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Representations of LGBQ+ Families in Young Children's Media

Allyson L. Snyder, James Alex Bonus, and Drew P. Cingel

Representations of LGBQ+ Families in Young Children's Media

Representations of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer (LGBQ+)¹ characters in children's media have proliferated over the last five years (GLAAD Media Institute, 2019). This shift has occurred in large part because attitudes toward LGBQ+ individuals have substantially improved among the general public, thus incentivizing content creators to diversify their representations (GLAAD Media Institute, 2020). Most LGBQ+ characters, however, have appeared in programs targeted to older children (i.e., ages 7 and older), with relatively few appearing in programs targeted to younger children (i.e., ages 3 to 6). This discrepancy likely stems from the fact that these programs typically depict age-appropriate romances among same-sex characters (e.g., crushes or dating). Although these stories allow older LGBQ+ children to see themselves represented on screen, they are less socially meaningful for younger children.

It is possible, however, to include socially relevant LGBQ+ representations in media for young children by focusing on diverse families. Family diversity varies across dimensions of race, socioeconomic status, gender, and family structure (Fine et al., 2000). Here, we focus on diverse family structure, such as a child who has two fathers or a child who has a mother that remains single because she is aromantic. In this commentary, we consider the theoretical importance of LGBQ+ representations in young children's media, review the current state of these representations, and provide recommendations for researchers and practitioners.

Theoretical Importance

¹ Both LGBQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer) and LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) are used as initialisms in this commentary. Shifts in usage are purposeful to reflect the inclusion of transgender individuals in specific research. Here, we discuss sexuality as an important part of diverse representation. Gender is also an important representation topic, but here we focus exclusively on sexuality, which is why we primarily discuss LGBQ+ individuals.

Increasing the availability of prominent, positive representations of LGBQ+ families in young children's media has two important theoretical implications: (1) It might enhance the effectiveness of educational programs by allowing children in LGBQ+ families to identify with characters more strongly, and (2) it might help mitigate against prejudice toward LGBQ+ individuals. Here we consider identification (Cohen, 2001) and the parasocial contact hypothesis (Schiappa et al., 2005) as theoretical frameworks for understanding the importance of LGBQ+ representation.

Identification Theory

Identification with media characters can occur for a variety of reasons, including recognition of similarity between self and character (Maccoby & Wilson, 1957). Research has demonstrated that children learn and remember more from characters who are similar or familiar to them (e.g., a childlike Muppet like Elmo) or who are otherwise socially meaningful to them, such as a mother or a teacher (e.g., Krmar, 2010; Lauricella et al., 2011; Troseth et al., 2006). Additionally, there is some indication that children identify more with characters who share a similar social environment. For example, *Sesame Street* was originally created to benefit low-income children living in cities, so creators designed the show to reflect the social environment of those children (i.e., inner-city Harlem; Greene, 2019). International productions of *Sesame Street* are also designed in culturally relevant ways, with neighborhoods and settings resembling those of children in the countries in which they air. Although research has not directly examined how mirroring these environments influences children's learning, decades of research has demonstrated the effectiveness of *Sesame Street* productions both domestically (Fisch et al., 1999) and internationally (Mares & Pan, 2013).

Family structure represents a prominent dimension of children's social environments. Currently, there are more than 11 million LGBTQ+ adults in the United States, and nearly 30% of these adults report that they are currently parenting a child under the age of 18 (The Williams Institute, 2019). These numbers suggest that there are nearly 1.6 million children growing up in LGBTQ+ households in the United States alone.² Consequently, it is concerning that these children have limited access to programming that represents their unique family structures. Representing these social environments in educational content might help promote learning about academic concepts (e.g., numeracy and scientific literacy), given that children in LGBTQ+ families might experience stronger identification with characters in those programs (Krcmar, 2010; Lauricella et al., 2011; Troseth et al., 2006). Although this same effect might not occur among children from traditional family structures, these depictions could nevertheless expose those children to information about diverse families. Imparting this type of sociocultural knowledge is arguably a worthwhile educational endeavor on its own. Moreover, identification with these characters would likely grow after repeated exposure (Bond, 2021), given that other types of similarities (e.g., personality, interests) would become more apparent over time.

Parasocial Contact Hypothesis

LGBQ+ representations in media can also act as agents of socialization that influence viewers' attitudes and beliefs (Berry, 2008; Gerbner, 1998), especially toward outgroups (Bond, 2021; Bond & Compton, 2015; Schiappa et al., 2005, 2006). Accordingly, it is possible that children who have no direct contact with LGBQ+ families might change their attitudes about those families by seeing them represented in media. While research has not documented how

² Considering the results of the Williams Institute survey, we conservatively estimate that there are around 1,600,000 children growing up with LGBTQ+ parents in the United States. This calculation assumes that every adult in the survey has a partner and that their partner was also surveyed and that each couple only has one child.

young children feel about same-sex or queer relationships, studies suggest that they hold implicit and explicit prejudices toward certain groups based on factors such as race, gender, or perceived attractiveness (see Aboud, 2005 for review). Consequently, it is possible that children might also hold prejudice toward families who are different from their own, especially if their own parents have negative opinions about LGBQ+ people.

One theoretical framework that is useful for considering how media might mitigate prejudice is the parasocial contact hypothesis. This framework suggests that mediated exposure to individuals from outgroups can reduce prejudice against those outgroups, similar to the effects of direct interpersonal contact (Schiappa et al., 2005). Already, research with adults has demonstrated that mediated exposure with LGBQ+ characters can reduce prejudice against LGBQ+ individuals, especially among people who have little (or no) interaction with LGBQ+ people in their everyday lives (Bond, 2021; Bond & Compton, 2015; Schiappa et al., 2006). Similar effects might also apply to young children. As parents frequently report co-viewing content with children under age 8 (Rideout & Robb, 2020), these depictions might also have the power to shape parent's attitudes (Bonus et al., 2022). In this manner, the inclusion of LGBQ+ narratives in media for young children has potential to mitigate prejudice across two generations: parents *and* their children.

Current State of Representations in Children's Media

As noted, there exist prominent examples of LGBQ+ characters in media targeted to older children (ages 7 and older). For example, *Adventure Time* and *Steven Universe* both feature relationships between female characters (i.e., Princess Bubblegum and Marceline; Ruby and Sapphire); *The Loud House* features a bisexual female character (i.e., Luna Loud); and *Andi Mack* features a gay male character (i.e., Cyrus). Typically, these characters are depicted in

romantic plotlines (e.g., Cyrus on *Andi Mack* has a crush on a boy who has feelings for Andi instead of him). These romantic plotlines are more meaningful for older children, who are often starting to explore romantic relationships as they enter adolescence (Collins et al., 2009). While younger children might experience early forms of romantic feelings such as crushes (Hatfield et al., 1988), parents and pediatricians generally suggest that children wait until they are older to formally enter romantic relationships (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2009).

Consequently, family diversity seems to be a more appropriate avenue for representing LGBQ+ characters in media targeted to younger children (ages 3-6). There are fewer instances of this type of representation, however, and available depictions typically manifest in brief moments rather than in prominent narratives. For example, one episode of *Clifford* reveals that Emily Elizabeth's friend has two mothers; one episode of *Sesame Street* features a moment where Nina introduces her brother and his husband; and the film *Toy Story 4* contains a moment where a child is dropped off at school by two moms. While these moments represent important points of representation, they are few and fleeting, and even adults sometimes fail to recognize when they occur (McAndrew & Bonus, 2022). Accordingly, the potential social benefits of these depictions might be lost (Berry, 2008; Gerbner, 1998), and more prominent narratives are needed.

One noteworthy exemplar is a 2019 episode of *Arthur*, which focused entirely on the marriage of Mr. Ratburn to his husband. A more extended exemplar is the 2019 program *The Bravest Knight* on Hulu. Each episode was structured around Cedric and his husband, Andrew, telling their daughter about how Cedric became the "greatest knight." These types of detailed stories allow for repeated engagement with diverse family content, which normalizes LGBQ+ family narratives and allows children the opportunity to develop parasocial relationships with

these characters. While there is not yet research on how children process these prominent LGBQ+ media narratives, a recent report examining high-profile films found that authentic and inclusive stories score better with critics and at the box office (Higginbotham et al., 2020), indicating a general desire among audiences to engage with diverse narratives.

One potential reason for this relative lack of representation is the vocal outcry that these narratives have received from some advocacy groups. For example, the inclusion of lesbian mothers in *Clifford* and Mr. Ratburn's wedding on *Arthur* sparked outrage from organizations like One Million Moms and *The New American*, which argued that media producers had violated parental trust by including these stories in children's programming (Foust, 2020). We note, however, that the majority of Americans are supportive of LGBQ+ individuals. Indeed, nearly three-quarters of Americans approve of same-sex relationships (Pew Research Center, 2020). Additionally, there is some limited evidence that parents are ready for this type of representation in children's media. Specifically, a recent study examined U.S. parents' perceptions of an episode of Nickelodeon's *The Loud House* in which a young girl, Luna Loud, has romantic feelings for another girl. The majority of parents surveyed (63%) had favorable views of the episode and expected it to have a positive impact on their child (McAndrew & Bonus, 2022). These patterns suggest that many parents are receptive to age-appropriate LGBQ+ representations in children's media.

Recommendations for Researchers and Practitioners

Considering the potential power of media as an agent for social change (Berry, 2008), both researchers and practitioners have an important role to play in diversifying children's media. Researchers can help to inform the development of LGBQ+ representations by working directly with queer parents to identify narratives that they would like to see represented,

especially narratives that move beyond fleeting moments of inclusion. Similar research has been used to understand Black parents' views about representations of Black characters in children's media (McClain, 2022), and this model could be used to examine the views of queer parents (e.g., same-sex, aromantic, pansexual, etc.) who represent diverse family structures. Researchers can also work to advance theory about why and how diverse family representations are important for young children. Although we highlighted the important role of identification for children's learning from media (Cohen, 2001), most extant research has focused on character race and gender rather than social environment (e.g., Aladé et al., 2021; Kahlenberg, 2017). It will be important for future research to examine how identification is influenced by the inclusion of diverse family structures in children's media. We also discussed the potential importance of parasocial interaction for reducing prejudice toward LGBQ+ families. As existing research has mostly focused on adolescents and adults (e.g., Bond, 2021; Bond & Compton, 2015), it will be important for future research to examine how exposure to diverse family representations influences children's (and parents') attitudes.

For media creators and producers, it is important to consider prominent and honest representations of queer families. Collaborating with researchers to conduct focus groups with LGBQ+ parents, as described above, can ensure accurate representations of LGBQ+ families in media. Moreover, media creators can also look to shows like *Andi Mack*, which was developed through noteworthy collaborations between a media company (i.e., Disney) and nonprofit groups (i.e., PFLAG and GLAAD). These collaborations were crucial for ensuring that LGBQ+ storylines in the program were respectful and age-appropriate (Wong, 2017). By working directly with LGBQ+ populations and organizations, creators of other programs can ensure that LGBQ+ narratives are honest, accurate, and effective. In doing so, media content creators and

researchers can work to ensure that all children, regardless of background and age, can see themselves and their families portrayed in a positive light.

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