



Dr Kairen Cullen

## Hollywood's Latest Must-Have

### Why TV and film productions should have psychologists on-set

- ★ **Running a household** while building a career is no easy feat, but Dr Kairen Cullen makes it look easy, balancing her time between delivering psychology assessments, novel writing, and advising media productions.

A Registered Practitioner Psychologist, an Educational Psychologist, chartered with the British Psychological Society (BPS), and an Associate Fellow with the BPS, Kairen's life has been go, go, go, making me extra appreciative that she found the time to share her journey into the film and television industry with me.

"I trained to become an educational psychologist back in the 90's. At that point it was necessary to have teaching experience; so I had been a teacher previous to this for about ten years.

I did my psychology first degree and then went on to do a masters at the Institute of Education, in Professional Education Psychology. Following that, because the profession became entirely doctorate level, I did

a PHD. It's quite a long route through.

Like many women, I combined a family with developing a career. I trained as a primary teacher, and I taught early years. I ran a nursery at one point, then I went into Key Stage Two in the primary sector.

I started doing some work in the student support department in secondary schools; and that, in



## The British Psychological Society

#### Why are psychologists on-set needed?

Working on media production sets can become very high pressure and emotionally confronting environments.

In 2019, the BPS's Media Ethics Advisory Group published 'Guidance for commissioners and producers', detailing the ways in which psychologists can benefit media productions with their involvement and psychological experience.

turn, led to becoming an advisory teacher for behaviour for all phases. I was also working with Special Ed (education) and that led to me doing my psychology degree.

It all fits together in retrospect, but at the time, I was doing one thing that was useful to the next."

In awe of Kairen's qualifications and journey, I shared my admiration with her during our phone call, to which she revealed: "It has taken a long time and it's been in quite an organic way – one thing had led to another, that's often the way it goes."

### ★ "Like many women, I combined a family with developing a career" ★

Kairen's support and care has transcended from behind closed doors to film and television production sets. Kairen, who is from North London, has been assisting young and vulnerable actors for 20 odd years, with the transition occurring naturally.

"Back in the early 2000's I was at first a press officer, then a chair of the Division of Educational and Child Psychology (at the BPS).

We started to get a few media requests for professional psychology input - and I kinda just got into it from that route."

Originally providing soundbites for newspapers and radio from a professional psychologist perspective, media productions started to catch wind of Kairen's valuable experience and insight.

"The main reason for getting in touch with me is to help with the wellbeing and safety of their young actors and sometimes vulnerable actors, this can be older actors too, if they have a particular vulnerability. It's all to do with safeguarding and wellbeing. As a practitioner psychologist nearly all my work is research and practice.

Kairen said she always gets involved with media production requests, helping to solve the question, "Is this young person or child going to experience any risks, do they have any sensitivities or vulnerabilities that being involved in production would be risky for them, or threaten their wellbeing or safety?"

"That's the focus I take. So, when I do my

work with a young actor, I always have some kind of discussion, usually on the telephone, with the adult involved, and then I will produce a report, which goes to the production.

There are lots of suggestions there for how the cast, the film crew, and the production needs to work with the young child. It's framed as a piece of work for the individual, but it will obviously have implications for the whole production."

### ★ "I am kind of like a resource for the production team and film crew" ★

Although she does not have to, Kairen has progressed into helping other members of the cast and crew on-set: "Interestingly that happened incidentally. I have done a fair bit of work that involves me being present on set; I am kind of like a resource for the production team and film crew.

"I often talk with the directors and producers about how to stage, film, and arrange things where content involves young actors."

"I found myself talking with adult cast members and even production staff about their experiences.

It's not as dramatic as it sounds; it's not people really really distressed or upset, but these are working conversations where I will share my professional experience and perspective and talk through issues."



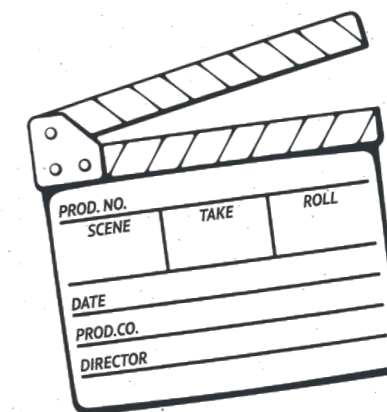
I knew the film and television industry was fast-paced, but Kairen shocked me with how quickly work had to be turned over.

"It's such a fast-moving industry. I've got someone who came to me end of last week who wants my involvement. Well it can happen within a day or two sometimes if I've established that I'm an appropriate person to be involved and I can help them with what they need."

And with such tight deadlines to meet, the importance of Kairen's educational background became extremely evident.

"You've got to be familiar with content and who is involved, but because I've been doing it sometime and I've got the experience I have, I have a few shortcuts.

I am pretty quick at taking in information and reading scripts and that sort of thing – I'm used to it. In terms of the psychology that I bring, well I've had a long time to develop that, so I've got quite a big pallet to choose from."





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**“I have worked with some really high-profile actors, producers and writers”**

With regret, Kairen told me she was unable to disclose who she has worked with and on what productions, sworn to secrecy. The secrets of the industry remain preserved.

“I have worked with some really high-profile actors, producers and writers - award-winning people very well known by the general public.”

However, Kairen was able to let me in on this secret: “Funnily enough, I was involved in an award-winning show for a TV production that did really well.

“I can tell you this one actually. It’s ‘Outlaws’, Stephen Merchant’s ‘Outlaws’ on BBC.”

Kairen has also had opportunities to travel with some productions: “I’ve worked in Eastern Europe ... I have also worked in Ireland – that’s as far as I have gone.”

But with technology today, the majority of Kairen’s work is based

at home, in London: “I have been involved in productions that have been located a lot further away, but because of the budgetary restraints on a production, they’ve generally done what they need with me in a UK based way. There’s lots of options now with virtual technology.”



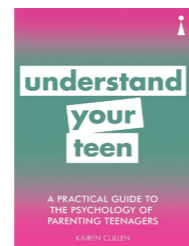
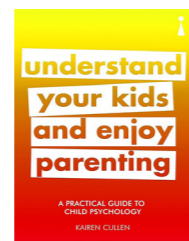
The job comes with many perks; of course the thrill of working on extravagant sets with famous actors and directors, but the gratification and fulfilment of helping people is Kairen’s favourite aspect of the job.

“The biggest satisfaction is definitely doing the best I can to help ensure it is a positive experience, for the young actors in particular. And there’s the satisfaction of also supporting this incredible industry.

It’s such an exciting, dynamic, creative industry. When you go onto a set it’s always, still is for me, quite amazing how much of a world they create in order to do their work. Just the sheer



Kairen’s published novel  
 Two of Kairen’s books from the ‘Practical Guides Series’



detail and the different skills and collaborations that come into play is hugely rewarding to be able to contribute to that, to help it flow that bit better and that bit more safely.”



**“I had to create my patchwork quilt”**



Now focusing mainly on media productions, with two currently on the go, and writing, Kairen has stepped back from offering standard educational psychology assessment services, but ensures she keeps herself on her toes: “I reached the traditional retirement age and I came to the conclusion that you could do enough of that and would want to be a bit more selective about my work.

It’s good because I have reached the stage now where I can be flexible enough to accommodate requests from media.

So now my two main interests are writing and work with media – and they are connected. I am trying to do some screenplay writing now and I’ve also written some novels. I guess you’d call them a slice of life, they have a psychological perspective, you wouldn’t be surprised to know.”



As we started to wrap up our conversation, Kairen reflected on her professional career: “I am fortunate in that I have combined a lot of (experiences), but they’ve kind of not happened in a planned way.

“Again, I’ll go back to the experience of being a woman with a family. I had to create my patchwork quilt, in terms of the experiences and skills I’ve managed to develop, and fortunately for me, there’s an outlet here.

“It’s not very predictable, and sometimes it’s not that regular, but over the years I look back and I realise it has mounted up to quite a lot.” ■

By Amelia Elder



Kairen for HCPC - My Story

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**“There’s the satisfaction of also supporting this incredible industry.”**

