# Gender Role Stereotyping of Parents in Children's Picture Books: The Invisible Father

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Previous studies reveal the reinforcement of gender stereotypes by picture books children read during the formative years. In these books, boys tend to be portrayed as active leaders, and girls as passive followers. Women and girls are under-represented. Men often exhibit career skills, and women perform traditional tasks in the home. Even when careers are nontraditional, personality characteristics and other qualities and behaviors are often stereotypical. Previous researchers emphasized the narrowly defined roles of women and children in picture books. In this study, we focused on the representation of mothers and fathers, and examined whether men are stereotyped as relatively absent or inept parents. A content analysis of the gender roles exhibited in 200 prominent children's picture books demonstrated that fathers are largely under-represented, and, when they do appear, they are withdrawn and ineffectual parents. Further research could establish whether seriously deficient models of fatherhood in children's literature affect the incidence of present, caring fathers in society.

**KEY WORDS:** gender stereotypes; parents; children's literature.

"Are you my mother?," repeats the baby bird, who never bothers to inquire about a father. P. D. Eastman's (1960) *Are You My Mother?* is among other children's books that assist with literacy but may reinforce undesirable parental stereotypes at the same time. Picture books provide prolonged and repeated exposure to parenting techniques and related gender roles. Are the fathers present in the stories? Are they integral parts of families? Do they care for and nurture their children? Given the nearly $1 billion worth of children's books purchased every year (Children's Book Council, 2002) and the nightly rituals of reading them, their representations of parental roles may influence the socialization of both children and parents.

Although the labor force participation rate for mothers with infants rose from 38% in 1980 to 55% in 2002 (Downs, 2003), mothers in dual-earner families still perform about one-third more housework than fathers do, and they shoulder the majority of cooking and child care responsibilities (Bond, Thompson, Galinsky, & Prottas, 2003). Inequities in household duties, including childcare, are cited as major sources of conflict and depression within families (Bird, 1997, 1999; Ross & Mirowsky, 1988). What factors interfere with a broader role for fathers that includes more nurturing and housework? One variable that stands in the way of gender equality in parenting is the gender socialization of children and parents that perpetuates traditional divisions of household labor. One avenue for this socialization is children's literature. Diekman and Murnen (2004) found that even books praised as nonsexist in their portrayal of female characters seldom portray male characters in traditionally feminine gender roles.

Data from various studies suggest that gender-stereotypic portrayals in children's literature can influence the readers' attitudes and behaviors. For example, Trepanier-Street and Romatowski (1999) found that when books were selected with attention to the presentation of gender roles, the result

was a decrease in the stereotypic gender attitudes of the preschoolers exposed to the books. Fox (1993) discussed the significance of gender portrayals in children's books in terms of the transmission of a society's culture to new generations. She presented evidence from experiments with college students, who typically imitated the default of having a male main character and the inclusion of traditional stereotypes when writing their own stories for children. Narahara (1998) reviewed the research on sexism in books and its influence on children, and concluded that characters in books become gender role models; nonsexist books have been shown to have desirable influences on the self-concept, attitude, and behavior of children.

Weitzman, Eiffer, Hokada, and Ross (1972) studied 18 Caldecott Medal winners and runners-up to determine the relative presence of female and male characters in acclaimed children's books, and found that female characters were under-represented in titles, central roles, and pictures. Boys and girls were portrayed as active and passive, respectively, in the books. Men had careers, and women were wives and mothers. Subsequent studies of children's books by Kolbe and La Voie (1981), Heintz (1987), Williams, Vernon, Williams, and Malecha (1987), Purcell and Stewart (1990), Allen, Allen, and Sigler (1993), Kortenhaus and Demarest (1993), Turner-Bowker (1996), and McDonald (1998), among others, generally demonstrated that stereotyping and representational inequities began to improve in the 1970s, although significant imbalance and narrow gender roles still exist. Nilsen (1978) found that the percentage of female characters in award winning children's books fell steadily from 46% to 22% between 1950 and 1975. Collins, Ingoldsby, and Dellmann (1984) reported improved ratios of female to male characters in children's book titles, central roles, and pictures, and Dougherty and Engel (1987) found that the percentage of female characters had risen to 43% in the mid-1980s. Hamilton, Anderson, Broaddus, and Young (2005) found no additional progress in the relative frequency of female characters between 1987 and 2002.

Previous researchers have demonstrated an overall gender imbalance in favor of male characters in popular children's picture books, as well as demeaning gender role stereotypes for women and children. In the present study, we examined whether male characters, despite their prevalence, are under-represented in the vital role of parent. We examined the degree and form of imbalance in the portrayal of women and men in parenting roles; our general hypothesis was that the mothers and fathers in these books would exhibit stereotypical behaviors and qualities. Specifically, we hypothesized that: (1) relative to mothers, fathers would be absent more often and mentioned less often; (2) mothers would be portrayed more often than fathers as affectionate nurturers, and fathers would be portrayed as relatively hands-off parents; (3) mothers would more often express the stereotypically feminine emotions of happiness and sadness and would more often be disobeyed, whereas fathers would more often mention money, express anger, and discipline their children.

## METHOD

### Sample

The total sample consisted of 200 children's picture books. Following several of the previous studies of stereotyping in children's books, our sample included the 30 Caldecott Medal winners and Honor Books (the formal name for Caldecott runners-up) for 1995–2001. In order to draw from a larger and more representative collection of the books that are currently being read, we expanded the selection criteria to include signals of popularity that have not been the focus of previous research in this area. The sample included 155 non-Caldecott-winning best-selling children's books of 1999–2001 as determined by the *New York Times*, Amazon.com, Barnes and Noble, and *Publishers Weekly*, as well as the nine additional bestselling Little Golden Books, the 2001 New York Public Library list of "books everyone should know," and the 2001 Funorama.com top 10 picture books. These designations all translate into relatively large sales volumes.

### Procedure

#### *Design of the Coding Instrument*

To design the coding instrument, one female professor, one male professor, two female students, and one male student contributed items, and then we edited and refined the instrument to prepare it for preliminary testing. The faculty researchers and their student assistants read a sample of six books, completed preliminary copies of the code sheets, and noted questions or problems with the

instrument. The research group then met to make further changes in the instrument and to assemble an "annotated" version of the instrument with details on the counting procedure as explained below. Next the faculty members and students each rated another set of six books, came together again, and compared their ratings. Further changes were made to the instrument, and additions and amendments were made to the annotated version. The items were clarified over five iterations of this process until each of the readers coded sample books consistently. All of the items for each book were then coded by the same two female students.

*Instrument Contents*

The coding instrument contained 43 items about the physical presence, actions, emotions, and mentions of mothers and fathers. Responses were counts of occurrences per book, initially recorded as tic-marks and then summed. Items 1–4 addressed mother–son, mother–daughter, father–son, and father–daughter pairings. One or more offspring of the same sex with one parent counted as one pair. Items 5–7 were counts of pictures with just the mother, just the father, or both parents. These counts were not contingent on the presence of a child in the scene. Items 8–13 concerned mentions of mothers and fathers by female children, male children, or anyone else. Multiple references to the same parent within a single sentence were counted as one mention.

Items 14–27 were for the parental nurturing behaviors of touching (by hand), carrying, hugging, kissing, making other types of physical contact with, talking to, and feeding. For each of these items, the counts were separated between interactions with babies and interactions with older children. The actions could appear in pictures or be described in text; a single action that was both pictured and described was only counted once. Touching as part of more involved contact, such as carrying or hugging, was only counted as the more involved action. Items 28–43 dealt with each type of parent's mentions of money, expressions of happiness and sadness, crying (a subset of expressions of sadness), expressions of anger, yelling (a subset of expressing anger), disciplining or scolding, and being disobeyed. The emotions could be expressed in direct quotes, descriptions, or facial expressions. Multiple expressions of emotion within the same scene were counted separately.

With our coding procedure, we collected ratio data on the number of occurrences of each of the measured items per book, such as the number of scenes in Toby Speed's (2000) *Brave Potatoes* in which a mother was pictured but not a father. We translated some of these ratio data into nominal data on whether each book included parents at all, any mothers, any fathers, any mother-only scenes, and any father-only scenes. The remainder of the sample is made up of ratio data, and the analyses involving averages and *t*-tests were performed using only the ratio data.

## RESULTS

The coders recorded the same response for over 98% of the data points over the entire sample of books. We calculated weighted kappa coefficients to test the null hypothesis that the observed level of agreement could be the result of random guessing.[3] Straightforward items, such as the number of scenes with a mother but not a father, were rated with the highest level of consistency, $\kappa = .81$, $Z = 19.67$, $p < .0001$ (one-tailed). Most of the disagreement lay among items that can be subjective, such as the number of times a mother expressed happiness, $\kappa = .72$, $Z = 16.92$, $p < .0001$ (one-tailed). In each case, the null hypothesis was rejected at the .0001 level of significance. When the coders' responses did differ, the responses were averaged.

### Appearances and Mentions

The first hypothesis concerned the number of physical appearances and mentions of mothers and fathers. Of the 200 books studied, 139 included parental figures. In support of the hypothesis that fathers would be under-represented, mothers appeared in 128 of the books (64%), and fathers appeared in 95 books (47.5%). One hundred of the books (50%) contained mother-only scenes, and 55 books (27.5%) contained father-only scenes. Sixty-four books (32%) had mother-only scenes but no father-only scenes, and 19 books (9.5%) had father-only scenes but no mother-only scenes, $\chi^2$

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[3] A kappa coefficient is positive when the observed level of agreement exceeds the expected level of agreement from random guessing, and a kappa coefficient equals 1.00 when there is perfect agreement. Unlike a simple kappa coefficient, a weighted kappa coefficient takes the magnitude of disagreement into account.

**Table I.** Mean Number of Appearances and Mentions per Book with Parents as Characters

|  | Mother | Father | *t*-Value |
|---|---|---|---|
| Appears | 6.15 (9.16) | 3.30 (5.06) | 3.27*** |
| Appears without spouse | 4.59 (9.19) | 1.74 (3.99) | 3.27*** |
| Appears with son | 1.32 (3.26) | 0.69 (2.63) | 1.75* |
| Appears with daughter | 1.93 (7.27) | 0.40 (1.14) | 2.43** |
| Appears with son or daughter | 3.25 (7.74) | 1.09 (3.07) | 2.99** |
| Mentioned by female child | 0.67 (2.73) | 0.22 (1.63) | 2.23* |
| Mentioned by male child | 0.30 (1.86) | 0.17 (0.91) | 0.76 |
| Mentioned by any child | 0.97 (3.30) | 0.39 (1.84) | 2.20* |
| Mentioned by anyone | 7.87 (10.31) | 5.70 (11.13) | 1.62 |

*Notes.* Standard deviations are in parentheses. The *t*-value is from a paired, one-tailed Student's *t*-test.
\*$p < .05$. \*\*$p < .01$. \*\*\*$p < .001$.

$(1, N = 83) = 24.40$, $p < .001$ (a chi-square test is available here because the two variables are mutually exclusive). Both a mother and a father appeared in 76 books (38%), and 20 books (10%) always included both parents together.

As our data included the specific number of occurrences of each measured item within each book, the primary analytical tool was a series of paired Student's *t*-tests for differences in the sample means. The books that included parents contained more scenes with a mother figure ($M = 6.15$, $SD = 9.16$) than with a father figure ($M = 3.30$, $SD = 5.06$), $t(138) = 3.27$, $p < .001$ (one-tailed). Children in the books made more than twice as many mentions of mothers ($M = 0.97$, $SD = 3.30$) as of fathers ($M = 0.39$, $SD = 1.84$), $t(138) = 2.20$, $p = .01$ (one-tailed). And mothers were more common than fathers in each of the seven other measured types of appearance and mention. See Table I for statistics on the number of scenes with each type of parent and parent–child pairing, and on mentions of each type of parent, per book with parents as characters.[4]

### Nurturing Behavior

The results confirm the hypothesis that mothers would be portrayed more often than fathers as affectionate nurturers. Babies were nurtured almost 10 times as often by mothers ($M = 0.77$, $SD = 2.18$) as by fathers ($M = 0.08$, $SD = 0.39$), $t(138) = 3.78$,

$p < .001$ (one-tailed). Older children were nurtured more than twice as often by mothers ($M = 2.32$, $SD = 3.43$) as by fathers ($M = 1.09$, $SD = 2.45$), $t(138) = 3.63$, $p < .001$ (one-tailed). With the exception of hugging babies and carrying older children, mothers in these books performed every measured nurturing behavior at least twice as often as fathers, and the differences were significant at the .05 level or below on the basis of paired, one-tailed Student's *t*-tests. In support of the hypothesis that fathers would be relatively hands-off parents, there was no action that fathers performed significantly more often than mothers, and fathers were never seen kissing or feeding babies. See Table II for statistics on each measured type of nurturing behavior per book with parents as characters.

### Emotions, Discipline, Money, and Obedience

The findings support the hypotheses that mothers would more often cry and be happy, but not the hypotheses that fathers would more often discipline children and express anger.[5] In the 139 books with parents as characters, mothers expressed emotion more often ($M = 2.58$, $SD = 4.39$) than fathers ($M = 1.47$, $SD = 2.96$), $t(138) = 2.55$, $p = .01$ (one-tailed). Mothers yelled more than five times as often ($M = 0.13$, $SD = 1.16$) as fathers ($M = 0.02$, $SD = 0.10$), $t(138) = 1.06$, $p = 0.15$, although there was only a small amount of yelling overall, and the gender difference was not statistically significant. There were no significant differences in the frequency with which

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[4]Any of the means in the table can be multiplied by 139/200 to determine the mean among all of the books, including those without parents. Two-factor analyses of variance indicated no significant interaction between parent's gender and child's gender in terms of appearances or mentions.

[5]Patterns of means were similar when we examined only the books that included scenes with the type of parent in question.

**Table II.** Mean Number of Nurturing Actions per Book with Parents as Characters

| Action by parent | Recipient is baby | | | Recipient is older child | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Mother | Father | t-Value | Mother | Father | t-Value |
| Touch | 0.07 (0.35) | 0.01 (0.07) | 1.99* | 0.56 (1.21) | 0.24 (0.58) | 3.05** |
| Carry | 0.50 (1.62) | 0.06 (0.30) | 3.29*** | 0.25 (0.68) | 0.27 (1.03) | −0.20 |
| Hug | 0.01 (0.06) | 0.00 (0.04) | 0.58 | 0.14 (0.37) | 0.07 (0.28) | 2.38** |
| Kiss | 0.03 (0.18) | 0.00 (0.00) | 1.90* | 0.07 (0.28) | 0.01 (0.10) | 2.40** |
| Other contact | 0.04 (0.22) | 0.00 (0.00) | 2.30* | 0.25 (.074) | 0.11 (0.36) | 1.95* |
| Talk | 0.065 (0.37) | 0.004 (0.04) | 1.96* | 0.93 (1.97) | 0.37 (0.94) | 3.19*** |
| Feed | 0.05 (0.24) | 0.00 (0.00) | 2.52** | 0.12 (0.33) | 0.03 (0.23) | 2.68** |
| Any nurturing | 0.77 (2.18) | 0.08 (0.39) | 3.78*** | 2.32 (3.43) | 1.09 (2.45) | 3.63*** |

*Notes.* Standard deviations are in parentheses. The *t*-value is from a paired, one-tailed Student's *t*-test.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

mothers and fathers expressed sadness, mentioned money, or were disobeyed. See Table III for statistics on expressions of emotion, acts of discipline and disobedience, and mentions of money per book with parents as characters.

## DISCUSSION

The results strongly support our general hypotheses of imbalanced representation and stereotypical parental portrayals. Fathers were significantly under-represented, and they were presented as unaffectionate and as indolent in terms of feeding, carrying babies, and talking with children. Mothers made most of the contact with children, did most of the feeding, and expressed emotion more often than did fathers. No behavior we coded was exhibited by fathers significantly more often than by mothers.

Contrary to our hypotheses, mothers disciplined children and expressed anger more often than fathers did. In a summary of research on gender differences in aggression and anger, Hamilton (2001) concluded that the stereotype and general tendency is for women to be less aggressive than men, but that the difference depends on the ages, settings, and measures involved. Fischer and MosQuera (2001), among others, suggested that women may suppress expressions of anger for fear of reprisal and the violation of cultural expectations. In the typical children's book context of mothers working with young children, reprisal and cultural expectations may be of less concern than in a work environment, and our findings may reflect the relative safety of anger expression by women in the familial setting.

Blankenhorn (1995, p. 68) called fatherless families America's "most urgent social problem," and he held "cultural scripts," including children's books, at least partially responsible. Raag and Rackliff (1998) presented evidence that, although fathers are under-represented in parenting studies relative to mothers, fathers play an important role in the gender socialization of their children. Pleck (1981), Lamb (1986), and Silverstein (1996) cited evidence of men's ability to succeed as caregivers, and suggested that a redefinition of fathering that emphasized the nurturing role as well as the providing role would make masculinity less oppressive for men and women alike. The wide range of successful parenting models, including single fathers, single mothers, and same-sex parents, makes clear the flexibility of the paternal and maternal roles, which should not be confined to narrow stereotypes. In 2002, there were an estimated 2,000,000 single fathers in the U.S. and 105,000 married fathers who stayed at home to care for their children while the mothers worked (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003).

Fathers appeared in only 47% of the books sampled, and they appeared in about one-half as

**Table III.** Mean Number of Expressions of Emotion, Acts of Discipline and Disobedience, and Mentions of Money per Book with Parents as Characters

| Action | Mother | Father | t-Value |
|---|---|---|---|
| Expresses happiness | 1.92 (3.61) | 1.13 (2.77) | 2.23* |
| Expresses sadness | 0.15 (0.40) | 0.18 (0.97) | −0.33 |
| Cries | 0.08 (0.30) | 0.025 (0.17) | 2.06* |
| Expresses anger | 0.30 (1.29) | 0.11 (0.41) | 1.74* |
| Yells in anger | 0.13 (1.16) | 0.02 (0.10) | 1.06 |
| Any emotion | 2.58 (4.39) | 1.47 (2.98) | 2.55** |
| Child disobeys | 0.06 (0.27) | 0.05 (0.22) | 0.78 |
| Disciplines/scolds | 0.24 (1.23) | 0.04 (0.16) | 1.88* |
| Mentions money | 0.01 (0.13) | 0.02 (0.14) | −0.22 |

*Notes.* Standard deviations are in parentheses. The *t*-value is from a paired, one-tailed Student's *t*-test.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

many scenes as mothers. When present, fathers were relatively less likely than mothers to touch, hug, kiss, make other contact with, talk to, or feed children. The degree to which parental stereotypes influence the behavior of parents and the expectations of children for their parents is left for future researchers to determine. Trepanier-Street and Romatowski (1999), Fox (1993), and Narahara (1998) are among those who have found that traditional portrayals generally reinforce gender stereotypes. Johns (1981) found that children's books that contain gender role stereotypes led to negative attitudes toward women among children, whereas nontraditional children's books lead to positive attitudes toward women. It seems likely that the parenting roles portrayed in children's books also have a direct effect on the attitudes, expectations, and even the behaviors, of parents and children.

## CONCLUSION

In the present study, we examined the parental roles presented to picture-book-reading parents and children. The results indicate significant imbalance in the portrayals of mothers and fathers. Mothers were shown more often than fathers as caring nurturers who discipline their children and express a full range of emotions. Fathers were under-represented and portrayed as relatively stoic actors who took little part in the lives of their children. A risk of stereotypical portrayals is that they may socialize children and parents at important periods in their development, when parents identify their role in the spectrum from affectionate caregiver to deadbeat absentee, and when children form their expectations of their parents. Whereas Weitzman et al. (1972) sought the invisible woman, we must now be similarly concerned about the invisible father.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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