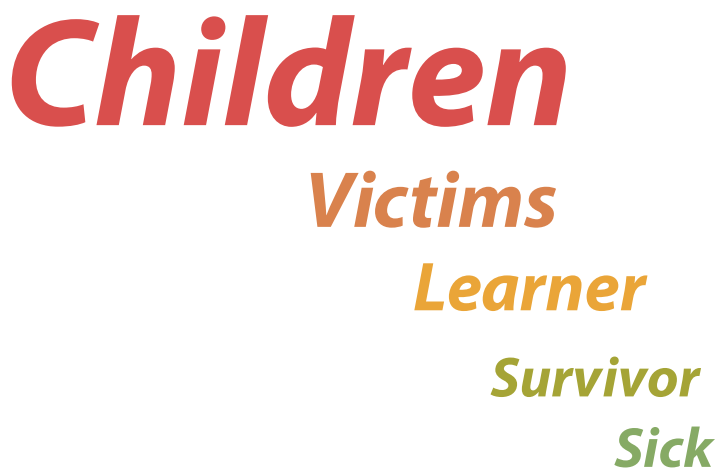
8. Top 5 children's roles

“When I look at the roles that children play in news I have moved from being beyond angry to furious”

Cedella Kasinahama, 12 years old, Female
Parkhurst Primary

Children are often seen but not heard in the media. This is evident as seen in Figure six which shows access to children at nine per cent. The media needs to access children in stories that are about them and should not confine them to stereotypical roles but diverse and empowering ones such as hero, winners and etc. It is important that the media shows children in their diversity in order to help challenge the stereotype of children seen in limited roles in the communities. This has not been the case as media continuously portrays children in roles that are negative, as can be seen in the figure below.

Figure 7 - Top 5 roles



The results above show that “Children” as a role dominated at 40 per cent followed by “Victim” at per cent. “Victim” as a role is disempowering to children as it paints them in a negative and helpless way while just mentioning them as “children” does not in any way mean they are shown in a positive light. “Children” as role was used when the story referred to children belonging to a particular family and making reference to children in general. While it is important for the media to recognise the vulnerable children especially in negative stories such as those about abuse, it should ensure that there are more empowering roles such as survivor, sportsperson and achievers.



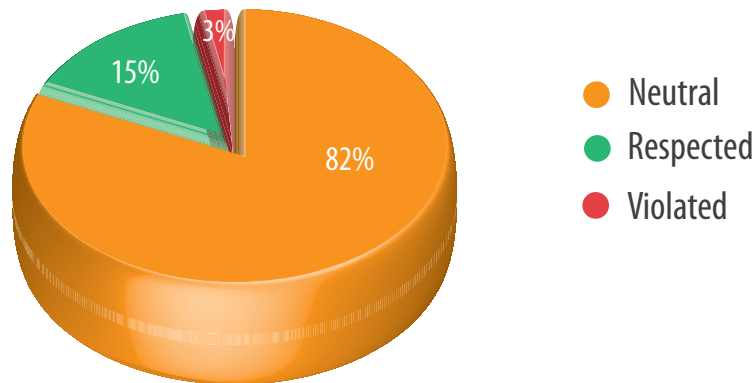
9. Rights respected

“We demand that media respect, promote and not violate our rights to dignity, privacy, freedom of speech and our right to participation”

Emmanuel Ngoie, 12 Years Old, Male
Troyeville Primary

Children’s Act 38 of 2005 highlights the children’s rights and it is therefore important for the media to ensure that these rights are not compromised.

Figure 8 - Children’s rights

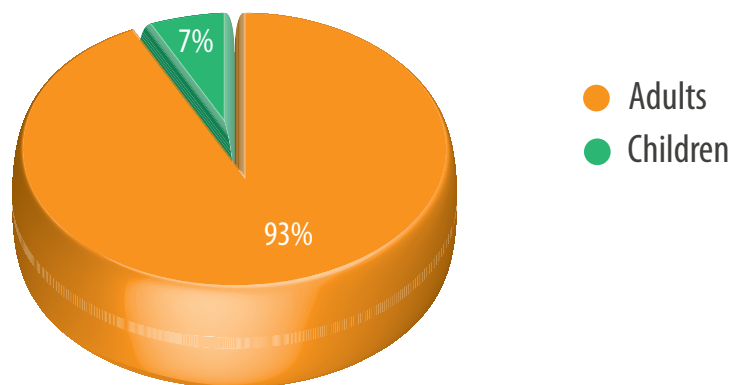


However, the result shows that media did not full adhere to protecting children’s rights. Three per cent of the stories clearly did not respect their rights. This is a slight decrease from the four per cent recorded in 2014¹⁰. The media was deemed to have not respected children rights when they failed to protect the children’s identity and access them where necessary, even though the media houses are commended on their reduction in child rights violation in their reporting, they are urged to always seek to ensure that all children’s rights are respected.

10. Children versus adults

All voices matter, despite factors such as age, male or female, rich or poor. The media should ensure that voices of both children and adults are adequately covered in their reporting.

Figure 9 - Children’s vs adult’s voices



The results above show that children were accessed at seven per cent in all the stories compared to adults who were accessed at 93 per cent. In 2014 children were accessed at 8.2 per cent and adults at 91.8¹¹ per cent. By not accessing children where possible and in their best interests, the media is

¹⁰ MMA 2014 Children’s Report

¹¹ Ibid

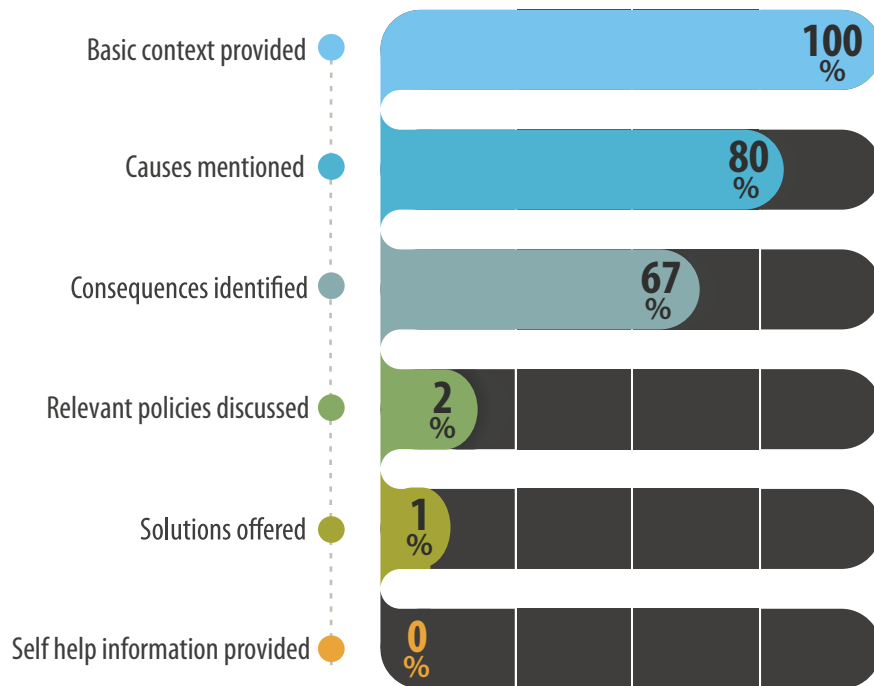
12. Quality of information

“We demand that journalists put more effort in getting more information before publishing a story about children”

Emmanuel Ngoie, 12 Years Old, Male
Troyeville Primary

As the purveyor of information, the media should always strive to ensure all the stories published or broadcast are informative to audiences.

Figure 11- -Quality of information



The stories monitored hardly went beyond providing basic context. The reasons for this could be many ranging from tight deadlines to lack of willingness to research about the topic being reported on. The results above show that stories only provided the basic context is at 100% while those that provided self help information, offered solutions or discussed relevant policies were at 0%, 1% and 2% respectively. Where possible, media should endeavour to empower their audiences by offering possible solutions, discussing relevant policies and also providing self-help information, especially on stories about child and substance abuse, etc. This may be achieved by thorough research and accessing as many sources as possible, including children as sources of information.



13. Conclusion and recommendations

Based on this assessment of South African media; media need to improve the children's participation and protection of their rights. The results show that children's voices are not adequately represented, their rights are still violated and the media is struggling to provide more information in the stories to help the reader to fully comprehend the context of all stories. However, media should be commended for better boys' and girls' representation and diverse issues coverage.

MMA recommends that media houses and media practitioners take into consideration the following recommendations:

- ∅ Since children constitute a substantial proportion of the population in South Africa (currently at 40%), there is need for this to be reflected in the number of stories about children that the media covers. MMA does not advocate for a quota system but at least a broader recognition of their importance to our present and our future.
- ∅ Children face an array of challenges and media should cover the diverse issues that affect children, and this not only includes diversity of topics covered but also diversity in terms of geographical coverage. Children also bring fresh perspectives and can reveal different sides to common stories on issues from economy to politics and sport.
- ∅ Where possible, media needs to go beyond just mentioning children to accessing them as much as possible. Given that at times accessing children can be cumbersome and daunting, it is essential that media practitioners are constantly reminded of the value of including children's participation and are continuously trained on how to ethically access them.
- ∅ Media should aim for zero tolerance on infringing on children's rights in their reporting. This may be achieved through continuous training as well as effective media accountability systems that ensure that media practitioners who fail to act ethically in their reporting are held to account.
- ∅ Children are capable of much more than they are given credit for and media should strive to portray them in roles that are empowering rather than disempowering. For example, instead of portraying children as victims of abuse they should be seen as survivors since the latter has positive connotations.



Empowering
Children &
the Media