

DRAG QUEENS, CHILDREN, AND LIBRARIES, OH MY! A MODERN-DAY ISSUE

ENG W270: THIRD PLACE

Robert Conte

Abstract

Drag Queen Story Hour (DQSH) has sparked a debate in communities and political circles over the past five years. While some view it as a positive and educational event showcasing diversity, others believe it has sinister motives of subverting children morally, socially, and psychologically. The clash between conservative and progressive groups is evident in social media discussions and articles. The controversy surrounding DQSH has led to discussions on indoctrination, gender stereotypes, and LGBTQ issues. Authors like Jamie Campbell Naidoo advocate for continuing such programs to promote diversity and acceptance in communities. On the other hand, William F. Jasper expresses concerns about the potential negative impacts of exposing children to drag queens, arguing that it goes beyond mere entertainment. The differing viewpoints highlight the complex nature of the debate surrounding DQSH.

For some, imagining a new type of class setting where the instructor is a female impersonator evokes a negative reaction. At the same time, others are embracing this new way of learning with open arms and an excitement that is contagious. With the creation of Drag Queen Story Hour (DQSH) by Michelle Tea in San Francisco at the start of 2015, drag queens reading stories to children in libraries and schools has taken the world by storm. In recent years, the attention

surrounding drag artists has expanded in favorable ways while at the same time drawing harsh criticism. With some looking at drag as an artform that can add diversity to life, others are seeing it as a perversion that has no place in society. On both sides of the issue there remains a key concern: the children. The question being asked is whether the exposure of drag queens in a classroom or library setting is helpful or harmful to today's kids. With research, facts and personal stories being at the forefront of this discussion, the once inconceivable idea of drag queens reading to children is becoming a reality and proving to have a positive effect on today's youth and their families.

The conversations surrounding DQSH range from civil peer-reviewed articles that encourage the continuation of these programs to inflammatory opinion pieces that have a way of raising the hair of their audiences. In his article, "The Fabulousness and the Fury: Preparing for a Drag Queen Storytime," author and manager of library services Douglas Davey (2020) writes a contemporary guide on dealing with the issue of negative feedback over drag queen story events. Davey (2020) explains a reason for the criticism is fear for the safety of the children. Parents have come forward with such complaints as, "The performers will sexually assault children during the performance, and that, around the world, there has been a spree of drag queens doing just that" (Davey, 2020, as cited in Public Comment Prior to the Show section, para. 5). Though the author has not seen any evidence of his own to warrant this fear, he acknowledges that the unease comes from a place of sincerity, lack of knowledge on the topic, and a wish for the betterment of the community. Contributing to this conversation, author Jamie Campbell Naidoo (2018) writes about the issue of handling discontented community members in his article "A Rainbow of Creativity: Exploring Drag Queen Storytimes and Gender Creative Programming in Public Libraries." The author, who is also a professor of library and information studies, lays out the different ways to produce a drag story hour in the face of political opposition. His

message throughout the article is to continue the programming with a solid plan in place in the face of adversity. Naidoo (2018) writes: "By offering DQS programs, the library can help establish an environment that accepts and celebrates diversity" (as cited in Advocacy for Rainbow Families and Comm. Engagement Strategies section, para. 1).

By contrast, William F. Jasper (2020), an American journalist, takes a different approach when diving into the issue of indoctrination in his article, "Drag"ing Kids Into the LGBTQ Abyss: Outraged Parents and Grandparents are Fighting to Protect America's Children From the Drag Queen Story Hour Explosion Being Promoted by the Militant LGBTQ Lobby and its Big Business/Big Media Allies." Jasper asserts that "the indoctrination on transgenderism begins in kindergarten, with children being encouraged to question their 'gender' and 'gender stereotypes'. And it gets progressively more extreme from there" (as cited in Intro. section, para. 5). The writer takes issue with and argues that these events are not merely for the entertainment of children, but for something far more sinister--an attempt to subvert children morally, socially, and psychologically (as cited in Thirty Years of Subversion section, para. 1).

Jasper is not alone in his feelings as shown in the article, "Clear and Omnipresent Danger: Digital Age Culture Wars and Reactions to Drag Queen Story Hour Across Diverse Subreddit Communities," written by Alyssa J. Davis and Heather H. Kettrey (2021), who hold a Master's in social sciences and a PhD in sociology, respectively. This piece showcases this new age culture war by pointing out the many issues that far right groups are posting about on social media. In Subreddit communities, conservatives are exchanging their negative thoughts on drag queens and children sharing the same space with threats and violent rhetoric while progressive groups are fighting back, using choice words to defend their stance.

It is true that in researching this topic, it has been difficult to find credible, peer-reviewed articles opposing DQSH. This may be

in part due to the world of academia being more of a liberal outlet. However, there are still plenty of articles with flashy headlines that push a conservative narrative. Fox News featured an article on their website entitled, "Drag Queen Story Hour's Radical Origins and the Subversive Sexualization of our Kids," an opinion piece by Christopher F. Rufo (2022), who uses fallacies to get a rise out of his audience, a popular trend with the many opinion pieces written on this topic. Rufo (2022) writes:

In Minneapolis, a drag queen in heels and a pink miniskirt spread his legs open in front of children, and in Portland, a large male transvestite allowed toddlers to climb on top of him, grab at his fake breasts, and press themselves against his body. (para. 15)

The author provides little context when describing this scenario and follows it by explaining that drag has always been about sex. He begs the question of his readers; how could it ever be about anything else? While never having attended a story hour himself, the writer uses colorful trigger language such as: transvestite, pedophile, and ideology to describe them. His sentiments conclude with what the future will look like when political leaders, parents and community members get wise to what is actually taking place inside library walls. Rufo (2022) writes, "They will draw a bright line between adult sexuality and childhood innocence and send the perversions of queer theory back to the margins, where they belong" (para. 17). The author hints to his readers that it is time for people to stand up to the outlandish queer community and send them back into the shadows, where he appears to believe is the best place for this minority group.

In conducting my own primary research on this topic, I was able to ask the important questions and gauge how individuals truly feel without guiding them with my own thoughts on the issue (see appendix for the original questions asked to participants). The online survey was distributed on Facebook to 2,652 "friends" and was

completely voluntary. The collection process lasted 24 hours with a total of 160 respondents, resulting in a completion percentage of 16.575%. With that, the overwhelming majority of respondents proved to be in favor of DQSH, effectively arguing that these events are an asset to a child's life. Conservative parents and religious groups have expressed concern over the idea that drag queens could potentially indoctrinate children that attend these story hour events. However, the heavy liberal presence among the respondents (admittedly, a limitation within my research), showed the opposite to be true. One hundred nineteen of the 160 participants strongly disagree that a child is at risk of indoctrination or grooming when surrounded by a drag queen in any setting. On the other hand, when asked if children were at risk of indoctrination or grooming when surrounded by religious clergy in any setting, the respondents were inconsistent with their responses, with most people somewhat agreeing with that statement. Parents and community members of all political sides seem to have the best intentions when it comes to protecting the youth of today. As one respondent wrote, "I think story hours are awesome no matter who puts them on. Kids need to hear good stories, watch good theater, and read books, so who cares what the person's wearing as long as they're modest when presenting."

A popular negative criticism of DQSH is that the artists are dressing in a provocative and immodest fashion. This talking point has become prominent amongst those that oppose the events, and though it can be true for the adult atmosphere of a nightclub, it holds little truth in a library or school setting. The website *Cleveland.com* features an article entitled, "Welcome to Drag 101, Where the More You Know, the Less You Fear" by columnist Leslie Kouba, who dispels the many rumors that are swirling around these events, while taking the opportunity to reassure parents that DQSH are more than appropriate for young children. Kouba (2023) writes "Don't ever compare drag with strip shows. No one takes their clothes off. In fact, most performers

are wearing more layers than kids going sledding” (as cited in para. 16). Her argument playfully addresses the seriousness of the accusations while shedding light on reality. This back-and-forth debate over appropriateness and potential grooming has grown into an amplified dispute over beliefs of what is right and what is wrong. The difference in the arguments, however, is that one side is using facts based on research and the other is letting their emotions get the best of them. The focus of those in favor tends to be on personal experience and data in peer-reviewed articles that support DQSH, with the emphasis relying heavily on encouragement and the continuation of these events.

With the state of the nation’s divisive pattern over the better part of the last decade, it is no surprise that members of a community that represent acceptance and inclusion are trying to bring families together. The difficulty in that though, is when an issue is as complex as drag queens and children sharing the same space, many people need to be heard. Those who oppose the events fear the psychological impact it will have on children. In a study conducted by Brie Radis et al. (2021), the authors look closely at whether DQSH have psychoeducational effects on children. The results provided evidence that the events are beneficial not only to LGBTQ+ children but to heteronormative families as well. The authors argue that drag queen reading programs as an educational tool help children and their families begin the important discussion surrounding issues of gender identity and expression. Their study also suggests that the negative discourse around the program, including protests, causes children to fear for their safety and exposes them to hate (Radis et al. 2021).

Growing up as a young gay man at the tail-end of the 20th century was not the easiest task. Facing day after day bullying made me question my very existence. Though I have grown into a confident, well-adjusted individual, those feelings have a way of sticking. When hearing about members of the LGBTQ+ community facing backlash for

just being who they are, it reminds me that we have a long way to go in becoming equal to our fellow heterosexual neighbors. The idea of those protesting and spewing hatred around such events as DQSH stirs up emotions that are all too familiar. Parents and guardians have the absolute right to express their views on both sides without feeling like they are being backed into a corner. They have the option to celebrate the unique, glittery, larger than life artform, or they can just as quickly reject it. The issue, however, is that one side is not allowed to place their beliefs on the other. As one participant in my primary research wrote, "If you don't want your kids going to the drag queen story hours, then just don't take them. It's really that simple. It is very harmful that we are using something meant to be inclusive for spreading hatred."

In his article, "'I'm Just Trying to Make the World a Little Brighter': How the Culture Wars Hijacked Drag Queen Story Hour," associate editor of *The Guardian Culture* Tim Jonze (2022) writes, "Politically speaking, drag queens and kings have been at the forefront of the LGBTQ+ movement for some time; Marsha P Johnson was one of the prominent figures during the 1969 Stonewall riots in New York City" (as cited in para. 16). While DQSH is not as extreme a gesture as throwing the first brick to start the riots, like Johnson did, it is still a brave task that is not for the faint of heart. Drag queens are, at times, walking through crowds of protestors just to enter the story hours, facing threatening language and harsh criticism. Once safely inside the building, the world of storytelling begins, with the artists captivating their young audiences and family members. Jonze (2022) discusses the main goal of story hours with Cherri Ontop, a queen who hosts events at her local library. She states:

I have these children for an hour: I'm not going to try to tackle gender identity issues. My aim is just to give them little bits of information to try to make their world a bit brighter.

I tell them that, growing up, I was considered very different, but now I get to wear what I want – and look at how fabulous I am! I let them know that being different is really cool, and so is being normal...and we can live in society together. (as cited in para. 21)

Fearmongering is an easy way to generate controversy, but if those who protest and stand in opposition took a moment to try to understand the intent behind the story hours, they just may be surprised at what they find.

Mrs. Kasha Davis is an American drag queen that has been featured on season seven of Ru Paul's Drag Race. She is also an actor and a frequent host of DQSH around the country. I had the privilege of asking Kasha her take on what these story hours mean to her and how she sees them effecting children and their families. She explains that even though the audience is mostly younger children, from infant to seven years old, she is aware that the audience of parents and grandparents are getting just as much out of the event as the kids, or more. Kasha's excitement is contagious as she describes the message she hopes families are leaving with. The popular drag queen explains, "We focus not on 'how to do drag,' but instead, if you see anyone different in the world, treat them with kindness. We teach the importance of expressing creativity and believing in and loving yourself" This popular theme has seemed to become a trademark of DQSH events around the country and Kasha's events are no exception. She describes the atmosphere as "Mrs. Doubtfire, hosting Pee Wee's Playhouse, inside Mr. Roger's Neighborhood" (personal communication, June 6, 2023).

Even though she has not personally seen pushback for her events, something she chalks up as luck, she believes the opposition around the country is exposing the "actual issue, which is transphobia" (personal communication, June 6, 2023). Kasha Davis, however, is not letting the criticism get her down as she is confident that these events

are changing lives. She is seeing in real time the difference they are making for families of all types. She describes her favorite memory as a father approaching her in tears one day after a story hour. He thanked her for showing him that his child has a loving and healthy community to be a part of. With all the joy and gratitude being expressed toward her, Kasha explains one of her many goals in life: "I just want to provide the world with something happy, healthy, positive, and kind that wasn't available when I was a child" (personal communication, June 6, 2023). She notes that she could only imagine what these events would have done for her and her father's relationship had they been available, a popular sentiment that is heard throughout the queer community.

Over the last five years, the topic of drag queens reading to children has created an undeniable debate amongst community members and political parties. It has become a modern-day culture war that has placed today's youth right in the middle. As drag queen Cherri Ontop states, "It's so easy to dress homophobia and transphobia up as concern for children" (Jonze, 2022, as cited in para. 23). Our future generations need to learn and be taught that every human being is worthy of acceptance and inclusion, without the prejudice of some parents being placed on them. Whether it is in a school or public library or if the teacher is a cisgender female or an over-the-top drag queen, it is essential that today's children expand their minds with both knowledge and tolerance. Though it is true that the studies are still young on how these events are making an impact on a child's life as they age, there is no denying the joy they exude in the moment. In future research, it would be interesting to ask children how they feel about these events. When they are grown, it would be a fascinating study to see how it has affected their education and growth. For now, though, with this being a newer topic, the focus of research remains on the adult perception of the story hours.

In her article, "Kids Are Born Without Prejudice & Here's How to Keep Them That Way," Esther Peverley (2020) writes, "There is

nothing predetermined in a child's mind, at birth, that creates bigotry, racism, or intolerance. The environment a child is brought up in directs their way of thinking and creates their prejudices" (as cited in para. 1). Parents and guardians have the enormous responsibility of raising their children in whatever way they see fit, but given this information, it is clear that the adults begin the process of either acceptance or intolerance. Throughout the years, the LGBTQ+ community has overcome many obstacles and will continue to do so. The help and support of allies has contributed to the existence of queer people's lives and creates a safe space for younger LGBTQ+ kids to come to terms with their own sexuality. Not only do Drag Queen Story Hours provide an outlet for "rainbow families," but they also engage heteronormative families that want to expose their children to the many colorful aspects of life. With the unlikely, but successful pairing of drag queens and children coming together to create an educational event, it showcases what imaginations can do. Even though there are some who oppose this convergence, there are many more who appreciate it for what it represents. It is a new way of learning, a new way of expressing, and above all, it teaches us that if we allow them, children will accept those that may look and act slightly different from themselves. ■

REFERENCES

- Davey, D. (2020). The fabulousness and the fury: Preparing for a drag queen storytime. *Partnership: The Canadian Journal of Library and Information Practice and Research*, 15(2), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.21083/partnership.v15i2.6219>
- Davis, A. J., & Kettrey, H. H. (2021). Clear and omnipresent danger: Digital age culture wars and reactions to drag queen story hour across diverse subreddit communities. *Social Currents*, 9(1), 25–44. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23294965211050019>
- Jasper, W. F. (2019). “Drag”ing kids into the LGBTQ abyss: Outraged parents and grandparents are fighting to protect America’s children from the Drag Queen Story Hour explosion being promoted by the militant LGBTQ lobby and its Big Business/Big Media allies. *The New American*, 35(15), 10+. https://link-gale-com.proxyeast.uits.iu.edu/apps/doc/A597715492/OVIC?u=iulib_east&sid=bookmark-OVIC&xid=3ec1dc29
- Jonze, T. (2022). “I’m just trying to make the world a little brighter:” How the culture wars hijacked Drag Queen Story Hour. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2022/aug/11/im-just-trying-to-make-the-world-a-little-brighter-how-the-culture-wars-hijacked-drag-queen-story-hour>
- Kouba, L. (2023). Welcome to Drag 101, where the more you know, the less you fear: Leslie Kouba. *Cleveland*. <https://www.cleveland.com/opinion/2023/04/welcome-to-drag-101-where-the-more-you-know-the-less-you-fear-leslie-kouba.html>
- Naidoo, J. C. (2018). A rainbow of creativity: Exploring drag queen storytimes and gender creative programming in public libraries. *Children and Libraries*, 16(4), 12–22. <https://doi.org/10.5860/cal.16.4.12>
- Peverley, E. (2020) Kids are born without prejudice & here’s how to keep them that way. *Moms*. <https://www.moms.com/kids-born-without-prejudice-tips-how/>
- Radis, B., Wenocur, K., Jin, J., & Keeler, C. (2021). A rainbow for reading: A mixed-methods exploratory study on drag queen reading programs. *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health*, 17(3), 332–349. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15401383.2021.1892557>
- Rufo, C. (2022). Drag queen story hour’s radical origins and the subversive sexualization of our kids. *City Journal*. <https://www.foxnews.com/opinion/drag-queen-story-hours-radical-origins-subversive-sexualization-kids>

Robert Conte is originally from New York, and now lives in the Southern Indiana/Louisville region with his husband. Robert will graduate with a B.S. in Psychology in the Spring of 2025, then move on to receive his master’s in clinical Mental Health Counseling.

APPENDIX A:

Survey Questions

1. What is your age?

- a. 18-24 years
- b. 25-34 years
- c. 35-44 years
- d. 45-54 years
- e. 55-64 years
- f. 65+ years

2. What is your gender?

- a. Male- Cisgender
- b. Female- Cisgender
- c. Transgender Male
- d. Transgender Female
- e. Non-Binary
- f. Gender Fluid/Gender Queer

3. What is the highest level of school you have completed?

- a. High school graduate or equivalent (ex. GED)
- b. Some college, no degree
- c. Bachelor's or Associate degree
- d. Master's degree
- e. Doctorate degree

4. What is your political party affiliation?

- a. Democrat
- b. Republican
- c. Independent
- d. Libertarian
- e. Other

5. Are you a parent?

- a. Yes
- b. No

6. What is the age of your children?

- a. 0-10 years
- b. 11-20 years
- c. 21-30 years
- d. 31-40 years
- e. 41+ years
- f. N/A

7. Have you ever attended a show that featured a drag queen?

- a. Yes
- b. No

8. Across the nation, state lawmakers are advancing and passing bills that ban or censor drag performers. Do you support the current bans and limitations being imposed on drag queens and drag venues popping up across the country?

- a. Yes
- b. No

9. Do you think state and local governments should decide whether Drag Queen Story Hours can continue?

- a. Yes
- b. No

10. Given the opportunity, would you attend a Drag Queen Story Hour with your children (if applicable), or support the event at a local venue?

- a. Yes
- b. No

11. If a Drag Queen Story Hour was taking place in your local community, how likely would you be to criticize and/or protest the event?

- a. Extremely likely
- b. Somewhat likely
- c. Neither likely nor unlikely
- d. Somewhat unlikely
- e. Extremely unlikely

12. Do you agree or disagree with this statement: "A child is at risk of indoctrination or grooming when surrounded by drag queens in any setting?"

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Somewhat agree
- c. Neither agree nor disagree
- d. Somewhat disagree
- e. Strongly disagree

13. Do you agree or disagree with this statement: "A child is at risk of indoctrination or grooming when surrounded by religious clergy in any setting?"

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Somewhat agree
- c. Neither agree nor disagree
- d. Somewhat disagree
- e. Strongly disagree

14. Which words best describe what comes to mind when thinking of drag queens reading to children?

- a. Inclusion/Acceptance
- b. Perversion/Sinful

15. Those in favor of Drag Queen Story argue that “it is an opportunity for parents and their children to be inclusive while learning.” Those that oppose the events argue that “it is brainwashing our youth to accept this perversion.” In a sentence or two, do you think Drag Queen Story Hours are helpful or harmful to today’s children? Why?
