

## **Working with Children Actors by Magda Olchawska**

I do have to say I was pretty nervous when I decided to work with a child actor. A lot of my scripts have children characters written in, but since it always takes such a long time to go from the script idea into production, I never gave a second thought about do's and don't's of working with the young actors.

I did research the Internet extensively for any information about working with kids and to my biggest surprise, there wasn't that much information out there. The bits and pieces that I found were to either try to avoid working with children actors, which wasn't helpful at all or to shoot chronologically, which was brilliant advice if you have the time and the money to do it. We neither had the time nor lots of money to do it.

To make the film happen and to be able to work with a child actor I had to rely on my instinct; both as a mother (I am surrounded by kids all the time so having that extra knowledge was a benefit) and as a film director.

The film I shot recently with the child actor is called "Dad". It's a short film, shot independently on a tiny budget during one day.

However, as we all know most of the director's work goes into the pre-production, and I'm one of those directors who needs and likes being prepared before going into production.

Below is a list of actions I took to make myself and my child actor ready for the production.

1. I looked for adult actors who worked with kids before, either on the film or as a teacher etc. It was important to me that the grown-up actors knew how to connect and play/be playful with kids.
2. Once I knew who my dad was (a wonderfully talented British actor Daniel Knight, who was willing and flexible enough to work with the child actor), we arranged a couple of play dates where the two of them got to know one another and played games together. Daniel had worked with children before and was terrific in getting Mikolay engaged and playful. Seeing the two of them playing so nicely I knew the relationship between the two of them was going to be solid.
3. From the very start of the production, Mikolay knew he was going to be in the film. He knew what the story was about and he knew who was going to play his dad and also the actress

that was going to play his mum. He had lots of questions as kids do and it was even way before we started reading the script. Most importantly he wanted to know why his mum couldn't be played by his real mum and his dad by his real dad. Of course, I had to talk to him about that and explain that actors work in the film and they can act and imagine things, and there are the people he watches on the screen. His birth parents weren't actors and couldn't possibly use their imagination, as well as the professional actors, could. He took that on board and internalised the answer, as he always does with subjects he tries to understand.

4. Two weeks before the production I began reading the script to Mikolay on a daily basis. Every day I would ask him if he had any questions and sometimes he had and sometimes he didn't. He had some new inputs into the script and physical movement of his character. We played "what if" game so he could imagine much better, clearer what it would have been like to be in his character's shoes.

5. A week before the shoot we started learning lines. It turned out that for Mikolay it was pretty easy to remember them. In fact, for most kids, it is relatively easy to learn text by heart and memorise lines. My advice in here would be not to rush with pushing the child to learn the lines. I feel that making the process more organic is going to be more beneficial for children and the project.

6. A day before the shoot, Mikolay had another play date with Daniel, playing his dad and Elena, playing his mum. During those couple of hours, one could see that the relationship between Mikolay & Daniel was becoming very solid and grounded, which was the most important to me as a director.

7. We decided to start shooting with a very easy scene, playing football, something Mikolay likes and is very good at. I felt that it was essential to start with something easy, something that would be a confidence booster for him.

8. Throughout the whole shoot, Daniel was with Mikolay, talking, bonding and having a good time together. Daniel always ran his lines with Mikolay before the talking scene (not all their scenes had dialogue). I spoke to Mikolay before each scene to remind him what the scene was about.

9. Before we started shooting, Mikolay requested no hands holding with his 'on-screen' dad. However, when we got towards the end of the day just about to shoot two pretty emotional scenes, Mikolay was holding hands with Daniel, no problems at all. I do have to say that by the end of the day the two of

them became very good friends.

10. During the shoot, I had with me board games, arts and crafts, Lego blocks and sweets prepared for Mikolay to keep him occupied and busy during the periods of waiting. During the waiting time he played a lot with the make-up artist (they knew each other and were friendly, which I do have to say was very helpful). If you have someone your child actor likes and you can afford to pay this person, do it. Hire someone to babysit your child actor during the quiet times. Children get bored and tired very quickly and need to be entertained all the time.

11. After we shot the first two scenes, I got Mikolay an ice cream and chips in the local coffee shop, which he asked for and I respected his request. Carrot and not stick work best with the children.

12. By the time we got to the very emotional scenes, Mikolay & Daniel were so comfortable with one another that it wasn't a problem for Mikolay to feel the real emotions.

#### **TAKE AWAY**

1. Casting is important. Make sure your adult actors feel comfortable working with children actors. If the centre of the story is the relationship between the adult actor and the child actor it is essential they build solid relationship beforehand.

2. Spend as much time with your child actor as you can. Start with building trust and relationship between the two of you before you go on to developing the character of your young actor.

3. Hire someone to work on the set with the child actor during the break times. Kids have an abundance of energy.

4. Listen to your child actors and take on board what they are saying. Kids have fantastic instincts and often are right.

5. Have special treats for them on the set as an award for their hard work or for doing the scene well.

6. If your child actor has questions, answer those questions as truthfully as you can. Be honest with your child actors; kids can feel fakeness.

7. If you have the budget, hire a coach who can help you direct the kid/s you are going to work with. But once again it

all comes down to casting and how comfortable you, the director, is going to be working with that particular child.

8. Having small crew helps the child not to feel overwhelmed.

9. Introduce the crew and cast to your child actor.

10. Put a lot of work and effort into your pre-production with the child actor; it will pay off on the set.

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