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Ellen Goodman / Syndicated columnist

CBS, you've got to be kidding me

WASHINGTON — When they write the cultural history of childhood in 21st-century America, I hope they leave room for a few unkind words about "Kid Nation."

CBS' latest new reality show is about 40 kids from 8 to 15 years old who are dropped into a ghost town in New Mexico with only a production crew to call their own. The kids' task, we are told, is to "try to fix their forefathers' mistakes and build a new town that works."

Their real job, of course, is to attract viewers who want to see what happens to the "first ever kid nation." Will kids left to their own devices create a democratic idyll or a savage anarchy?

There is nothing particularly new about the conflicting images of children as innocents and children as beasts. It's as old as mythology. It lives on in the heart of every parent who's seen her child turn from a screaming sociopath at the supermarket checkout to a philosopher king at the beach: "Who painted the sky blue?"

But the real founding fathers of "Kid Nation" leave little to chance or choice. It's the producers, not the so-called "pioneers," who determine the structure of the town called Bonanza. It's the adults who lay the cultural grid down the main street. And this makes "Kid Nation" an entry into the annals of childhood as it's now lived and argued about in America.

You see, this is what the adults brought with them from Hollywood to Bonanza: competition, class and consumerism. In the very first episode, the children were directed to form four armies for color war. They were told that victory would determine their class status. And it did.

In a scenario Karl Marx couldn't have made up, the winners of the war were dubbed "upper class," the runners-up were labeled "merchants," then "cooks," and finally "laborers." The little capitalists were allowed to use their very unequal paychecks for very unequal chores to pay for goodies at the town store. The producers did everything but deny the lower-income children their health coverage.

Cutthroat competition, class divisions, unrelenting consumerism. Maybe it is reality programming after all. Aren't these the basic three C's of the culture in which we are all raising children?

Parent bashing is the favorite indoor sport these days. It's behind the voyeurism that makes "Supernanny" popular and Britney Spears unpopular. It's why we cheered the judge assigning the sinking celebrity a parenting coach.

Ordinary parents are held responsible for protecting their children from every imaginable danger. They are fed a high-anxiety diet of horror stories about lead paint in toys, Crocs on escalators and killer cribs. If you Google "danger" and "children," you get 21 million hits of everything from online predators to junk food.

Yet, even the most watchful parents are not immune to criticism. The latest villains are the helicopter parents. *See them hover over their children's lives! Watch them pull the invisible apron strings of a cellphone, book their children's playdates and write their college entrance essays while squashing their sense of imagination.* Parents even have to protect kids from overprotection.

The back story is that America has privatized child-raising. We regard children as the wholly owned subsidiary and responsibility of their families. Parents, in turn, can become so absorbed in worrying about the side rails on cribs that we lose focus on the cultural environment that encases all of us. And there is no bike helmet that can protect our children's brains from the three C's.

Before it premiered, "Kid Nation" itself was charged with endangering the children by violating child-labor laws and even child-abuse laws. Indeed, the consent form that the parents signed is as creepy as the ones you don't read before you go into surgery. Even creepier was the scene when two homesick children cried and not one adult had the impulse to drop a camera and offer comfort.

Nevertheless, the real trouble in Bonanza is not that the cast of mini-survivors was exposed to "serious bodily injury, illness or death." It's that the children urged to build a better town (read "world") than their forefathers were manipulated into the copycat media culture. The reward is a gold star literally worth its weight in gold: \$20,000.

The only hero so far is 8-year-old Jimmy, the New Hampshire boy who had the good sense to go home. As for the rest? The children of Bonanza didn't make the rules. They inherited them. It's not a kid nation. It's our nation.

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