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Triadic Family Conversations About Gender: Children as Driving Forces and Messiness in Messages They Receive

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The goal of the present study was to unravel the unique contributions of fathers, mothers, and preschoolers to conversations about gender during picture book reading, as well as examining the relationship between parents' gender messages and their stereotypes. The sample consisted of 142 families. During a home visit, triadic parent-child Gender Stereotypes Picture Book reading was filmed to code implicit and explicit forms of gender talk. A computer task (implicit attitudes) and questionnaire (explicit attitudes) were used to measure parents' gender stereotypes. As expected, the gender picture book evoked questions and statements about gender (mostly from mothers). Regarding implicit forms of gender talk (i.e., gender labeling and evaluating activities), we found no structural differences between the three family members in terms of expressing stereotypical or contra-stereotypical ideas. There were also no differences between boys and girls in (receiving and expressing) implicit gender messages about the pictures. Regarding conversations that included explicit forms of gender talk, we found a pattern in which children started most often with a stereotypical comment, followed by questions (mostly mothers), confirmations, and negations by the parents. It was remarkable that children frequently received mixed messages in response to their stereotypical comments, and that children tended to stick to their stereotypical opinion even when challenged by their parents. Parents' gender messages were not structurally related to their gender stereotypes. This study shows that children are a driving force of family conversations about gender, and reveals messiness in the gender messages children receive from their parents.

Keywords: family gender messages, gender picture book reading, gender stereotypes, preschoolers, triadic observations


Supplemental materials: <https://doi.org/10.1037/fam0000931.supp>

The way in which family members communicate with each other about gender in daily life provides young children with both implicit and explicit messages about the interests, activities, and behaviors that are deemed (un)suitable for boys and girls (Gelman et al., 2004). According to the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, everyday language shapes how children conceptualize the world around them (Kay & Kempton, 1984). Children from families in which stereotypical ideas about gender are frequently communicated through language will be more aware of traditional gender categories in their direct environment (e.g., which toys are considered to be typical for boys and girls), which affects the development of their own gender concepts (Liben & Bigler, 2002). Despite the proven key role of

language in the transmission of cognitive and social-emotional schemas between family members, such as theory of mind, emotion recognition, and ideas about healthy eating habits (e.g., Arroyo et al., 2017; Aznar & Tenenbaum, 2013; Bachem et al., 2018; Ruffman et al., 2002), relatively little attention has been given to family gender talk as a gender-socialization route in early childhood.

Because people are often unaware of the way they talk about gender in conversations, and gender talk is difficult to capture during brief unstandardized observations, picture book reading is considered an effective and naturalistic procedure to prompt conversations about gender in families with young children (Mesman & Groeneveld, 2018). Indeed, various studies showed that picture

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Data and study materials (including the gender picture book) are available from the authors.

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books designed for that purpose are successful in eliciting different types of gender talk in parents (DeLoache et al., 1987; Endendijk et al., 2014; Friedman et al., 2007; Gelman et al., 2004). These studies revealed that parents sometimes convey gender messages to their children in direct ways through comments on pictures that either confirm or reject gender stereotypes, but more so in implicit ways like using gender labels for gender-neutral figures showing stereotypical behavior and evaluating stereotypical and contra-stereotypical activities in a positive or negative manner (e.g., “Look, these girls are cooking, that’s nice!”). Most of these studies focused on dyadic mother–child interactions, even though there is reason to believe that fathers and mothers communicate differently with their children about gender. Research shows that fathers have stronger explicit gender stereotypes than mothers, while mothers have more implicit stereotypes than fathers (e.g., Endendijk et al., 2013; Nosek et al., 2002). As a result, fathers may convey their gendered ideas more directly to their children, while mothers are more likely to use indirect forms of gender talk, for example, by evaluating the same behavior in boys and girls differently. In a previous study on gender talk (Endendijk et al., 2014), we observed fathers and mothers in their homes during separate visits, while discussing a picture book with their two children of 2 and 4 years of age. We found some support for the notion that fathers and mothers differ in their gender messages as mothers evaluated activities that are in line with gender stereotypes more positively than fathers, while fathers used more stereotypical comments when discussing pictures with activities that go against stereotypes (e.g., “Dolls are for girls” while discussing a picture depicting boys playing with dolls). However, overall mothers and fathers were very similar in the way they talked about gender with their children. Perhaps differences between fathers and mothers in the communication with their child are more pronounced when observing both parents simultaneously in the same situation. During this type of interactions parents may be more likely to correct each other either implicitly or explicitly, and to compensate for their partner’s messages about gender or the lack thereof. Although research on interactional synchrony and coparenting in triadic interactions indeed shows clear differences in parent–child interaction styles between mothers and fathers (e.g., de Mendonca et al., 2011; de Mendonca et al., 2019; Lindsey & Caldera, 2006), to our knowledge family conversations about gender in early childhood involving both parents at the same time have not yet been studied.

Apart from being able to compare mothers’ and fathers’ contributions to family conversations about gender, family-wide interactions involving both parents and their child have been found to provide unique information in terms of predicting child development above and beyond the effects of dyadic mother–child and father–child interactions (e.g., Fosco & Grych, 2013). This is in line with family systems theory (Cox & Paley, 2003), which states that individual family members’ functioning can only be fully understood when taking their relation to other members as well as the family as a whole and its subsystems into account. This theory also posits that the relationship between parenting and child development is not a one-way street; families form complex networks of reciprocal influences, in which family members cocreate their interaction patterns. Coming back to family conversations about gender, we know very little about the quantity and quality of children’s contribution and to what extent they are able to steer

the conversation in a certain direction. This is surprising because not only do children seem to initiate more conversations in general with their parents than parents with their children (VanDam et al., 2019), children develop gender stereotypes at an early age. For example, 10-month-old infants can already detect gender-related categories (Levy & Haaf, 1994), and by the age of 4 years stereotypes are well developed (Fagot et al., 1992), and even rather rigid (Gelman et al., 2004). Specifically, many children hold essentialist beliefs about gender during the preschool period in that they consider gender differences in interests, preferences, talents, and emotions as unchangeable and mutually exclusive (e.g., a boy cannot like dolls because dolls are for girls). This means that children are likely to have something to say about gender during family conversations.

From a constructivist framework, it is particularly interesting to study children’s role in family conversations about gender because from this viewpoint children at a young age already are active agents in the construction of their own cognitive concepts, and language is considered an important mode through which we exchange our perceptions of the world around us (Gelman, 2009). Bearing this framework in mind, Gelman et al. (2004) studied gender talk of mothers and their children aged 2 to 6 years during picture book reading. They found that mothers predominantly affirmed the stereotypical statements of the child, while they seldomly negated the child’s stereotypes. However, using a written prompt in the picture book (*Who can . . . [feminine or masculine activity]?*) could have stimulated this pattern of responses with children responding to questions in the pictures in line with existing gender stereotypes and mothers simply affirming this possibility (e.g., *Who can chop wood?*—Child: “Daddy,” Mother: “Yes, he can”). In addition, Gelman et al. (2004) did not examine children’s responses to their mothers’ gendered comments and fathers were not included in the study. As a result, the way in which gender concepts are coconstructed in the family context remains largely unanswered.

The contributions of children and parents to family conversations about gender may differ for boys and girls. In Western societies, gender norms are stricter for men and boys than they are for women and girls (e.g., Koenig, 2018). This may lead family members to communicate more stereotypical gender messages and to respond more stereotypically to others’ gender remarks when the conversation involves a boy. Indeed, mothers have been found to make fewer counter-stereotypical comments with their sons than with their daughters (Friedman et al., 2007). Also, in our previous study, we found that fathers who discussed the picture book with their two sons communicated more implicit stereotypical messages about gender than fathers who discussed the book with two daughters or with a daughter and a son (Endendijk et al., 2014). To our knowledge, differences between boys’ and girls’ contributions to family conversations about gender have not yet been studied. However, it is plausible that boys make more stereotypical comments about gender than girls, given evidence that boys themselves hold stronger stereotypical beliefs than girls (e.g., Cvencek et al., 2011; Vander Heyden et al., 2016).

The goal of the present study was to unravel the unique contributions of father, mother, and child to family conversations about gender during picture book reading, not only in terms of how much they contribute, but also in what way. Specifically, we focused on both implicit forms of gender talk like gender labeling and evaluating

boys' and girls' activities, and explicit forms of gender talk like stereotypical and contra-stereotypical comments. In addition, we wanted to gain more insight into the way both parents and children respond to each other's stereotypical and contra-stereotypical comments, and how they may evoke these comments in each other. The third and final aim of this study was to examine the association between parents' gendered ideas and the messages they give to their children about gender during picture book reading, thereby distinguishing between fathers' and mothers' implicit and explicit stereotypes in relation to their implicit and explicit gender messages. Because family-wide conversations on gender, including both parents and child, are still uncharted territory in family research, we explored the relative contribution of each family member to the conversation as well as the way family members respond to each other's gender comments in a descriptive and explorative manner. Further, we hypothesized that (1) mothers use more implicit forms of stereotypical gender talk than fathers, and fathers use more explicit forms than mothers; (2) children use more implicit and explicit forms of stereotypical gender talk than both parents; (3) parents and children use more implicit and explicit forms of stereotypical gender talk when the child is a boy than when the child is a girl; (4) parents' gender talk is related to their gender stereotypes.

Method

Sample

This study is part of the research project "Tomboys and pansies," which examines the messages children receive from their mothers and fathers about gender (non)conformity. Families with a preschooler in the Western region of the Netherlands were recruited using two methods. First, a Facebook advertisement was placed between November 2016 and December 2016 with information about the study and contact details of the research team. Second, between December 2016 and July 2017, families selected from municipality records were invited by post to participate in the study. Families were eligible to participate if the child was between 4 and 6 years of age at the time of recruitment. The families were included if they were born in the Netherlands, or in another Western country, or if they were adopted and grew up in the Netherlands. Only families living in a two-parent household were eligible for participation. Families were asked to participate in one home visit including both parents and their preschooler. In addition to the home observations, participation in the study included computer testing and filling out questionnaires.

Because this study was part of a larger project, aimed at gender messages from both fathers and mothers, the sample size was determined by the sample size of this larger project. For the present study, families were excluded from analyses when they did not discuss the Gender Stereotypes Picture Book in Dutch ($n = 3$). This resulted in a sample of 142 families. Fathers were between 28 and 66 years old ($M = 38.47$, $SD = 6.09$) and mothers were aged between 25 and 48 years ($M = 35.75$, $SD = 4.77$). The children were on average 5 years old ($SD = 0.69$, range 3.87–6.75). Almost half of the children were girls (48%). The majority of the children had one or more siblings (77%). Most of the parents had finished academic or higher educational schooling (fathers: 58%, mothers: 66%) or secondary vocational education (fathers: 35%, mothers: 21%). Most of the participating parents were married, had a registered partnership or cohabitation agreement (97%).

Procedure

Each family was visited once when father, mother, and the child were present. Before each home visit, both parents were asked to individually complete a set of digital questionnaires. During the home visit, dyadic and triadic parent–child interactions were filmed, parents and child were interviewed, and computer tasks were administered to the parents and child. The participating families received 20 Euros and a small present for their child. All visits were conducted by pairs of trained bachelor and master students. Written informed consent was obtained from all families. Ethical approval for this research was provided by the Research Ethics Committee of the Institute of Education and Child Studies of Leiden University (ID: ECPW2016/136). We report how we determined our sample size, all data exclusions, all manipulations, and all measures in the study. This study was not preregistered.

Measures

Stereotypical Gender Messages

An adapted version of the Gender Stereotypes Picture Book (Endendijk et al., 2014) was developed to elicit implicit and explicit comments about gender of both parents and children during book reading. The book consists of 13 pictures without text or storyline, with drawings of boys, girls, and gender-neutral children alternately pictured in stereotypically masculine or feminine activities, see Table 1. In addition, the picture book contained four pictures depicting boys and girls showing negative behavior toward a peer, and children doing gender-neutral activities (filler pictures). The gender-neutral children were created in such a way that they could be interpreted as either a boy or a girl (i.e., ambiguous gender, clothes in neutral colors, half-long hair). The girls and boys in the book were dressed in stereotypically masculine (e.g., dark-colored pants and sweaters) and feminine (e.g., light-colored skirts and dresses) clothes. A pilot study with university students showed that the children in the pictures were interpreted as they were intended, with boys and girls being labeled correctly in more than 99% of the cases and the children intended to be gender-neutral being labeled as girl or boy equally often (Endendijk et al., 2014).

Based on our previous experiences with the Gender Stereotype Picture Book and for the purpose of the present study, we made some adjustments and improvements to the present version of the book. First, to improve comparability between the content of the different types of pictures, two children were depicted in each picture instead of alternating pictures with two or three children as in the previous version. In addition, we used one instead of two book versions for all families in the study because this time we observed a triadic interaction instead of two separate dyadic parent–child interactions. Second, because gender messages about boys' and girls' antisocial behavior toward other children may vary depending on the gender of the dupe, we included pictures of (a) a boy showing negative behavior toward another boy, (b) a girl's negative behavior toward another girl, (c) a girl showing negative behavior toward a boy, and (d) vice versa. The previous version of the book contained only pictures of boys being negative to boys and girls being negative to girls. Third, the filler pictures in the current picture book contained only pictures of gender-neutral activities like drawing and reading, to optimally divert family

Table 1*Picture Types Used in the Gender Stereotypes Picture Book*

Description	Activity	Child gender	Picture type	Types of gender talk
Reading	Neutral	Neutral	Filler	—
Cooking	Feminine	Girls	Congruent	Evaluative comments Comments/prompts about gender Involving child
Pushing from chair	Negative	Boy toward girl	Negative behavior	Evaluative comments Comments/prompts about gender
Drawing	Neutral	Boys	Filler	—
Hand-clapping game	Feminine	Neutral	Gender-neutral children in feminine activity	Gender labeling Comments/prompts about gender Involving child
Football	Masculine	Boys	Congruent	Evaluative comments Comments/prompts about gender Involving child
Throwing clay	Negative	Boys	Negative behavior	Evaluative comments Comments/prompts about gender
Dressed as pirates	Masculine	Girls	Incongruent	Evaluative comments Comments/prompts about gender Involving child
Pushing from bike	Negative	Girl toward boy	Negative behavior	Evaluative comments Comments/prompts about gender
Dressed as princesses	Feminine	Boys	Incongruent	Evaluative comments Comments/prompts about gender Involving child
Play with train	Masculine	Neutral	Gender-neutral children in masculine activity	Gender labeling Comments/prompts about gender Involving child
Throwing sand	Negative	Girls	Negative behavior	Evaluative comments Comments/prompts about gender
Swing	Neutral	Girls	Filler	—

members' attention from our focus on gender-typed behavior. The previous book version contained filler pictures depicting both boys and girls doing either feminine or masculine activities together, which may still have drawn participants' attention to gender. Fourth, to make sure that families with ethnically Dutch and Arabic or Turkish backgrounds in the Netherlands could identify with the children in the book (in line with the aim of the research project to examine the impact of cultural background on gender socialization), we included children with varying shades of hair color (e.g., light and dark brown, black, blond) and subtle variations in skin color.

During the triadic observation, both parents were asked to talk about the Gender Stereotype Picture Book with their child without further directives. This discussion took a maximum of 8 min. The session could be ended earlier if the parents and child had finished the book. An adapted version of the coding system we used in the study of Endendijk et al. (2014) was developed for coding both parents' and children's implicit and explicit gender messages during book reading. In this adapted coding system, conversational turns (e.g., comment, remark, question) of each interaction partner were coded in consecutive order for the entire video. A conversational turn is bounded by the conversational turn of one of the other interaction partners. For example, consider the following conversation:

Father: "What do you see?"

Mother: "Yes, what do we have here?"

Child: "Boys playing football"

The question of the father is bounded by the question of the mother, which in turn is bounded by the child's answer (i.e., 3 conversational turns). Coding conversational turns enabled us to count the frequency of each of the following variables.

For each family member (father, mother, and child), we coded the following types of gender talk: (a) *Use of gender labels* refers to using feminine labels (e.g., "her," "she," "girl," "Sandra") or masculine labels (e.g., "his," "he," "boy," "Nick") when talking about the pictures with feminine and masculine activities. (b) *Evaluative comments* refers to positive evaluations (e.g., "Football is nice," "Her hair looks beautiful"), and negative evaluations (e.g., "Playing pirates is stupid," "Ugly dresses") of what is shown in the pictures. These included evaluations of boys' and girls' activities or appearances in the book as well as more general descriptions about the pictures with a clear positive or negative valence. (c) *Comments about gender stereotypes* refers to stereotypical (e.g., "Boys never play handclapping games") or contra-stereotypical (e.g., "Girls can also dress as pirates") comments about gender. For each comment about gender stereotypes, we coded the direct response of the other two family members. This response could be confirming (e.g., "You're right"), rejecting/contradicting (e.g., "I don't agree"), or family members could ignore the comment. (d) *Prompting comments about gender* prompts that elicit comments about gender stereotypes in other family members (e.g., "Boys dressed as princesses, what do you think about that?"). Subsequently, we coded the other family members' replies (mostly one family member replied) as stereotypical or contra-stereotypical. (e) *Involving child* includes messages that relate the activity or appearance of the children in the

book to the focus child when talking about the activities in the pictures. Depending on the gender of the child, these messages could be stereotypical (e.g., “You like to cook too” to a girl), contra-stereotypical (e.g., “I also have a princess dress” said by a boy), or neutral (e.g., “Do you like that?”). See Table 1 for the types of gender talk that were coded per picture.

After being trained, five coders rated the videos on family members’ use of gender labels and evaluative comments. In addition, they transcribed the parts of the conversations that included gender as a topic above and beyond gender labeling or simply stating what can be seen in the picture. These transcriptions included comments that relate the content of the picture to the focus child as such messages inevitably relate the content to a boy or a girl. Inter-coder reliability was established on 20 observations. All intra-class correlations (single rater, absolute agreement) were higher than .72. During the coding process, 11 observations were coded twice by separate coders and discussed to prevent coder drift. Subsequently, prompting comments about gender, comments about gender stereotypes, and involving child were coded based on the transcriptions by the first two authors and a research assistant, who had not visited the families. Agreement between the coders was obtained for all transcriptions.

Implicit Association Task

Implicit gender stereotypes of fathers and mothers were assessed by a computerized version of the Implicit Association Task (IAT); the family-career IAT (Nosek et al., 2002). This version measures the association of female and male attributes with the concepts of career and family. The computer task was built with E-prime 2.0 (Schneider et al., 2002) based on the task on the Harvard Project Implicit demonstration website (<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/>) and the Nosek et al.’s (2002) article. The task consists of congruent blocks in which participants are requested to sort career attributes (e.g., the word “salary”) to the male category and family attributes (e.g., the word “children”) to the female category, and incongruent blocks in which participants have to sort career attributes to females and family attributes to males (for details on the administration of the IAT, see Endendijk et al., 2013). Participants conducted the IAT on a laptop computer. Reaction time and accuracy were automatically recorded for every trial. The improved scoring algorithm by Greenwald et al. (2003) was used to determine each participant’s level of implicit stereotypes. A high positive score represented more difficulties to pair male attributes to the family concept and female attributes to the career concept than to pair female attributes to the family concept and male attributes to the career concept. In other words, higher positive scores represent stronger stereotypical ideas about the roles of men and women. Negative scores represent counter-stereotypical ideas about gender roles.

Child Rearing Sex-Role Attitude Scale

The Child Rearing Sex-Role Attitude Scale (CRSRAS, Freeman, 2007) was used to assess parents’ explicit attitudes about gender-differentiated parenting of boys and girls. The questionnaire consisted of 19 items (e.g., “I would be disappointed if my daughter would behave as a tomboy”), completed on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging

from 1 (*totally disagree*) to 5 (*totally agree*). Contra-stereotypical statements (e.g., “I could buy my son a doll”) were recoded so that higher mean scores on the scale referred to stronger explicit stereotypical attitudes about parenting. Internal consistency of the scale was adequate for both mothers (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .81$) and fathers (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .79$).

Data-Analysis

All variables were inspected for possible outliers that were defined as values more than 3.29 *SD* below or above the mean (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2012). Outliers were winsorized by giving them a marginally higher value than the most extreme not outlying value (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2012). Percentages of the different types of implicit and explicit gender messages are reported per family member (father, mother, and child), for example, the percentage of children using the label “boy” for gender-neutral characters in the book. In addition, repeated-measures analyses of variance (RM-ANOVA) were used to test differences between fathers, mothers, and children in frequency of gender messages. When the assumption of sphericity was violated, the Greenhouse–Geisser correction was applied. *T* tests were used to examine differences between messages from and directed to boys and girls. Pearson correlation analyses were performed to examine associations between parents’ gender messages and gender stereotypes. Data and study materials (including the gender picture book) are available from the authors. We hypothesized that (1) mothers use more implicit forms of stereotypical gender talk than fathers, and fathers use more explicit forms than mothers; (2) children use more implicit and explicit forms of stereotypical gender talk than both parents; (3) parents and children use more implicit and explicit forms of stereotypical gender talk when the child is a boy than when the child is a girl; (4) parents’ gender talk is related to their gender stereotypes.

Results

Input in the Triadic Discussion

During the triadic reading of the Gender Picture Book, children, mothers, and fathers differed in their amount of input during the discussion as indicated by their number of conversational turns: $F(1.70, 238.60) = 26.78, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = 0.16$. Children had the most turns, on average 51.46 ($SD = 23.59$, range 1–137), followed by mothers who had on average 48.59 turns ($SD = 23.41$, range 12–134). Fathers had the lowest number of turns: On average 39.69 turns ($SD = 24.13$, range 0–169). Post hoc comparisons showed that each pair of means from the three family members differ significantly from each other. There were no differences between the number of turns for boys versus girls, $t(139) = -0.14, p = .90$, or for turns in conversations with sons versus daughters for fathers, $t(139) = -1.16, p = .25$, or mothers, $t(139) = -0.04, p = .97$.

As expected, the gender picture book evoked questions and open-ended statements about gender that can elicit comments and conversations about gender stereotypes (“Boys dressed as princesses, what do you think about that?”). Such questions were asked by 30 mothers (with 45 questions), 17 fathers (with 24 questions), and one child (with 1 question). The frequency differed between the family members: $F(1.60, 222.99) = 13.03, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = 0.09$. Post hoc comparisons showed that all three family members differed from each

other: Mothers ($M = 0.32$, $SD = 0.72$) asked the most questions about gender, followed by fathers ($M = 0.17$, $SD = 0.54$), and children ($M = 0.01$, $SD = 0.08$). These questions were mainly evoked by gender-incongruent pictures (70%) and, to a lesser degree, gender-congruent pictures (17%). There were no differences between the frequencies of questions about gender directed toward boys versus girls, fathers: $t(139) = -0.13$, $p = .89$; mothers: $t(139) = 0.97$, $p = .34$.

Although most questions were directed toward the children, some of the children did not react to their fathers (33%) or mothers (47%). Most children responded to these questions by confirming gender stereotypes to their fathers (50%) or mothers (42%). These responses to questions ("Can girls be pirates?") could be short ("No!") or consist of explicit stereotypical comments ("No, only boys can be pirates!"). A small group of children responded by contradicting the stereotype to their fathers (17%) or mothers (11%).

Use of Stereotypical Gender Labels

The majority of the children, mothers, and fathers did not use masculine and feminine gender labels for the gender-neutral children in the pictures depicting a feminine or masculine activity. In the feminine activity, 9% of the children used the label "boy" and 8% the label "girl" for the gender-neutral children. This was the case for 2% and 3% of the fathers, and 1% and 6% of mothers, respectively. In the masculine activity, 18% of the children used the label "boy" and only 1% the label "girl." Again, parents rarely labeled the gender-neutral children as boys (fathers 2%, mothers 6%) or girls (fathers 1%, mothers 2%).

When focusing on the frequency of gender labeling, there is a difference between the family members in stereotypical gender labeling of gender-neutral children in feminine and masculine activities: $F(1.64, 224.40) = 18.71$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.12$. Post hoc comparisons showed that children ($M = 0.47$, $SD = 0.77$) used stereotypical labels more often than their fathers, $M = 0.12$, $SD = 0.36$, $t(137) = -5.41$, $p < .01$, and more often than their mothers, $M = 0.20$, $SD = 0.54$, $t(137) = -3.91$, $p < .01$, but that parents did not differ from each other, $t(137) = 1.97$, $p = .05$. In addition, there were no differences between boys and girls in the frequency of stereotypical gender labeling, $t(136) = -0.32$, $p = .75$, or in the frequency of stereotypical labeling directed toward boys or girls, fathers: $t(139) = -0.11$, $p = .91$; mothers: $t(102.42) = -1.68$, $p = .10$.

So, contrary to *Hypothesis 1* mothers and fathers did not differ in their implicit stereotypical gender talk (labeling), but consistent with *Hypothesis 2* children used more implicit gender talk than both parents. Contrary to *Hypothesis 3* parents and children did not use more gender talk when the child was a boy than when the child is a girl.

Stereotypical Evaluative Comments

Tables 2 and 3 show the percentages of children, mothers, and fathers who made positive, negative, both, or no comments about the stereotypical (Table 2) or contra-stereotypical pictures (Table 3). If parents or children made an evaluative comment about the stereotypical pictures (Table 2), these were always positive for girls, and almost always positive for boys. There were differences between the family members in evaluative comments about stereotypical pictures (ranging from -1 negative to +1 positive per family member): $F(1.90, 267.03) = 19.64$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.12$. Post hoc comparisons of comments made about the stereotypical pictures showed that all three family members differed from each other: mothers ($M = 0.31$, $SD = 0.49$) made the most positive comments, followed by fathers ($M = 0.26$, $SD = 0.44$), and children ($M = 0.05$, $SD = 0.28$). There were no differences between boys and girls in the evaluative comments about the stereotypical pictures, $t(139) = 0.84$, $p = .40$, or in the number of evaluative comments directed toward boys versus girls, fathers: $t(133.42) = -1.40$, $p = .16$; mothers: $t(139) = -0.43$, $p = .67$.

In response to the contra-stereotypical pictures (Table 3), there were more negative evaluations, especially from children and fathers about the picture with boys in a feminine activity (boys dressed as princesses). Again, there were differences between the family members in their evaluative comments about contra-stereotypical pictures (range: -1 negative to +1 positive): $F(2, 280) = 12.69$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.08$. Post hoc comparisons showed that mothers ($M = 0.38$, $SD = 0.54$) were more positive than fathers, $M = 0.17$, $SD = 0.46$, $t(140) = 3.64$, $p < .01$, and children, $M = 0.11$, $SD = 0.46$, $t(140) = 4.94$, $p < .01$, while there were no differences between fathers and children, $t(140) = -1.16$, $p = .25$. Again, there were no differences between the number of evaluative comments made by boys versus girls, $t(139) = 0.99$, $p = .33$, or the number of evaluative comments directed toward boys versus girls, fathers: $t(120.99) = -0.87$, $p = .38$; mothers: $t(139) = 1.74$, $p = .08$.

So, contrary to *Hypothesis 1* mothers used more implicit stereotypical gender talk in that they were more positive about stereotypical pictures, but they were also more positive about the contra-stereotypical pictures than fathers. Again, contrary to *Hypothesis 3* parents and children did not use more gender talk when the child was a boy than when the child is a girl.

Involving Child

Messages that relate the activity or appearance of the children in the book to the focus child occurred quite often. In 55% of the families, one or more family members related the content of the picture to the focus child in a way that confirmed the stereotype ("Sophie, you like to bake cookies as well"), and in 40% of families,

Table 2
Relative Use of Evaluative Comments About Stereotypical Pictures

Family member	Girls in feminine activity				Boys in masculine activity			
	Positive (%)	Negative (%)	Both (%)	None (%)	Positive (%)	Negative (%)	Both (%)	None (%)
Child	5	0	0	95	1	1	0	98
Mother	25	0	0	75	13	2	0	85
Father	22	0	0	78	8	0	0	92

Table 3
Relative Use of Evaluative Comments About Contra-Stereotypical Pictures

Family member	Boys in feminine activity				Girls in masculine activity			
	Positive (%)	Negative (%)	Both (%)	None (%)	Positive (%)	Negative (%)	Both (%)	None (%)
Child	11	6	1	82	9	1	0	90
Mother	31	1	1	67	18	2	1	79
Father	13	4	1	83	11	0	0	89

the reference to the focus child involved a contradiction to the stereotype (“Tim, you don’t like soccer!”). Thirty percent of these families overlapped: One of the family members related the content of a picture to the focus child in a way that confirmed the stereotype, and another picture in a way that contradicted the stereotype, or one family member confirmed the stereotypes, while another contradicted the stereotype, related to the child). Split by a family member, 29% of the children, 30% of the mothers, and 28% of the fathers related the child in a stereotypical way to the content of the picture, $F(1, 140) = 2.47$, $p = .09$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$. Stereotype-contradicting links between the picture and the child occurred in 19% of the children, 25% of the mothers, and 13% of the fathers, $F(1, 140) = 1.99$, $p = .14$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$. There were no differences between boys and girls in involving the child in stereotypical pictures, fathers: $t(138) = -0.31$, $p = .76$, mothers: $t(138) = 0.61$, $p = .54$, children: $t(138) = 1.34$, $p = .18$, or contra-stereotypical pictures, fathers: $t(138) = -0.75$, $p = .45$, mothers: $t(138) = 1.07$, $p = .29$, children: $t(138) = -1.65$, $p = .10$.

So, contrary to our Hypotheses (1) mothers, fathers, and (2) children did not differ in their implicit stereotypical gender talk (involving the child), and (3) parents and children did not use more gender talk when the child was a boy than when the child is a girl.

Explicit Comments About Gender Stereotypes

A small group of parents and children made explicit stereotypical (“Only girls can dress as princesses”) or contra-stereotypical comments (“Girls can also play football”). In total, there were 54 stereotypical comments and 29 contra-stereotypical comments. For gender-stereotypical comments, 19 children made 26, 11 mothers made 13, and 13 fathers made 15 such comments. For contra-stereotypical comments, 1 child made 1, 17 mothers made 19, and 9 fathers made 9 such comments. There were differences between the family members in the number of stereotypical comments: $F(1.79, 248.23) = 3.43$, $p = .04$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.02$. Post hoc comparisons showed that children made more stereotypical comments ($M = 0.19$, $SD = 0.54$) than their mothers, $M = 0.09$, $SD = 0.34$, $t(139) = 2.30$, $p = .02$, but the number of children’s comments did not significantly differ from their fathers, $M = 0.11$, $SD = 0.35$, $t(139) = 1.87$, $p = .06$. There were no differences between fathers and mothers, $t(139) = 0.43$, $p = .67$. In addition, there were no differences between the number of stereotypical comments made by boys versus girls, $t(138) = -1.56$, $p = .12$, or toward boys or girls, fathers: $t(99.39) = -1.76$, $p = .08$; mothers: $t(138) = -0.85$, $p = .40$.

There was a difference in the number of contra-stereotypical comments between the family members: $F(1.41, 196.44) = 9.89$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.07$. Post hoc comparisons showed that all three family members differed from each other: Mothers made the most

contra-stereotypical comments ($M = 0.16$, $SD = 0.49$), followed by fathers ($M = 0.06$, $SD = 0.24$), and children ($M = 0.01$, $SD = 0.09$). These stereotypical and contra-stereotypical comments were mainly provoked (76%) by the two incongruent pictures (girls dressed as pirates and boys dressed as princesses). When looking at gender differences, boys and girls did not differ in the number of contra-stereotypical comments they made themselves, $t(67.00) = -1.00$, $p = .32$, but mothers of daughters ($M = 0.25$, $SD = 0.61$) made more contra-stereotypical comments than mothers of sons ($M = 0.08$, $SD = 0.33$): $t(101.12) = -2.01$, $p < .05$. There were no differences between fathers of daughters or sons: $t(119.68) = -1.10$, $p = .27$.

So, contrary to *Hypothesis 1* mothers and fathers did not differ in their explicit stereotypical gender talk (comments), but mothers used more contra-stereotypical gender talk than fathers. Consistent with *Hypothesis 2* children used more explicit gender talk than their parents. Also, in line with *Hypothesis 3* mothers used more explicit contra-stereotypical gender talk when the child was a girl than when the child was a boy. This was not the case for fathers.

For the total gender picture book, the percentages of turns that include gender labeling were 15% (mothers), 16% (fathers), and 25% (children), this includes sentences like “This is a boy”, “She looks like Kate”, and “She is playing soccer”. Of the sentences that include gender labeling, only a very small percentage included a gender (contra) stereotypical comment (“Girls do not like soccer”): Stereotypical comments mother: 1.2%, father: 1.7%, child: 1.4%, contra-stereotypical comment mother: 1.7%, father: 1.0%, child: <0.1%). Although the share of gender (contra) stereotypical comments is very low, there are 32 families (23%) that have one or more conversations that include gender (contra) stereotypical comments (and discuss these).

A more in-depth evaluation of the 45 conversations that included (discussions about) stereotypical and/or contra-stereotypical comments is conducted for these 32 families (69% with girls). Most of these conversations started with a stereotypical comment from the child (“Girls can’t be pirates”), and were mainly followed by questions from the mothers (“Why do you think that?”), followed by another stereotypical reaction of the child (“They just can’t!”), and sometimes followed by another question from the mother. Another clear pattern is a confirmation of the child’s stereotypical comment: The child started with a gender stereotype, and this is confirmed by fathers or (mainly) mothers (“You are right, girls don’t like swords.”). Overall, stereotypical messages from parents were generally reactions to stereotypical comments of the children. The in-depth evaluation shows that when mothers made stereotypical comments, children and fathers mainly agree. When fathers made stereotypical comments, children agree, but mothers more often question these comments or react with a contra-stereotypical comment.

When focusing on conversations that included contra-stereotypical comments, these comments were a reaction to a stereotypical comment of a child about half of the time, see for example this conversation with a daughter, while discussing the picture with the boys dressed up as princesses:

- Father: "Huh!?"
- Child: "Ehm, ehm, this one can't go in a long dress?" (points to boy in red dress)
- Mother: "Why wouldn't he wear a long dress?"
- Child: "Because he's a boy!"
- Mother: "Because he is a boy? Boys can wear a dress too, right?"
- Child: "Er, and they, they, they are ... Hey, this is a girl?" (points to boy in pink dress)
- Mother: "Also a boy, I'd say"
- Father: "Girls can have short hair too? There's nothing wrong with that? Then why wouldn't boys be allowed to wear a dress?"
- Child: "Is for girls only!"
- Father: "Well, you also wear jeans right? Or is that not just for boys then?"
- Child: "No, these aren't." (points to princess pictures)
- Father: "No, is this really inappropriate? Why?"
- Child: "That's why!"
- Father: "Oh."

In most of the conversations that start with stereotypical comments from children, followed by contra-stereotypical comments from one or both of the parents, children stick to their stereotypical opinion, or just turn the page. In addition, when mothers started with a contra-stereotypical comment, these were mainly confirmed by their partners, but rejected by their children. More examples of conversations about gender stereotypes are included in the Supplemental Material.

Implicit and Explicit Stereotypes

For implicit stereotypes, there was a significance difference between the IAT scores of fathers and mothers, $t(140) = 5.32$, $p < .01$: Mothers had stronger stereotypes ($M = 0.50$, $SD = 0.33$) than fathers ($M = 0.29$, $SD = 0.36$). For explicit stereotypes (CRSRAS questionnaire), fathers ($M = 2.05$, $SD = 0.44$) reported stronger stereotypes than mothers ($M = 1.81$, $SD = 0.42$): $t(140) = -5.62$, $p < .01$. The IAT scores were not related to any of the variables derived from the gender picture book reading. The CRSRAS scores were related to the evaluation of incongruent pictures for fathers and mothers (both parents: $r = -.19$, $p < .05$): Parents with stronger explicit stereotypes were less positive about

gender contra-stereotypical pictures. So, contrary to *Hypothesis 4* parents' gender talk was not structurally related to their gender stereotypes.

Discussion

To our knowledge, this study is the first to disentangle the unique contribution of father, mother, and child to family conversations about gender during picture book reading, and to shed light on the apparently inconsistent communication patterns that arise when a family member makes an explicit (contra-)stereotypical comment. Of the three family members, children had the highest input in the conversation, which stresses the importance of taking children's contribution to family conversations about gender into consideration. We found evidence that when children displayed gender talk, either implicitly or explicitly, this contribution often conveyed gender stereotypes. In fact, most conversations including an explicit gender comment started with a comment expressing a gender-stereotypical idea of the child. Even when parents offered their children a more gender-flexible point of view in response to such a comment, children stuck to their initial stereotypical opinion or simply did not react. These findings illustrate the essentialist beliefs children hold in the preschool period about what is appropriate and normal for boys and girls (e.g., Gelman et al., 2004), and underscore the rigidity of these beliefs even in a context in which they are being challenged.

It should be noted that, apart from gender labeling, we found no clear evidence for our hypothesis that children structurally use more implicit and explicit forms of stereotypical gender talk than their parents (*Hypothesis 2*). In other words, when we look at mere frequency of stereotypical gender talk children seem quite similar to their parents, especially to their fathers. It is only when we focus on family conversations that included an explicit comment on gender, that we see a stronger tendency in children to adhere to their stereotypical ideas.

When we zoom in on the contribution of fathers and mothers, we see a tendency in mothers to focus more on gender, both implicitly and explicitly, but not necessarily in a stereotypical manner. So, the hypothesis that mothers use more implicit forms of stereotypical gender talk and fathers' more explicit forms was not supported in our study (*Hypothesis 1*). More in-depth analysis of the conversations including an explicit gender comment showed a pattern in which mothers regularly respond with a question or contra-stereotypical remark to the comments displaying stereotypical ideas of their child or partner. It could be that being filmed stimulated at least some of the mothers to react in a politically correct way to the pictures by focusing on gender in line with the prevailing sociopolitical ideal in the Netherlands that males and females should be considered and treated as equals (Plantenga & Remery, 2015). Indeed, women tend to be more prone to social desirability in social research than men (e.g., Chung & Monroe, 2003; Dalton & Ortegren, 2011; Hebert et al., 1997). This may relate to the commonly reported result, also found in this study, that women report fewer explicit gender stereotypes than men (e.g., Banaji & Greenwald, 1995; Blakemore & Hill, 2008; Rudman & Glick, 2001), while they have stronger implicit stereotypes (Endendijk et al., 2013; Nosek et al., 2002).

Not only did we see that mothers frequently question or contradict their child's explicit comments conveying gender stereotypes, they

also confirm this type of comments almost as frequently, as do fathers. Both questioning and confirming explicit stereotypes voiced by one of the family members also happened regularly within the same conversation. So, children receive mixed messages from their parents after they express gender stereotypes, which may reflect individual inconsistencies in parents' own gender schemas. In a related vein, we found little support for the hypothesis that parents' gender talk is structurally related to their gender stereotypes (*Hypothesis 4*). Both findings could be explained by the variation of the topics that were covered in the measures for parents' gender messages (various appearances and play behaviors of boys and girls in the Gender Picture Book) and for their gender stereotypes (implicit stereotypes in computer task: Males' and females' roles in and outside the family, explicit stereotypes in questionnaire: Parenting of boys and girls). The degree to which parents' beliefs about different topics are gendered may vary depending on the diversity in their stereotypical and contra-stereotypical experiences with these topics (e.g., having had a mother staying at home to take care of kids and having a son who prefers ballet over football). This idea aligns with the contact hypothesis (Palluck et al., 2019), which states that contact with different kinds of people in different kinds of roles reduces prejudice.

Although individual gender stereotypes are often portrayed as a fixed and coherent set of cognitive concepts about what is appropriate for males and females in general, in reality adults' stereotypical beliefs are likely to be more fluctuating, and context as well as topic dependent. Indeed, various experimental studies have refuted the notion that social attitudes about concepts such as gender and ethnicity are stable and invariant (e.g., Blair, 2002; Mitchell et al., 2003; Schwarz et al., 1998). In fact, subtle changes in the context of an experiment (e.g., being confronted with a positive or negative example) can change automatic attitudes toward specific groups of people without the participant being aware of such a contextual effect (Mitchell et al., 2003). After children reach a peak in their gender-essentialist beliefs in the preschool years, gender stereotypes gradually become less rigid and considered less as universal over time (Ruble et al., 2007). As children mature in a West-European country like the Netherlands, they are likely to be exposed to numerous examples that either confirm or contradict traditional ideas about the characteristics and behaviors of males and females in different facets of everyday life, revealing the complexity of gender roles. This is not to say that stereotypes disappear, but they become more flexible and, possibly, less coherent.

Finally, we did not find evidence for the hypothesis that parents and children use more gender talk when the target child was a boy (*Hypothesis 3*). So, boys did not structurally receive or express more stereotypical information than girls. However, most explicit discussions about gender were elicited by the picture of two boys dressed as princesses, in which children frequently made it clear that they thought it was odd or simply not possible. In addition, mothers made more comments displaying contra-stereotypes to their daughters than to their sons. These findings support the notion that gender nonconformity is less accepted in males than in females (e.g., Koenig, 2018), particularly by children (Gelman et al., 2004). Overall, in the majority of conversations that included explicit comments on gender, displaying either stereotypical or contra-stereotypical ideas, the target preschooler was a girl (69%), suggesting that there is more room for open family discussions about the validity of gender stereotypes with preschool girls than with boys.

This study has some limitations. First, the generalizability of our findings is limited due to the selective nature of our sample with few lower-educated parents, despite our efforts to include families with a wide range of educational backgrounds. However, it should be noted that the percentage of middle-to-low educated parents in this study was higher than in most other studies in this field (e.g., Endendijk et al., 2014; Kulik, 2002). Second, although the gender picture book evoked both implicit and explicit comments in the three family members, the frequencies of such comments, especially the explicit ones, were relatively low. This limits the power of our statistical analyses and the generalizability of the conversation patterns when one of the family members made an explicit comment on gender. The relatively low frequencies of comments on gender in our study are in line with the prevailing Dutch ideal that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities (Plantenga & Remery, 2015). This is likely to be particularly the case in a predominantly high-educated sample because higher educated people tend to be less explicit in their gender talk (Krysan, 1998). In addition, the low frequencies of gender (contra) stereotypical comments are comparable with previous studies using pictures without further prompts to elicit gender talk (e.g., Endendijk et al., 2014). Indeed, there is evidence that gendered parenting in early childhood occurs mainly through implicit parenting practices: Most gender messages are subtle (Mesman & Groeneveld, 2018). However, when more explicit gender messages do occur and are discussed within the family, they are likely to serve as powerful sources of information for children regarding gendered interests and behaviors. Close examination of the ways in which such messages shape conversations about gender in a triadic family setting is important to elucidate the nature of conversational dynamics that may perpetuate or reduce children's gender stereotypes.

Despite the limitations, this study adds to the literature by emphasizing the role of children, even at preschool age, as active agents and a driving force in family conversations about gender, stressing their oftentimes traditional and gender-essentialist beliefs. Further, the study is the first to help uncover not only how parents react to their children, but also to each other while discussing what is appropriate, what is normal, and what is possible when it comes to the appearance, interests, and play of boys and girls. The messages children receive about gender from their parents as well as parents' underlying gender schemas seem to be much more inconsistent and context specific than is generally assumed in the literature. Further research is needed to gain more insight into the inconsistency in parental gender messages as well as gender attitudes across different situations and with respect to different topics.

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