# Hegemonic Masculinities and Heteronormativities in Contemporary Books on Fathering and Raising Boys

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## Abstract

Books published on fathering and raising boys are becoming increasingly popular. These books claim simply to describe boys and fathers. However we suggest that they make only specific identities available. We make this suggestion on the basis of a critical analysis of six books published since an initial study by Riggs (2008). In this article we extend Riggs's analysis by identifying how the books analyzed draw upon hegemonic masculine ideals in constructing boys' and fathers' identities. The analysis also suggests that biological essentialism is used to justify the identities constructed. Five specific implications are drawn from the findings, focusing on understandings of males as well as females, the uptake of dominant modes of talking about males, and the ramifications of biological essentialism. The findings emphasize the need to pay ongoing attention to popular parenting books since, rather than offering improved strategies for raising boys, these books present assertions of what boys and fathers should be.

## Keywords

**Introduction**

In Western societies, boys and men are routinely presented with messages about what it means to be male. From a very young age, boys are exposed to a range of rules instructing them in how they should act and think in particular ways in order to be accepted and considered *normal*. (We will use italics throughout this article to signify our use of this construct.)With this in mind, writers such as Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli (2001) have argued that it is crucial to explore how boys learn these rules, and to focus on the role that such rules play in the production of normative subject positions made available to males. Such subject positions, it has been suggested, are especially evident in books on both fathering and raising boys (Flannery Quinn 2009). Notionally, it is presumed that such books are sought out by parents to help them identify productive ways of making decisions about child rearing. It has been suggested, however, that what such books in fact do is render intelligible only very specific modes of masculinity, which are taken up by fathers (and, indeed, mothers) and passed on to boys (Martin 2005). While such books are both crucial and warranted—they respond to a gap in the literature and serve to recognize the increasing role that men play in parenting—it is imperative that we be critical of what messages this literature is presenting.

In analyzing six books on fathering and raising boys, we explore the subject positions made available in the books to fathers and sons. In so doing the research reported here updates Riggs's (2008) analysis of how heteronormativity occurs in parenting books that focus on raising boys, and extends it by examining the construction of hegemonic masculine norms. Furthermore, and given that previous research focusing on books on fathering has paid little attention to the construction of mothers, the research presented in this article also considers how women and girls are constructed by implication through the ways in which men and boys are represented. We conclude by suggesting that parenting books offer a

relatively homogenous image of boys and fathers, relying on very specific constructions of what is expected of them. We suggest that although such books claim to be referring to all boys or fathers, they are, instead, referring to a very specific and narrow segment of boys and fathers.

**Previous Literature**

While a small body of empirical and theoretical literature (summarized below) has focused on books aimed at fathering and raising boys, updated research is timely since ideas about what is considered normal and appropriate for males continue to evolve (even though in many cases these books maintain a relatively static image of masculinity). Both the popular press and scholarly literature have called for a reconstruction of masculinity resulting from the now widely accepted problems associated with the characteristics of traditional masculinity, such as, for example, the appropriateness of male dominance and privilege (see Silverstein et al. 2002). Since the early 1990s, studies have shown a significant decrease in cultural and institutional homophobia, and evidence has increasingly shown that it is at least possible for males to engage with feminine forms of gender expression (Anderson 2008). Nonetheless, as we argue below, such changes are still very much framed by normative discourses of masculinity which limit non-normative expressions.

Previous research has shown that contemporary parenting books take a biological essentialist view of gender (see Anderson and Accomando 2002; Anderson et al. 2002; Riggs 2008). Biological essentialism claims that gender is a permanent and stable feature of individuals (Bem 1993). Within such logic it is argued that there is a particular nature or essence that belongs uniquely to those assigned femaleness at birth compared to those assigned maleness at birth, and that these differences can explain behavior exhaustively. In contrast, academic literature examining parenting books often takes a social constructionist perspective, as does the analysis presented in this article. This view is critical of taken-for-

granted ways of understanding the world, and, rather, sees gender as a construct that is worked up through repeated everyday practices and interactions between people (Burr 2003). For example, most parenting books make a clear distinction between what is required to raise boys, and what is required to raise girls. This segregation is justified as a consequence of the presumed natural differences between boys and girls. However, in writing books narrowly focused on boys' needs, authors are compelled to construct boys and girls as differently as possible (Anderson and Accomando 2002). The apparent need to describe and respond to the special needs of boys, then, actually results in *creating* such needs, and, consequently, creating *boys*. Therefore, parenting books are not simply reporting perceived differences, but are, rather, reifying these differences as natural.

Early work conducted by Gleason (1996; 1997) identified how parenting advice provided in Canada focused on ideas such as the importance of a father figure, the perceived threat of homosexuality as a potential developmental outcome, and heterosexual marriage as the appropriate context in which children should be raised (and to which children should aspire). Significantly, work conducted since this time has identified the same themes in more contemporary books focused on fathering and raising boys (Anderson and Accomando 2002; Riggs 2008). This demonstrates the point made above that while much has changed socially, culturally, and historically in terms of dominant discourses on gender, books on fathering and child rearing present a relatively static image of gender.

Anderson et al. (2002) conclude that the parenting books they examined, despite claiming otherwise, largely draw on gender ideologies that reflect essentialist and traditional views of parenting. For example, whilst the the books in Anderson et al's analysis acknowledged the socially constructed nature of gender, they nonetheless presented the role of fathers as minimal; they are required only to show up and be around. Anderson and Accomando (2002) identify how such books use a variety of discursive strategies to appear as

though they are describing reality. Specifically, these authors outline how the books in their sample construct a reality in which mothers and fathers are fundamentally different types of parents, thus emphasizing the claim that the most appropriate and ideal way to raise a child is within a mother and father dyad. Riggs's (2008) analysis focuses on the subject construction of boys in these books, specifically by exploring the construction of boys' sexuality in contrast to their gender identity, and on how gay boys are represented in books on fathering and raising boys. Riggs described how these books construct the so-called average boy through the negative portrayal of boys who identify as gay or who do not enact a normative gender identity, thus emphasizing heterosexuality as the normal developmental outcome for boys.

Moving beyond previous literature on parenting books aimed at fathers and raising boys, literature from the fields of masculinity studies and sexuality studies offers ways of understanding the lenses through which such parenting books operate. Connell (1987), for example, argues that masculinity is not a natural given, but rather a culturally-located stereotype about what males should be. As a result, Connell describes multiple masculinities, although he indicates that some are considered more ideal than others. Hegemonic masculinity, as Connell terms it, is thus located at the top of a hierarchy of masculinities, and men are encouraged to aspire toward it since it embodies the most honored way of being a man. Importantly, as Connell notes, hegemonic masculinity does not necessarily align with reality—most males do not inhabit subject positions that fully correspond with this cultural ideal; it is an aspirational goal. An important feature of hegemonic masculinity is that it is based on the presumption of heterosexuality; homosexuality is placed within the category of subordinated masculinities (Connell 1987). The favoring of heterosexuality is typically referred to as heteronormativity, which describes the multiple mundane and everyday ways that heterosexuality is produced as natural, unproblematic, and a taken-for-granted

phenomenon (Kitzinger 2005); non-heterosexual people are viewed as a variation or deviation from the norm of heterosexuality.

These two theoretical concepts—hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity—would both appear to offer considerable analytic leverage in the analysis of books aimed at fathers and about raising boys. As such we treated them as key tools for examining the sample of books in the analysis provided below.

**Sample**

Six books were selected for analysis from a wider corpus of eleven. We discuss these books because they are widely representative of all the books in the corpus and include the greatest numbers of extracts included in the analysis presented below. Books in the wider sample were initially selected because they are revised editions of those analyzed in Riggs's (2008) study, while additional books were identified from online searches of the popular bookstores Bookworld, Dymocks, Collins Booksellers, and Booktopia. The search terms were "raising boys" and "dads and sons" as well as "fathering" and "parenting sons."

The sample analyzed below includes two types of books. The first type are directed at fathers in general (those raising both sons and daughters so not gender specific). These are *Fathers Who Dare Win* (Grant 2012) and *Being Dad: For Dads-To-Be and the Women Who Love Them* (Holt and Jones 2010). The second type includes four books directed at parents in general about raising sons. These are *Raising Boys: Why Boys Are Different— and How to Help Them Become Happy and Well-Balanced Men* (Biddulph 2013); *Raise an Emotionally Healthy Boy* (Zeff 2013); *The Purpose of Boys: Helping Our Sons Find Meaning, Significance, and Direction in Their Lives* (Gurian 2010); and *Raising Boys in a New Kind of World* (Reist 2011).

**Analytical Framework**

Our approach to analyzing the books was informed by work in the field of critical psychology. Following authors such as Clarke (2007), we believe that approaches based on critical psychology, particularly since they are informed by social constructionism, are analytically useful for the ways in which they provide opportunities for examining taken-for-granted norms, and for the insights they afford us about how particular social practices (such as parenting and family making) are constructed. These approaches seek to examine how truth claims are made, in whose service they operate, and how they often function to exclude or marginalize.

We employed a thematic analysis informed by the broader epistemology of critical psychology as outlined above. Thematic analysis may be understood as "a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes the data set in (rich) detail. However, frequently it goes further than this, and interprets various aspects of the research topic" (Braun and Clarke 2006: 79). In using such an analysis we take as important the idea that any analytic framework should not only identify broad themes across a corpus of data, but should also fulfill the broader aim of an approach grounded in critical psychology which is to prioritize political analysis. In other words, such an analysis, as we see it, is one that examines how particular subject positions are made available to people as a result of the political context in which they live. Our analysis of themes arising from the books is thus inherently political because it does not stop at just identifying the themes and providing examples. Rather, it follows through on this by discussing the implications of the subject positions deployed within the books by situating them in a social context whereby certain subject positions are constructed as *normal* through comparison to subject positions that are positioned outside the norm.

**Procedure**

Analysis of the data consisted of several stages. First, each book was initially read from cover to cover by the first author so as to gain familiarity as well as allow for an analysis of all the sections of the books. After this, a second in-depth reading was accompanied by taking note of any instances that related to masculinity, heteronormativity, sexuality or which referenced biologically essentialist accounts of gender. These instances were then organized thematically, with the themes, to a large degree, being obvious and dictated by the foci of the books. As demonstrated in the analysis below, the themes themselves were in fact descriptions of subject positions made available by the books to boys and fathers. As such, the analytic categories used are subject positions rather than themes for all, bar one, of the categories.

It is important to note that the analysis presented below focuses not on the apparent intentions of the authors, nor how parents may take up what these books present. Rather, the analysis looks at what subject positions are made available to boys and fathers. Even though each book is written by a different author, with different primary aims, they construct very similar masculine subject positions for boys and fathers.

**Analysis**

From the analysis, four subject positions were identified: *"Normal" boys*; *Boys outside the norm*; *"Normal" fathers*; and *Fathers outside the norm*.

The following sections of the analysis outline each subject position in detail. These subject positions are constructed through the deployment of various interpretative repertoires, and these are explored in turn. Through this, the specific and narrow construction of each subject position is illustrated, as well as how the authors justify and normalize them.

The analysis ends with an exploration of an additional theme that was identified from the corpus, that of the father and son relationship. The authors of all books used this to

bolster the construction of the *normal* boy and the *normal* father. Attention is also paid, where appropriate, to the implications of how the books construct girls and women.

### *"Normal" Boys*

All of the books construct for the reader what a *normal* boy is, along with his associated behaviors which are based heavily on stereotypical images of what boys are expected to be in Western societies. This is achieved by referencing biological and hormonal causes, and what is seen to be the inevitable nature of boys. For example, while Gurian does recognize cultural and social influences, he nonetheless emphasizes what he constructs as boys' "hardwiring": "boy psychology is not just socialized but also hardwired into our sons" (2010: 30). Through referencing what are taken as natural causes, and explaining boys' behavior with reference to biology, books such as this assert to parents that the description provided of the *normal* boy is based in a pre-given reality, and is the correct, and, indeed, the only way for a boy to be a boy.

Across all the books in the sample, boys are constructed as driven by testosterone that automatically leads to specific behaviors in all *normal* boys. The appropriating of claims about testosterone to legitimate very specific behaviors in boys is rhetoric more than truth; testosterone is not exclusive to their sex. Implied, of course, is the claim that boys who do not exhibit testosterone-driven behaviors are not only different to the *normal* boy, but they are biologically different. Biddulph (2013), for example, makes claims about testosterone to justify much of what boys are and what they do, so much so that he has an entire chapter entitled "Testosterone!" (45), 16 pages dedicated to how testosterone controls boys. Other books suggest that for boys aggression is normal, and it will not go away, and this is because "testosterone feeds aggression, and levels begin to rise noticeably in boys as young as ten" (Reist 2011: 189). Testosterone is also described as driving boys to risk-taking behavior because "testosterone is a risk-taking and aggression chemical" (Gurian 2012: 32). The behaviors that result include "driving fast and dangerously, performing daring skateboarding

tricks, drinking or drug-taking to excess" (Reist 2011: 132). Boys are therefore described as having an overwhelming desire to act violently and dangerously because of the surges of testosterone that they get throughout the day.

In addition to relying on an argument based on biological essentialism—claims about testosterone—all the books construct *normal* boys in terms of struggling to express their emotions. Reist (2011) and Zeff (2013) dedicate entire chapters to this, with Zeff titling his chapter "Why It's Difficult For Males to Express Empathy and Emotions" (7). Specifically, boys are constructed as though they actively suppress their emotions in order to seem masculine: "boys don't want to appear weak, so rather than expressing what's bothering them and discussing their problems, they frequently shut down emotionally" (Zeff: 121). Biddulph (2013), however, suggests that a boy does not choose this; he is hardwired to suppress his emotions: "when he's emotional, the verbal part of his brain shuts down" (212). Some authors, however, suggest that boys do not express their emotions because they do not experience a full range of emotions; boys are just unemotional by nature. Gurian (2010) outlines how boys are not in tune with their feelings and thus need help in this regard.

> Boys don't have as much inner access as girls do to sensorial information,
> memory, or feelings. In order to gain complete empathic development,
> boys will often need cultural and social maps and rigorous rituals to
> make connections between their senses, important memories, and
> important feelings. (35)

Finally, all the books construct the *normal* boy as heterosexual, and prepubescent boys' heterosexuality is treated as a taken-for-granted fact. Biddulph (2013) explains that "by thirteen or fourteen most boys have strong sexual feelings and a fascination with images of women that are presented all around them" (137). Parents are described as pivotal in boys'

heterosexual development, where (presumably heterosexual) fathers are told to discuss and encourage boys to interact with females. Grant (2012) suggests that

> [t]alking to your son on this weekend about his relationships with the
> opposite sex will be significant. Your high view of women, your love and
> respect for your wife, will mould his view of women. (197)

*Normal* boys are also constructed as having an aggressive nature toward women. Boys are described as being so overcome by sexual aggression that they are incapable of seeing females as other people so they need help to overcome their desire to control and dominate women, and must be taught how to respect them. This is best depicted in Biddulph's (2013) explanation.

> Sex and aggression are somewhat linked—controlled by the same centers
> in the brain and by the same hormone group. This has been the source of
> enormous human tragedy and suffering, inflicted via sexual assaults on
> women, children and men. Because of this connection, it is very
> important that boys are helped to relate to women as people, to have
> empathy and to learn to be good lovers. (60)

Not only is this construction concerning—being sexually aggressive should not be tolerated, let alone normalized—it is also problematic to suggest that all boys are unable to control themselves in the presence of females.

As the extracts in this section highlight, types of hegemonic masculinity are actively deployed in the construction of the *normal* boy. Parent readers are taught that these are both desirable, and for the most part, predetermined by biology. Such a biologically essentialist argument, however, excludes boys who do not conform to this hegemonic image.

***Boys outside the Norm***

The books appeared to rely on the assumption that almost every parent has a *normal* boy as a son. Even though the academic literature has successfully identified the plural nature of masculinity, it is significant that the books analyzed provided no alternative masculine subject position for boys other than that occupied by the *normal* boy.

Biddulph (2013) does acknowledge that his book is written exclusively for the *normal* boy and therefore will not be applicable to all boys.

> Each boy is different—what we have described here is the pattern for the
>
> average boy. There is great variation among males and also lots of
>
> overlap between sexes…. Nonetheless, the general pattern will hold true
>
> for most children. (48)

While Biddulph justifies this decision by asserting the universality of the *normal* boy, Gurian (2010) takes a different approach, describing any boy who is not *normal* as one who is going through a phase, which is only temporary, and that all boys will eventually develop into *normal* ones.

> Men in the audience who were like Mick—young, sensitive, naïve,
>
> unsure of themselves (I was also one of these)—feel a special sympathy
>
> for him… most of the men who were once like Mick also remember that
>
> sometime later in life they became more like the older boys. (26)

Through what is offered as the positive outcome of this story about Mick, Gurian positions any alternative to the *normal* boy as unacceptable, therefore suggesting to parents that being *normal* is the correct developmental outcome for boys. Gurian instructs parents that any boy who is sensitive or unsure is not expressing a valid subject position for a boy. Parents are informed that such a subject position should not be considered appropriate, and that they should expect such a boy to grow out of it and become a *normal* boy. There are very clear

consequences for such a perspective since boys who do not fit the *normal* boy subject position will be continually expected to change and, as the expression goes, to grow out of it.

While it is important that these books recognize that not all boys will adhere to the dominant construction of what is seen as normal, the way in which they present alternatives clearly marginalizes boys located outside the norm and makes them appear unappealing. The authors do this by denying responsibility; the books are written so that it appears as though the authors themselves are not saying that all boys should be *normal*, but rather, it is the boys who are demanding normality: "beginning around age 10, a boy's peer group demands conformity. Anything a boy does that's different may be used to ridicule him" (Zeff 2013: 63). Again, these authors make claims to purportedly natural causes to strategic ends. By explaining boys' behavior as biologically fixed they are able to assert to parents that this description is based in reality. Biddulph (2013), too, refuses to take responsibility for his claims by explaining that boys police one another's masculinity through accusing one another of being gay—"if you are creative or different, you run the risk of being labelled a 'poofter'" (157). Biddulph suggests that a boy should fear being labelled a "poofter," and this unproblematized reference to the use of homophobic rhetoric is deplorable. This indicates the inability or unwillingness of the authors to question the link between male dominance, sexism, and homophobia.

The derogation of homosexuality is not limited to monitoring those who deviate from standard masculine expectations, but is also evident in how these authors distance themselves from suggesting the acceptability of a homosexual subject position for a *normal* boy. For example, only two books even recognize the possibility of males being other than heterosexual. Yet despite this recognition, coverage of homosexuality is still nonetheless marginalizing. For example, whilst Biddulph (2013) only dedicates two pages to a section titled "what if your son is gay?" (150–151). Furthermore, it is significant that Biddulph poses

the title hypothetically: "what if", rather than using constructive language such as "boys are…", "boys do…" like he does when he is discussing the *normal* boy. Furthermore, dedicating a section of the book to non-heterosexual boys quite clearly ostracizes such boys, emphasizing that they are different. Zeff (2013), too, dedicates a section of his book to non-heterosexual boys, titled "special support if your son is gay" (130–132), again ostracizing these boys by suggesting they are different and require "special support" (without accompanying acknowledgment that any need for support specific to gay youth is primarily a corollary of homophobia and heteronormativity, not a product of the boys' developmental trajectory *per se*).

The problematic nature of Biddulph's (2013) representation of gay boys is heightened in his suggestion that parents will naturally feel a sense of loss if their son is not heterosexual—"it's natural to feel some grief and concern" (150). This type of comment suggests to parents that a non-heterosexual subject position is something to be upset over; in place of a *normal* boy theirs is an outsider boy to whom they will need to adapt. Zeff (2013), too, sympathizes with parents about how difficult it is to have a gay son, emphasizing their need to come to terms with it (130).

Again, these authors refuse responsibility by suggesting that it is not they who are concerned with non-heterosexuality; their mission is to attempt to help these boys by getting them ready for the real world. For Zeff it is advisable to "let your son know that he needs to use discretion as to whom he comes out to, since there are some insecure bullies who might taunt him for his sexual preference" (Zeff 2013: 132). These authors need to address the issue that such bullying occurs only if we keep instructing people to view homosexuality as something outside the norm, which is precisely what these authors do.

***"Normal" Fathers***

Like the valorized subject position made available to the *normal* boy, the books similarly

make available a subject position for those located within the role of the *normal* father. The

attributes of this father are similar to those of the *normal* boy. The authors emphasize the

biological nature of these attributes since what is typical of a boy is concrete and impervious

to change, and is, in turn, indicative of hegemonic masculinities spanning across life.

Specifically, the *normal* father is often depicted in the books as an absent presence.

For example, Reist (2011) suggests that:

> Many boys are living without a father physically or emotionally present in the
>
> home. Many fathers have 'left', even when they are there 'in body', and the
>
> relationship can range from weak to non-existent. (20)

If a father is both physically and emotionally present, he is still described as unavailable

because of work demands. Grant says, "[T]ry to avoid meetings at night-time where possible,

or at least plan to be home three nights a week" (2012: 144). These authors rely upon

hegemonic masculine norms, collectively describing fathers as the traditional breadwinners,

while not expecting them to be caregivers at all.

Fathers are also constructed as angry and aggressive, and thus need to be aware of and

manage this. Biddulph suggests that a father should "know how to not 'lose it', especially

when he is angry, tired and frustrated" (2013: 89). Fathers' aggressive tendencies are

illustrated in the way their punishment styles are depicted. Dads are described as using

corporal punishment methods, as well as screaming at and shaming their sons, but are

informed by the authors that this is not the correct or best way.

> As previously mentioned, shouting at your son creates fear, rather than an
>
> understanding [of] why he is being punished; and the use of corporal
>
> punishment, such as spanking, only increases aggression in children and

teaches a child that violence is the way to express anger and assert power.

(Zeff 2013: 45)

Grant (2012) sympathizes with fathers and recognizes their mistake in their use of particular forms of punishment. As he points out, "[U]nfortunately, too many of us think nagging, yelling and blaming is discipline" (226). It is significant, however, that these authors do not provide any alternative modes of being. Fathers are told that anger and aggression are not good but that is as far as the instruction goes. Rather than being told to be emotionally vulnerable, for example, fathers are just advised to rein in their aggression. This is a product of fathers being constructed as unemotional, or at least unwilling to discuss emotions. Reist (2011) explains how avoidance or unhealthy coping is not only the preferred way for some males to deal with emotions, but it is natural for them to do so: "…some might call this avoidance or an unhealthy way of dealing with feelings. For many men, it is the preferred natural way" (64).

It is significant that the authors do not link fathers' disposition to aggression and lack of emotional expression to male dominance, traditional masculinity, or patriarchy. Rather, they are constructed as a direct result of fathers' nature. Specifically, fathers' aggression is linked to their controlling nature; fathers are inherently invested in power and control. The authors attempt to deconstruct this by explaining control as a failing, but, again, they provide no other alternative modes of being, other than reminding fathers that gaining control, or being in control, is something best avoided. They are told that "the key to good behavior is not in controlling your children" (Grant 2012: 346). It is important to note that control is a repertoire used in the construction of both boys and fathers although its manifestation varies. Boys are said to seek out groups so that they can become leaders and gain control. Fathers, however, are described as already having control, and so they need to avoid being controlling or "tone it down". Even though these authors instruct fathers to express caution when it comes

to control, perhaps in recognition of male dominance, boys are instructed to foster this attribute and assist in its development. Therefore, it is necessary to question whether these books are attempting to deconstruct or reconstruct patriarchy.

Finally, as with the *normal* boy, all *normal* fathers are constructed as heterosexual. In a society in which the traditional nuclear family is no longer the statistical norm, it is significant that these authors are relying on the assumption that each father is partnered with his son's mother. For Grant, "kids need fathers who love their mothers" (2012: 250). The authors again fail to assume responsibility by suggesting that it is not their view that mothers and fathers ought to be a couple, but, rather, children need their parents to be a couple. The normalization of heterosexual fathers is established through the use of unquestioned heteronormative advice throughout all these books. Gurian, for example, says, "[P]ay attention to everything that is happening to your partner—what she's saying, how she looks, any other clues to what she's feeling" (2010: 114).

Reist (2011) acknowledges changing societal trends, and the dissolution of the nuclear family, but he still favors this mother father dyad, thus silencing possible alternatives.

> The relationship between Mom and Dad is the matrix out of which
>
> children grow…. In this new kind of world, this matrix relationship may
>
> not involve the child's two biological parents. That is the optimal
>
> solution, but whoever the caregivers are, the model of a loving
>
> relationship with another adult is fundamentally important. (212–213)

The assumption of heterosexuality in fathers is also established through the reference to them as the second parent, the "fun" and "optional" parent. Mothers are described as the more important parent. So not only are fathers constructed negatively (in that they are not involved), but parenting is described as needing the balance of a man and a woman since fathers are depicted as not being able to do the "hard" work.

*Fathers outside the Norm*

All the books were identified as relying on the assumption that every father is a *normal* father. Even though masculinity is plural, the books analyzed provide no alternative masculine subject position for fathers. This omission is significant. Through presenting only an image of what the *normal* father is, the implication is that any other father is not *normal*.

Holt and Jones (2010) do mention in passing the idea that there are fathers who do not conform to the image of the *normal* father but they do so in a way that ridicules these fathers, thus making such a subject position unappealing. By doing this, the authors are able to demonstrate what a father should not be, thus reinforcing the assumption of the subject position of *normal* father. For example, Holt and Jones emphasize that the *normal* father should be underprepared, uninterested, and in denial of his approaching fatherhood. They include themselves in their description that all fathers-to-be do not want to, or will not seek help regarding their impending fatherhood.

> It's just that no one tells us what we are in for, we don't read, and very
> few self-respecting Aussie males talk about pregnancy with their mates
> until after the birth, and even then it's with those who have already been
> through it. (3)

By doing this, the authors are suggesting that if any male is excited and interested in fatherhood, he has no self-respect. Fathers are therefore denied the opportunity to take on a caregiving role, or if they do, they are denied positive recognition for this, and are, rather, punished.

Further, all the books deny fathers a non-heterosexual subject position, relying on the assumption that to be a father one must be in a heterosexual relationship. Holt and Jones (2010) do recognize the existence of non-heterosexual fathers, but they excuse their lack of coverage by the following statement, "[W]e apologies in advance for not covering issues like

multiple births, special needs children, same-sex parenting and single parents" (ix). The books analyzed are promoted as generalist books so it is valid that a non-heterosexual father might want to read these books supposedly written for "every parent" and "every family". These books make such claims, yet rather than include a diverse range of parents and families, they revert to heteronormative assumptions. Non-heterosexual fathers are informed that they do not fall within the category of every parent or every family and so do not fit the subject position of a *normal* father.

Additionally, while only one reference to gay fathers is made across all these books, aspects of them and quotes from previous sections highlight the explicit and implicit marginalization of gay fathers. For example, the cover of Holt and Jones' (2010) book presents the image of a male with his head against the belly of a pregnant woman, looking quite concerned and confused. Not only does this further depict the belief that all fathers should be hesitant about their impending fatherhood, but that, indeed, parenthood begins only through a female partner giving birth. This not only marginalizes non-heterosexual fathers, but also single parents, parents who wish to adopt, foster, or simply become parents through methods (such as surrogacy) that do not follow the traditional, normalized, and expected approach.

### *The Father and Son Relationship*

The construction of what constitutes *normal* fathers and sons is reified in how the typical father and son relationship is depicted. Fathers and sons are shown bonding over, and engaging, in typically masculine activities. For example, Grant (2012) encourages fathers to take their sons "away for a blokes' weekend hunting, fishing, or surfing…" (67). Fathers are therefore assumed to not only possess these masculine attributes, but to enjoy exercising them, so much so that this is how a father should bond with and spend time with his son.

Specifically, *normal* fathers and *normal* sons are represented as not only enjoying sports, but that sport is vital to their masculinity and their father/son relationship. For Biddulph, "boys need sport" (2013: 6) and "sport offers a boy a chance to get close to his father, and to other boys and men" (189). Zeff (2013) claims that for boys, "being good at sports is an important factor in masculinity" (2013: 87). Here, Zeff is suggesting that sport is an opportunity for both fathers and sons to measure their masculinity; being good suggests that they have achieved masculinity, and being bad means they are lacking masculinity.

The importance of sports is further emphasized through the recurring use of the metaphor of fathers as coaches. For example, Grant (2012) says, "Dads, we can coach our children into their potential" (357). This suggests that fathers reading these books may not comprehend their role as parents unless it was likened to that of a coach.

Additionally, fathers are described as their son's hero, or told that this is what they should aspire to be. As Grant (2012) explains to fathers:

> Not many of us will have the opportunity to rush into a burning building,
>
> while being shot at by terrorists, to rescue a damsel in distress. However,
>
> our children need their dad to be a hero. What our children need are
>
> moral heroes, faithful heroes and wise heroes. (47)

Sons are then described as seeking hero status, to be like their dads. For example, Reist explains how boys need to "accept" their impending hero status: "first he needed to accept his role as questing hero" (2011: 275). Heroes are understood to exhibit characteristics of strength, endurance, and dominance. It is significant that these authors advocate that fathers need to adopt these characteristics and that boys should strive for them. It could be suggested that the authors have taken the term dominant male and replaced it with hero, embracing the notion of men as powerful and superior to females.  This is particularly evident in Grant's suggestion that males seek to "rescue" females (47).

**Discussion**

The analysis presented in this article outlines how contemporary books on fathering and raising boys construct limited available subject positions for fathers and sons. Specifically, when they are constructing the *normal* father and son, these authors draw on characteristics of hegemonic masculinity and they make heteronormative assumptions. The only alternative identities presented are done so in direct opposition to these *normal* identities, and are thus marginalized.

Overall, the analysis reinforces the findings of previous research, supporting the claim in the introduction that while things may be changing, what parenting books present as normal and appropriate has not changed. We have identified two dominant subject positions based on ideas of what is considered normal, making available one hegemonic subject position to sons and fathers. Across the books, we have drawn on three interpretative repertoires used to construct the *normal* boy: he is driven by his testosterone, he is emotionally closed; and he is heterosexual. Five interpretative repertoires were drawn on to construct the *normal* father: he is unavailable; aggressive; unemotional; in control; and heterosexual. The books present these subject positions as factual by relying on biologically essentialist arguments, presenting their constructions as a result of the natural and innate differences between males and females.

Consistent with Yarwood's (2011) claim that the fathering role is restricted by hegemonic masculinity (a good father is one who is economically active rather than a nurturer or care-giver), these books present the normal father as one who is unavailable, a construction also identified by Anderson, George and Nease (2002). Unlike previous research such as that by Anderson and Accommando (2002) which has suggested that parenting books *implicitly* maintain traditional notions of gender and masculinity, the analysis presented in this article has identified how the books in fact *explicitly* endorse traditional forms of masculinity. Since

no previous research has looked comparatively at the construction of fathers and sons, it is significant to identify that the books reinforce the construction of each by presenting them as similar, as well as by constructing the typical father and son relationship. This relationship is constructed on the basis that it is between the normal father and son, thus furthering the endorsement of hegemonic masculinity.

The analysis provided also shows, similar to the findings of Riggs (2008), that while not homophobic, the books are structured through heteronormative assumptions, describing the normal boy and father as strictly heterosexual. This construction is not just implied but is, rather, explicit; fathers are encouraged to assist in the development of their sons' heterosexuality by teaching them how to be with girls, supporting Martin's (2009) finding that parents construct heteronormative understandings for their children. Unlike previous research, however, the current analysis identified the ways in which the books describe boys as being sexually aggressive toward women, and suggest that they need assistance to overcome their desire to dominate women. Further, supporting Gleason's findings (1996; 1997) that heterosexual marriage is emphasized as the ideal context in which children should be raised, a father is not only constructed as heterosexual, but is assumed to be married to his son's mother (which family set-up sons apparently need).

While the majority of boys and fathers are presumed to inhabit what is constructed as a normal subject position, some of the books did present alternatives. Rather than being presented as alternative yet equal, however, these identities are treated in opposition to normal identities, and, through this, the books reinforce the claims regarding what is normal. Similar to Riggs's (2008) findings, in our analysis non-heterosexual identities are relegated to the margins, as it were, of the books, placed in special chapters, thus positioning these boys in direct opposition to the *normal* boy. Since no previous research has looked into the construction of fathers in isolation, it is significant that our analysis identified

the fact that no books made available to fathers a non-heterosexual subject position, with one author apologizing for not covering related issues in his book.

Given these findings, it is important to question, then, what contemporary society thinks of boys and men. We suggest that it is problematic to present boys as being sexually aggressive and in need of assistance to overcome this because this implies that without guidance, heterosexual boys are incapable of controlling their behavior when in the presence of girls or women. Further, by presenting this as a part of boys' inherent nature, the books suggest, by implication, that we cannot hold boys responsible for such behavior since it is out of their control. It is thus important to consider what these findings mean for girls and women. These books not only teach boys and men about who they should be, but, in turn, teach them how to treat women and girls. When dominant forms of masculinity are encouraged, and the appearance of being in any way feminine is discouraged, this reinforces the subordination of females. Furthermore, not only do the books presume that specific behaviors are associated with each sex, but that all individuals fit within these two sexes. If all the books are based on presumed innate differences between those assigned female at birth and those assigned male, what does this mean for transgender individuals? What views are the books presenting and encouraging against those who do not identify with the sex assigned to them? Diversity and individuality will be accepted only when we all understand that what counts as masculinity and femininity is part of social constructionism, and not tied to biology.

The effects of what these books present to men and boys must be taken seriously because, rather than offering improved strategies for men's raising of happy and healthy boys, these books present assertions of what boys and fathers should be based on both hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity. Future publications in this area that claim to be generalist books (like the ones analyzed here) should be ones that recognize but also affirm non-

normative identities and sexualities and this requires a shift away from normative biological

claims about fathers and sons.

**Bios**

Damien Riggs is an Associate Professor in social work at Flinders University and an

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