



'Media' is the page of the Society's Press Committee. This section of *The Psychologist* aims to promote and discuss psychology in the media. If you would like to comment on a recent newspaper article, TV programme or radio broadcast involving psychology, if you have tips for others based on recent experiences, or if you know of a forthcoming programme or broadcast, please contact the 'Media' page coordinating editor, Fiona Jones (Chair, Press Committee), on fionaj@psychology.leeds.ac.uk.

An emotional lightning conductor

INTERNATIONAL Missing Children's Day (25 May) dawned amidst the third week of a media frenzy surrounding the search for missing four-year-old, Madeleine McCann. The widespread coverage has constituted a major part of the sophisticated campaign launched by the McCanns in their attempt to find their daughter.

After the initial days following Madeleine's disappearance, the McCanns proactively channelled all their energy into their cause. Press reports suggest this shift followed the arrival of a team of experts that included a forensic psychologist, criminal behaviour experts and trauma counsellors. It seems the McCanns were encouraged to focus on positive visualisation to give them the strength to turn their hope into action. The *Daily Mail* reported that trauma counsellors encouraged them to imagine Madeleine running through a door and into their arms. In an interview in *First Magazine*, Alan Pike, a trauma consultant from Yorkshire-based Centre for Crisis Psychology, said he encouraged the McCanns to imagine Madeleine was 'somewhere safe, warm, and being cared for appropriately'. He also

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advocated adopting a routine in order to induce a sense of control. The McCann's daily routine has been widely publicised and is updated by Gerry McCann's blog on the Madeleine website.

Although the McCanns described intense feelings of guilt, their positive determination to think forward and focus on what they can do now appears to have enabled them to cope. Mary Riddell of *The Observer* suggested they dread the fading of the media attention, as it is in this campaign that their hopes lie. But although the McCann's message is being effectively

delivered to the public, the difficulty the police face in communicating with the abductor was discussed in *The Times* by David Canter, Professor of Psychology at the University of Liverpool. The only line of contact they have is through media statements and it is important to adopt sufficient sensitivity so as not to scare the abductor into making the situation tragic. Canter says 'the priority will be to prevent the offender from thinking he has no way out, that he has no options or control over the situation'.

Other psychological angles covered in the media included reports that 'a child psychologist will this week begin explaining to the twins why their four-year-old sister has been away from the family for more than three weeks and to help them prepare for the long-term consequences of her disappearance' (*The Times*). On BBC Radio Leicester, child psychologist Clode Knight (Kidscape) trod very sensitive ground with speculation over the effects on Madeleine herself. But interestingly, the Society's Media Centre reported far fewer enquiries from journalists than they had received in response to other national crime stories such as the Ipswich murders.

There was, however, some general discussion as to how parents cope with a world where child abduction occurs, though few psychologists provided input. In one article (*The Times*) sociologists such as Professor Frank Furedi warn against a tendency towards paranoid parenting, suggesting this can leave children inadequately equipped prepared to cope with the world. Parents are left with the challenge of creating an appropriate balance where both safety and independence are fostered. David Hughes (*Daily Telegraph*) describes Madeleine as 'an emotional lightning conductor' for the country's hopes and fears, the overwhelming public response being a means of coping with a feeling of helplessness. As the McCanns have channelled their fears into action, the public have written cheques, tied ribbons and lit candles, perhaps gaining comfort that they are doing something to increase the chances of Madeleine's safe return.

Jill Owen and Harriet Gross

MAY saw the fashion world launch its own inquiry into the health of size zero models, to tie in with London Fashion Week. The debate continues as to whether a ban on size zero models would act as a deterrent against unhealthy weight loss pursuits.

There have also been a series of documentaries aimed at exposing the shocking reality of the lengths necessary to achieve the size zero body shape ('Superskinny me: The race to size double zero', 'Super slim me' and 'The truth about size zero'). Participants attempted to drop from a healthy weight to a size zero in minimum time through the use of extremely unhealthy weight loss methods.

In the *International Herald Tribune*, Britain's Eating Disorder Association expressed concern about the potential health impact on those taking part in Channel 4 documentary 'Superskinny me'. Interestingly, although the documentary highlighted the psychological symptoms experienced by the two journalists who took part, psychology lacked representation in the monitoring and intervention processes; one being referred to a psychiatrist amidst concerns that she was developing an eating disorder. In a *Daily Mail* article following her participation in BBC's 'Super slim me', Dawn Porter said 'there was a psychologist on standby in case it all got too much' but did not elaborate on this role.

The continuing obsession is not just with underweight models: pop Star Lily Allen had prided herself on avoiding weight obsession, but admitted to succumbing to extreme concerns about her body and feeling pressured into being thinner. In *The Guardian*, Susan Ringwood, of the eating disorder charity Beat, spoke of the current particularly thin aesthetic ideal and the pressure to obtain this unrealistic standard. In a web interview about eating disorders and the media (www.keepthedoctoraway.co.uk), Deanne Jade, founder of the National Centre for Eating Disorders suggested 'women have always valued themselves more for how they look than for what they do'. Perhaps media exposure of these issues of weight and identity could focus more on the valuable role of psychology in developing healthy body image confidence and female identity.