

# **(S4, E13) Sins of the Mother: Family Vlogging & Child Endangerment**

To me, peak friendship is sharing the weird digital rabbit hole you've found yourself in. Are you reading everything that's ever been written about protest dogs in Greece? Have you gone absolutely feral consuming content about which brands had to rapidly react to remove the Twin Towers from their packaging following 9/11? Hell yeah. I love that. When I go on these deep dives, I'm sort of like a cat returning with some terrible offering in their mouth at 3 in the morning. I'll find someone whose friendship I value, who has a vaguely aligned interest and then sort of do the digital equivalent of dumping a half-dead lizard on their bed.

So, I was delighted when my friend messaged me the other day to say they'd fallen down a rabbit hole about mummy vloggers who were actually monsters behind the scenes, and then sent me an article involving Mormonism, YouTube money and multiple arrests. That in turn got me thinking about child influencers, family vlogging and entertainment labour laws, so I thought I'd bring you on the journey.

I'm Alex, this is Pop Culture Boner, the podcast edition, and today I'm thinking about family vloggers.

Ok, so if you've been online for the last week, you might have guessed that the

nexus for this episode was the arrest of Utah-based mummy vlogger Ruby Franke and her offsider, Jodi Hildebrandt on 6 counts of felony child abuse. People have been making complaints about Franke online for years because, for all her millions of followers and steady AdSense income from YouTube, she's been shockingly open about the types of physical and emotional punishment that she uses on her six kids. In fact, much of the video content that populates their channel is about what punishment the children have received, why and how they feel about it.

The arrest has sparked more discussion about children, their right to digital privacy and their place in the content ecosystem of the internet. So, I wanted to spend some time looking not only at the case itself, but also the genre of mummy and family vlogging more broadly, the rights of child performers in these settings and how they differ from the rights of other children in the entertainment industry. Buckle up – this one is going to mostly be depressing, I think.

Let's start with the genre itself – the family vlog scene kind of grew out of the mummy bloggers of the early 2000s. That's the sort of sentence where if you said it a 16th Century peasant their head would explode. Anyway. Like most

things that eventually transform into unfathomably toxic internet backwaters, it started off innocently enough. Blogging sites were beginning to pop up left and right, with a focus on being user-friendly and easily accessible, and new mums who were seeking an outlet for themselves during a period of their life that could be quite isolating, started documenting their day-to-day. This type of content quickly found its niche and the market exploded. Writings that were humorously relatable or gave an unpolished view of motherhood were particularly popular.

As the boom years of blogging started to wane, YouTube put vlogging at the forefront – same content but now with video. Where blogging provided some level of curated anonymity, or at the very least, added something of a text-based buffer between the mum, the kids, and the audience, vlogging stripped a lot of that away. You could pull your whole family into the frame with you and let them record their thoughts in real time.

Now, in the early days of YouTube the concept of the mass audience hadn't made its way into users' minds, so many of the people who were uploading family content to the site felt that it was simply an easy way for them to share memories with far-flung friends and family. But as users began to discover people who were regularly uploading, the vloggers discovered that they had an audience. When YouTube began paying creators in advertising dollars, the prospect of big money began to appear on the table, and vlogging has a low barrier to entry. Simply point the phone at yourself, your friends or your loved ones and roll the tape until you catch something. If

you're a somewhat charismatic parental figure with similarly camera-confident offspring, family vlogging is a no-brainer. There are of course, two small problems here. The first is that no parent is the perfect parent 100 per cent of the time. You can love your kids more than life itself and still have the occasional day where you think "why have I ruined my own life by birthing the spawn of Satan himself?" My own mother cannot look at a photo of me at my third birthday party without going "I have never wanted to disown you more", and that was 30 years ago. She's never recovered. My point is, kids are great but they're a lot of work, and the hard moments are much less forgiving in surround sound. A written version is more sympathetic to your parenting sins than a 3-minute video in which you interchangeably scream at, bargain with, and threaten your toddler in increasingly hysterical tones.

While you can, of course, edit up the video, I can also guarantee that you have no idea how weird your family is – none of us do until we have someone turn to us and go "what the fuck was that?" So you're not a good judge of how best to cut up your hysterical, crying video to paint yourself in a positive light. Parents who try to film raw or real moments with their kids run a pretty significant risk of looking absolutely deranged, even where what's happening is pretty benign.

Which brings me to the second problem – sometimes, it's not benign. Success on YouTube is increasingly governed by the whims of an abstract and unforgiving algorithm. While some creators get around this by firmly establishing a fanbase, networking with other people

on the platform and seeking additional revenue streams, we've also seen creators resort to more and more extreme content to bolster the visibility of their videos. This attitude also extended to family vloggers, who started prompting extreme emotional reactions from their children through things like pranks.

Emotionally terrorising your children to appease something as unknowable and flawed as a YouTube algorithm is obviously horrifying, but I do feel like channels that engaged in this type of content overtly were pretty quickly shut down. For example, the parents on the FamilyOfFive channel. That channel was abruptly ended in 2017 for violation of YouTube's terms of service and the parents involved were arrested, lost custody of their children and were charged with neglect of a minor following videos of the children being forced to participate in 'pranks' that resulted in the physical injury of their siblings. It wasn't exactly swift justice, but the extreme nature of the content caught the eye of audiences meaning it was able to be dealt with in a reasonably time-sensitive fashion. But the abuse is not always as overt as screaming at your kids until they have a breakdown while smacking their siblings in the face.

Part of what makes Ruby Franke's content all the more insidious is that it was notably less overt. So, let's talk about Ruby Franke and her 8 Passengers channel. 8 Passengers was started in 2015 and posted daily vlogs of Ruby, her husband Kevin and their six kids. Over 5 years, the channel steadily grew in popularity, eventually amassing over 2 million subscribers and 1 billion video

views. But starting in around 2020, when people were spending a lot more time inside hyper-fixating on their social channels, Franke's audience began to raise concerns about the treatment of the children. In one video, Franke is sitting in her car explaining to the camera that she just received a message her 6-year-old daughter's teacher informing her that the kid forgot her lunch and asking her to drop something off. Franke says that she explained to the teacher that packing a lunch was one of her daughter's responsibilities and that she had lied about packing one, so she would not be dropping off anything extra. She looks into the camera and says, "I know that it would make her teacher more comfortable if I brought in lunch. But hopefully no one gives her anything, so she learns."

I don't have kids, but I've worked in a lot of childcare jobs. The idea of assigning 6-year-old their own unchecked, unsupervised lunch packing duties is insane. They can remember stuff, sure, but it's rarely ever the thing you want them to remember. It's usually the contents of a book on lizards and a swear word you told them to forget. And you'll know this because they'll tell you the entire contents of the lizard book while you're trying to get them to find their shoes and remember the difference between their right and left feet.

In another video, Franke is discussing her eldest son's bedroom and reveals that he hasn't had a bedroom or a bed for the last 6 months. He's 15 years old at this point and has been sleeping on a beanbag in the living room after playing a prank on his little brother. Franke

laughs and says that in their household she believes punishments should go on for 6 months at least to ensure the lesson is learned. She's smiling and laughing as she says this, and in turn her son laughs along as he tells the story of the prank he pulled on his brother. Still smiling Franke turns to him and says "It seems like you still think it's funny. That means you might not have learned your lesson. You've only just gotten your room back, we might have to take it away again." Her son quickly stops laughing and hides his hand behind his mouth and mutters that he doesn't think it's funny.

These are both extreme forms of punishment that involve denying the children food, comfort and privacy. One of the things that makes this most unsettling is the fact that they're both delivered with a cheerful smile to the camera and a knowing wink at the audience implying that we all know that this is the right course of action. The digital commentariat agreed and a Change.org petition was started to have the channel reviewed and the Franke's investigated. Child Protective Services were called and both Kevin and Ruby Franke went on a PR whirlwind, giving interviews to Business Insider claiming that the clips about their son and daughter had been taken out of context in order to defame them.

Throughout 2021, Franke's posting on her 8 Passengers channel declined along with her audience, and in 2022 she partnered up with Jodi Hildebrandt. Hildebrandt runs a company called ConneXions, which offers counselling services largely to members of the Mormon Church. The Washington Post notes that Hildebrandt was put on probation for 18 months and

almost lost her license as a therapist after discussing a patient's pornography addiction publicly. Hildebrandt hired Franke to work as a mental health coach, and together they launched the channel Moms of Truth. I've had a look at the Instagram pages for each of these businesses and they're kind of horrifying – in one post they reinforce the idea that even a compliant person is not actually good enough because they're only giving the appearance of obeying instructions while retaining their own thoughts and opinions. In another a crying child has tracked mud from their shoes over a white carpet, with a little speech bubble that says "My shoelaces were double knotted too tightly and I couldn't get them off" with a caption explaining that this is a child creating their own evidence to justify their wrong-doing and that it is a manipulation tactic. Both of these things create an environment where it is impossible for anyone, but particularly for a child, to do the right thing.

Finally, on 30th August, 2023 Franke's youngest son appeared on a neighbour's doorstep with duct tape around his wrists and ankles that was cutting into the skin alongside existing lacerations that appeared to be from rope. He was emaciated and asked the neighbour for food and water before asking them to call the police. He explained that he had escaped through the porch window. The 911 call is floating around the internet and you can hear the neighbour who called the police tearing up as he tries to explain the state the child is in. When the police arrived, they also found the youngest daughter in a similar condition in the bathroom of the home. It apparently took first responders two

hours to extract her from the bathroom because she was convinced that she earned the punishment. Both Franke and Hildebrandt were arrested, because the pair had been filming together in the days prior, meaning that Hildebrandt would have been aware of the condition of the children and failed to act. They've both been charged with 6 counts of felony child abuse.

Dozens of people connected to the Franke family have come forward saying that they have been trying to alert police to the abuse for years. Neighbours have said they've called Child Protective Services and law enforcement dozens of times to no avail. Hildebrandt's niece has come forward to say that they suffered similar abuse at the hands of their aunt. Franke's sisters have come out to say that they tried to involve law enforcement multiple times. Franke's eldest daughter has previously revealed that she cut contact with her family years ago after moving outside the family bubble to attend college at Brigham-Young University. When news of her mother's arrest broke, she posted a photo of the police cars outside the family home with the caption 'Finally'.

Now, there's a lot of criticisms you can make here about the structures of power within the Mormon Church that recommend extreme corporal punishment for children and the various failures of law enforcement to act upon obviously credible claims of child abuse. But one thing I think is really worth delving into is the amount of agency kids had in this situation, and the almost total lack of influencer industry regulation. Which is where we get to talk about child actors, labour laws for young performers and

the ways that new media lags behind in terms of protecting its youngest stars.

Time for a quick history lesson on the laws governing child actors – for the sake of chronology, most of this is taken from a fantastic write up by Ailbhe Rogers for the Library of Congress, which I'll link in the show notes. So, a particularly grim thing that you should always keep in mind when talking about any sort of labour law is that rules for safety and regulation are always written in the blood of the workers who have come before. That's a rare thing that a child star might have in common with say, an electrician. Children are generally not considered to be capable of understanding the requirements of a contract, which meant in California, they could effectively break a contract without repercussion. This was annoying for the movie studios under the studio system of the 1920s, because their big underage stars could effectively jump from studio to studio with no consequence. So, the studios successfully lobbied to implement a clause that would remove that right if a judge signed off on it. There were, of course, no standards these contracts had to meet for a judge to approve them, leaving many children trapped in years long contracts they couldn't escape.

Then came the case of Jackie Coogan. Coogan was one of America's most famous child stars following his role in the Charlie Chaplin hit, *The Kid*. You might also know him as Uncle Fester, from the original *Addams Family*. When he came of age, he discovered that his mother and stepfather had spent his \$4 million fortune, leaving him essentially destitute. He sued in 1938, but was only able to recover about \$126,000. The Coogan Act was

established, ensuring that a portion of all child actor's net income was set away in a trust fund that could only be opened when they came of age. The act had noble intentions but was ultimately was often ineffective for a few reasons – the money still effectively belonged to the parents, and the percentage that was put away for the child was discretionary, meaning that it didn't have to meet a particular standard. That's why, for example, Macaulay Caulkin's parents were able to wipe out the majority of his earnings from his extensive childhood career during their 1995 divorce. That law was changed in 2000 to close these loopholes for child actors by placing a fixed 15% of the income in the child's Coogan account, and keeping it in their name.

Beyond income protection, there are also rules regarding the times child actors can film and requiring that they have a studio teacher/ welfare officer on set to continue their education and ensure their safety while filming. Special permits are required for filming at night, or in settings that might be considered dangerous. For an example of why these laws are necessary, Google the Twilight Zone accident of 1982. Anyway, these laws are imperfect – for one thing, they only apply in the state of California, and while this is where the bulk of the film industry is based, it does leave kids in vulnerable positions elsewhere in the US where they rely entirely on state laws or trade unions to cover them because child performers are exempt from federal labour laws. Importantly in this context, the laws as they stand also only cover children in film productions – they do not extend to the child stars of the internet age. Producers of user-generated content

on social channels like YouTube do not have to be concerned with either the Coogan Act or any of the requirements for on-set child welfare.

Now, you might be wondering if that's having an immediate impact on the kids, and boy howdy, is it ever. Bills have been proposed in Illinois and Washington that would achieve similar outcomes to the Coogan Act, by protecting a portion of the child's income and ensuring that a child whose image was monetised could request the removal of their digital footprint from social platforms. Cam Barrett, an advocate who was subjected to a career as a child at the centre of a family vlogging channel testified at the hearing.

She told the Washington Post that kids are essentially working the second they wake up to the moment they go to sleep. She says "Their life and their home is their stage. If this is going to continue to be a thing, there should be laws to protect the child's labor. A lot of these kids, their lives are constantly overshared, and they have to put on a performance for a camera."

Details of Barrett's first period were shared online, resulting in severe bullying at school. Photos of herself as a child in a bikini are still the first images that come up when you Google her real name, and she is constantly frightened that they might be weaponised against her. While not every child influencer has had a poor experience on the platform, every single one of them, including the ones who felt positive about the family vlogging process, had some sort of horror story about being recognised by adult

strangers in a way that felt scary to them as a child, or being bullied in school when other kids discovered the channel.

And these privacy questions are some of the most concerning for me. While I'm not one to live in a perpetual state of fear of my fellow citizens, adult content creators can barely manage to have healthy relationships with their audience. Multiple social media stars, particularly women who stream on platforms that facilitate a lot of audience interaction, like Twitch, had reported being stalked or harassed. What hope does a kid have in that environment where their presence is at the whims of a parent controlling the account?

Ruby Franke's treatment of her kids is the result of an extreme belief system, but the fact that she was able to build an audience at all points to a bigger problem with the content creation industry and child stars. I honestly don't know if I have a fully formed opinion on the best solution here. But I do think that behaving reactively probably only setting us up for bigger tragedy in the future, particularly when the democratisation of content creation means that children are more likely to fly under the radar in niche content markets. The smaller the audience, the less traction you're likely to receive until something incomprehensibly awful happens.

Well, that was the family vlogging episode. I told you – a real barrel of laughs. Honestly, the more I read about child stars throughout the 80s and 90s the sadder I get. There's some real depressing content in there. If you're looking for a great documentary, you should check

out Showbiz Kids. It's directed by Alex Winter, of Bill and Ted fame, who was a child actor himself. Anyway... if you want to join my biannual spiral about the Twilight Zone accident, talk to me about it next time you see me at the pub!





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**Episode written and narrated by Alex Johnson and produced by Wes Fahey. Theme tune by Wes Fahey. (Soundcloud: [lee snipes](#))**

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