

# Normalizing Heterosexuality: Mothers' Assumptions, Talk, and Strategies with Young Children

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*In recent years, social scientists have identified not just heterosexism and homophobia as social problems, but also heteronormativity—the mundane, everyday ways that heterosexuality is privileged and taken for granted as normal and natural. There is little empirical research, however, on how heterosexuality is reproduced and then normalized for individuals. Using survey data from more than 600 mothers of young children, ages 3 to 6 years old, this article examines how mothers normalize heterosexuality for young children. The data suggest that most mothers, who are parenting in a gendered and heteronormative context to begin with, assume that their children are heterosexual, describe romantic and adult relationships to children as only heterosexual, and make gays and lesbians invisible to their children. Those who consider that their children could some day be gay tend to adopt one of three strategies in response: Most pursue a passive strategy of “crossing their fingers” and hoping otherwise. A very few try to prepare their children for the possibility of being gay. A larger group, primarily mothers from conservative Protestant religions, work to prevent homosexuality. I conclude by discussing the implications of these findings for understanding sexual identity development and the construction of heteronormativity.*

*I said, “Someday you will meet a boy that becomes your friend and then makes you feel warm and happy inside. That feeling is called falling in love. When you meet that boy you may decide together to get married like mommy and daddy.”*

*—Mother of a 3-year-old girl*

Social scientists have identified not just heterosexism and homophobia as social prob-

lems, but also heteronormativity—the mundane, everyday ways that heterosexuality is privileged and taken for granted as normal and natural. Heteronormativity includes the institutions, practices, and norms that support heterosexuality (especially a particular form of heterosexuality—monogamous and reproductive) and subjugate other forms of sexuality, especially homosexuality. While a few researchers have begun to examine the production of heteronormativity in everyday life (e.g., Kitzinger 2005), there is little research on how heterosexuality is normalized for individuals and how people come to understand heterosexuality as natural. Through examining heterosexual mothers' sexual socialization of young children, this article analyzes one way that heterosexuality becomes normalized in individuals' understandings of the social world. I demonstrate that mothers' heteronormativity is manifested in how they think about and parent their children with regard to sexuality. Mothers, themselves enmeshed in a heteronormative

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social context, monitor, manage, and imagine heterosexuality in their children. Such parenting practices (re)produce heteronormativity as children are taught to understand themselves and the world through a heteronormative lens.

## HETEROSEXUALITY AND HETERONORMATIVITY

For decades, scholarship in the social sciences has understood that heterosexuality is both socially constructed and hegemonic. Historians have documented the invention of the category of heterosexual persons and demonstrated how macro-socioeconomic structures have both supported and undermined its construction (D'Emilio 1983; Katz 1995). Feminist theorists have examined the compulsory nature of heterosexuality, explicating how it is managed, required, and institutionalized (Ingraham 1994; Rich 1980), and queer theorists have analyzed the abject position of homosexuality (Butler 1990; Sedgwick 1990, 1993). This scholarship demonstrates the social construction of heterosexuality, its normativity, and its privileges, albeit largely at the macro-level. How is heterosexuality or its hegemony constructed within individuals? That is, how do individuals come to understand heterosexuality as normative in the first place? As with some social constructionist accounts of gender (e.g., Martin 1998; Miller 2006), there is no developmental account of heteronormativity. Correspondingly, and as Miller (2006:446) suggests, any theory "with a 'view from nowhere' in development is somewhat limited."

We do, however, have multiple developmental accounts of sexual identity from which to draw and build. Psychologists have researched sexual identity at the level of the individual, producing multiple theories of how sexual identity is arrived at and transformed across the life course (Bem 1996; Diamond 1998, 2003; Savin-Williams 2005; Troiden 1993). This literature typically focuses on the development of sexual identity among non-heterosexuals, with a few exceptions (e.g., Chodorow 1992; Kitzinger 2005). In trying to explain gay, lesbian, and bisexual identity, much of this scholarship begins from differences in early temperament or innate desires (e.g., Bem 1996; Savin-Williams 2005). While there are many accounts of generic sexual development (most of which are

implicitly heterosexual), development of heterosexual *identity* is, comparatively, undertheorized and underresearched. Vague notions of "naturalness" are usually assumed in describing heterosexual identity (Chodorow 1992).

The focus on how individual identities unfold, and how sexual identity labels are taken up by non-heterosexuals, does not tell us much about how heteronormativity is learned and constructed in everyday life at the level of individuals (regardless of whether those individuals become heterosexual or take up another sexual identity). We know little about how, living in a social context thick with heteronormativity, individuals come to accept and privilege what is culturally proscribed as natural and normal.

Heteronormativity (Jackson 2006; Kitzinger 2005), of course, encompasses the many mundane, everyday ways in which heterosexuality is privileged over homosexuality, taken for granted, and seen as natural, ordinary, persistent, and without need of explanation. Jackson (2006) argues that heteronormativity "governs" both gender and sexuality and operates through multiple dimensions of social life (e.g., structure, meaning, everyday practice, and individual subjectivity). Heteronormativity is also normative in a moral sense, defining what is within the bounds of "normal." While some research has begun to examine how these dynamics are reproduced in everyday social life by those "not motivated by heterosexist prejudice or discriminatory intent" (Kitzinger 2005:478), there is no sociodevelopmental account of how we come to understand which kinds of sexual and romantic relationships are normal. Developmental accounts must also address how heteronormativity is established in childhood. Indeed, there is evidence—discussed next—that such understandings are present in young children and that interaction with parents, most notably mothers, may be especially pivotal.

## SEXUALITY AND CHILDHOOD

Social scientists have long been interested in how children come to understand and employ patterns of social dominance such as race (Lewis 2003; Moore 2001; Van Ausdale and Feagin 1996), gender (Maccoby 1988; Martin 1998; Thorne 1993), and class (Connell 1970; Lareau

2002; Weinger 2000). This research has found that children are cognitively sophisticated and not too "egocentric," as some psychologists have described them, and can make use of "adult," abstract, and complex categories of meaning such as race, class, and gender. Some find that even preschool-aged children are astute learners and users of such categories (Maccoby 1988; Van Ausdale and Feagin 1996).

With respect to sexuality, a substantial body of ethnographic research demonstrates that children understand, enact, and participate in heterosexuality by early elementary school. For example, in her research at two elementary schools, Thorne (1993:71) finds that "sexual meanings, highlighted by names like 'chase-and-kiss' and 'kissers-and-chasers,' infuse cross-gender [heterosexual] chasing at every age." Furthermore, Best (1983:116–17) finds that children as young as 2nd grade are engaged with the heterosexual discourses and practices of "boyfriend and girlfriend":

Boys/men were expected to be attractive, even irresistible, to girls/women, and second grade boys adopted this aspect of the male role with considerable zest. . . . Third grade girls spent endless amounts of time fantasizing about "boyfriends" and marriage. Any gesture of appreciation shown them by boys—the lending of a pencil or an eraser—was viewed as a display of personal interest and would be eagerly discussed with other girls.

These early elementary school practices become more astute and entrenched over time. By the end of primary school, children make sophisticated use of interactive heterosexual performance, as well as heterosexist and homophobic harassment (Renold 2002, 2005). Similarly, in a study of summer camp, McGuffey and Rich (1999) find that boys in middle childhood use homophobia (especially name calling) to police masculinity. This literature shows the ever developing sophistication of children's understandings of the normativity and hegemony of heterosexuality. It also demonstrates that children are well aware of these practices by at least early elementary school.

But what happens before children are ensconced in the practices of elementary school and peer groups? Children learn a lot about gender (and sometimes a bit about sexuality) from preschool teachers and daycare workers

(Blaise 2005; Danby 1998; Martin 1998; Skelton 2001; Wallis and VanEvery 2000). Preschool children also learn about gender and sexuality through the media. Children's media, especially films aimed at girls, are filled with hetero-romantic story lines (Do Rozario 2004; Martin, Luke, and Verduzco-Baker 2007; Tobin 2000; Witt 2000).

Research also consistently finds that parents construct gender for their children, and key to this construction is a child's sexuality. This is especially true for boys, because their behaviors and dress are particularly limited in early childhood and often implicate their sexuality (Martin 1998; Thorne 1993). Parenting advice about gender both raises and appeases parents' fears that non-normative gender behavior is a sign of homosexuality (Martin 2005). Parents', especially heterosexual fathers', fears about gender non-normativity are intimately tied to concerns about children's, especially sons', heterosexuality (Kane 2006). Similarly, among parents whose children were sexually abused, McGuffey (2005) finds that fathers use homophobia to reassert and "fix" a son's masculinity after the abuse. These studies suggest the importance of heterosexuality to normative gender identity for parents of young children.

What can we learn about heteronormativity by directly examining parents' sexual socialization practices with their young children? Early childhood is usually seen as a natural precursor to later development and often overlooked. How might parents convey the normativity of heterosexuality to children in early childhood? I examine what mothers—admittedly only one source of sexual socialization, but an important one—convey to children. I am not suggesting that parents' actions will shape or predict (or not) a child's sexual identity. Rather, this article examines how heterosexuality may come to be understood as normative in early childhood, regardless of a child's ultimate sexual identity.

## MOTHERS, CHILDREN, AND HETERONORMATIVITY

I argue that mothers reproduce heteronormativity in and for their children. It is important to note, however, that mothers are constituted by

the very heteronormative context that they then reconstruct for their children. As transmitters of the cultural norms about heterosexuality, mothers are simultaneously constrained by what it means to be a good mother and the many dimensions on which mothers are judged for their mothering (Blum 2007; Hays 1996; Singh 2004). Mothers are particularly under scrutiny concerning their children's sexuality, given the long (and not entirely gone) history of blaming mothers for children's, especially boys', homosexuality (du Plessis 1993). This context shapes mothers' practices and strategies as they parent.

Finally, children are not blank slates merely in the process of becoming adult social actors (Martin et al. 2007; Thorne 1993). Rather, socialization can be understood as a process through which children make meaning from the many pieces of culture they absorb. They simultaneously alter, resist, and manage the conflicting meanings of various pieces of culture, discourse, interactions, and social structures. Children do not necessarily absorb what their mothers tell them without alteration, resistance, and integration with other cultural ideas and knowledge. Socialization is, in these regards, a two way process; children's questions, actions, and reactions all shape what parents say and do with children. This is likely particularly true for issues surrounding sexuality. Experts tell parents to talk to their children about sexuality only when a child asks a question, and parents seem to follow this advice (Frankham 2006). Much sexuality education by parents is thus dependent on a child's inquisitiveness and the available sources of information that might prompt a child to ask a question (Martin et al. 2007). Mothers do not construct heteronormativity on a blank slate, but in interactions with variously knowledgeable and inquisitive children living in varied social contexts.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

The data for this study come from a larger project I conducted on mothers' sexual socialization of young children. Most research on this topic uses small and unsystematic samples (Geasler, Dannison, and Edlund 1995; Moore 2003) and retrospective data (Ward and Wyatt 1994) (likely due to human subjects review boards' requirements and other difficulties in getting access to

broader populations of parents and children when researching sexuality). In an attempt to overcome these limitations, I conducted a Web-based survey of U.S. mothers with children ages 3 to 6 years old. The Web survey allowed me to reach a wider range of mothers than could be gathered in interviews or focus groups (Geasler et al. 1995). The survey also allowed me to collect comparable closed- and open-ended answers to a wide range of questions.

## SAMPLE

The mothers for the study come from a panel of respondents provided by Survey Sampling International (SSI). SSI is a well-respected provider of Web panels, maintaining a panel of 2.6 million individuals in the United States. From this group, I drew 12,500 e-mail addresses of mothers, with the intent of collecting 500 surveys. I launched the survey in February 2006 with an e-mail invitation to participate. Those who replied to the e-mail answered screening questions to confirm that they fit the sample criteria. The survey was open for eight days, during which I collected 641 responses. I could have collected more responses with follow-up reminders and a longer survey period, but cost prohibited this. Using a Web sample and survey was significantly more cost-effective, and provided a larger sample and more information, than other surveying means (Couper, Traugott, and Lamias 2001). Willingness to participate in Web surveys, and access to the technology to do so, likely shaped the profile of the respondents.

The mothers in the sample were 33.8 years old, on average (see Table 1). Most were married (77 percent) and White (88 percent), while about 5 percent were Black, 3 percent Hispanic, 2 percent Asian, and 1 percent American Indian. About 35 percent of mothers had a college degree or more, and approximately half the sample had a household income below \$50,000. The other half fell between \$50,000 and \$150,000, with most at the lower end of this range. Half the mothers worked outside the home, with a mean of 33 hours worked per week. Geographically, the mothers were distributed proportionately across all 50 states. Two mothers described themselves as bisexual.

Respondents were asked to choose their religion from Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, Protestant,

**Table 1.** Sample Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	SD
Age (N = 640)	33.82	7.12
Number of Children (3 to 6 years) (N = 640)	1.25	.52
Age of Child Considered in Survey (N = 631)	4.60	1.07
Proportion Responding about Girls (N = 632)	.50	.50
Proportion Responding about Boys (N = 632)	.50	.50
Annual Household Income, \$ (N = 637)		
Less than 30,000	.19	.40
30,000 to 49,999	.30	.46
50,000 to 69,999	.24	.43
70,000 to 89,999	.14	.35
90,000 to 109,999	.06	.25
110,000 to 150,000	.05	.21
More than 150,000	.01	.10
Not Employed (N = 631)	.51	.50
Hours Worked in Paid Employment (N = 314)	.33	.12
Marital Status (N = 638)		
Single	.06	.24
Married	.77	.42
Divorced	.10	.30
Widowed	.00	.04
Domestic partner	.07	.25
Ethnicity (N = 640)		
White/Caucasion	.88	.33
Black/African American	.05	.21
American Indian/Alaskan Native	.01	.12
Hispanic/Latino	.03	.18
Asian	.02	.14
Other	.01	.11
Highest Level of Education (N = 639)		
Less than high school	.02	.12
High school diploma	.20	.40
Some college	.44	.50
Bachelors degree	.25	.43
Some graduate school	.04	.19
Graduate degree	.06	.24
Religion (N = 641)		
Catholic	.22	.41
Protestant I <sup>a</sup>	.15	.36
Protestant II <sup>a</sup>	.35	.48
Muslim	.00	.07
Jewish	.02	.13
No religion	.22	.41
Other	.04	.20

Note: Valid responses N's in parentheses for each variable.

<sup>a</sup>I recoded Protestant denominations into Protestant type I and type II based on the distinctions made by Laumann and colleagues (1994:146-47). Protestant I's comprise liberal or moderate denominations such as Methodists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians. Type II Protestants include conservative denominations that have evangelical or fundamentalist world views, such as Baptists, Church of Christ, Assembly of God, and those who described themselves as "Christian" or "Born Again."

no religion, and other. Those who chose Protestant also selected a denomination, and those who chose "other" were asked to explain. I recoded the answers to the religion questions

into the variables Catholic (22 percent), Jewish (2 percent), Muslim (.5 percent), Protestant I (15 percent), Protestant II (35 percent), no religion (22 percent), and other (4 percent). This recod-

ing moved many who first reported "other" into one of the Protestant categories, as they also wrote "Baptist," "Christian," or "Methodist." The few remaining in the "other" category are not classifiable in any of the above categories (e.g., Wiccan or Buddhist). I recoded the Protestant denominations into Protestant I and II based on the distinctions made by Laumann and colleagues (1994:146-47). Protestant I comprises liberal or moderate denominations such as Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, and Episcopal. Type II Protestants are conservative denominations with evangelical or fundamentalist world views, such as Baptist, Church of Christ, Assembly of God, and those who answered "Christian" or "Born Again."

The Web survey did not produce a random representative sample, but it came closer to representing U.S. mothers of young children on some dimensions than on others. According to an analysis of national data from the Current Population Survey, mothers of 3- to 5-year-olds are slightly younger (about 32.3 years versus 33.8) and slightly less likely to be married (69 percent versus 77 percent) than the mothers in my sample; a similar 36 percent have a college degree or more. The median income of households with children under age 18 according to the 2006 Census is \$58,865. Half the mothers in my sample reported a household income below \$50,000. Stay-at-home mothers are overrepresented in my sample (50 versus 40 percent). My sample also differs from the general population on race. Whites are overrepresented and other racial/ethnic groups are underrepresented, particularly Blacks (who make up 12.7 percent of the population but only 5 percent of the sample).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Using a Web survey likely produced these differences and the biases resulting from them. First, stay-at-home mothers may be more likely to respond to SSI's calls for participants to earn cash and other items while "working" from home. If the choice to stay home reflects their views on gender roles, then these mothers may be more conservative in their sexual values. If so, the analyses may overestimate the extent to which mothers uphold heteronormativity (although there are no differences by employment status). Second, non-Whites are underrepresented, and this too may be due to using a Web survey, given that the digital divide in the

## METHOD

The survey consisted of open- and closed-ended questions asking mothers what they say (and do not say) to their children about sexuality and reproduction. Some questions asked about the content of what the children were taught, drawing on the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States' (SIECUS) guidelines for comprehensive sexuality education for kindergartners (SIECUS 2004). Some questions asked the context (e.g., timing, prompts) for mothers' discussions with children about sexuality and reproduction. Other questions addressed mothers' feelings about these conversations with their children, barriers to educating their children on these topics, other sources of their children's sexual and reproductive knowledge, and demographic information. The questions were not directly framed around heterosexuality but were about sexuality education in general. Most of the questions required simple yes or no answers and some were followed by open-ended questions. For example, the survey began with a broad question: "Have you talked with your child about sex and reproduction or issues surrounding these topics?" For those who said yes, an open-ended question followed, asking the respondent to describe the conversation. The survey used this form of question to ask if and how mothers described "what a wedding is," "falling in love," "divorce," "your own wedding," and "the day your child was born."<sup>2</sup>

I draw at length from two particular questions: "Have you ever wondered if your child might grow up to be gay or lesbian?" and its open-ended follow-up question, "Why or why not?"<sup>3</sup> I also use the answers from the yes-or-no ques-

United States is partly based on race (DiMaggio et al. 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Between 86 and 94 percent of the mothers answered the open-ended questions. Their answers vary in length from a short sentence to a paragraph; the examples here represent the range of lengths. I examined the variation in who answered these questions and found no statistically significant variation by race, household income, or education.

<sup>3</sup> Two research assistants first coded the open-ended answers. They read all the answers and generated a set of categories for each question. We then consolidated overlapping categories and produced a

tions: "Have you made a statement to your child that is similar to:" "Some people are homosexual, which means they can be attracted to and fall in love with someone of the same gender," "Two people of the same gender can live in loving, lifetime committed relationships," "Homosexual men and women are also known as gay men and lesbians," "Homosexuality is wrong," and "Making fun of people by calling them gay (e.g., homo, fag, queer) is disrespectful and hurtful."

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

While heteronormativity develops from many sources (e.g., media, peers, and other adults), I use evidence from the data to show how mothers' own heteronormative assumptions, talk, and strategies may constitute heteronormativity in their children. Again, mothers are not (solely) "responsible" for children's heteronormativity. Mothers live in a context in which mothering is continuously judged; teaching children about sexuality at all (let alone teaching *young* children anything other than the norm, that is, monogamous, reproductive heterosexuality) is highly suspect if not dangerous. Understanding mothers' practices, however, can illuminate how heteronormativity is reproduced through a mundane, persistent, everyday process that is often without oppressive intention (Kitzinger 2005).

Below, I describe two sets of practices in which mothers engage. The first set of practices assumes one's child is heterosexual and projects that identity onto the child's behavior. These practices are widely shared among mothers in this sample and are used to construct heterosexuality and make it normative. This assumption of a child's heterosexuality colors mothers' sexual socialization of children more generally and may lead to the erasure of gays and lesbians from children's social maps. The second set of practices concerns the strategies mothers use when considering the possibility that their children could one day be gay or lesbian.

Mothers are not nearly as uniform in this regard. A few prepare for the future, many passively hope for "the best" (i.e., that their children are heterosexual), and others parent for the prevention of homosexuality. Notably, mothers' own social contexts (e.g., whether they have close friends or family who are gay or whether they belong to a conservative religion) influence which strategy they pursue.

### *ASSUMING HETEROSEXUALITY AND CONSTRUCTING HETERONORMATIVITY*

Most parents presume that their children are heterosexual. This unarticulated, usually unthought, assumption steers much of the heterosexualization of young children. The presumption of heterosexuality at birth is the first step on the way to heteronormativity.

The survey asked mothers if they ever wondered if their 3- to 6-year-olds might grow up to be gay or lesbian; a majority of mothers (74 percent) reported that they had not. Mothers were significantly more likely to wonder about boys than girls (about 8 percent more likely,  $p < .05$ ).<sup>4</sup> Many said they wondered because of a son's non-normative gender behavior (e.g., "he likes dolls" or "he likes his sister's dresses"). This is the only finding illustrating such gender differences. Given the relatively narrow set of behavioral and appearance choices for young boys (Kane 2006; Martin 1998, 2005), this finding is not surprising. However, when no "signs" were present, most mothers claimed they did not wonder. The phrase "ever wondered" does not imply one thinks there is a good chance or even some chance, but asks simply whether the parent had considered the possibility. Heterosexuality's normativity means that most parents understand their children as heterosexual. This attribution of heterosexuality (much like gender attribution) means that mothers then interpret their children's behavior as heterosexual (Kessler and McKenna 1978).

The assumption of heterosexuality frames mothers' understandings of their children's

set of codes for each open-ended question. Next, they coded all questions independently. We discussed and recoded the few answers (less than 5 percent) that they each coded differently. I used some of these codes to construct the categories and strategies described throughout this article.

<sup>4</sup> Details of the logistic regression analyses that include marital status, race, household income, education, and religion as controls are available from the author.

cross-gender play, leading them to prescribe heterosexual romantic interest and desire to many cross-gender interactions. For example, in Table 2, Panel A, we see that 25 percent of all mothers (column 1, row A-1) and 36 percent of mothers with 6-year-olds (column 5, row A-1) describe their children as having had a crush on someone of the other gender. Heteronormativity leads mothers to read their children's behavior against the dominant discourse of children as asexual while, at the same time, using adult meanings to understand children's behavior.

For example, one mother of a 3-year-old girl wrote that she did not worry about her child growing up to be lesbian: "She already has boyfriends and has always been interested in having a husband. When her brother was born she asked if he was going to be her husband." Instead of interpreting male peers as "friends," the mother describes them as "boyfriends." Rather than understanding interest in "having a husband" at age 3 as similar to an interest in being a ballerina or a superhero—that is, as a game of pretend not realistically related to one's actual adulthood—the mother believes her child's interest is predictive. Finally, this mother constructs her daughter's confusion about her relationship to a new baby as evidence of proto-heterosexuality, rather than (a perhaps common) childhood misunderstanding of family relationships. Some mothers presented the romantic attractions, flirtatious desires, and love interests of their (elsewhere described as asexual) 3- to 6-year-olds as evidence of the children's heterosexuality and as an explanation for why they did not wonder if their children might grow up to be gay:

He is already attracted to girls and just does not show any signs that I can see.

My son loves girls—women any age.

She already has crushes on boys.

She seems normal and well adjusted, and she is boy crazy, she falls in love with half of the guys she sees on TV and she is only 5. She is trying to marry Orlando Bloom. She doesn't say anything like that about girls.

Because he thinks he is already married to a 13-year-old girl who is my daughter's best friend.

At this point she seems to be straight because she has showed interest in little boys her age and she says that they are her boyfriends.

[I don't wonder] because right now all he talks about is his little girlfriends!

In describing their children's heterosexual crushes, none of the mothers described any sexualized behaviors, not even kissing or hand-holding. Rather, mothers imputed romantic interest to their children's playing with, befriending, or talking about peers of the opposite sex.

Mothers, it appears from the data, use different behaviors to discern heterosexuality and homosexuality in children. Mothers used terms like "crushes" and "little girlfriends" to imply a romantic attraction and establish their children's heterosexuality. Mothers who wondered if their children might someday be gay, however, did so not because their sons had crushes on boys (or their girls on girls), but because of a child's non-normative gender behavior. The mothers used imputed desire and attraction to read heterosexuality, but they used gender behavior to read homosexuality.

Furthermore, these data suggest that most mothers do not wonder if their children might someday be gay partly because they find "evidence" of heterosexuality in children's cross-gender behavior and expect that behavior to produce a stable lifetime identity. They operate with a model of sexual identity in which adult sexuality develops linearly from the "signs" in early childhood (Aveline 2006). This is a model of sexuality that gay people themselves often put forward in coming-out stories (Plummer 1995): one is born with a sexual orientation that develops linearly from childhood; gender conformity and cross-gender romantic interests are dismissed as required detours on the way to the "real" gay self. Social scientists have demonstrated that sexual desire, behavior, and identity are frequently inconsistent elements in peoples' lived experiences (Golden 1987; Laumann et al. 1994). Indeed, sexual development is on-going (Diamond 2003, 2006) and social-historical contexts create the possibility of identities and their fluidity (Stein 1997). Mothers do not see such variability in the sexualities they imagine and construct for their children. They envision normative heterosexuality linearly developing from early childhood.

#### **TEACHING HETEROSEXUALITY THROUGH LOVE AND MARRIAGE**

Assumptions of heterosexuality likely influence parenting practices by permeating and shaping what mothers teach their children. It is



**Table 2.** Percentage (N) of Mothers by Age of Children who Reported a Crush, Discussed Falling in Love, and Discussed Marriage and Weddings

		(1) All		(2) Age 3		(3) Age 4		(4) Age 5		(5) Age 6		(6) Total N
		%	(N)	%	(N)	%	(N)	%	(N)	%	(N)	
Panel A: Crush												
(A-1)	Reports child had a crush on someone (of the other gender)	25	(104)	9	(9)	27	(28)	29	(30)	36	(37)	421
Panel B: Falling in Love												
(B-1)	Discussed falling in love	33	(203)	15	(18)	29	(50)	39	(65)	45	(70)	614
	Of those: <sup>a</sup>											
(B-2)	Heterosexualized falling in love	33	(66)	22	(4)	46	(23)	31	(20)	27	(19)	203
(B-3)	Told child “falling in love will happen to you”	19	(38)	33	(6)	26	(13)	12	(8)	16	(11)	203
(B-4)	Described falling in love as leading to marriage	29	(59)	28	(5)	42	(21)	25	(16)	24	(17)	203
Panel C: Weddings and Marriage												
(C-1)	Described what a wedding is	69	(419)	43	(50)	67	(114)	79	(131)	80	(124)	610
	Of those: <sup>b</sup>											
(C-2)	Described weddings as heterosexual	42	(174)	42	(21)	47	(54)	39	(51)	39	(48)	419
(C-3)	Said same-sex wedding possible	1	(6)	2	(1)	.8	(1)	2	(3)	.8	(1)	419
(C-4)	Described their own wedding	51	(251)	38	(31)	50	(67)	57	(85)	55	(68)	495
(C-5)	Stated: “When you grow up you will get married.”	52	(325)	36	(43)	55	(97)	59	(100)	52	(85)	631

<sup>a</sup>203 mothers reported having a discussion about falling in love with their children. These responses were then coded for heterosexualized falling in love, described love as leading to marriage, and told the children it would happen to them. These are the subsequent three categories. Categories are not mutually exclusive.

<sup>b</sup>419 mothers talked with their children about weddings. These responses were then coded for those that highlighted the heterosexuality of weddings (e.g., "a man and a woman"). These are reported on the subsequent line.

important to note that mothers of 3- to 6-year-olds say little to their children about sexuality itself. Only 3 percent of mothers had said anything about intercourse, and about 50 percent said they had discussed that a baby grows inside the uterus.

Nonetheless, mothers do instruct their children in heterosexuality, and a version that is ultimately normative: it is love-filled, monogamous, married, and reproductive. Mothers discuss romantic love and marriage with young children, and these topics are important and substantive vehicles for heterosexual socialization in early childhood. Although there are more cultural spaces available for homosexuality today, the social constitution of normative heterosexuality has not changed (Johnson 2005:15): "In its cultural representations, love is hegemonically expressed heterosexuality, and still draws on the 'traditional' scripts of marriage and heterosexual domesticity." Love is culturally understood as natural and good, something acceptable for children to learn about. In learning about romantic love, children learn about heterosexuality. Romantic love is the conduit of that learning, and it is available for children to discover from parents' accounts of love, weddings, and marriage.

The data show that mothers teach their children that they will fall in love and marry someone of the opposite gender. First, in Panel B of Table 2, we see that 33 percent of mothers reported having discussed "falling in love" with their young children (column 1, row B-1). Of the mothers who described their falling-in-love talk with their children, 33 percent discussed it in heterosexual terms (column 1, row B-2). For example, they explicitly said that love happens between a man and a woman, linking it to their own heterosexual relationships or heterosexual marriage.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> The two thirds who did not heterosexualize falling in love this way did not offer same-sex love as a possibility. Rather, their answers consisted of vague or gender neutral descriptions of falling in love, such as "when two people love being with each other—love spending time together, have things in common, and have the same beliefs and love each other unconditionally."

Falling in love is when a man and a woman who are grown ups have deep feelings for one another and want to spend all their time together.

It is something that happens when a lady and a man really like each other, they like each other so much that they start falling in love with each other.

I describe falling in love as a very special friendship between a man and a woman. I describe BEING (not just falling) in love as the way my husband and I feel about each other, wanting to spend time together for the rest of our lives, placing someone else's needs equal to your own, making a life together, working together, compromising, raising a family, etc.

Second, of the mothers who purposefully talked to their children about what it means to fall in love, 19 percent told their children that falling in love is something that will happen to them (column 1, row B-3):

He asked about my ring. I told him that someday he will meet a nice girl and fall in love, just like mommy and daddy. And then he will get married and give her a ring that says I love you forever. Daddy gave me my ring to tell me he loves me forever and ever.

God has chosen a special person for you to fall in love with. You will know who this person is because God will show you the love.

Through these conversations, children may come to understand that hetero-romantic love is something that will happen to them, not an abstract event that happens to others. Such conversations may play a role in constructing children's understandings of themselves as "supposed to be" heterosexual.

Third, mothers also linked falling in love to getting (heterosexually) married. Of those who reported discussing falling in love with their young children, 29 percent said that love results in marriage (column 1, row B-4). They reported saying things like "falling in love happens when a man and woman marries [sic]" and "[my] child asked why his father and I got married, I told him because we loved each other. And that it takes time to find the right person and when you do you get married. He knows about love. I am not so sure he understands falling in love the way I do at this time."

Apart from the falling-in-love talk, mothers also discussed marriage and weddings quite a bit. In Panel C of Table 2, we see that by the time children are 6 years old, 80 percent of mothers have talked to them about weddings (column 5,

row C-1). Also, 55 percent of married mothers had described their own weddings to their 6-year-olds (column 5, row C-4). Married and college-educated mothers talked more about weddings than did other mothers, while Black mothers talked about weddings less frequently.<sup>6</sup> Many married mothers reported that their children had seen their wedding pictures or wedding video or were at the mother's wedding. These occasions prompted discussions of weddings, marriages, and their meanings.

Furthermore, 52 percent of children heard from their mothers in some context, "when you grow up you will get married" (column 1, row C-5). For the vast majority, despite there being more talk than ever before of gay marriage, this meant heterosexually married. Indeed, parents often explicitly described marriage as heterosexual. In their descriptors of marriage, more than any other phrases, mothers used "love" and "between a man and a woman." More than the promise, the vow, or even god's role, mothers emphasized love and heterosexuality. One fourth of mothers described both simultaneously, explicitly depicting weddings as being about love and heterosexuality. Like the prescription for falling in love, these comments tell children that the rituals and institutions are about the children themselves and what they will become. When asked what they told their children about weddings, they reported the following:

When two people, a man and a woman, get together they fall in love and want to spend the rest of their lives together they decide to get married.

My children have both been in weddings as part of the wedding party (flower girls). My youngest isn't curious but my oldest knows that when a man and woman get married it's because they love each other and want to be together forever and maybe have children. She does think you have to marry the first boy you kiss, which, at 5 she's already done. I did tell her that wasn't necessarily true.

When a man and a woman love each other very much, like your mommy and daddy and decided they want to start a family of their own. Mommy dresses in a pretty gown and lots of family and friends come to watch you as you marry your prince.

<sup>6</sup> Both differences are statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ) based on logistic regression analyses with household income, education, race, marital status, and religion. Details are available from the author.

That two people who love each other have a wedding and get married. The bride gets to wear a white dress and be a princess for a day and the groom is her prince and afterwards they have a party called a reception to celebrate with their family and friends and they get to eat cake. She really liked the eat cake part.

Girls and boys are boyfriend/girlfriend and most of all friends. They decide they want to spend their time and life together so they might get married. Some people live together without being married. Ideally, marriage comes before sex and babies.

Notably, only six mothers described some discussion of same-sex marriage in their talks about weddings and marriage (column 1, row C-3). A few mothers even made it clear that their children understand that same-gender people cannot marry: "She knows that boys marry girls (no same sex relationships). You get married because you are in love." Discussion of marriage with young children may thus also inscribe heteronormativity.

Children's media also echo the connections between love, marriage, and heterosexuality. Although not asked about it specifically, mothers discussed their children's (especially girls') knowledge about love and marriage from the media, particularly movies. In young children's movies, romantic love is constructed as a special and incredibly powerful domain of life that is separate from same-gender friendship and other relationships (Martin and Kazyak 2008). While same-gender friendships are fun or funny, heterosexual love is portrayed as powerful. For example, falling in love can break a spell (*Beauty and the Beast*), cause one to give up her identity (*The Little Mermaid*), be so special that it is off limits even to a powerful genie (*Aladdin's* genie cannot make people fall in love), or lead children to disobey a parent (all of these and *Pocahontas*). Mothers' comments made the importance of such media clear:

I often tell my children that someday they will meet a very special person that will make them feel beautiful inside and out. My daughter is a true fan of all that is Disney princess, so she already has her own views on falling in love.

We explained that falling in love is when you want to spend all your time with someone for a very long time. She also watches and reads a lot of Disney stories so she believes that every girl will meet a prince just like in the stories and they will find each other and fall in love, get married and have babies.

Several mothers also said that their daughters link weddings to the princesses in movies and stories:

[I told her that] a wedding is when two people fall in love and want to stay together forever. They then become husband and wife. It is easy for my daughter to understand because her father and I are married. She has been to weddings and says that brides look like princesses.

[I told her that a wedding is] when a boyfriend and girlfriend decide to try to live together forever (she knows married from prince/princess stories).

The data suggest that children learn that romantic heterosexual love is important from this media, and they then link romantic love to marriage in discussions with their mothers. Media socialization likely builds heteronormativity in conjunction with parents' heterosexual socialization (Martin et al. 2007).

### THE INVISIBILITY OF GAYS AND LESBIANS

Through mothers' assumptions that their children will become heterosexual, most teach their young children that romance, love, weddings, and marriage are heterosexual. By implication, the children should grow up, fall in love, and get married heterosexually. The assumption of a child's heterosexuality also reinforces heteronormativity in another way: gays and lesbians are erased from children's social worlds. Most mothers do not discuss gays and lesbians with their children, nor do children see gays and lesbians depicted in the media (Martin et al. 2007).

In Table 3, we see that 62 percent of mothers said nothing to their children about gays and lesbians, not even something negative or disparaging (column 1, first row). Given that 8 percent of mothers told their children that homosexuality is wrong (column 1, last row), that leaves less than one third of mothers who acknowledged gay and lesbian lives, in a way that was at least informational, in discussions with their children. Among this group, 11 percent told their children that "some people are homosexual which means they can be attracted to and fall in love with someone of the same gender" (column 1, second row). Also, 9 percent told their children that homosexuals are also called gays and lesbians (column 1, third row). These mothers reported naming and acknowledging the existence of gays and lesbians for their children. Such processes likely help their children construct more complex understandings of their social world. Such information may also, depending on the context in which it is delivered, disrupt the heteronormativity in children's worlds.

**Table 3.** Percentage (N) of Mothers by Age of Children and What They Said about Homosexuality to Their Children

	(1) All		(2) Age 3		(3) Age 4		(4) Age 5		(5) Age 6		(6) Total N
	%	(N)	%	(N)	%	(N)	%	(N)	%	(N)	
Made no statements about homosexuality or gays and lesbians	62	(394)	76	(91)	70	(123)	56	(95)	51	(85)	631
Stated: Some people are homosexual, which means they can be attracted to and fall in love with someone of the same gender	11	(72)	9	(11)	7	(12)	12	(21)	17	(28)	631
Stated: Homosexual men and women are also known as gay men and lesbians	9	(57)	4	(5)	5	(8)	8	(14)	18	(30)	631
Stated: Making fun of people by calling them gay is disrespectful and hurtful	26	(165)	17	(20)	20	(35)	32	(54)	34	(56)	631
Stated: Two people of the same gender can live in loving, lifetime committed relationships	16	(103)	13	(16)	14	(24)	17	(28)	21	(35)	631
Stated: Homosexuality is wrong	8	(52)	3	(4)	5	(9)	11	(19)	12	(20)	631

### THE POSSIBILITY OF HOMOSEXUALITY: PARENTING STRATEGIES

The focus thus far has been on the role of parents' assumptions that their children are heterosexual. There are, nevertheless, important ruptures in heteronormativity. In this section, I examine three strategies mothers use when considering the idea that their children could grow up to be gay or lesbian. This typology emerged from the inductive coding of the open-ended question: "Have you ever wondered if your child might grow up to be gay or lesbian? Why or why not?"<sup>7</sup>

First, as seen in Table 4, a few mothers (about 6 percent) described themselves as purposefully parenting to be sure that their children know that gays and lesbians exist (column 5, first row). These mothers want their children to learn that if they are gay or lesbian, their identity will be accepted. I call this strategy *preparing for the possibility of homosexuality*. These mothers often describe having out gay family members or close friends. They are more likely to wonder about the possibility of their children being gay and to express acceptance of this wondering:

Because I know that many kids do [end up gay], and I've known too many GLBT people who have felt very unhappy at their own response to being GLBT. I want to make certain my kids don't add to this in others (because I am certain that they know some kids who are GLBT, even if the kid doesn't know it yet), and because I want them to be happy about finding love, regardless of the gender of the person.

[I] have gay family members, gay and lesbian friends. I want her to know that it would be OK whatever she grew up to be, I don't want her to feel

<sup>7</sup> I used half of the answers to this open-ended question to develop this analysis. Among the answers that I did not code into one of the strategies presented here are primarily the brief answers from mothers who said that they just do not think about it, that their children show no sign of being gay, or that their children are too young. A few are answers from mothers who worry that their children might be gay because of gender deviance or because they have a gay or lesbian relative. These non-coded open-ends are evenly distributed across religion (46 percent of those with no religion; 53 percent of Catholics; 54 percent of Protestant I's; and 49 percent of Protestant II's).

she needs to be heterosexual because it is expected of her.

My sister is a lesbian and I was pretty sure of it before she came out. I even asked her while we were teenagers. She became very angry with me. She did not come out 'til she was 24 years old. We were very close growing up and I think I've been the most accepting of her. It wasn't an issue. I would be accepting of my children because I don't see anything wrong with it. I think the hardest thing is talking to them and making them more open-minded about my sister.

I want to make sure that if he is gay, that he's comfortable with it. I believe that most gay people are born that way. I never tell him he has to be one way or the other, just stuff like: If you want to have kids, you can, but don't have to. You don't have to ever get married if you don't want to.

These mothers not only think it is okay if their children turn out to be gay, but they actively prepare for the possibility. They try to teach their children to be "open-minded," and they try to convey that they do not expect heterosexuality from their children. These parents leave open the possibility for a wide variety of paths.

Much more common than the sentiments of these few mothers, however, are the mothers who employed the strategy I call *hoping for the best*. Of the mothers who imagined the possibility of their children being gay, 62 percent said they would love and support their children if this did turn out to be the case (Table 4, column 5, second row). Nonetheless, their comments underscore that they hope their children will not be gay or lesbian (although these mothers expressed a wide range of views on homosexuality). Sometimes their comments include the caveat that although they would not wish this for their children, they would love their children in spite of a gay or lesbian identity, if necessary:

At this point, I don't see any difference if they are interested in [a] specific gender. And even if they gonna be gay or lesbian, I will support them. Even [if] I don't approve of gay and lesbian.

I have no reason to believe my daughters will grow up and become lesbians but if that is the way it is, I would not love them any less. I would be supportive of them and the way they have chosen to live their lives. My role as a parent is to guide them, mold them into productive human beings and then let them go to live their life and make their own decisions. I think society overall is becoming more receptive to the gay and lesbian community. However, I am not naive enough to believe that they wouldn't encounter some difficulties as many peo-

**Table 4.** Parenting Strategies Regarding Homosexuality by Religious Group

Parenting Strategies	(1) No Religion	(2) Catholic	(3) Protestant I <sup>a</sup>	(4) Protestant II <sup>a</sup>	(5) Overall	(6) Total N
Preparing for the Possibility (%)	7	8	10	2	6	13
Hoping for the Best (%)	88	79	74	30	62	142
Parenting for Prevention (%)	5	13	16	68	33	75
Total Percent	100	100	100	100	100	
Total N	58	53	31	88	230	230

Note: Jewish (3) and Muslim (1) not included because of small N. Chi square significant,  $p < .001$ .

<sup>a</sup>I recoded Protestant denominations into Protestant type I and type II based on the distinctions made by Laumann and colleagues (1994:146-47). Protestant I's comprise liberal or moderate denominations such as Methodists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians. Type II Protestants include conservative denominations that have evangelical or fundamentalist world views, such as Baptists, Church of Christ, Assembly of God, and those who described themselves as "Christian" or "Born Again."

ple do not believe in homosexuality but my children will ALWAYS have parents to love and support them no matter what.

The thoughts are always given to us in everyday life: TV shows, people we meet, etc. However, I know it will not matter to me or my husband if my son ends up to be homosexual over heterosexual. As long as he is a good person and he is happy, it's all we can ask for. We will not promote for him to do this, but we also realize it is a chance we all, as human beings, take.

It could happen to any parent. My husband and I have discussed it and I guess we would be open to the idea although it's not something we exactly want to happen.

I have no reason to wonder if he is going to be gay. If he is I will not love him less. It isn't worth thinking about.

You never know, I'm just keeping an open mind in case it's the case, not that I want it to be. But if I keep an open mind about it I'll be okay.

I am not worried about it as I cannot change what my child's sexual preference is. My child will choose what her sexual preference is when she gets to that stage in her life.

What differentiates these mothers from both those who parent for the possibility of homosexuality and those who parent to prevent homosexuality (as I discuss below), is their passivity with regard to parenting and homosexuality. Regardless of their own views about homosexuality, these mothers seem to share the belief that there is nothing parents can do to shape their children's sexuality. Although they do not say so specifically, they seem to lean toward a biological, immutable understanding of sexuality. These mothers are resigned to the idea that par-

ents cannot change a child's sexuality. Furthermore, although many mothers who "hope for the best" say they will still love a child who turns out to be gay, none suggest that they would like this to be an easy process for their children, nor do they parent in ways that might make it easier for a child who does become gay.

The third group of mothers employ a strategy I call *parenting for prevention*. Table 4 shows that 33 percent of mothers actively pursue parenting strategies that attempt to produce or ensure their children's heterosexuality (column 5, row 3). Mothers who belong to conservative religions (Protestant II) (Laumann et al. 1994) are far more likely than others to adopt this strategy (column 4, row 3). When asked why they did not wonder if their children might one day be gay or lesbian, these mothers said they were parenting in a way that would prevent it, and therefore they did not have to "worry" about it:

We model a heterosexual healthy marriage life in our family so I believe our daughter sees a correct woman's modeling as do our boys with their dad.

Because I believe that it is a sin. But, there are many, many sins in the Bible. I know that I sin, everyday, even though I try my hardest not to. Still, I pray that my child will also strive not to sin. One way not to sin (or to sin less) is to recognize what you believe is wrong (or sinful). That way you can make an effort not to. I believe that I can teach my children that this is a sin and model a good relationship for them, and this will never be an issue.

Because I think if you raise them with good stability and the right surroundings, things like that do not appear to be normal to him so he would realize in his mind that a same-sex marriage just isn't normal nor is it a part of his lifestyle.

Because he will learn that the Bible does not allow that. We will not allow it. And if he is, he will be committed to a psyc. hospital to find out what is wrong with his mind and brain function!

Because it is biblically wrong and my child will NOT be subjected to any kind of tolerance for that behavior. He is taught to love the person, but hate the sin. We have taught him about Sodom and Gomorrah in the Bible and he knows they were wrong and that is why those cities were destroyed.

It is wrong to be homosexual and I will teach my child the same thing.

I don't believe that children are born gay [but] that it is brought on by environmental influences, or how a child is treated. I don't treat my children like fragile pieces of glass I treat him like he's a boy and expect him to act like a boy.

As is clear from the voices above, one way mothers attempt to prevent homosexuality is to teach their children that it is wrong, often by relying on religious understandings. While mothers told children very little about homosexuality or gay people, 22 percent of those who discussed it explicitly said "homosexuality is wrong." Some mothers think teaching these "values" to children will prevent them from becoming gay. From the data, it is not clear how much children understand and retain these teachings. The data suggest, though, that some children do recall these lessons. For example, a mother of a 5-year-old daughter wrote that she does not worry about her child being gay as her daughter "has said that boys marry girls. It's silly for boys to marry boys and girls to marry girls."

This prevention strategy is significantly associated with conservative religion ( $p < .001$ ). Much has been written about religious conservatives' beliefs that they can turn gays into ex-gays (Ezren 2006; Moon 2005). My data suggest that this idea has permeated parenting practices such that some parents explicitly think they can prevent gay identities from emerging in their children in the first place. Conservative religious organizations, such as Focus on the Family, publish childcare books that extol this view. They emphasize the importance of a two-parent home, children's affirmation of their identity as male or female, children's identification with the same-sex parent, and the prevention of sexual abuse (see, e.g., Reisser 1997). The "parenting for prevention" mothers echoed all of these practices. While the idea that parenting practices can prevent homosexuality is most explicit and detailed in parenting advice from

the far right, this view is prevalent in popular parenting advice from a wide range of perspectives (Martin 2005). In some ways, it is surprising that more mothers did not report engaging in such practices. Perhaps the strength of the assumption of heterosexuality, especially when children are young, keeps those who are not heavily invested in conservative religious views from actively pursuing such strategies.

In sum, other than a few mothers who consciously parent for the possibility that their children might one day be gay or lesbian, most mothers who consider the possibility do so in ways that solidify the normativity of heterosexuality. Those who employ the "cross your fingers and hope for the best" strategy remain silent about homosexuality, making it invisible to their children. Those who employ the "prevention" strategy give children information suggesting that homosexuality is not normative, not an option for them, and not a positive option for anyone. What is striking is that these strategies are used by parents whose children are under age 6.

## CONCLUSIONS

The research presented in this article suggests that mothers begin to construct heteronormative understandings for their children in early childhood. This likely contributes to older children's and adults' sense that heterosexuality is natural. Mothers' ascription of heterosexuality to very young children, their discussions of love and marriage that assume heterosexuality, and their prescriptions to their children that they will heterosexually marry when they grow up all contribute to early constructions of heteronormativity. Furthermore, mothers' heteronormative presentation of the world may erase gays and lesbians from children's social worlds. For many young children, gays and lesbians do not exist—the words, symbols, people, and relationships are not part of a child's lexicon. Finally, very few mothers actively parent for the possibility that their children could grow up to be gay. While a few do try to ensure that their children know a gay identity is acceptable, many more mothers actively parent to prevent homosexuality, and, by far, these mothers belong to and are influenced by conservative religions. These mothers think that by teaching that homosexuality is wrong, modeling a good marital rela-

tionship, and requiring proper gender roles, they can prevent their children from being gay. The largest group of mothers in this sample said they would still love their children if they grow up to adopt a gay or lesbian identity. Among these mothers, however, none describe actively parenting to give their children knowledge about gay identities or to ensure that their children know such an identity is acceptable.

These findings raise many new questions about how mothers normalize heterosexuality in early childhood. Mothers clearly play an important role in the ways demonstrated here, but they also produce heteronormativity through the books, movies, and other culture to which they expose their children and through the many mundane conversations they have with others that children overhear. Future work should explore how different social contexts of mothering, produced by race, class, religion, and sexual identities, shape mothers' production of normalized heterosexuality. Mothers' identities, social locations, and communities surely differentially shape not only the extent but also how they normalize heterosexuality.

My data focus on mothers and exclude the role of fathers and other caretakers in the construction of heteronormativity. Because mothers are generally more responsible than fathers for children's day-to-day sexual education (Nolin and Petersen 1992), concentrating on their role makes sense. We also know that fathers tend to be more traditional in their gender socialization of children (Kane 2006; Maccoby 1998). Mothers and fathers may therefore differ in the sexual socialization of their children, perhaps especially concerning gender identity. Men also report more homophobic attitudes than do women (Loftus 2001), so there may be other differences as well. Consequently, the results presented here may underestimate the construction of heteronormativity in young children by their parents. Finally, interactions with older siblings may also influence the construction of children's heteronormativity. This study does not address these sources of familial learning.

Children, even very young ones, do not get their information about the social world solely from parents, nor do children always absorb the information and meanings their parents convey in the way parents intend. The version of heteronormativity that mothers offer children is likely disrupted in numerous ways throughout

childhood. Future research should examine young children's meaning making directly. What do children hear and retain when parents talk (or are silent) about homosexuality? How do young children interpret such information or combine it with other sources of information? How do they make sense of information from daily life that does not fit their developing notions of heteronormativity (e.g., a peer with two dads, a comment about gay marriage, or the word "gay" itself)? Doing such research with young children will likely be difficult given the sensitivities of parents and human subjects boards. As researchers, we need to find ways to address this gap in our understanding.

In the meantime, this study suggests that mothers convey heteronormativity to children from the time children are very young. These early, mundane, everyday conversations likely lay the foundation for understanding and abiding the larger heteronormative context in which children will develop. In their earliness, their banality, and their embeddedness in routine child care, these conversations demonstrate both how engrained heteronormativity is in the fabric of daily life and how efforts to change this will need to reach the very threads of society.

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