"*Boys Love Boy Toys*": A Qualitative Study Exploring the Role of Fathers in Young Boys'

Gendered Toy Preferences

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Abstract

"Boys Love Boy Toys": A Qualitative Study Exploring the Role of Fathers in Young Boys'

Gendered Toy Preferences

Early childhood is an especially important period for children's acquisition of gender related attitudes and beliefs. For boys, fathers serve as one of the primary social influences through which they learn about common gender stereotypes, including gender-typical and cross-gender play (Freeman, 2007). The current qualitative study was conducted with six boys (ages 4-6) and their fathers (ages 34-37), where fathers were first asked to complete an adapted version of the *Child-Rearing Sex-Role Attitude Scale*, which assessed their attitudes and beliefs about gender related toys, activities, and behaviors. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the father-son pairs, or with the boys alone, where they participated in a series of toy-preference activities. Descriptive coding and content analysis were used to analyze the responses boys provided for their choices of toys. Responses indicated that boys have a more stereotyped definition of "girl toys" than they do of "boy toys". Fathers' self-described beliefs reported on the *Sex-Role Attitude Scale* were similarly reflected in their behaviours and comments during the interviews with their sons. The father-son dynamic, including father and sons' responses to instances of gender non-conformity are discussed.

Keywords: gender, father-son relationship, toy preferences, gender stereotypes, masculinity, parental influence, early childhood, toys, play.

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Introduction

Starting from a young age, boys learn that they are fundamentally different from girls in a multitude of ways. From the clothes they wear to the activities they engage in, the gender binary becomes obvious to children in many aspects of their everyday lives (Halim & Ruble, 2010; Halim et al., 2014). Throughout childhood, their knowledge of gender norms and stereotypes becomes more complex as their exposure to various models of socialization increases (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). Through peer and family interactions, children acquire an understanding of gender expectations and as a result, learn to negotiate their own identities within different contexts (Chu, 2005; Deaux & Major, 1997; Levant et al., 2018a). For boys, the traditional masculinity ideology constrains them to conform to the expected male norms and discourages them from engaging in perceived feminine behaviors (Ben-Zeev & Dennehy, 2014; Blakemore, 2003; Levant & Richmond, 2016; Renold, 2001). When endorsement of the standard of hegemonic masculinity is uncompromising and fixed, there can be serious consequences to both boys' psychological and social wellbeing (Chu, 2005; Randell et al., 2016; Way et al., 2014). Given the impact of social influences on boys' gendered behaviors, the current study aimed to explore young boys' existing working schema of masculinity and the role that their fathers play in shaping it.

Prominent Theories of Gender Identity Development

Gender Schema Theory

The study of gender identity development in childhood began in the early 1980s, with researchers aiming to comprehend how children come to understand and process gender related information. In 1981, Sandra Bem introduced the Gender Schema Theory about children's understanding of gender, which suggests that children learn to process current and new

information through an ever-changing gender schema. Accordingly, children use this schema as a prescriptive guide to organize the behaviors, attitudes and physical characteristics of both sexes into gender-based prototypes, against which they evaluate others and themselves (Bem, 1981). As they learn which attributes are associated with each sex, children begin to assimilate their self-concept into the gender schema and regulate their behavior to conform to their culturally based notions of masculinity and femininity (Bem, 1981).

Gender differences in children's play preferences emerge early on in childhood and evidence suggests that boys and girls display gender differences within the first years of life (Blakemore & Centers, 2005; Cherney & Dempsey, 2010; Lauer, Ilksoy & Lourenco, 2018). More specifically, preschool girls tend to exhibit greater preferences for dolls and domestic toys such as tea sets, kitchen items, while preschool boys exhibit greater preferences for playing with toy trucks and manipulative items such as Legos (Lauer, Ilksoy & Lourenco, 2018).

In evaluating the reach and impact of gender schema theory 20 years later, Starr and Zurbiggen (2016) have found that children's internalization of the schema contributes to increased processing time of information related to one's own gender, and this novel information has allowed researchers to better understand why children engage in gender stereotyped behaviors. In explaining the gender self-socialization process, Farkas and Leaper (2016) posited that when boys identify strongly with their gender group and hold stereotyped attitudes about what it means to be a boy, they are more likely to adopt the stereotypical characteristics of their gender (i.e., boys play football, boys are competitive, boys play rough, etc.).

Social Cognitive Theory

Another relevant theory was brought forth by Kay Bussey and Albert Bandura (1999), who favoured social cognitive approach to gender identity development, and proposed a

multifaceted transmission model that takes into account cognitive, social, affective and motivational. Gender identity has been defined by Bussey (2011) as involving the self-representation of a gendered self, informed by the knowledge and beliefs held of one's own biological sex and gender, and the perceptions and treatment of others based on one's gender. SCT emphasizes the importance of modeling from parents, peers, and mass media as a major mode of influence on children's acquisition of gender concepts, as these often promote traditional gender constructs. Additionally, the social power that accompanies modelling can have a significant impact on boys; specifically, it has been found that there is more careful monitoring of behavior with regards to gender on the part of boys, since they are more likely to be sanctioned for behaving in ways that deviate from the expected gender norms (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). In a 1997 ethnography exploring how macho and misogynistic masculinities were created in UK secondary schools, Debbie Epstein further supported Bussey and Bandura's statements about differential social sanctions for boys' non-conforming gender behaviors; while it was considered acceptable for the 'tomboy' girls to participate in traditionally masculine behaviors (e.g., playing rugby, dressing in stereotypically boy clothing, etc.), the opposite was perceived for boys who engaged in more feminine behaviors. In fact, Epstein (1997) suggests that when boys engage in gender deviant behavior, it is considered problematic because behaving "like a girl" is perceived as "disgraceful", and boys will often be judged and ridiculed more severely for this type of conduct (Bussey & Bandura, 1999).

According to Martin, Ruble and Szkrybal (2002), while SCT included variables such as the child's emotional state, self-standards, and modelling experiences, both Gender Schema Theory and Social Cognitive Theories propose that children display gender-typed behavior before they have developed gender-related cognitions. Once more, this emphasizes the important

influential role of socialization on children's gender identity development, and tendency to engage in gender typed behaviors and activities.

The Role of Hegemonic Masculinity

According to Farkas and Leaper (2017), boys are more concerned with the imposition and strict following of gender norms for two main reasons: (a) the clear definition of norms for their gender, and (b) the fact that traditionally masculine traits and activities tend to have a higher status than their feminine counterparts (Epstein, 1997). Boys learn about the perceived superiority of the male gender through the concept of hegemonic masculinity, which refers to a culturally dominant form of masculinity produced through discourses and practices of power and authority (Bhana, 2016; Levant et al., 2018B; Renold, 2011). The 'boy code' which operates on a fear-based social learning mechanism, contains a set of rules and regulations about socially acceptable ways of being for boys; it includes behaviors such as showcasing physical and athletic ability, demonstrating sexual prowess, proving toughness, and refraining from expressing one's emotions with others (Randell et al., 2016; Reigeluth & Addis, 2016; Way et al., 2014). The Theory of Precarious Manhood emphasizes the powerful role of patriarchal societal norms that consider "masculinity as a highly valuable, socially conferred, hard won, and easily lost status that requires constant demonstrations of worthiness" (Ingram et al., 2019, p. 140). Accordingly, as boys attempt to ensure that their own masculinity is never doubted, they may engage in potentially harmful behaviors of authority and dominance as a way to prove their masculinity to their male counterparts. Whereas when boys attempt to break the rules of the boy code, they often report a sense of being watched and fear the possibility of being attacked and scrutinized by their peers (Chu, 2005).

The Power of Social Influences

The Role of Fathers

It is evident that social influences, such as a boy's parents and peers have the potential to inform, encourage and constrain them to conform to the socially prescribed male norms through reinforcement, punishment and observational learning (Levant & Richmond, 2016). Specifically, parents play a significant role in how children come to negotiate their gender identity and also shape their behaviors by endorsing gender stereotypes (Deaux & Major, 1987). Parents will typically communicate their expectations to their sons by using verbal and nonverbal cues, and overt actions, such as the conveying of a gender segregated division of labour in the household, using a firmer tone of voice, and communicating the importance of playing sports (Bhana, 2016; Deaux & Major, 1987). As a result, boys receive the message from their parents that girls and boys are different in significant ways (Halim & Ruble, 2010).

Relatedly, boys' relationships with parents are often characterized by lower levels of warmth, depth, and self-disclosure, in addition to fewer instances of seeking out of parental support when experiencing emotional events (Farkas & Leaper, 2016). The effects of the socialization process, whereby boys are discouraged from expressing and sharing their emotions with their parents, may be related to a condition known as alexithymia, which means "without words for emotions" (Levant & Powell, 2017). Levant et al. (2018a), posited that fathers specifically play an important role in the gender role socialization as they convey both implicitly and explicitly, gender appropriate ways of being to their sons. In a study that assessed college men's recollections of their fathers' expectations for their masculinity, many participants reported the sentiment that their fathers may have felt that it was their job was to "toughen them up" and "make men out of them" (Levant et al., 2018a). As a result, boys are likely to grow up

feeling increased pressure to live up to an internalized ideal of masculinity, which includes avoiding emotions and concealing vulnerabilities, engaging in aggressive behaviors, and displaying attitudes of dominance and strength (Farkas & Leaper, 2016; Kehily, 2001; Levant & Powell, 2017). Much of the research examining the father-son relationship has been conducted with young adult males, who express greater feelings of insecurity, masculine gender role stress and issues related to self-esteem related to growing up with fathers who were perceived as being emotionally distant and hypermasculine (Casselman & Rosenbaum, 2014; DeFranc & Mahalik, 2002). Levant et al. (2018a), posits that the ways in which fathers model traditional masculine behaviors to their sons has important and long-lasting effects on their sons, including poorer psychological health and aggressive behavior toward women.

The Role of Friends

Children's friend groups can also serve as an important source of influence on their gendered behaviors. Research by Bhana and Mayeza (2016) notes that primary school boys learn how to construct gender relations of power from their peers, on the school playground. In their interviews with 30 boys from a working-class South African primary school, the researchers found that boys' definitions of what it meant to be a *real* boy included qualities such as being sporty, strong and tough. Relatedly, while the boys asserted themselves as hegemonic males, they could not do so without mentioning what they were not: which is homosexual. Gay boys were often perceived as the 'other', because of their effeminate behavior, gentle play style and small build, which contributed to making them appear distinctly different from the 'real boys'. The interviews revealed how boys appear to be creating and enacting their gender identity relationally, as they presented themselves as superior in comparison to gays and girls who were weak and inferior (Bhana & Mayeza, 2016).

There appears to be a strong motivation on the part of boys to adhere to group norms and view themselves as part of their gender group, which conveys the importance of collective identity belonging (Farkas & Leaper, 2016; Halim & Ruble, 2010). In Halim and Ruble's (2010) research on gender identity and stereotyping in middle childhood, it was found that boys are more likely to play in large groups and were often perceived by their female counterparts as "those boys", while girls were more likely to be perceived in terms of their individual identities. Accordingly, with boys constructing their self-identity relationally from their larger collective friend groups, their male peer group offers a performative space where masculinity can be put on display and critiqued (Halim & Ruble, 2010; Kehily, 2001). The enforcement of hegemonic masculinity usually takes the form of gender policing, whereby young boys and girls respond to gender norm violations by correction, ridicule and identity negation (Martin & Ruble, 2010). As early as preschool, Martin and Ruble (2010) have noted children being observed engaging in gender policing, suggesting that these initial actions may be contributing to the maintenance of gendered behaviors in later childhood. While the norms and expectations conveyed to children carry significant social sanctions, there are instances in which boys decide to deviate from the heteronormative standards and transgress from the idealized masculinity. They are reported to be at a higher risk of becoming victims of gender-based bullying, and of being labelled as homosexuals (Renold, 2007).

The Consequences of Deviating from the Norm

The cultural and societal pressure that is imposed on boys to live up and conform to an idealized form of their gender identity poses a significant risk for those who may deviate from this ideal (Ben-Zeev & Dennehy, 2014; Bhana & Mayeza, 2016). In a study by Blakemore (2003), which evaluated boys' and girls' knowledge of gender norms (e.g., toys, clothing,

parental roles, occupations, etc.), children between 3 to 11-year-olds demonstrated that knowledge and comprehension of such norms, including norm violations, increased with age. In line with Social Cognitive Theory (Bussey & Bandura, 1999), Blakemore (2003) also revealed that as children got older, they reported increasingly negative evaluations of boys' gender norm violations, in comparison to girls' gender norm violations; for instance, boys' violations were perceived as harshly as moral violations, such as stealing. When boys engage in stereotypically feminine behaviors they are likely to be perceived as "weak" and "less of a man" (Ben-Zeev & Dennehy, 2014), and as a result, they learn that they need to display and exaggerate their masculine qualities, while suppressing feminine ones in order to avoid having others question their masculinity (Chu, 2005).

It can be extremely challenging for boys to defy the standard of hegemonic masculinity, as its presence is prominent throughout many aspects of their lives. Much of the research on boys' development suggests that there is a need for greater support and attempts to help teach boys how to reflect and think critically about gender norms (Chu, 2014; Claussen, 2017; Kiselica & Englar-Carlson, 2010; O'Neil et al., 2013). In a study by Way et al. (2014) to explore the patterns of adolescent boys' resistance to norms of masculinity, the researchers reported that boys' close relationships to their parents was an influential factor contributing to the maintenance of resistance over time. The expression of emotions and vulnerability shared by boys and a close significant other appears to be a key component in the relationship between resistance to hegemonic masculinity and psychological wellbeing (Randell et al., 2016; Way et al., 2014).

The Current Study

Whether to succumb to or to resist stereotypical norms, boys face the challenge of an identity struggle that is not often addressed in the developmental literature. Having access to a close confiding relationship with a parent can help boys navigate this process (Chu, 2005; Chu, 2014). While there has been a significant number of quantitative studies exploring the value of the father-son relationship from the perspectives of adult sons' (Levant et al., 2018; Randell et al., 2016; Way et al., 2014), qualitative research on the young child's point of view is limited. Given the impact fathers have on their sons' future adult behaviors, this study aims to explore fathers' impact on young boys' developing schema of masculinity. According to Freeman (2007), parents tend to express gender neutral attitudes in their responses to the *Child-Rearing Sex-Role Attitude Scale*, while their children tend to predict more gender stereotypical behaviours from their parents.

The current study aimed to discover how boys come to make choices for their own and the opposite gender, the ways in which they justified such choices, and how their fathers' presence influenced their understanding of gender stereotypes. The reason for investigating the behaviours of preschool and early elementary children is that they are just beginning to develop a more complex knowledge and understanding of gender norms and stereotypes, as the role of social influences becomes more prominent.

Methodology

Given the state of the pandemic situation and lockdown restrictions Quebec, the study took place virtually, through the use of the video-conferencing platform Zoom. The interviewees used devices of choice (e.g., laptop, tablet, iPad, etc.) for the entirety of the interview. The method of convenience sampling was used to recruit participants (Hays & Singh, 2012), as this

was the easiest and safest method given pandemic restrictions. A recruitment poster was circulated throughout the researcher's social networks and in two Montreal first grade classrooms, in aims of reaching a desired sample size of 6 to 8 father-son pairs. The inclusion criteria were: being a boy (male) between the ages of 4 and 7 years old, conversant in English, and whose fathers also consented to participate in the study. The inclusion criteria for the fathers included being a father who consents to participate in the study with his child.

Participants

Data from six father-son pairs were used in the study; participants resided in the Greater Montreal Area and were of middle-class family households. Boys were aged from 4 to 7 years old and for anonymity purposes, they have been given the following pseudonyms: Luke (4 years old), Marc (4 years old), Christopher (5 years old), Brad (5 years old), Jason (7 years old) and Alex (7 years old). All boys had at least one sibling, with Luke and Carter having one brother, Alex and Marc having one sister, and Jason and Brad who were siblings, also had one sister.

Demographic information about the fathers including their age, race and number of children were collected prior to their completion of the Sex-Role Attitude Scale; fathers were asked to provide this information in a short questionnaire which appeared upon accessing the link to the online *Sex-Role Attitude Scale*. All fathers self-identified as White/Caucasian and were aged between 34 to 37 years. Again, for anonymity purposes, fathers were given the following pseudonyms: Rodney (Luke's dad), Jesse (Marc's dad), Matthew (Christopher's dad), Joey (Brad and Jason's dad) and Frank (Alex's dad). Four of the fathers (Rodney, Matthew, Jesse and Frank) had between 1-2 children, and one of the fathers (Joey) had 3 children.

Questionnaire

The Child-Rearing Sex-Role Attitude Scale was used to assess fathers' attitude about male and female roles (see Appendix B). The 14-item 5-point Likert questionnaire was adapted from a study by Freeman (2007) and was meant to assess adults' attitudes and beliefs about gender related toys, activities, and behaviors. The fathers were emailed a link complete the scale on the *Microsoft Forms* survey platform, a few days prior to the interview.

Virtual Chest of Toys

In collaboration with a computer game developer, the researcher created a sorting game where young children could select from an assortment of toys/games, and then place their selection(s) into a toy chest. Each activity was set up in a "playroom" with the same layout and functions. In two activities, a boy character or a girl character were added to the playroom, next to the toy chest (see Figures 1, 2 and 3 in Appendix C).

The game was developed using a platform known as *SCORM Cloud*, which allowed for simultaneous recording of the children's choices during the activities to be presented in a Google Sheet. The collected data included: (1) how many toys/games the child clicked on, (2) the number of times the child clicked to view inside the chest, (3) the total time the child took to make their final selection, and (4) which toy/game(s) the child ultimately selects.

The assortment of toys included 24 toys presented in a visually appealing manner to the children. These include nine stereotypically "boy toys" (i.e., a toy truck, a Lego set, a Spiderman doll, a football, a superhero costume, a plane, a Nintendo video game, a toolkit, and a WWE wrestler doll); nine stereotypically "girl toys" (i.e., a doll, a tea set, a toy kitchen, a cuddly toy, a ballerina tutu, a baby doll stroller, a bead jewellery set, a Dora the Explorer computer, a Ken doll, and a microphone), and six "gender neutral" toys (i.e., a boardgame, Play-Doh, a puzzle, a

book, a xylophone and a slinky). The current list of toys was developed from a collection of studies that have conducted toy-preference experiments with children ranging from 3 to 8 years of age (Blakemore & Centers, 2005; Cherney & Dempsey, 2010; Davis & Hines, 2020; Francis, 2010; Freeman, 2007; Kollmayer et al., 2018). While many studies have included only two categories of "boy" and "girl" toys, gender neutral toys will be included in this study, because these are considered to be equally preferred by both girls and boys and offer the option of a less gender stereotypical toy for the participants to choose from (Blakemore & Centers, 2005; Davis & Hines, 2020; Francis, 2010; Freeman, 2007; Kollmayer, 2018).

Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were used to explore the young boys' existing working schema of masculinity, and their rationale for gender-typed toy preferences. This type of interview offered a more complete picture of the phenomenon being investigated and allowed the child's voice to be at the forefront, which was one of the aims of this study (Hays & Singh, 2012). Although a set of questions was created beforehand, these were specifically intended to act as a guide for the researcher, in order to get the conversation started, and to keep things on track (see Interview Guide in Appendix D). Upon choosing a toy, boys were asked a series of follow-up questions in order to obtain a better understanding of their reasoning; some of these questions included: What toy did you choose? Why did you choose that toy? Have you played with that toy before? When asked to choose toys that boys, girls or both boys and girls would like to play with, the researcher asked the children to compare and contrast among their choices, so as to encourage the boys to think critically about their choices.

Procedures for Data Collection

The collection of data took place in three phases:

(1) Fathers who gave written consent for themselves and their sons to participate in the study (see Appendix A) were invited to complete the 14-item Child-Rearing Sex-Role Attitude Scale (see Appendix B), on a 5-point Likert scale. They were emailed a link to complete the scale and they were instructed to complete at their earliest convenience before the interview. This provided information about the fathers' gender-related attitudes. Fathers were also asked to share their name, email address, age, race, and the number of children they have in a mandatory pre-survey form in order to access the scale.

(2) Via the Zoom platform, the father-son pairs were asked to jointly choose, from the "Virtual Chest of Toys" game, one toy that they would like to play with together. This allowed the researcher to observe the fathers' behaviours during this paired activity with their sons, and to explore their attitudes with respect to sex-roles. The researcher went through the collection of toys with the father-and- son pairs, in order to ensure that the child knew what each item was and to clarify any ambiguous toys. Having the children work along with their fathers to choose one single toy that they would both like to play with seemed fitting, given young children's stability in gender-typed preferences for toys, and the need to better understand the role fathers play in reinforcing these preferences (Davis & Hines, 2020; Freeman, 2007; Lauer, Ilksoy & Lourenco, 2018). The decision for having a forced-choice task is consistent with the tradition of toy preference studies (Blakemore & Centers, 2005; Cherney & Dempsey, 2010; Davis & Hines, 2020; Francis, 2010; Freeman, 2007; Kollmayer et al., 2018), which prompts the participants to think carefully about which toy they would want to play with the most. When necessary, prompts were offered to remind the pair to work together, and to choose only one toy. If the pair chose more than one, the researcher prompted them to continue to discuss and narrow down one-by-one.

The recorded Zoom session captured the specific language that participants used to describe their different choices of toys. Once the child and father shared their final decision, follow up questions were asked in order to obtain a better understanding of their reasoning for choosing the specific toy. In addition to recording the father-son interactions via the Zoom platform, the researcher also took additional field notes, where necessary, about the ways in which they negotiated which toy to choose, including the non-verbal communication that took place between the two.

(3) Individually with each child, the researcher engaged in three short activities together, without the input of the fathers. Each activity was followed by a semi-structured interview to explore the young boy's rationale for his choice, in order to explore his developing scheme of masculinity; the semi-structured interviews highlighted each child's voice and preference (Hays & Singh, 2012). The three short activities are as follows:

a) First, the researcher invited the child to play a make-believe game, using the same Virtual Chest of Toys as the earlier activity with their fathers. The child was introduced to two make-believe "friends", Timmy and Rosie (see Figures 2 and 3 in Appendix C). The child was asked to pick a toy that he would like to play with Timmy (boy), and another toy to play with Rosie (girl). The researcher followed-up by asking the child which toy he had chosen and why?

b) The researcher redirected the child's attention to the toy that he and his father had previously chosen together to play with in the first activity, and asked if he would choose the same toy again now that he was given the opportunity to choose independently. The intention behind asking the child to identify his personal choice was to observe if any differences were reported between the forced choice option with the father and the forced choice option when

choosing alone. This provided an understanding of the children's implicit and explicit knowledge of gender-role beliefs.

c) Finally, the researcher asked the child to choose three toys that he believed *only boys* would like to play with, three toys that *only girls* would like to play with, and three toys that both *boys and girls* would like to play with. The goal of the last sequence of questions was to explore the child's perception of stereotypically boy toys, stereotypically girl toys, and gender-neutral toys. The child's choices for each gender were compared with the choices made when asked to pick a toy to play with his friends Timmy and Rosie, and with his father. An interview guide was used to establish consistency across interviews and ensure a smooth interview process (see Appendix D).

Qualitative Data Analysis

The current study involved the use of both a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews via the Zoom platform to explore fathers' and sons' gender-role beliefs. By adopting a phenomenological approach and conducting the interviews with semi-structured, open-ended questions allowed the participants to share their individual perspectives and experiences (Hays & Singh, 2012). The data collected from the questionnaire and the Zoom-recorded interviews were stored electronically on the researcher's portable computer hard drive. The audio recordings were manually transcribed and then organized into a table, where first- and second-cycle coding took place. The data was analyzed in a clear and consistent manner, by paying meticulous attention to the participants' language and reflecting on emergent patterns and the meanings of both the fathers' and sons' experiences (Saldaña, 2013).

As described by Saldaña (2013), when analyzing interviews that are destined towards revealing a specific individual's perspective, it is imperative to prioritize coding the participant's

data, rather than the researcher's questions and comments. However, when the interaction between participant and researcher was deemed significant, in terms of constructing meaning, then it would be appropriate for the researcher's contributions to be coded along with the participants' verbatim (Saldaña, 2013). The boys' varying ages might have influenced the extent to which their coherent narratives and rationale during the interviews, and the exchanges between the researcher and participants were more than just information gathering, thus these were additionally coded. The data was pre-coded by reading through the transcripts, and highlighting important participants' quotes, which allowed for an efficient first cycle of coding.

The In Vivo coding method was used in the first cycle of coding; this involved the creation of codes based on the direct language used by the participant, which allowed for the child's voice to be central, in addition to grounding the analysis from hid perspective (Saldaña, 2013). Given that the aim of the study was to understand gender stereotypes from a voice that has often been neglected, the young male perspective (Blaise, 2005), in Vivo coding provided a deep and complete understanding of this unique point of view (Saldaña, 2013). In addition, the researcher's field notes on the voice tone, gestures and non-verbal communication, further provided useful information that applied to deeming codes as significant and added meaning to the participant's statements. Process coding was simultaneously used to understand the interactions and emotions the children expressed in response to certain situations, as they recalled instances that took place with their fathers or in their experience playing with siblings and other children. On select occasions, emotion coding was used to analyze non-verbal cues, such as laughter and sarcasm. As described by Saldaña (2013), acknowledging the emotions that accompany thoughts and actions allows for greater insight into the participant's perspective. In sum, the use of multiple coding methods within the first cycle of coding allowed the researcher

to provide codes that were detailed, yet reflective of the participants' voice, experiences, and emotions.

The second cycle of coding involved themeing the data, which allowed for meaningful categories to emerge from the data naturally, rather than looking for predefined categories (Saldaña, 2013). Thematic analysis of the codes involved going over the data to identify any commonalities and potential relationships among the first cycle codes, and then deciding how these could be combined to create central themes. The following main themes with select subthemes were deduced and analyzed from the data collected; (a) the father-son dynamic, (b) communication strategies (c) reasoning offered for choices and (d) response to gender non-conformity. The themes combined the participant's direct language and the underlying meaning of statements, to provide a complete picture of both the father and son's perspective at the center of this analysis (see partial coding schema in Appendix E).

Results

The children who participated in this study were asked to choose from the Virtual Chest of Toys what they would like to play with their fathers, with either a boy or a girl, or with boys and girls. These activities elicited the children's play preferences as well as their beliefs about what are appropriate toys for their gender – i.e., boys.

Choosing a Toy to Play with Father

The data collected from the boys' responses to both the forced and free-choice toy preference tasks revealed their implicit knowledge of gender norms. he boys' responses were categorized as follows based on the toys presented: stereotypically boy (SB), stereotypically girl (SG) and gender neutral (NT).

When the boys were asked to pick a toy to play with their fathers, 5 out of 6 chose the SB toys presented on screen, with choices ranging from the superhero costume, Legos, Nintendo Switch and the football. The reasoning offered for their choices ranged from familiarity with the toy, the functionality of the toy and enjoyment of the toy. Christopher, age 5, whose father did not have any direct involvement in his choice, spent a few seconds quietly thinking before choosing the football (SB) to play with his father. While he did not consider any other options, nor did he verbalize a direct reason for his choice, Christopher was certain in his choice as he did not hesitate when sharing his response. Although there was no clear reasoning offered for his choice, he did recall a memory of playing football with his father and brother in the summertime and added that his brother got upset when he tackled him. On the other hand, Marc, age 4, who chose the superhero costume (SB), immediately knew that was what he wanted to pick, shouting "*That one!!!*". His choice was motivated by his perception of enjoyment of the toy ("*because it's soooooo cool*"), and by his familiarity with the toy; he and his father told a story about how his dad had bought him and his sister matching Superman and Superwoman costumes. Brothers Jason and Brad, ages 7 and 5, respectively, both chose the Nintendo Switch (SB) to play with their dad. Initially, they did not spontaneously elaborate on their reasoning and explanations, but as their father started to talk about how the boys spend lots of time both at school and at home playing with their Nintendo Switch, they opened up to talk about their favourite game. While they were shy at first, their newfound enthusiasm appears to have been a result of watching their father share his explanation about why his sons' might have chosen the Nintendo Switch. Familiarity with and enjoyment of the Nintendo Switch motivated their choices.

Luke, 4 years old, initially chose the NT Play-doh, but was promptly questioned by his father, "*Play doh? […] You don't want to play with the Legos*?". In response Luke changed his

choice of toy from a NT one to a SB toy – the Legos. Here, it is worth noting Luke's passive acceptance of his father's suggestion; Luke did not argue, nor question his suggestion but instead he looked at his father and said: *"Ohhh…what about that too!"*.

Alex, 7 years old, also chose a NT toy – the Connect 4 board game – and when asked why, he explained his choice by describing the functionality of the game, *"because it's a strategy game, so like you have to, like you have to figure out what the opponent's next move is going to be […] and then you use your move"*. It was particularly notable that Alex was the only boy who sought his father's input about his choice of toy; a negotiation between them took place where they systematically chose their top three options and from there deduced which toy they wanted to play with the most. The interaction between Alex and his father was quite interesting as his father shared that when they usually play together, naturally Alex would dictate the terms of what toy or activity they would play with, however here he emphasized to his son that they would be picking together. Additionally, when considering their potential options, both Alex and his father were open to hearing one another's thoughts and opinions and after eventually deciding on the Connect 4 boardgame, the pair shared in mutual agreement by nodding their heads while looking at each other.

Independent Choice. When the boys were asked to choose, without discussing with their fathers, a toy that they would like to play with their fathers, Christopher and the two brothers, Jason and Brad, continued to choose another SB toy (Nintendo Switch, football, respectively). Familiarity with the toy, again, played a role in their choices: Christopher shared that he has a Nintendo Switch at home and that he and his brother are currently trying to find a way to have multiple players so that they can play together with their dad. Jason and Brad's father recalled a memory where him and his sons gathered a big pile of leaves in the fall, and he would throw his

sons the football and they would end up diving into the pile of leaves as they ran to catch it. The boys and their fathers engaged in a moment of sincere laughter with smiles on their faces, as they reminisced on a fun moment that they had shared together.

The two youngest children, Marc and Luke, who had previously chosen SB toys when asked to pick with their fathers, shifted to a NT and SG toy, respectively, when they chose independently. Marc's father accepted his new choice of a xylophone without any interference and in fact smiled when his son explained his reasoning for choosing the musical instrument: "*Because they make beautiful music!*". However, when Luke chose the toy kitchen to play with his father, his choice was once again questioned by his father who laughingly asked "*You want the kitchen*?". Luke was flummoxed and turned to his father when asked why he would like to play in the toy kitchen with his father. To reinforce his disapproval, his father chuckled and said, "*Don't look at me!*" and proceeded to look away from his son (see Appendix E). Luke eventually explained his reasoning by describing the functionality of the toy kitchen, and the food that he and his dad could make while playing with it.

In comparison, Alex who had previously chosen a NT toy with his father, had now changed his choice to a SB toy – the football. When asked why he chose the football this time around, Alex appeared to have been influenced by his father: "*because…my dad, before he said that he wanted to choose the football, so I'm choosing it now*". The response from Alex's father was relatively neutral to his son's choice; he did not convey any verbal or non-verbal signs of agreement.

Choosing a Toy to Play with Timmy and Rosie

When the boys were asked to choose a toy to play with two make-believe friends, Timmy and Rosie, in order to elicit their understanding of gender-stereotyped preferences, Jason and

Alex, both age 7, chose SB toys to play with Timmy (Football, Nintendo Switch), but NT toys to play with Rosie (Play-doh and Slinky). When they were asked to explain their choices of toys with Timmy, they appeared to rely on intuitive understanding of boys' preferences and they were rather vague in their rationale: "*Because we're going to go on a computer and we can't really play with any of the outdoor toys… and we can only play with the indoor toys*" (Alex). Jason was initially silent when asked why he chose the football; when he was further interjected and asked if football is a sport he enjoys playing, he then nodded his head in agreement. In contrast, they were more articulate about their choices for Rosie, and the reasoning offered were based on functionality and gender preferences:

Alex: "*Because usually girls like to play with Play Doh a lot of times*"

Jason: "*Because you can mold it different stuff and make what you want with them*"

The two youngest boys, Marc and Luke, did not appear to take into consideration gender-stereotyped preferences when they chose toys to play with Timmy or Rosie. Marc chose NT play-doh and slinky to play with Timmy and Rosie, while Luke chose the SG toy Dora the Explorer computer for Timmy and the NT toy microphone for Rosie. When providing reasoning for their choices, Luke focused on the enjoyment that both Timmy and Rosie would have playing with the toys, while Marc explained his choices in terms of the functionality of the toys:

Luke: "*We could play with [play-doh] because there's soooo much we can build with it*"
Marc: "*Because [the slinky] walks down the stairs!*"

While Christopher took into consideration gender-stereotyped preference when choosing the SG toy (Barbie doll) for Rosie, he chose the NT cuddly toy to play with Timmy. When asked by the researcher as to why he would think Timmy would enjoy playing with that toy with him, he referred to his own preference for playing with stuffed animals and added that he has a big stuffed dinosaur at home.

Brad who was 5 years of age, chose stereotypically BT for both Timmy and Rosie (Nintendo Switch and airplane), and for his two choices, he also provided reasoning that was based on the function and his own personal enjoyment of the toy. When explaining his choice of the Nintendo Switch for Timmy, he said: "*Because it's fun and you get to make your own buildings and you get your own houses and you can make axes…*", and for the airplane for Rosie: "*Because I find it cool, and I find that its cool that they could fly through the air*".

Overall, the boys' rationale for their choices in choosing a toy to play with their fathers, or with Timmy and Rosie were influenced by their perception of enjoyment and functionality of the toys. However, none of the boys offered explicit explanations based on their play experience involving other children.

Choosing Toys to Play with Boys vs. Girls

Consistency was observed across all the children when they were asked to choose three toys that they thought only girls would like to play with: they all chose SG toys *for* girls. When boys were asked to choose toys *for* girls, the exclusive focus on *girls* was highlighted in the phrasing of the question itself, whereas when they were asked to choose a toy to play *with* Rosie, they took into consideration what *they* would enjoy playing with. This was particularly evident in Brad's choices. He recognized that girls would prefer the doll, tea set and Dora the Explorer computer as toys, because *"….. usually I see girls like, sometimes I see girls like, get pots of….. and like pretend they have water in cups and they feed their dolls*". In contrast, when he chose a toy to play *with* Rosie, he chose the airplane that *he* liked.

Three other boys (Alex, Jason and Brad) also added that it was easier to choose toys *for* girls. Alex stated: "*Because there is less options, and usually boys don't really play with the girl*

toys as much". Among the boys, only Christopher felt that it was harder to choose toys *for* girls because he was less familiar with "girl stuff".

When the boys were asked to pick three toys that they thought only boys would like to play with, they also included at least one SB toy in their choices. Three boys (Marc, Christopher and Alex) chose exclusively SB toys (superhero costume, football, wrestler doll, and Spiderman action figure); in particular, Spiderman and wrestler doll were chosen by all three of them. Their rationale emphatically revealed strong gender stereotyped preferences. For example, Marc, 4 years old, said, "*because they're boys stuff*". Christopher and Alex, who are 6 and 7 years old respectively, indicated that "*girls don't like to play football*", and Christopher additionally asserted that the physical demand of the sport rendered it unpopular for girls "*.....there's like tackling, so [the girls] don't want to play it*".

Among the three other boys who did not exclusively choose SB toys, they each included some SB toys in their choices. Jason and Brad each chose two SB toys; Jason included one NT toy (boardgame), while Brad included one SG toy (jewellery set).

Luke and Brad, the 4-year-olds, chose SB toys for boys, but they each included one SG toy as well. For Luke, who chose a SB toy (toolbox) and a NT toy (Puzzle), also included the cuddly toy (SG), which he perceived as a "boy toy" because of the potential enjoyment boys would have when playing with it. Brad, who chose two SB toys (Nintendo Switch and Spiderman action figure), included a jewelry set (SG) in his selection. There was a change in his typical tone of voice and usual eye contact were observed when he provided explanation for his choice of the jewelry set, as he began to lean further into his father's chest and hide his face. The shyness exhibited by Brad, when explaining his choice of the SG jewelry set, suggested a sense of embarrassment for having chosen a SG toy. In this manner, he showed an implicit knowledge

of what toys are considered "acceptable" and "not acceptable" for boys to play with. According to two of the boys, Marc and Alex, having a young sister as a playmate appeared to have informed their knowledge and rationale for gender-stereotyped toys for girls. Marc, who chose the tea set as one of the toys for girls, explained that he often played make-believe tea party with his younger sister. In parallel, Alex was also certain that girls would not enjoy SB toys:

> Researcher: *"And what about the Spiderman and the wrestler, girls don't like to play with those either?"*
> Alex: *"Noo…I don't think I seen my sister play with a Spiderman toy or a wrestler"*

He further ascertained that he had *never* seen girls at school play with Spiderman or wrestler figurines. However, he acquiesced that, if his younger sister were to ask him to play with the Spiderman toy, he would find it acceptable:

> Researcher: *"So let's say [your sister] came up to you and said "Can I play with your Spiderman?" What would you say? Would it be okay if she played with it?"*
> Alex: *"Yessss"*

Choosing Toys to Play with Boys and Girls

For the last question, boys were asked was to choose three toys that they thought both boys *and* girls would like to play with. The responses provided for this question included the most variability, as was expected, given that they were asked to choose toys for both genders. In explaining his inclination to include NT toys for both boys and girls, Alex expressed a firm believe that it was unlikely that girls would enjoy playing with the SB toys he had chosen. Four other boys (Marc, Brad, Christopher and Jason) recognized the context of sharing and mutuality and included at least one NT toy in their choices (e.g., such as the puzzle, play-doh, slinky, Connect 4 boardgame, and storybook). Brad explained his choice of the NT slinky from what he

had seen at a party: *"I chose the slinky because once I was at a party and I saw boys and girls playing with it so…"*.

However, there were also SB toys (Nintendo Switch, Legos and plane) and SG toys (Dora the Explorer computer, jewelry set, toy kitchen, doll, tea set, and microphone) included in the boys' choices. The reasoning for these choices were related to their functionality, the enjoyment of the toys, as well as their familiarity and experience having played with the toys. Jason, age 7, focused on functionality when he said: *"The necklaces and the beads, because….. ummm…..boys and girls could wear necklaces with beads on it. And boys and girls could…um…read books together"*. Christopher, age 6, was adamant that toys are not only for one gender *"because boys like kitchen stuff and they play, and girls like to play with blocks and boys too. And some girls like to play board games and some boys too"* (see Appendix E).

In summary, the boys in the study were inclined to identify stereotypically boy toys when they were choosing with their fathers. When given the opportunity to choose, independently, a toy to play with their fathers, most of the boys did not expand their choices to include any stereotypically girl toys. The boys also expressed strong and consistent stereotyped belief that girls preferred to play with stereotypically girl toys. Similarly, when they had to choose a toy that they would like to play with another girl (i.e., Rosie), they clearly recognized that a stereotypically boy toy would not be appropriate. In contrast, the boys in this study showed more varied preferences when they had to choose toys for boys. While they all included at least one stereotypically boy toy when asked to imagine what toys boys usually liked to play with, two of the boys identified two stereotypically girl toy as their preference. The boys' responses in each condition are summarized in Table 1.

8. I would buy my son a doll	20%	40%	40%
9. I would not hire a male babysitter	60%	-	40%
10. Boys, more than girls, need competitive sports	40%	-	60%
11. A parent who would pay for ballet lessons for a son is asking for trouble	-	20%	80%
12. Math and science are as necessary for girls as boys	100%	-	-

As depicted in the table above, there were three out of the 12 statements where consensus was shared amongst all fathers. Firstly, when considering the two statements about gender equality among boys and girls, all fathers agreed that both boys and girls need to develop social skills, and to acquire math and science competencies. Secondly, with regards to the statement assessing response to gender typed activities, all fathers shared in disagreement that only boys should be permitted to play competeitive sports.

Most remaining statements garnered approximate consensus among fathers (i.e., having of the five fathers sharing similar opinion), with the exception of the two following statements: "*I would buy my son a doll*", and "*I would not hire a male babysitter*". Luke's and Alex's fathers, Rodney and Frank, respectively, were certain that they would not buy their sons a doll (Statement 8), and that they would not hire a male babysitter (Statement 9). When considering Rodney's response to Statement #8, which assessed fathers' attitudes towards cross-gender play, a maintenance of beliefs was held and reflected during the interview when he seemingly disapproved of Luke's choice of a cross-gender toy (e.g., choosing the toy kitchen to play with his dad). Additionally, when Luke chose the doll as one the toys that he thought both girls *and* boys would enjoy playing with, Rodney repeatedly questioned him, "*Where did you play with a doll?*" and "*Where did you play with a doll?*". When Luke hesitated and did not answer his father, his father made a point to clarify to the researcher that his son has *never* played with a doll before: "*I don't think you ever played with a doll…*", while chuckling under his breath.

Alex's father, Frank, expressed the strongest gender-stereotyped attitudes among the fathers. His responses to the statements showed: (a) that he would not buy his son a doll (Statement 8), that boys who exhibit "sissy" behaviors will never be well adjusted (Statement 5), (c) that he feels upset when he sees boys put on a dress when they play dress-up (Statement 7), (d) that he would not hire a male babysitter (Statement 9), and (e) that boys, more than girls, need competitive sports (Statement 10). In other instances, Frank's differential responses to the statements appeared to be prompted by the subtleties in the wording. For example, he disagreed with the statement that "Only boys *should* be permitted to play competitive sports", but he agreed with the statement that "Boys, more than girls, *need* competitive sports"; these responses revealed that while he believed that boys, more than girls, *need* competitive sports, he did not believe that girls should be barred from competitive sports. Similar beliefs were echoed by Alex when he shared that it would be unlikely for girls to enjoy playing with stereotypically boy toys, however he would be accepting if his sister were to want to play with one of his SB toys.

Contrary to his gender-stereotyped responses on the questionnaire, Frank was most likely to engage his son in reflecting on his choices. He often questioned Alex's gender-stereotyped choices and seemingly tried to prompt Alex to accept cross-gender toys:

Frank:	*"But now I have a question for you…would you play with Wonder Woman?"*
Alex:	*"No!!"* *smiling*
Frank:	*"No? Why wouldn't you play with Wonderwoman?"*
Alex:	*"Umm… I don't want to"*
Frank:	*"What about Batwoman?"*
Alex:	*"No"*
Frank:	*"Supergirl?"*
Alex:	*"No"*
Frank:	*"So because they're girls, you wouldn't play with them?"*
Alex:	*"Mhmmm…"* (nods head yes)
Frank:	*"Okay. There's no right or wrong answer, that's your answer"*

Contradictions between attitude and behaviours were expressed differently by Christopher's father, Matthew. On one hand, he agreed that boys could have the balance of competitiveness and vulnerability (Statement 10 and Statement 3), he was "undecided" about his son choosing a female-stereotyped profession of nursing (Statement 4). Throughout the interview, Matthew was mostly quiet and uninvolved when Christopher's choices reflected gender-stereotyping, but he intervened and questioned Christopher when he made gender non-conforming choices. For example, when choosing a toy to play with Timmy, Christopher at first jokingly chose the SG toy (stroller), to which his dad immediately laughed and said, "*Don't be silly!*". When Christopher persisted to choose another SG toy (the cuddly toy), Matthew turned to his son and rhetorically asked, "*The cuddly toy? You think that [Timmy]'s gonna want to play with the cuddly toy with you?*". Later, Matthew again tried to assert his influence on his son's response when Christopher's chose the SG toy kitchen as one of the toys that boys would like to play with:

Matthew: "*Would a boy want to play with the kitchen though?*"
Christopher: "*Noooooo*" he laughingly responds.

When Christopher mistakenly dragged the kitchen into the toy-chest, Matthew proceeded to take the mouse from his son's hand and removed the kitchen for him. The fact that Matthew was quick in his reaction and did not wait for his son to remove the kitchen himself, inferred a strong message that cross-gender play was unacceptable and that he would not be disregarded and ignored a second time.

Among the fathers who responded to the statements, two of the fathers, Joey (Jason & Brad) and Jesse (Marc), expressed openness to gender non-conforming attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. In comparison to the some of the more stereotypical views conveyed by the other fathers, both Joey and Jesse's responses to the statements showed: (a) that they do not feel upset

when they see boys put on a dress when they play dress-up (Statement 7), (b) that boys do not need competitive sports more than girls (Statement 10), (c) that they strongly disagree that boys who exhibit "sissy" behaviors will never be well adjusted (Statement 5), and (d) that it is not healthy for boys to cry only when they have been hurt (Statement 3). For Jesse, the acceptance he shared in his responses on the scale were also conveyed in his interaction with his son; after having completed the independent choice task where Marc chose the NT xylophone to play with dad, he proceeded to drag the jewellery set into the virtual toy chest. In comparison to the reactions other boys received when choosing a SG toy, Marc received a more accepting from his father:

> Jesse: *"What was that buddy? You added something else in Marc...do you know what that is?"*.
> Marc: *"Ummm I don't know…"*
> Jesse: *"That's for making jewellery, like beads and necklaces and stuff. If that's what you want, you can choose that!"*

During that moment, Jesse made it known to his son that if he were to choose the jewellery set instead of the xylophone that would be completely acceptable, and it also suggests that the beliefs Jesse holds about cross-gender play are consistent with his behaviours during the interview with his son.

Similarly, Joey was also observed demonstrating openness and acceptance towards his son's (Brad) choice of SG toys, when he was asked to choose toys that he thought only girls would like. When Brad picked the doll and referred to her by the name *"Rapunzel"*, his older brother Jason immediately turned to him and began laughing: *"Rapunzel?!"*. The response he received for calling the doll by her name, elicited a strong emotional reaction in Brad where he proceeded to become silent and slowly slipped off his seat, and hid off camera as he laid on the ground. It is worth noting, that while the interview focused on the father's role, Brad's mother

intervened to address the situation as her son appeared to be distraught by what had happened. Together with Brad's mother, the pair reassured their son that he was not being laughed at and that they had not expected him to know the doll's name. After picking Brad up off the floor, and placing him on his lap, Joey looked at his son and whispered: "*Go ahead Brad, continue what you we're saying. We want to hear what you have to say*". The way in which Joey helped bring his son back to the interview after he experienced a moment of embarrassment for expressing knowledge of SG toys, further demonstrates the acceptance he conveyed towards gender-nonconformity in his responses to the *Sex-Role Attitude Scale*. In the same way that Joey agreed that he would buy his son a doll, when faced with a real-life situation where his son was "interacting" with a doll, Joey did not show any reluctance nor did he disapprove his son for knowing the doll's name.

Interpretation of The Results and Discussion

One of the most consistent finding in the present study was that even the youngest boys at age 4 appeared to have already developed stereotypical definitions of "girl toys". This was inferred from the data where all the boys chose exclusively SG toys *for* girls, and therefore, have a more gendered view of what it meant to be a "girl". While recent research suggests that gender stereotypes of girls revolved around appearances, and stereotypes of boys revolved more around activities (Cristofaro & Tamis-LeMonda, 2008; Halim & Ruble, 2010; Halim et al., 2013), these findings suggested that boys were taking into account more than just the "pink frilly dresses", but they are also well-aware of girls' activities and toy preferences. Although it cannot be ascertained that broad gender norms were more clearly defined for girls than they were for boys, the stereotyped choices shared by the boys nevertheless suggested that they have already developed and internalized a repertoire of gender preferences for the opposite gender.

In addition, it is also interesting to consider how boys might use their internalized gender schemas differentially for themselves vs. for girls (Martin & Halverson, 1981). Children often make use of their generalized in-group/out-group schema to categorize objects, behaviors, and roles as being for males or females; as such, they refer to this schema to decide what is appropriate for both genders. For example, boys would rely on their in-group/out-group schema to conclude that "*girls play with dolls*" or "*girls don't like football*". In contrast, the boys who participated in this study shared a more nuanced definition of "boy toys". When they were asked to choose toys to play with a make-believe male friend, there appeared to be greater flexibility and perhaps more possibilities for deviation from the norm of what boys "should" like. There was an even distribution between exclusively boy toys for boys, as well as inclusion of girl toys and gender-neutral toys for boys. Bussey's (2011) ideology of gender identity development as an ongoing process, lend support to boys' tendency to choose outside of the strict gender stereotype for "boy toys". Bussey postulated that children learn to construct their identity from the social and personal influences in their lives, as well as different contexts in which they find themselves; therefore, their in-group/out-group schema is but one factor that they would consider. When choosing toys for boys, including Timmy, they might also consider personal preferences and experiences while choosing "things for me" and "things not for me". Martin & Halverson (1981) explain how children's own-sex schema is important because it captures how they make stereotyped choices as a member a specific gender category.

Additionally, in the presence of their fathers, 5 out of the 6 boys chose SB toys to play with fathers. Even without the direct involvement of their fathers, the boys' choices included almost exclusively boy toys, with the exception of one gender-neutral and one girl toy. This finding suggests that boys not only have developed an awareness of the kinds of toys their

fathers would approve of, but that they are also conforming to their fathers' expectations, based on this awareness and knowledge of what their fathers prefer.

The present study aimed at gaining greater insight into the role that fathers have in influencing their sons' understanding of gender-stereotyped toy play, by investigating their gender-related attitudes as expressed by their responses on the adapted *Sex-Role Attitude Scale.* During the interviews the father-son pairs also engaged in their own unique dynamics, made use of various communication strategies, and expressed thought-provoking reactions to gender non-conformity, all of which contributed to the ways in which the young boys conveyed the gender schemas they have developed for both their own and the opposite gender.

While the issue of social desirability had previously been anticipated with the use of the *Sex-Role Attitude Scale* (Burge 1981; Freeman, 2007), this study found a close correspondence between the beliefs fathers conveyed on the scale and the behaviours they expressed during the interviews. Fathers who shared stereotypical and/or non-stereotypical beliefs on the scale, also expressed very similar beliefs in their behaviours throughout the interview with their sons. The correspondence between the beliefs and behaviours suggests that fathers felt at ease sharing their true and honest opinions with the researcher and did not feel the pressure to portray a "socially acceptable" version of themselves. The divided level of acceptance to the item: "*I would buy my son a doll*", however, did reveal some telling differences of opinion among fathers and their varying levels acceptance with regards to cross-gender play. It has been reported that parents express a sense of discomfort towards boys' behaviors that might be considered to be feminine (Freeman, 2007). However, in the current study, two fathers (Joey and Jesse) agreed that they would buy their son a doll, which may suggest a possible shift in fathers' attitudes away from traditional masculine norms and expectations. Although this was only observed in two fathers in

the study, their responses should be considered in light of the previous studies, which portrayed

boys' gender roles as rigid (Burge, 1981; Halim et al., 2013; Solbes-Canales et al., 2020; Todd et

al., 2017; Wilbourn & Kee, 2010).

The Father-Son Dynamic

The interactions observed between the father-son pairs offered valuable insight into the

unique dynamics of each relationship. According to Lamb et al.'s (1985) tripartite model of

father involvement, there are three essential elements: (a) paternal engagement (e.g., direct

caregiving, play, etc.), (b) accessibility, and (c) responsibility. Refinement of the threefold model

by Pleck (1997) focused on the distinction of "positive paternal involvement", with one of

fundamental characteristics being the interdependence between the father and child (Brotherson

et al., 2003). One can deduce, from the fathers' interest and willingness in participation in this

research studies, that they are likely to be high in level of engagement, accessibility, and

responsibility in the development of their sons. While there are many contextual factors and

specific dimensions to the father-son relationship, the ways in which fathers engaged with their

sons during the interviews was of particular interest, as this had an influence on how sons

responded and participated in the activities. Throughout the interviews, fathers were often

observed engaging in this kind of positive paternal involvement as they demonstrated

acceptance, openness, encouragement, helping behaviours and humour towards their sons. For

instance, Alex's father Frank was accepting of his son's refusal to play with female superheroes

and made it known to Alex that there was no right or wrong answer, but he was interested to

understand how Alex felt about this kind of cross-gender play. Interestingly, while parents tend

to express a desire for their children to be less gender stereotyped in their play, their implicit

expectation that they want their children to engage in gender-typed activities (Farkhas & Leaper,

2016) might have prompted the boys to choose more stereotyped boy toys when their fathers were actively present. As research suggests, children acquire stereotypical ideas of masculinity and femininity from both their male and female parents, respectively, and parents who fulfill traditional gender roles are more likely to have children with less egalitarian gender beliefs and attitudes (Klann et al., 2018). Therefore, Alex's reluctance to play with "girl toys" might suggest that his exposure to gender-non-conforming attitude was limited, because his father's stereotypical responses to the *Sex-Role Attitude Scale* provide a glimpse into some of the beliefs he may be exposed to at home.

Another notable instance of positive paternal involvement was observed in Brad and Jason's father, Joey, who actively participated in choosing a toy to play with his sons and in answering questions. There was a sense of togetherness among the three of them, which helped alleviate any shyness the boys may have felt at first. Joey continuously made efforts to be engaged with his sons by asking them which toy they wanted to choose and sharing in their excitement when they succeeded in moving a toy to the Virtual Chest of Toys (e.g., when Brad, the younger son, succeeded in navigating the Chest of Toys game on his own). This kind of engagement is fundamental to the psychological safety in father-son relationships and allows boys to be honest and authentic (Watson-Phillips, 2016), which in turn fosters a warm, connected relationship that continues be important through a child's school-age years and adolescence (Brotherson et al., 2003). Joey consistently demonstrated openness towards his sons' choices when they were asked to pick toys for the opposite gender; he reminded his sons that they could choose whatever toy they wanted and that they shouldn't feel they have to pick something because of what their father or brother picked. As Klann et al., (2014) suggest, it is clear that fathers model gender behaviors to their children; further, fathers who play a direct role in

parenting their sons help to raise individuals who appear to be more relaxed concerning gender role expectations of traditional masculinity (Morman & Floyd, 2002). Accordingly, when the boys were later asked to provide rationale for their choice of toys, it was their father's encouragement that allowed them to feel at ease explaining their choices for the opposite gender.

Communication Strategies

The communication that takes place between father and son includes the ways in which the father relates to his child, by exchanging both verbal and nonverbal messages that are meant to enhance trust and understanding (Brotherson et al., 2003). Throughout the interviews, fathers communicated with their sons in a variety of ways, such as using familiar examples, questioning, instructing, in addition to conveying non-verbal behaviours such as looking at their sons, and smiling. Given that boys were unfamiliar with the interviewer and the research experience, it was often helpful when fathers facilitated by using examples that their sons were familiar with in their day-to-day lives. For one of the youngest participants, Marc, who was confused about the researcher's question asking him if he thought girls would also like to play with stereotyped boy toys, his father Jesse, made it relevant to him by repeating the question and replacing the word "girls" with the name one of his female friends. With a familiar female friend in mind, Marc was quickly able to respond to the question. Research suggests that while knowledge of gendered toy preferences emerge in early childhood, the conceptualization of the female and male gender as distinct whole groups may be harder for young children to grasp (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2013). For Marc, to think of what a *friend* would like was easier than thinking of what a "*girl*" would like.

Questioning was one of the most common forms of communication used by fathers. Whether it was to ask their sons if they needed help, or to ask them what toys they wanted to

choose, the fathers often posed questions in ways that not only facilitated the interview, but also allowed for positive interactions between the father-son dyads. As outlined in the results, there were several instances where a son's choice of toys was questioned by his father, most notably when a stereotypically girl toy was chosen for males. These findings pointed to the importance of implicit and explicit messages boys received from their fathers regarding what was "appropriate" or "inappropriate" gendered choices or behaviors for boys (Levant et al., 2018). Resistance to social norms of masculinity, such as a boy choosing to play with a doll (SG) instead of a truck (SB), was most commonly defined as expressing beliefs or behaving in ways that countered the "boy code" (Way et al., 2014). With fathers playing an instrumental role in their sons' early gender role socialization, they were not only teaching their boys the standard of hegemonic masculinity by questioning their choices, but in fact became the standard of masculinity to which their sons would use as an archetype or reference point of masculinity (Bucher, 2014).

The non-verbal behaviours observed were limited, given the nature of the online interviews. However, it is still worth considering the ways in which the pairs interacted with one another through gestures, voice tone and facial expressions. The moments where boys were seen sharing a smile with their dads offered a glimpse of their special bond; these exchanges were essential in the maintenance of the pair's positive emotional states and also in sustaining positive and synchronous interactions (Bai et al., 2016). While some studies have suggested that fathers are likely to express more positive emotions and interact with children with a warmer emotional tone than mothers (Brand & Klimes-Dougan, 2010; Campos et al., 2013; Denham, Bassett, & Wyatt, 2010), it remains unclear whether the positive emotional tone expressed during the present study would be observed in the everyday interactions between the fathers and their sons.

Reactions to Gender Non-Conformity

The ways in which the boys responded to instances of gender non-conformity revealed valuable information about their tendency to adhere to gender norms and to endorse traditional notions of masculinity. There were a number of occasions where one of the boys had mistakenly clicked on one of the stereotypically girl toys, followed by very immediate actions to correct themselves, seemingly embarrassed by their mistakes. These observations were consistent with previous research which suggest that during childhood, more boys than girls tend to report lower tolerance for counter-stereotypical behaviours (Farkas & Leaper, 2016; Katz & Ksansnak, 1994) and that correction is one of the main ways in which children respond to gender norm violations (Martin & Ruble, 2010). Studies have also shown that gender-typing behaviours are observed earlier in boys than in girls, and lower levels of flexibility have been reported in boys' toy choices and play behaviours (Blakemore et al., 1979; Cherney & Dempsey, 2010; Kourilsky & Campbell, 1984).

Feelings of embarrassment and shyness were also inferred from the boys' need to justify their gender non-conforming choices as possibly enjoyable for boys and girls (e.g., when Marc chose the jewellery set, or when Brad called the doll "Rapunzel"). These emotions were most often in direct response to comments and questioning that the boys were receiving from their fathers. Much of the previous research has been unclear about whether the gender norm violations of boys are evaluated more negatively than those girls, and there is no conclusive evidence related to the effect of age (Blakemore 2003; Wilson-Smith et al., 1995); however, it is clear that children learn about various gender stereotypes, as well as about other social conventions and moral rules during the preschool and elementary school years. With boys' norm violations being evaluated similarly to moral violations (Blakemore, 2003), this would explain

why the boys interviewed felt a sense of embarrassment akin to having done something "wrong". According to Smiler (2014), some boys have a critical perspective on masculinity, where their choices regarding resistance or conformity to gender norms are dependent on the context in which they find themselves; nevertheless, there remains a lack of consensus regarding the relevant factors that may influence such context.

Limitations

Some limitations of the study should be considered when interpreting the results. Firstly, the small sample size is one of the most important factors which contributes to the limited data that was collected. While the participants consisted of boys with siblings, counterbalancing the sample by including boys who are only children, and boys with sisters and without sisters would allow for a close look at sibling influences. In addition, more children in each age group would provide a better understanding of the different ways in which age played a role in boys' awareness and expression of gender related knowledge.

A larger sample size would also allow for the inclusion of more diverse demographic variables. The sample in the present study was relatively homogeneous, as it consisted only of white, middle-class boys and their fathers. Research suggests that the performative role of "fatherhood" can be greatly influenced by demographic variables such as age, race (Thompson & Bennett, 2015), and ethnic heritage (Morman & Floyd, 2002). Furthermore, the intersection of an individual's race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, nationality, religion, etc., emphasize the complex nature of how the social construct of "masculinity" might operate differently in particular cultures or contexts (Levant et al., 2018). Thus, future studies should consider recruitment of a more diverse sample in order to reflect the richness of the father-son relationship.

Another common issue that arises with toy preference studies refers to the fact that not all studies always use the same toys. The specific toys used in any particular study, and whether those toys are classified as stereotypically girl toys, stereotypically boy toys, or gender-neutral toys, are not standardized across toy preference research (Hines, 2020). Notably, the gendered classification of toys is also influenced by culture, ethnicity, as well as social class.

With regards to the series of questions that were developed for the boys, some confusion was reported for one the question when they were asked to choose three toys that they thought both boys *and* girls would like to play with. As such, the instructions were repeated and clarified for the boys to understand what was being asked of them.

It is also essential to consider the limitations of using on-line environment to conduct qualitative interviews, especially with young participants. During the data collection, there were technological glitches in the Virtual Chest of Toys game, which impeded some participants from proceeding smoothly from one activity to the next. In addition, while it had originally been anticipated that fathers would not be present for the series of questions that were intended for the boys to respond to independently, due to the nature of the online environment and the ages of the participants, fathers occasionally had to provide assistance to their young sons as they navigated through the *SCORM Cloud* platform. Although this added to the fathers' involvement and engagement in the study, it did limit boys' ability to share openly and honestly without their fathers' influence. During the silent moments where the boys did not respond to the questions being asked of them, fathers often intervened and shared their own answers which may have prevented their sons' from sharing their own responses. In addition, the Zoom platform did not allow the researcher to view the participants in full to observe for any subtle changes in body language. Future online studies should anticipate such issues, and if possible, to carry out in-

person interviews as this allows for a true and real interactions to be observed. If the study were to have taken place in an in-person context, boys would have been presented with the physical toy chest and would have had the opportunity to interact and play with the toys during the interview. In addition, it would have been possible for fathers to leave the room so that the boys could respond to the questions without their fathers' presence; children would be more free to choose the toys they wanted, without any external influence.

Lastly, while the *Sex Role Attitude Scale* was an efficient method of capturing fathers' attitudes and beliefs about gender related toys, activities, and behaviors, the inclusion of more open-ended questions and discussions with the fathers individually, could have provided supplementary valuable information about their beliefs. The following questions could have allowed fathers to reflect more meaningfully on the ways in which they influenced their son's understanding and expression of traditional masculine gender norms: What is your view on gender stereotyping and what influenced your attitudes and beliefs about gender behaviours? What does it mean to be a good father? What kind of son do you wish to raise? How do you teach your son what it means to be "a man"?

Significance of the Study and Future Research Directions

While the present findings have added valuable information to the growing research on the role of fathers in their sons' gender role socialization, there remain unanswered questions: How would fathers react when seeing their sons play with the stereotypically girl toys they chose? Would the attempts to correct their sons' choices be more or less overt during instances of free play time with their sons? Would the presence of both parents differently influence the children's choices, and would the presence of mothers impact the ways in which fathers intervene or comment on their son's choices? Future research should also consider interviewing

children in pairs while conducting a similar toy-preference study (e.g., boy-boy vs. boy-girl), as this would allow for a greater understanding of the role of peers, and the ways in which the same and opposite gender differently influence boys' gender conforming or non-conforming choices.

Notwithstanding the low sample size, the current findings have critical implications for teachers and parents; given boys' clear stereotypical definition of "girl toys", it is imperative for both boys and girls to be exposed to more instances of cross-gender play. For teachers, this means encouraging children to play with the variety of toys available in the classroom. Although it is common for girls to congregate around the dress-up and toy kitchen areas of the room, boys should also be welcomed to play alongside their female peers. This can be achieved by including more gender-neutral items in these play areas (e.g., unisex costumes for both boys and girls) and increasing exposure and acceptance towards cross-gender play (e.g., reading books about boys who like to play with dolls). By offering children more opportunities to observed gender non-conformity in the classroom, they will learn that they can play with whichever toys they please, regardless of their gender. For parents, especially fathers, it is worth considering the implicit and explicit messages that they may be sending to their sons during instances of play. For instance, given the fact that boys only chose stereotypically boy or gender-neutral toys when asked to pick toys to play with their fathers, it is important for fathers to also engage in play with stereotypically girl toys. While their sons may continue and perhaps prefer to play with stereotypically boy toys with their fathers, solely being exposed to stereotypical boy play can have an important influence on their acceptance and willingness to interact in any form of cross-gender play.

Furthermore, while the fathers serve as an important social influence for their sons' acquisition of gender stereotypical play, it is also worth considering how the influence may or

may not act in similar ways for their daughters? Extending the current study to include young girls would additionally shed light on the similarities and/or differences in the choices girls make for both their own and the opposite gender, in the presence or absence of their fathers. Do young girls have similar stereotyped views of what it "means" to be a girl or a boy? In exploring the ways in which young girls and boys justify their choices, a more complete picture of early childhood gender socialization can be acquired. Understanding the basis of children's stereotypical and non-stereotypical beliefs and attitudes can help inform the creation of inclusive gender education programs and curriculums that promote acceptance and tolerance.

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Appendix A

Consent Form (Parents)

INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM

Study Title: Boys Will Be Boys: Exploring Masculinity in Early Childhood
Researcher: Julia Tesolin, Master's Candidate in Child Studies
Researcher's Contact Information: julia.tesolin@mail.mcgill.ca
Department of Education
1610 Saint-Catherine St W
Montreal, QC H3H 2S2
Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Elsa Lo
Faculty Supervisor's Contact Information: elsa.lo@concordia.ca

You and your child are being invited to participate in the research study mentioned above. This form provides information about what participating would mean. Please read it carefully before deciding if you want to participate or not. If there is anything you do not understand, or if you want more information, please ask the researcher.

A. PURPOSE

The purpose of the research is to understand how young boys identify and perceive gender stereotypes typically associated with the male gender. These stereotypes can include the types of activities and behaviors they expect boys and girls to engage in, from the toy they play with to the friends they choose. Specifically, this study is intended to highlight the young male perspective, which has recently garnered great attention as it provides a unique and valuable understanding of how boys construct masculinity from their social influences.

B. PROCEDURES

If you decide to participate in this study with your child, you will be asked to first complete a short online questionnaire, known as the Child-Rearing Sex-Role Attitude Scale which is intended to assess adults' attitudes and beliefs about gender related toys, activities, and behaviors. You will be asked to rate 12 items on a scale of strongly agree to strongly disagree.

On the day of the interview, you will be invited to join a Zoom videoconferencing call with your son. The first activity will involve you and your child working together to choose a toy that you would both like to play with from a larger collection of toys. Then the interview will proceed with only your child; together they will continue playing the same game but with two imaginary friends: a boy and a girl.

In total, participating in this study will take approximately 30 to 40 minutes.

C. RISKS AND BENEFITS

This research is not intended to benefit your child personally. However, if a child expresses an angry/sad memory, or reports an instance of being hurt/bullied, this will be talked through with the parent, at the end of the study. In the highly unlikely event of the child reporting abuse of any kind, the appropriate authorities and research supervisor will be informed.

D. CONFIDENTIALITY

I will gather the following information as part of this research: audio recordings of the interview. By participating in this study, you agree to let me have access to information about yourself and your child. I will not allow anyone to access the information, and I will only use the information for the purposes of the research described in this form.

The information gathered will be confidential. That means that it will not be possible to make a link between you and the information you provide.

I will protect the information collected by storing it electronically in a password-protected file on my personal hard drive.

F. CONDITIONS OF PARTICIPATION

You do not have to participate in this research. It is purely your decision. If you do participate, you can stop at any time. You can also ask that the information you provided not be used, and your choice will be respected. If you decide that you do not want us to use your information, please inform the researcher before TBD.

There are no negative consequences for not participating, stopping in the middle, or asking us not to use your information.

G. PARTICIPANT'S DECLARATION

I have read and understood this form. I have had the chance to ask questions and any questions have been answered. I agree to participate in this research under the conditions described.

NAME

_____

(please print)

SIGNATURE

_____

DATE

_____

If you have questions about the scientific or scholarly aspects of this research, please contact the researcher. Their contact information is on page 1. You may also contact their faculty supervisor.

If you have concerns about ethical issues in this research, please contact the Manager, Research Ethics, Concordia University, 514.848.2424 ex. 7481 or oor.ethics@concordia.ca.

Verbal Assent Form (child)

Hi (insert child's name)! I'm here to ask you if you want to help me with a project that I have to do for school. If you decide that you want to help me out, I am going to ask you some questions about you at the beginning, and then I have a fun activity planned for you and your daddy, and then there's going to be another game that we're going to play just me and you.

Because we're going to be playing, I need to use my phone to record what we're saying, but nobody else will be able to listen to it other than me. I have to record what we're saying, because I can't always be writing while we're talking and doing the activities, because that would be crazy to do those two things at the same time, right? And because what we talk about is important for my school project, I need to make sure I remember what we're saying.

If you get tired or you're not having fun, we can take a break or stop whenever you want! We can also skip some of the questions if you're not sure what to answer.

Do you have any questions for me?

Do you want to work with me on my project and play the game I talked to you about?

Child's response: ☐ Yes ☐ No

_____
Child's Name (printed)

_____
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent (Principal Investigator)

_____
Date

Appendix B

Child-Rearing Sex-Role Attitude Scale (Adapted from Freeman, 2007)

Directions: Please indicate your opinion about each statement. Do you Strongly Agree, Strongly Disagree, or is your opinion somewhere in between these extremes? Mark one choice for each item.

Child-Rearing Sex-Role Attitude Scale

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Both boys and girls really need to develop social skills	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Only boys should be permitted to play competitive sports	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
It is only healthy for boys to cry when they have been hurt	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I would discourage my son from saying that he wants to be a nurse when he grows up	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Boys who exhibit sissy behaviors will never be well adjusted	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Parents should set different behavior standards for girls and boys	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I feel upset when I see boys put on a dress when they play dress-up	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I would buy my son a doll	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I would not hire a male babysitter	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Boys, more than girls, need competitive sports	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Math and science are as necessary for girls as boys	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I would feel disappointed if my daughter acted like a tomboy.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Appendix C

Figure 1

Toy Collection Presented to Children
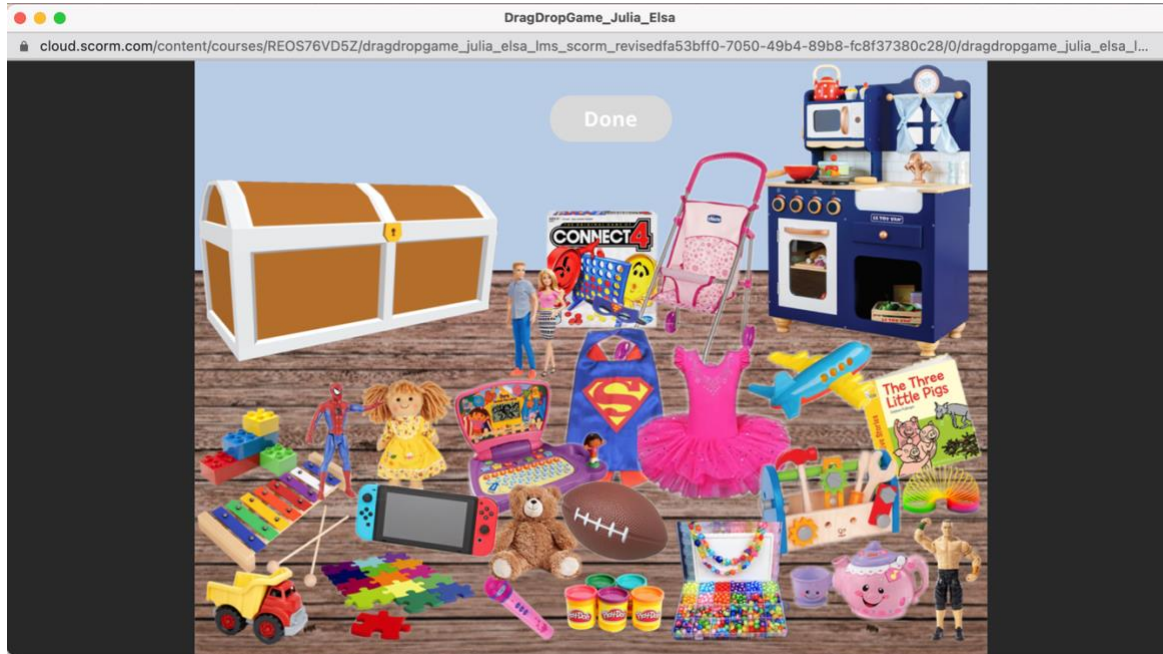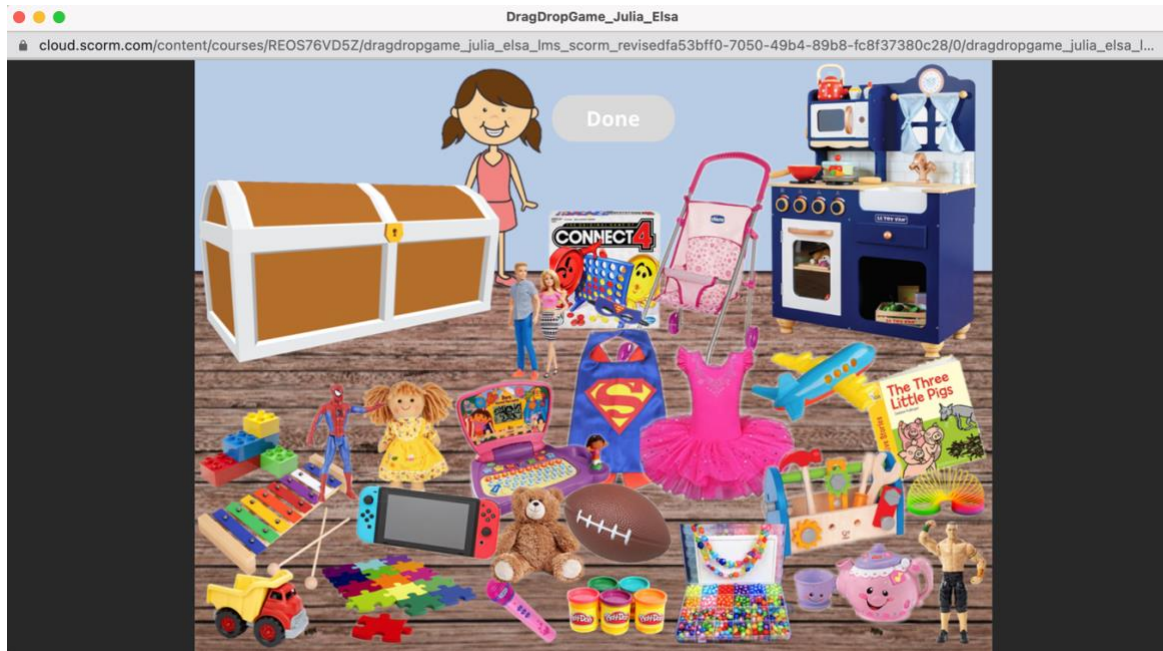

Figure 2

Rosie with Toys Presented

Figure 3

Timmy with Toys Presented

Appendix D

Interview Guide and Questions

Father-son activity: Today, you and your daddy will be playing a game together which I think you are both going to like. Here I have toy chest and I took out all of my toys, and I would like for you to choose 1 toy that you and daddy like to play with? I want you to choose something <u>together</u>.

    Follow up questions include:

- What toy did you choose?
- Why did you choose that toy?
- Have you played with that toy with daddy before?
- Why do you like that toy so much?

Son only activity: We're going to continue playing this game, but now my friend Jill wants to play with us, if that's okay with you. Can you choose one toy that you would want to play with, with Rosie?

    Follow up questions include:

- What toy did you choose?
- Why did you choose that toy?

Now my friend Timmy wants to play, can you choose one toy that you would want to play with, with Jack?

Before, I asked you and your daddy to choose a toy to play with together, remember. If you would have chosen by yourself, without your dad, what toy would you have chosen and why?

Now can you choose 3 toys that you think only boys would like (and that girls would never like) and 3 toys that only girls would like (and that boys would never like). Now can you choose 3 toys that both boys <u>and</u> girls would like to play with?

    Follow up questions include:

- Why do you think boys would like those toys?
- Why do you think girls would like those toys?
- Why do you think boys and girls would like to play with those toys? (compare to two previous toy choices).

Appendix E

Codes and Categories with Corresponding Quotes

Colour Coded Scheme:

Jesse (dad) & Marc: Blue

Rodney (dad) & Luke: Orange

Michael (dad) & Christopher: Green

Frank & Alex: Yellow

Joey (dad), Brad & Jason: Purple

Codes and Subthemes	Line Numbers - Quotes
	Father-son Dynamic
Subtheme: Engagement	J & M
	13-14: I don't even know what you did today, cause Daddy just came home from work so I'm finding out too. Did you play with Mommy?
	38: Let's do this Marc!
	78: Okay… Oh, look at all that stuff Marc!
	175: I used to have that! I have a slinky too remember? (asking dad)
	235: Oh there's the slinky!
	404-5: You thought it was a camera. Its not a camera, but it's a good guess. It looks like the camera we have
	486: Go ahead, we're listening. We're listening
	R & L
	21-2: Oh yeaaa (looks at dad) […] *dad smiling back at son*
	79: So cool! (dad)
	114: We have that too (dad to son)
	235-7: *looks at dad* Oh yeaa, yea yea […] Yeaa
	275: Hmmm…what do you think he would like to play with? *looks at son*
	M & C
	471: Hmmm…only boys
	594: Boys and girls…hmmmm
	F & A

	38: So Alex is really excited about this game, I told him that we were going to play a game today and he's been asking me about it.
	J, B & J
	85: Use your words!
	270: Okay so Brad, which one do you want?
	351: Wooooahhhh! (all 3 together)
	406-8: Minecraft, yea […] Minecraft, Minecraft, Minecraft..mmrmrr *incomprehensible* [..] *dad looks at son laughing*
	507-7: Cause you're talking about playing..you wanna play Minecraft with him, and that's why? *looks down at son* And you think he'd have fun playing Minecraft with you? […] *nods head yes*
	576: *dad looks at Jason and they both smile*
	656: *dad and Jason look at each other laughing*
	692: *Dad looks at Jason* No…that one we haven't read, we know the story. But ummm.. [..] But I don't think we ever read it…[…] But we never read it.
	740: *dad sits behind his sons covering his ears*
	781-7: Remember when we dove into the leaf pile […] YESSSSS!! […] Ohhhhh yessss!! *looks at dad* […] Yeaaaaa *smiling* […] *dad laughs*
	1081: We weren't expecting you to say that […] *Jason laughing*
<u>Subtheme:</u> Acceptance	**J, B & J**
	484: Jason, which one do you want to choose? […] Football! […] Footballllll…okay
	1038: Yea, there's no right or wrong answer, whatever you think