



Right-wing and evangelical media helped land anti-trans parent group the Kelsey Coalition in USA Today

The Kelsey Coalition has been promoting harmful junk science in the media and to policymakers

Special PROGRAMS

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USA Today published an anti-trans op-ed on August 12 from a member of the Kelsey Coalition, a small group of anti-trans parents that has been promoted in right-wing and evangelical media for several months. The group spreads anti-trans misinformation under the guise of promoting responsible parenting.

In the op-ed, parent Jay Keck detailed his years-long attempts to deny his son's gender identity and block school administrators from affirming his son. Keck's anti-trans sentiments reflect the Kelsey Coalition's growing efforts to organize parents and health care professionals to block young trans people from receiving life-saving gender-affirmative care.

The Kelsey Coalition is a group of anti-trans parents who advocate against accepting children's gender identity

The Kelsey Coalition claims to be "a non-partisan organization whose mission is to promote policies and laws that protect young people from medical and psychological harm." It was launched in March and is made up of parents who claim their "transgender-identifying children have been harmed by physicians, therapists, and clinics throughout the US."

Very little information about the Kelsey Coalition is readily available to the public. The group's website does not include information about its permanent staff and is scant on detail related to the group's incorporation or tax status. However, the website does solicit anonymous anti-trans personal testimonies from parents, feature online petitions that anti-trans parents can sign, and provide resources aimed at helping anti-trans parents lobby elected officials.

Despite claims of representing “hundreds of parents,” a review of its content and mentions of the group elsewhere showed only six public-facing members. Three are anonymous parents identified by the names Bill, Elaine, and Crystal. The other three include founder Katherine Cave, anti-trans endocrinologist Michael Laidlaw, and Keck, the author of the USA Today op-ed.

The group outlines projects specifically advocating against protections from conversion therapy for transgender youth and against the Equality Act, which would add “gender identity” and “sexual orientation” to existing civil rights nondiscrimination protections.

Right-wing and evangelical media have helped boost the Kelsey Coalition’s profile

A March 28 Heritage Foundation panel advocating against affirming the gender identities of transgender youth gave the Kelsey Coalition its first major platform to push its anti-trans views in right-wing spheres. The panel featured a woman going under the pseudonym “Elaine,” an anonymous mother of a trans child and member of the coalition. Elaine’s commentary was subsequently reprinted in Heritage’s media outlet, The Daily Signal, and right-wing evangelical outlet LifeSite News. It was also covered by The Christian Post.

After Elaine’s speech at the Heritage Foundation, several right-wing and evangelical outlets cited the Kelsey Coalition in anti-trans content, including National Review, PJ Media, CBN News, and The Christian Post. This coverage pushed similar misinformation about trans children and included such quotes as a Kelsey Coalition member comparing affirmation of children’s gender identity to “medical scandals” like “frontal lobotomies” and “forced sterilization to control ‘undesirable’ populations.”

Kelsey Coalition founder Cave wrote an article for Public Discourse in which she made false claims that gender-affirming treatment for transgender children “is a growing medical scandal” and “not evidence-based medicine.” In fact, these claims ignore recommendations from the American Academy of Pediatrics and the large body of research that supports the practice of affirming young trans people.

The USA Today op-ed reflects a dangerous entry into the mainstream and is riddled with misinformation

While coverage of the Kelsey Coalition over the past few months was limited to the echo chamber of right-wing and evangelical media outlets, USA Today’s publication of Keck’s op-ed marks a dangerous potential entry into the mainstream.

In the op-ed, Keck noted that he refused to recognize his child as transgender and told school administrators “to call her by her legal name at all times,” or otherwise deadname him. Deadnaming, or referring to a transgender person using their “birth name” rather than their affirming name, is a disrespectful practice that invalidates a trans person’s identity. It can also be “completely draining to a trans person’s mental health and can trigger anxiety, depression and gender dysphoria.” Additionally, numerous studies

show that transgender children are more likely to thrive when they are affirmed by their parents, teachers, and health care providers. Keck criticized conversion therapy protections and seemingly endorsed the dangerous and discredited practice for his child by saying that his son's school was preventing "her from getting the help she needs."

Keck also suggested that his child came out as trans due to the influence of another trans student, writing, "Shortly after meeting [a trans student], my daughter declared that she, too, was a boy trapped in a girl's body and picked out a new masculine name." Flawed and since reevaluated research has suggested such a trend, labeling it "rapid-onset gender dysphoria," or ROGD. The concept originated on anti-trans blogs in 2016, dubiously suggesting that being trans is a result of "social contagion." The academic journal that first published the flawed research wrote an apology for its original publication, noting that the concept is "not a clinically validated phenomenon or a diagnostic guideline." Keck's promotion of ROGD is not surprising, as he is the Chicago leader of ParentsofROGDKids, another group of parents who do not accept their children's trans identities.

Finally, Keck expressed fears that his child, who is now 18, may finally start to receive gender-affirming care in the form of hormone therapy without any "extensive mental health assessment." In fact, the standards of care set out by the Pediatric Endocrine Society and World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH) have clear guidelines for doctors working with young trans people who are medically transitioning. WPATH requires a "mental health screening and/or assessment ... for referral to hormonal and surgical treatments for gender dysphoria." It also states that any irreversible medical interventions should only be performed once "patients have lived continuously for at least 12 months in the gender role that is congruent with their gender identity" and notes that withholding medical treatment for gender dysphoric adolescents "could provoke abuse and stigmatization." Keck's op-ed notes that his trans child came out at 14 years old in April 2016, more than three years ago, so it appears that he has persisted in his understanding of his identity.

Though the Kelsey Coalition represents a small group of anti-trans parents, its influence seems to have grown beyond its small numbers since it was first elevated by the Heritage Foundation. On April 2, Rep. Tom McClintock (R-CA) cited the Kelsey Coalition's medical consultant, Michael Laidlaw, to fuel unfounded fears of "the medical dangers of this obsession with new transgender ideology" during a House Judiciary Committee hearing on the Equality Act. Moreover, the Kelsey Coalition recently submitted a petition to an office within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services calling for an end to a government-funded study on treating transgender youth. The Kelsey Coalition claimed the office has responded to the petition and said it will "start a review" of the contested study.

Correction (1/27/20): *This piece originally stated that USA Today published the Kelsey Coalition's op-ed on June 12. In fact, the op-ed was published on August 12.*