

Uproar over TV show? State's stars say what-EVER

"Kid Nation," a new reality show, is causing a stir, but two area kids and their parents had no complaints.

By [Neal Justin](#), Star Tribune

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Maggie Kakac and Brett Norstrom are on the verge of becoming national TV stars, and not everyone's thrilled about it.

The Minnesota students are among 40 participants in the CBS reality show "Kid Nation," the most controversial series of the fall season. Youngsters ages 8 to 15 were filmed living on their own for 40 days in Bonanza City, an abandoned town in the New Mexico desert, conducting council meetings, cooking dinner, operating a saloon (root beer) and setting their own bedtimes, all with minimum adult supervision.

Some see it as an intriguing social experiment, a vast improvement on reality shows that set up empty-headed hunks with a floozy of the month. Others think it comes dangerously close to "Lord of the Flies." "This is poison," said Paul Petersen, a former child star and founder of A Minor Consideration, one of several advocacy groups that have expressed outrage over the show, scheduled to premiere Sept. 19.

One parent has filed a complaint, charging abuse and neglect after her 12-year-old suffered facial burns while making a meal. Others raising their voices include Hollywood labor unions, concerned about the cast's long work hours, and the New Mexico attorney general's office, which is investigating whether the taping last spring violated any state laws.

But for the two local participants and their parents, the hubbub is as mysterious as advanced calculus, especially since no one -- including the kids and their families -- has seen an episode, aside from the show's producers, CBS executives and key advertisers.

Adults are standing by

"There's a lot of misinformation out there," said Brett's mother, Jules Norstrom, who lives in Edina. "I think once people watch the show, they'll be astounded by its integrity. I'd be more comfortable sending Brett back to Bonanza City than any summer camp."

The only footage released from the show is a five-minute trailer that deliberately stirs the pot. It features a couple of shouting matches, five different children in tears and this promise: "No parents, no teachers, no adults."

The last claim is misleading. In addition to an army of cameramen and producers, there were pediatricians, animal wranglers and child psychologists on the set, said creator Tom Forman.

"This was as well-thought-out as any show I've seen in terms of having contingency plans in case anything went wrong," Forman said. Nonetheless, "we really made a commitment that we were going to let them do everything they could on their own until we had to step in."

Brett, 11, said he sought out the set psychologist on two occasions because he "felt lonely at times." He said he missed his parents, whom he was allowed to call only every three days. Like all the "Kid Nation" families, they were kept away from the set until the final day of filming.

Maggie, 14, twisted her thumb during one activity. Medical people looked at it immediately, then took her to a local hospital, where she was treated for a small stress fracture, then returned to the set.

"She probably got better care there than she would have at home," said Maggie's mother, Patty Kakac, a folk musician who lives just outside the western Minnesota town of Evansville, between Fergus Falls and Alexandria.

The Lohan trap?

While there apparently were no serious physical injuries during production, it's harder to determine any lingering emotional impact.

Xiaojia Ge, who specializes in adolescent psychology at the University of Minnesota's Institute of Child Development, said having 8-year-olds interact so much with older kids might make them more vulnerable, and susceptible to stress.

"Without parents monitoring, supervising and protecting, it is very difficult for the younger ones to grow in such an environment," he said.

Nancy Gilatowitsch, company manager for Minneapolis' Children's Theatre Company, said it's important that young people have regular interaction with adults.

"We're always checking in, even if the kids don't think they need it," she said. "Kids will say they're fine because they don't want to be shown up. No one wants to appear vulnerable. But the reality is, they can't handle everything."