

Children's exposure to homosexuality in popular culture

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The issue of homosexuality is a hot topic because of its religious, political, and social aspects that can be debated. The Family Research Report says "around 2-3% of men, and 2% of women, are homosexual or bisexual" (Gallup). Education on the topic is vital to promote acceptance and this can be done through formal or informal education. Formally, healthcare professionals or school sexual education classes can educate. But informally, parents, friends, and media are the most influential on people.

In the media, homosexuality is portrayed in many ways and through many portals. In subtle ways it can be demonstrated with intimate friendships, inclusivity, hints, stereotypes, references, and physicality. The most easily influenced are children therefore they are the ones who need to be educated. Dennis says, "queering, locating undertows of same-sex desire between putatively heterosexual characters (Doty) is actually easier in programs targeted to children and adolescents than those targeted to adults" (739).

Homosexual representations in popular culture on television positively and directly affect the acceptance of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transvestite individuals by younger generations. Inclusivity is important in children's television programs to show viewers that heteronormativity is not the only option available in relationships. One show studied by Dennis uses a Nickelodeon show, *Ned's Declassified School Survival Guide*, to demonstrate how subtle changes in dialogue can send a more positive message.

The show is made as a guide to help adolescents survive in middle school or high school and offers tips on how to be successful in aspects not directly

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related to academics. In one episode Ned says "when you like someone..." when he could have just as easily said "when you like a girl..." (Dennis 742). Changing the tip to include both sexes indicates that the character views a relationship to not be restrained to one sex or the other. While involving a more general target, the program also drops the notion that one sex must always be attracted to the opposite sex.

Lack of such inclusivity leads children to grow up ignorant to the options they have and shows them that homosexuality is unacceptable. When a child relies on parents or formal education for sexual education, homosexuality is often excluded as a topic to be discussed and may be uncomfortable with it later in life when exposure is guaranteed. The largest case of ignorance and avoidance of the subject seems to be in the case of adolescent males, while adolescent girls tend to get a more complete and positive understanding of homosexuality in society (Herek, Cogan, and Gillis).

Although it may be a difficult topic to discuss with children or allow children to be exposed to, depending on the individual's beliefs or personal experience and knowledge, it is important that they give the children the information necessary to make decisions and judgments for themselves. This inclusivity positively affects children because they have the knowledge to accept individuals who are homosexual when they come in contact with them. In most cases in society, ignorance leads to fear, which is an unnecessary emotion when dealing with gay, lesbian, bisexual or transvestite people.

Stereotypes, specifically defying stereotypes, are an effective tactic to promote acceptance in children's television series. Because individuality is so important and applauded in our Western culture the defiance of social norms tends to be a good way to promote change or be noticed.

Heteronormative ideals are no exception to this rule and therefore to promote acceptance and shift away from homophobic ideas in the media, homosexuality needs to be more prominent. A good example of how going against the norm is a successful way to get attention is the hit TV show *The Simpsons*.

Everything about *The Simpsons* challenges the American Dream. It criticizes the hypocrisy within the American educational, religious, political, and economic systems (Tinglef). *The Simpsons* is also an example of defiance against heterosexual norms because there are many instances where the main character, Homer Simpson, acts in a way that is stereotypically homosexual such as kissing his secretary Carl, calling his wife Carl in bed, and having his favourite song be "It's Raining Men" (Dennis 60).

There are also secondary characters that act in a homosexual way such as Lenny, who sees a heaven full of Carls when he is dying. Another example is in Dennis' study where he observed beauty as an important and frequent occurrence with males in young children's programs, which is usually a trait attributed to females. This defiance of stereotypes is important for television series because it demonstrates the importance of individuality in our society and shows younger audiences that just because heterosexuality is the norm, it is not the only way to be.

When children understand this at a young age, they will tend not to hold back homosexual feelings if they get them later in life. Subtle or obvious hints are important aspects to children's programming because they demonstrate how homosexual ideas, behaviours, and acts are part of modern society. This exposure to subconscious hints implements the impression that these ideas, behaviours, and acts are not out of the ordinary and are to be accepted like all other aspects of society.

While watching television, children often see same-sex couples portrayed as intimate friendships. An example is with bullies Crony and Loomer on Ned's Declassified School Survival Guide who are always together. Some episodes show them doing stereotypical couple acts such as expressing jealousy if the other has a love interest. While studying the show, Dennis observed that in one episode Crony struggles to come out about his passion for fashion design, especially to Loomer, whom he thinks might end their friendship if he found out.

Dennis describes this struggle as a metaphorical coming out as gay, especially when dealing with the issue of the "gender transgressive" interest in fashion (741). Hints such as those directed at intimate friendships and other homosexual behaviours positively affect the children watching the programs because they increase the belief in the normality of resistance against the heterosexual norms. Such hints of resistance can often be seen in children's programming, especially in animated series with a high degree of fantasy (Dennis 744).

Thanks to media exposure, acceptance of homosexual culture has become increasingly popular recently. Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transvestite people are more common in the media than ever before and homosexual culture is generally accepted in bigger cities. Homosexual actors and characters are also becoming more common on Harper, 5 television programs. One example is the TV show The Simpsons with several regular characters that are clearly homosexuals such as Mr. Smithers, Homer's secretary Carl, and Marge's sister Patty. It is important for adolescents to see this kind of diversity on TV so that they can be more accepting in their own communities.

The Simpsons was awarded an Emmy Award for its 8th season, 15th episode, called Homer's phobia for the lessons it gives on homosexuality and acceptance. In this episode, a gay parade that passes by the Simpsons' home inspires Homer to attempt to man-up his son, Bart. Throughout the episode Homer has homophobic worries and tries to prevent Bart from turning gay, which is a negative lesson for children, but the show turns around at the end and Homer assures him of his unconditional love, whether he is straight or not (Padva 60).

Through inclusivity, defying stereotypes, and giving subtly hints homosexuality in children's television programs is increasing awareness and acceptance in younger generations of children. Although the incorporation of homosexual gestures and references in children's television rises the question of why producers, directors, and actors decided to add them in the beginning, whether it was a purposeful act with political intentions, a

deliberate but joking incorporation, or completely unintentional, it became evident that the effects are positive and will continue to be positive for as long as homosexual representation is positive.