

How the tide turned on transgender support charity Mermaids

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The charity Mermaids, which offers support services to transgender

young people and their caregivers in the UK, was once portrayed in the media as a respected source of advice and information. But by 2022, this had changed.

[Our recent study](#) showed that negative attention to the charity peaked in 2022, a year that saw British newspapers regularly publishing stories that helped establish an image of Mermaids as a danger to young people.

Our findings show how some [media outlets](#) have used negative representations of Mermaids to imply that those who support trans young people are untrustworthy. Such representations have threatened to turn the organization into a weapon against the very people it is trying to help.

In the past decade, there has been a significant increase in media attention on [transgender people](#) and the issues that affect them, something that has been noted [in research](#) commissioned by Mermaids and carried out by linguistics professor Paul Baker.

Studies have also shown how these media representations of transgender people [often dehumanize](#) them, [ignore and disregard](#) their identities, and characterize them as either [victims or villains](#).

[Representations of young transgender people](#) have tended to be more positive, or at least neutral. Yet [news stories](#) often suggest that their efforts to transition, for example through the adoption of a new name or clothing choices, should not be supported.

Increasing interest

[Our study](#) showed that Mermaids became the subject of particularly intense media scrutiny in late 2022. At this time, [news articles](#) and opinion pieces were calling into question the charity's legitimacy and authority, with particular attention to their support of young people's

decisions and preferences around clothing and names. The Times and Telegraph published numerous reports in the autumn of 2022 that called Mermaids' practices a "danger" to young people.

For example, in October 2022 the Daily Telegraph published an article titled "Trans charity helping 16-year-olds legally change names in secret," which also states that Mermaids "gave potentially dangerous chest-flattening devices to 14-year-olds against their parents' wishes."

Chest binders were a particular focus in many articles. Our research shows that the frequency of the word "binder" dramatically increased in 2022 articles about Mermaids. Binders are tight-fitting items of clothing that some trans and gender questioning young people wear in order to minimize [gender dysphoria](#) and affirm their gender identities.

Many of the articles describe binders as destructive, powerful mechanisms that are dangerous to young people. They focus on physical health problems, such as musculoskeletal and breathing issues, which can result from unsafe or unregulated binding.

The articles do not tend to acknowledge the harm that can be caused by gender dysphoria, or by attempting to bind the chest without adult supervision. [Research has shown](#) that the potential for health risks may be worsened if young people try to hide their use of a binder from adults, instead of discussing how to use one safely.

Mermaids [responded to the Telegraph](#) article by clarifying that they are working to reduce harm for young people. They note that providing "comprehensive safety guidelines from an experienced member of staff is preferable to the likely alternative." Mermaids' guidance says it is important to follow safety tips such as limiting use as much as possible in warm weather, even if you're struggling with [gender dysphoria](#).

Changing perspectives

The services offered by Mermaids have remained largely unchanged over the years. However, when we [investigated the representation](#) of Mermaids in British newspapers, we found there hadn't always been such high levels of negative attention.

Between 2015 and 2016, during their first year operating as a charity, there was hardly any interest in Mermaids' activities. Where it was mentioned, the organization was usually represented as a valuable support service.

In 2018, media interest increased significantly after the release of *Butterfly*, an ITV drama about a trans young person and their family. In the same year, the National Lottery announced they would be awarding a grant of £500,000 to support Mermaids' work through the Big Lottery Fund.

While newspapers were still signposting Mermaids as a source of information and support at this time, there was also resistance to the charity's growing recognition and positive reputation. For example, the *Sunday Times* reported "an outcry" following the Big Lottery announcement, calling into question the value of Mermaids' work as a public service.

Between 2019 and 2022, the frequency of articles about Mermaids grew again, driven by negative reporting around its practices and the leadership of former CEO Susie Green. 2022 saw the most significant peak in interest, with four times as many articles being published than in the previous year.

These changing representations of Mermaids are in line with wider shifts in the climate for trans young people in Britain. Just before Christmas,

the UK government's Department for Education released its [long-awaited guidance](#) on gender questioning children for schools and colleges in England.

The guidance, which is undergoing public consultation and is not legally enforceable, advises educators to take a restrictive approach to transgender pupils' social transition at school. The LGBTQ+ charity [Stonewall said](#) the guidance has "the potential to have a very chilling effect" akin to section 28, which banned the discussion of same-sex relationships in English schools between 1988 and 2003.

Recent years have seen more awareness of trans identities among the general public, and a [significant increase](#) in referrals to gender identity services. Much of the [media coverage](#) around trans young people alludes to the potential for regret.

However, the [vast majority](#) of young people who socially transition maintain a stable gender identity into adulthood and a 2021 US study found rates of [post-surgery regret](#) are 0.3%.

[Paul Baker's research](#) suggested that organizations like Mermaids may be targeted because they can more easily be named and critiqued than trans young people themselves. We would agree.

Discrediting the organization, not the people, allows journalists to question and oppose young people's [gender identities](#) without breaking media [guidelines](#) for reporting about trans people and children.

The dominant image of Mermaids as a dangerous and controversial organization has probably contributed to a growing culture of fear and suspicion around trans young people and those who support them.

Hardly a negative word has been directed towards transgender [young](#)

[people](#), yet the seeds of mistrust, in anyone who upholds their identities and choices, have been firmly planted by the British media.

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