

## **All the Boys are Straight: Heteronormativity in Books on Fathering and Raising Boys**

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### **Abstract**

Over the past decade a rapidly growing number of books have been published on fathering and raising boys. Whilst these books purport to simply describe boyhood, this paper suggests that in fact they are actively engaged in constructing boyhood, and in particular the gender and sexual identities of boys. Through an analysis of ten such books, this paper demonstrates how they are informed by a range of heteronormative and homophobic assumptions about boys and masculinity. Particular focus is given to 1) constructions of the 'average boy', 2) the assumption that such boys are 'naturally' attracted to girls, 3) discourses of the 'sissy' boy, and 4) accounts of gay boys. The analysis provided suggests that constructions of the first two are reliant upon negative constructions of the latter two. Implications for the ways in which we understand boys, parenting and families are drawn from the findings, and recommendations are made for research agendas that not only respect and include gay boys and their parents, but which celebrate the experiences of non-gender normative, non-heterosexual boys.

Keywords: raising boys, heteronormativity, gay boys, parenting, sexuality

## Introduction

Over the past decade we have witnessed the development of a rapidly growing body of literature focusing on both fathering and raising boys. Often presented in conjunction with one another, these two topics represent a growth industry in publishing on parenting, with an increasing number of new titles being added each year, and at least one specific publishing house focusing much of its energies on publishing work on men, masculinities, fathering and boys. Many of the books already published on fathering and raising boys report multiple editions (Biddulph, 1998; Elium & Elium, 2004), with some celebrating ‘10<sup>th</sup> anniversary editions’ (Gurian, 2006), some claiming to be ‘million-copy worldwide bestsellers’ (Biddulph, 1998), and others identified as ‘silver bestsellers’ (Lashlie, 2005). Importantly, this literature has not been limited to books aimed at the US market, but includes titles written by authors in the UK, New Zealand and Australia.

Whilst it may be suggested that the growing literature on fathering and raising boys responds to a gap in the market, it is important to question how this literature may also be very much invested in *creating* a market, and moreover, creating a particular way of understanding boys and fathers that is often normative in the ways in which it portrays masculinity. To suggest this is of course nothing new: authors such as Grant (2004) and Kidd (2000) propose that the recent spate of books on boys very much mirrors early twentieth-century books on boys, which were aimed at celebrating ‘boy culture’, instructing boys and their parents on how to live their lives, and countering what was then (as again now) seen as the ‘feminisation’ of family life. As such, these early books on boys and their contemporary counterparts may be seen not as simply

*describing* boys and boyhood, but as actually *prescribing* what boyhood should be (Grant).

Taking this suggestion as its starting point, this paper seeks to explore how boys are constructed in books on fathering and raising boys, and more specifically, how boys' sexuality is constructed. Examining representations of boys' sexuality is important due to what Bond Stockton (2004, p. 283) describes as the "tendency to treat all children as straight whilst we culturally consider them asexual". Whilst there exists a small body of research examining representations of boys in parenting and boy manuals (e.g., Anderson, George & Nease, 2002; Grant, 2004; Kidd, 2000), none of this has explored the construction of boys' sexuality (as opposed to their gender identity), and none have paid specific attention to how *gay* boys are represented. All of the targeted books claim to speak to a generalist parenting audience, as is exemplified in the following quote:

*Growing Great Boys* is a book 'for all seasons' – every parent, every family, whatever age, stage or condition, whoever they are, will find this book fascinating reading.

(Graham, in Foreword to Grant, 2006, p. 10)

Yet, as will be demonstrated in this paper, when only particular boys are typically represented, and when gay boys more specifically are either ignored or represented in negative ways, then parents (of any sexuality or gender), in addition to gay boys themselves, are clearly being told that they do not fall within the category of 'every parent' or 'every family'.

Thus, as will be demonstrated in the remainder of this paper, contemporary books on fathering and raising boys, much like their predecessors, do much more than what they claim. Such books claim to serve as studies of boy culture, and as guides to how best engage with and parent boys. Yet, as Kidd (2000) suggests, these books may be seen as among some of the prime proponents and manufacturers of a highly normative understanding of masculinity and boyhood. In examining ten books on fathering and raising boys, this paper explores four main areas that pertain to boys' gender and sexual identities as they are constructed within the books: 1) the construction of the 'average boy', 2) the emphasis upon boys' 'natural attraction' to girls, 3) constructions of the categories 'sissy' and 'wimp', and 4) accounts of gay boys. Particular attention will be paid to the ways in which the books produce particular heteronormative (i.e., the assumption that heterosexuality is the 'normal', and indeed 'proper', sexual identity) and homophobic (i.e., clearly discriminatory against people who do not identify as heterosexual) accounts of boyhood and parenting.

Following Anderson, George and Nease (2000), it will be suggested that the varying constructions of boys identified within the analysis display a marked asymmetry, namely the different levels of attention given to boys who are identified as heterosexual and/or normatively gendered, and those boys identified as gay and/or as 'sissies'. Not only is the 'average boy' constructed through its implicit comparison with those boys who do *not* fall within this category, but those boys who are not identified as 'average boys' are often actively constructed in negative ways. The paper concludes with an examination of the implications of these findings for gay boys themselves, and for those who parent them.

## The Books

The ten books examined in this article broadly cover the range of books available on fathering and raising boys. As with the broader literature on parenting, books on raising boys and fathering fall within three overlapping categories: 1) the confessional tale, 2) the brief 'how to' guide, and 3) the more wide-reaching manual. Books that fall within the first category tend to largely focus on the author's experiences as a parent, and thus tend to be less instructive and more autobiographical. It was decided not to focus on these books within this paper for two reasons: 1) it seemed somewhat problematic to analyse one particular parent's experiences and 'diagnose' their heteronormativity, and 2) the books written in this style at present constitute the numerical minority in popular books on fathering and raising boys.

Books written as brief 'how to' guides, the second category, tend to provide either summary overviews of a wide range of topics pertaining to raising boys and fathering, or they focus on a specific aspect of fathering or raising boys. Half of the books in the sample of ten fell broadly into this category. These were *Fathering your school-age child* (Brott, 2007), *The father's book* (Cohen, 2001), *Growing great boys* (Grant, 2006), *A man's guide to raising kids* (Grose, 2000), and *He'll be OK* (Lashlie, 2005). Of these, the books by Brott and Lashlie focus on specific aspects of parenting (respectively, fathers with children aged between 3 and 9 and parenting teenage boys), whilst the books by Cohen, Grant and Grose provide more generalist overviews of fathering and raising boys, but do not go into great depth on any one topic. All five books are written in fairly simple prose, speak to the novice parent reader, and in all cases bar Lashlie, are written explicitly by men who father.

Books that fall into the third category of ‘manuals’ tend to be the most well-known within the literature on fathering and raising boys. As with the ‘how to’ guides, these books provide overviews of all areas deemed relevant to raising boys, but the manuals go into greater depth on all topics, and tend to adopt a more ‘professional’ approach, where the authors identify not only as parents, but also as practitioners or higher degree holders. The five books that fell within this category were *Raising boys* (Biddulph, 1998), *Raising a son* (Elium & Elium, 2004), *The wonder of boys* (Gurian, 2006), *Bringing up boys* (Kahn, 1998), and *Real boys* (Pollack, 1999). These books are typically more formal in their approach, tend to cite more academic references, and are generally aimed at the more advanced reader (Biddulph being the notable exception).

The extracts from the books analysed in the following section represent but a small selection of the total number of instances of heteronormativity and homophobia identified within the ten books. Across the ten books a total of seventy instances were identified where either 1) the heterosexuality of all boys was presumed, 2) boys were constructed as ‘inherently’ or ‘naturally’ orientated to a particular form of gender or sexual identity, or 3) boys not identified as heterosexual were constructed in negative ways. The most common of these was the presumption that all boys are heterosexual. This structured all of the books, with all books bar one (Pollack, 1999) utilising examples of boys being attracted to girls in *all* anecdotes, illustrations, case studies and other various examples. As such, the reader is presented with an image of boys that not only presumes the heterosexuality of all boys, but which justifies this presumption by recourse to the inference that heterosexuality is the ‘natural’ sexual

identity for all boys. As will be argued, this is achieved through constructions of gay or non-gender normative boys that represent them as marginal, unusual, and generally a matter for concern.

## **The Analysis**

The sections that follow outline first the ways in which the 'average boy' is constructed within the texts, and then proceed to outline the three main ways in which boys' sexual and gender identities are reported within the texts: 1) boys who are attracted to girls, 2) boys who are variously labelled as 'sissies' or 'wimps', and 3) gay boys. As I will suggest, the category 'average boy' is implicitly (and often explicitly) connected to the construction of boys as 'naturally' attracted to girls, the corollary of this of course being that gay boys or boys identified as 'sissies' or 'wimps' are somehow unnatural, and certainly not 'average boys'.

### *The 'Average Boy'*

All of the books, without exception, go to considerable length to outline for the reader what 'typical' boys do. Whilst two of the books devote space to breaking down some of the stereotypical constructions of boys and masculinity (Kahn, 1998; Pollack, 1999), and how these negatively impact upon boys by forcing them into particular gender normative roles, these two books nonetheless then go on to construct an image of the 'average boy' that still centres upon an understanding of masculinity that is not markedly different to the other eight books. As a result, these two books construct a

similar argument to that used by the other books – that boys need male role models, and that, in essence, ‘boys will be boys’.

The authors of the remaining eight books unequivocally construct an image of the ‘average boy’ that not only takes as its starting place the stereotypical images of boys that circulate within Western societies, but justifies these images through recourse to notions of biology and inevitability. This is perhaps most evident in Elium and Elium’s (2004) citation of testosterone and its role in producing boy behaviours:

Boys are biologically driven via a drug-like hormone that is one of the most powerful manipulators of behaviour the world has ever known. It is this force that pushes boys to be aggressive and inspires them to win at all costs. (p. 10)

In this quote boys are constructed as being at the mercy of a ‘drug-like hormone’ that acts as a ‘force’ in their lives. Constructed in this way, such boys must be forgiven for their aggression and desire to ‘win at all costs’, the corollary of this being of course that boys who are not aggressive or competitive are somehow lacking the biology that ‘pushes’ other boys. Gurian (2006) takes a similar line in stating that “a boy is, in large part, hard-wired to be who he is” (p. 5). He too evokes hormones to account for the behaviours of boys: “Because of their dominance by the hormone testosterone, aggression and physical risk-taking are programmed into boys” (p. 6). In all three of these quotes the category ‘boy’ is thus clearly constructed as referencing a particular kind of boy, yet neither of these texts recognise that they are describing but one kind of boy, one that is produced by and within a particular social context. Rather, they make recourse to biology to legitimate their claims, and thus elevate notions of the

‘naturalness’ of boys who are aggressive risk takers to the level of taken-for-granted scientific fact (Anderson, George & Nease, 2002).

The following extract from Grant (2006) employs a similar argument as to the supposed factuality of boys’ action-orientated personalities, but extends the logic of science employed in the previous extracts by imbuing it with a ‘magical’ quality:

There is something special and magical about boys. Every parent of a boy notices, for instance, that their personalities and wiring are difference from girls. Left in the backyard to play, they will think up action games, climb trees, or create mock battles. They love action and heroism. (p. 18)

Grant asserts here that it is axiomatic that parents will notice differences between boys and girls, and more specifically, that these differences are marked by behaviours such as playing ‘action games, climb[ing] trees, or creat[ing] mock battles’. Parents are thus alerted that the average (but nonetheless ‘special and magical’) boy is ‘wired’ to do these things – we should expect to see these behaviours as they are what boys ‘naturally’ do. Cohen (2001) takes this construction of gender appropriate behaviours a step further, by not only stating what boys do, but also by stating what boys *do not* do:

Around the age of 6, children go into what Freud called latency. They become a-sexual though they are often extremely interested in gender-appropriate behaviour. Boys play with soldiers, girls with dresses and make-up. (p. 119)

‘Average boys’ thus do not become interested in ‘dresses and make-up’ – this is behaviour reserved for girls. Boys who are interested in ‘cross-gender’ play are thus implicitly depicted as not falling within the category ‘boy’ as it is constructed in such texts (as will be elaborated in later sections). Furthermore, boys who *do* fall within what are deemed the appropriate boundaries of ‘boy behaviours’ are constructed as not only inherently geared towards particular forms of play, but also to playing in particular groups, as Pollack (1999) suggests: “Researchers examining play in elementary school children find consistent patterns. Boys and girls cluster in same-sex groups” (p. 188). Such claims to ‘consistent patterns’ thus construct the ‘average boy’ as one who conforms to these patterns, with boys who do not falling outside the category ‘average boy’.

Of course, it should be noted that most of the books do recognise that there are a diverse range of behaviours that boys will engage in, but there is nonetheless a bottom line argument inherent to all of the books: that boys, on average, gravitate towards other boys in their play, that they undertake particular forms of play that are driven by their biology, and that this drive is unstoppable. Thus as Biddulph (1998) states: “What we have described here is the pattern for the average boy. There is wide variation among males and also lots of overlap between the sexes... *Nonetheless, the general pattern will hold true for most children*” (p. 38, emphasis added). In referencing ‘most children’, Biddulph (as but one example) allows for variation amongst boys, but suggests that we can discern ‘average’ from ‘non-average’ boys by their location in a relationship to the norms for boyhood described within his book.

On the whole, then, the ten books construct an image of the ‘average boy’ that takes particular gendered behaviours as normal, ascribes to these behaviours a largely scientific explanation, and implicitly constructs boys who do not display these behaviours as somehow ‘not normal’. These constructions of boyhood are further exemplified in the sections of books that focus on boys’ sexual identities, as is the focus of the following sections.

### *Boys and Girls*

As previously mentioned, across all of the books teenage boys are uniformly constructed as being attracted to girls. Indeed, many of the books state, using a similar biological argument to that described above, that this attraction is inevitable and indeed necessary. Gurian (2006), for example, states in his chapter on ‘Teaching boys about sex and love’, that: “the boy goes out and explores [his body’s] natural purpose with girls, some of whom end up pregnant” (p. 224). Here boys’ bodies are constructed as ‘naturally’ driven towards girls and heterosexual intercourse. Elium and Elium (2004) are even more explicit in their construction of boys’ bodies as inherently (and indeed solely) designed for heterosexual coitus and reproduction:

A man’s sexual role in the life cycle is much narrower and simpler than a woman’s role. His biological task is to successfully ‘plant the seed’. When this is completed, his body tells him to move on to another challenge – tension and release. (p. 18)

Throughout their text, and much like other authors such as Gurian (2006) and Biddulph (1998), Elium and Elium construct a narrative of boys’ sexuality that starts with ‘cavemen’ and the ‘natural role’ of men as hunters and gatherers. They utilise

metaphors of ‘tension and release’, ‘avoiding dangers’ and ‘survival of the species’ to justify the ways in which they represent contemporary males as inherently designed and driven to heterosexuality. This logic, however, often appears specious, as it suggests that because prehistoric men lived a hunter lifestyle, they developed higher levels of testosterone in order to stay alive, reproduce, and feed themselves and their families. That contemporary boys are driven by this ‘adaptive’ testosterone is thus taken as a justification for their ‘natural’ attraction to girls and their ‘drive’ towards certain behaviours, as outlined in the previous section. Where this logic fails is in its sequencing of behaviour to biology, and from biology to behaviour: if prehistoric men engaged in behaviours that led to the ‘evolution’ of increased testosterone, it does not automatically hold that this increased testosterone (as compared with females) should lead to certain behaviours (such as ‘action games, climbing trees, and creating mock battles’).

Yet despite the flaw in the historicised logic of boys’ sexual behaviours, the assumption of heterosexuality (even when ‘survival of the species’ would now dictate lower levels of reproduction) is held as a constant across all of the books. This occurs in ways that reference what Peel (2001) has termed ‘mundane heterosexism’ – the commonplace, and often banal, ways in which heterosexuality is asserted as the norm. This appears in examples such as: “Teenage boys are quite unsure about relationships and how to get girls to like them” (Biddulph, 1998, p. 2), and:

Anyone who can remember his own adolescence would realise that sex and sexuality is a pretty big issue for this age group... Don’t be surprised if your son sticks pictures of scantily clad females over his bedroom wall. (Grose, 2000, p. 85)

Here, and again as in the previous section, the category ‘boy’ is constructed as referring solely to boys who ‘stick pictures of scantily clad females over [their] bedroom walls’ and feel unsure about ‘how to get girls to like them’. References to ‘boys’ are thus references to *heterosexual* boys. This is rendered even more visible in the following quote from Pollack in a section on boys and sexuality (1999):

What other area causes boys to be so vulnerable, so open, so naked before girls?... On the one hand, the boy is becoming a man, with a man’s body and a man’s sexual appetites. He feels pressure from society and his peers, to perform as a man – to make out, have a girlfriend, have sexual intercourse. (p. 149)

In this quote, Pollack constructs ‘men’s bodies’ and ‘men’s sexual appetites’ as referencing heterosexual men. To ‘perform as a man’ is to ‘make out, have a girlfriend, have sexual intercourse’ – to be a man is to be a heterosexual man. Furthermore, and as the following quote suggests, to be a heterosexual man is not only to have a particular body and particular appetites, but it is also to locate these within the context of heterosexual marriage:

A dad who teaches his son to respect women by honouring his wife, to respect his sister when she says ‘no’, and to monitor his speech, will offer a wonderful gift to future wives. (Grant, 2006, p. 50)

Boys are to be taught to think about their ‘future wives’ via the ways they engage with their mothers and sisters. Not only are boys assumed within these books to be driven towards heterosexuality, but they must aim for heterosexual marriage. As suggested earlier, this type of statement demonstrates the flaws within the argument of the

books, which assumes a model of boys' behaviour that asserts that history leads to biology which leads to behaviour. There is nothing logical to suggest that increased levels of testosterone must lead to a desire for *heterosexual* sex, which must lead to engagement in heterosexual marriage. Such behaviours, like all behaviours deemed 'natural' for boys, are the product of cultural norms that make available particular identities to boys that are rendered intelligible within a heteronormative social context. This is not to suggest that many boys are not attracted to girls, but the fact that this attraction should be taken to equate not only with 'nature', but also the most desirable form of attraction, is most certainly the product of prohibitions on same-sex attraction within Western societies. As will be elaborated in the following two sections, such prohibitions are actively reproduced within books on fathering and raising boys.

### *'Sissy Boys' and 'Wimps'*

One of the categories against which the normatively gendered, heterosexually orientated, 'average boy' is constructed is that of the 'sissy' boy. The category 'sissy' or 'wuss' or 'wimp' is wielded across all of the books in ways that reinforce it as an undesirable category, even when some authors critique the category itself. Thus whilst some of the authors recognise that the category 'sissy' is used to enforce normative masculinity amongst boys, they nonetheless use it (often repeatedly) as an exemplar when talking about boys, and refer to it when talking about mother/son interactions. Elium and Elium (2004), for example, state that:

Many mothers are afraid to be too involved in their son's lives now, feel sadness at losing contact, and are confused as to what their role should be. We are afraid that loving our

sons too much will make them wimps, gay, or worse – tied to their mother’s apron strings forever. (p. 249)

In this quote the authors construct ‘wimps’ and gay sons as something bad – yes, being ‘tied to their mother’s apron strings forever’ would be *worse*, but the inference is that being a ‘wimp’ or gay is bad enough in itself. Kahn (1998) includes a subheading ‘The wimp’ in his text on boys, in which he states

The idea that boys will be boys, and the types of behaviour identified, are part and parcel of what we expect when bringing up boys. If boys do not fit this mould – and the difficulties it brings with it – then we may have another set of concerns: that boys are not ‘manly’ enough, that they may not fit in, that they may become the target of other people’s jokes and be seen as wimps. (p. 94)

In referencing ‘boys will be boys’, Kahn refers implicitly to boys who are normatively gendered – those boys described in the previous two sections. In contrast to these boys, Kahn refers to boys who ‘do not fit this mould’, boys who will experience ‘difficulties’ and ‘be seen as wimps’. This quote is interesting for the complex work it undertakes. Kahn expresses concern about the ‘difficulties’ such boys may face, but in doing so he reasserts a ‘we’ who ‘may have another set of concerns’, presumably parents who want their sons to be normatively gendered. Furthermore, and despite his concern, Kahn depicts the difficulties that ‘not manly enough’ boys experience as resulting from their ‘not fit[ting] the mould’, rather than the mould itself being the problem.

In his book on raising boys, Biddulph (1998) brings non-gender normative boys and gay boys into close alignment, perhaps more so than most of the other books, which often refer to 'sissies' or 'wimps', but do not necessarily equate this with a non-heterosexual identity. Biddulph quite blithely states that:

Some men fear that cuddling their son will make him a 'sissy' (for which you can read 'gay'). It won't. In fact, the opposite may be true. Many gay or bisexual men I have spoken to say that a lack of fatherly affection was part of what made male affection more important to them. (p. 15)

Again, this quote presumes that all fathers would fear their sons being gay, and in so doing runs together the category 'sissy' with the identity 'gay'. This, apparently, is based on Biddulph's armchair speculation from talking to 'many gay and bisexual men' that 'a lack of fatherly affection was part of what made male affection more important to them'. Not only is this statement problematic for the blame it places upon fathers, but the inference is that if fathers gave more affection then sons wouldn't grow up to be gay, which is thus constructed as the preferable option. This statement is also problematic as it is one of the few instances across all of the books where reference is made to gay men (rather than boys), yet the experiences of these men (some of whom may well have been fathers) never make an appearance again within the book. Gay men, in this sense, function as a plot narrative for Biddulph's anti-sissy, and in effect anti-gay, rhetoric, rather than as knowing subjects.

A further example of the assumption that being a 'wimp' is a negative thing, and that all fathers are implicitly heterosexual, appears in the following 'myth buster' provided by Grose (2000):

Myth number 12: Raising kids is for wimps: This is a throwback to the caveman days where men and women presumably knew their place. There is a significant amount of evidence that those men who involve themselves fully in all aspect of raising kids show masculine traits such as action-orientation, initiative, self-reliance and athleticism in abundance. (p. 18)

Not only does Grose make reference to ‘caveman days where men and women presumably knew their place’ (i.e., within gender hierarchies), but he reinforces those hierarchies by reasserting them through his assertion of ‘masculine traits’ that are constructed as prized possessions. In so doing, Grose constructs any men who do not display these traits as not only ‘wimps, but also not proper fathers.

Finally in regards to constructions of ‘sissy’ boys, Brott (2007) provides a list of ‘girly’ things that ‘average boys’ stay away from in order to avoid being labelled. As he states: “Boys [in co-ed classrooms] try to impress girls by being tough, and they stay away from ‘girly’ activities like chorus, drama, debating, and foreign languages” (p. 94). Lists such as this reinforce the idea of what a ‘real boy’ does, in comparison with those boys who may well engage in ‘chorus, drama, debating, and foreign languages’. In so doing, the construction of the category ‘sissy’ not only excludes non-gender normative boys from the category ‘boy’, but it also constructs the supposed behaviours of girls in derogatory ways.

As McInnes and Couch (2004), following Butler (1997), suggest; “hate speech not only acts upon the listener but contributes to the social constitution of the one addressed. It problematises and attributes a social position within hierarchical

structures” (p. 435). In regards to the use of the categories of ‘wimp’ and ‘sissy’ within books on fathering and raising boys, the construction of *potential* ‘sissies’ or the reporting of how some people treat ‘wimps’ serves to perpetuate the location of these categories within social hierarchies in which normatively gendered heterosexual boys are considered the only ‘real’ boys. Whilst it is of course the reality that boys *are* often harassed and discriminated against on the basis of these categories, their deployment within parenting books does little to locate the categories within a context of institutionalised heterosexism and homophobia, and instead very much constructs individual boys as the cause of the categories themselves. Yet whilst these categories are often wielded in unproductive ways within the books, it is the category ‘gay’ that is most frequently deployed in negative ways, as is elaborated in the following section.

### *Gay Boys*

Of the ten books, only four provide any focus on gay sons (Biddulph, 1998; Elium & Elium, 2004; Gurian, 2006; Pollack, 1999), and only one of these books (Pollack) includes an actual chapter on ‘Being different: Being gay’, with the remaining three including a section within chapters on (hetero)sexuality. As such, gay boys are very much relegated to the margins of the books, if they are seen to exist at all. References to gay sons typically follow the logic of what Bond Stockton (2004) has termed ‘gravestone markers’: “The phrase ‘gay child’ is a gravestone marker for where and when a straight person died” (p. 283). Consider for example:

Once the initial shock has registered, we must give ourselves time and room to be human.

For some parents, the experience of finding out their son is gay is like facing a death, and

we can be led through the stages of denial, anger, grief, and eventually acceptance. The vision of who we thought our son would become has to die. (Elium & Elium, 2004, p. 288)

Statements such as this presume a number of things: 1) That all parents desire for their children to be heterosexual, 2) that this desire brings with it particular ‘visions’ that die when a child is gay, and 3) that it is only ‘human’ for parents to feel like this (see Riggs, 2007, for another critique of these assumptions). Biddulph (1998) adopts a similar position, and his version makes explicit what these ‘visions’ may have been:

Even before our children are born, we have their lives mapped out for them! And what conservative dreams they are – a career, marriage, and grandchildren to sit on our knee! Finding out your teenage son is gay demolishes several of these fond hopes and replaces them with scary images instead. It’s natural to feel some grief and concern. (p. 123)

Again, it is stated that it is ‘natural’ for parents to ‘feel some grief and concern’. More concerning, however, is the fact that Biddulph seems to presume that dreams such as ‘a career, marriage, and grandchildren’ are ‘demolished’. This would suggest that Biddulph and other such authors are unaware that most gay men do have careers, that some gay men now can legally marry (and many have significant and meaningful long-term relationships even without state sanction), and that increasing numbers of gay men are having children. Statements such as this not only display considerable naivety about the lives of gay men, but are also normative in their presumption that all parents will have a particular life ‘mapped out’ for children, and that a gay son brings with him ‘scary images’.

In his chapter on gay sons, Pollack (1999) presents a relatively sympathetic portrayal of gay boys, including both the challenges they face and the legitimacy of their identities. Nonetheless, he too constructs parents' reactions to their son's same-sex attraction as legitimately concerned:

When we hear these staggering statistics [on gay teen suicide], when we begin to appreciate how lonely and frightened so many gay youths feel, some of us may be quick to conclude that being homosexual must be the primary cause of these problems. This kind of knee-jerk assumption... is perhaps only natural. (p. 209)

Here Pollack not only presumes that readers will attribute feelings of fear and loneliness amongst gay youth to their sexual identity, but he states that this is 'perhaps only natural'. The assumption that readers may make this interpretation is only intelligible in the context of a homophobic society (and amongst homophobic parents), yet Pollack, like all of the authors, does very little to challenge such homophobia, or to locate it in a relationship to the constructions of 'average boys' (and their accompanying normative gender and sexual identities) that appear consistently across the books.

The only author who clearly engages with homophobia (in this instance amongst teenage boys) is Lashlie (2005), in her suggestion that educators and parents need to challenge homophobia in schools and at home. She suggests that homophobia occurs as a result of "homosexuality [being] connected to insult because, for boys, being gay is 'the worst thing you can be'" (p. 214). Much like the rest of the text, statements such as this presume that all of the boys in the project she undertook identified as

heterosexual, and that *all* boys would consider ‘being gay’ to be ‘the worst thing you can be’.

Finally, whilst all of the books did not refer to gay sons, some did indeed refer to homosexuality, albeit in highly problematic and often offensive ways. Examples of this include: “Children born to older dads also have a very slight increased risk of certain kinds of tumors, cataracts, and being homosexual. Again, all of these risks are minuscule” (Brott, 2007, p. 78). References such as this to homosexuality construct it not only as a risk, but as something that parents should be concerned about. Readers who are parents of gay sons (and/or who are gay themselves) would no doubt find such statements offensive, at the same time as such statements can only serve to reinforce the views of those parents who *do* view the arrival of a gay son as the ‘gravestone marker’ of a heterosexual son.

In contrast to the construction of certain boys as ‘sissies’ or ‘wimps’ as outlined in the previous section – boys who are often constructed as ‘redeemable’ through addressing their behaviours or in supporting them to explore their own versions of masculinity (in a small minority of the texts) – the accounts provided of gay sons outlined here very much construct such sons as *unredeemable* – as producing the experience of bereavement for parents. Who these sons become after this process of bereavement is not explored in any of the books, nor are the lives of adult gay sons mentioned at all. As such, gay boys are on the whole represented as a glitch in the overall process of raising boys who are expected to arrive as adults with a clearly demarcated heterosexual identity and sense of self as a normatively gendered male.

## **Conclusions**

The analysis provided in this paper clearly outlines how books on fathering and raising boys construct the ‘average boy’, and how they do this via the negative construction of boys who identify as gay or who do not enact a normative gender identity. The examples presented here do not represent isolated examples of such negative representations, but instead represent the typical ways in which boys’ sexualities are depicted across all of the books. As such, stating that the books are inherently homophobic would perhaps be an overstatement, but stating that all of the books are structured by heteronormative assumptions about boys, parenting and families would constitute an accurate description of a collection of books that 1) presume the heterosexuality not only of boys but of parents, 2) encourage heterosexuality as the most viable and ‘normal’ developmental outcome for boys, and 3) fail to adequately explore the experiences and needs of gay boys (and indeed non-heterosexual parents).

As suggested in the introduction, these texts do not simply describe boyhood, but they actively construct it. The findings presented in this paper echo Grant’s (2004) suggestion that:

Twentieth-century educators and scientists found themselves equating the ideal with the normal and drawing on peer society for the definition of the normal boy. Boys coined the term sissy and used it to identify those boys who failed to meet the requisites of masculinity as set by the peer society. (p. 845)

The authors of the books analysed here similarly equate what are social norms (i.e., the majority of boys do indeed identify as heterosexual, many boys do display particular behaviours that are marked as ‘masculine’) with the ‘ideal’ image of boyhood. In so doing they draw upon their own and the broader society’s image of what constitutes an ‘average boy’, and they use this to define what such a boy ‘really is’, rather than recognising that this is simply what we have constructed him as being. This (faulty) logic then allows them to hold particular boys (‘sissies’, gay boys) up against this ‘average boy’ and highlight their supposed failings or inadequacies.

Interestingly, then, and as noted earlier in the paper, contemporary books on fathering and raising boys are structured by a paradox in reference to discussions of nature verses nurture. As Kidd (2000) suggests, boys’ behaviour is seen as both fixed and yet open to intervention: it is fixed in certain ways (i.e., testosterone is an ‘unstoppable force’), but it is open to certain forms of change (defined, of course, in terms of a normative masculinity, such as being open to influence from ‘positive male role models’). In this sense, discourses of science are used by the authors to argue their point in the places where it serves their purposes (i.e., in regards to the fixity of biology), but boys’ identities are also constructed as open and vulnerable to influence (i.e., in regards to the role of the media and the ‘lack’ of appropriate male role models). Such competing constructions allow the authors to justify their claims as to ‘what boys need’ by basing such claims upon ‘the facts’.

It is of course important to ask what kinds of futures we are constructing for men, families, and society when we promote particular depictions of boys and masculinities and when we derogate the experiences of boys who do not conform to that of the

‘average boy’. How does the promotion of competitiveness, aggression and other supposedly ‘masculine’ behaviours normalise the existence of these behaviours, and thus potentially justify their often violent enactment? How do books on boys and fathering legitimate misogyny and homophobia, and what does this mean for readers and objects of the texts (i.e., boys) whose lives are negatively impacted upon by such forms of discrimination? And how may these books actually serve to legitimate the beliefs of some parents who may well consider a gay son to represent a ‘death’, and who may well wish for boys who are normatively gendered? As this paper has demonstrated, the effects of these books must indeed be taken seriously, as there is considerable potential for them to be used in ways that are detrimental to a wide range of boys and their parents.

To conclude, and to provide some direction for future publications on fathering and raising boys, it is useful to turn to the work of Sedgwick (2004), in her excellent chapter on ‘How to bring your kids up gay’, in which she states:

If I had ever, in any medium, seen any researcher or popularizer refer even once to any supposed gay-producing circumstance as the *proper* hormone balance or the *conducive* endocrine environment for gay generation, I would be less chilled by the breezes of all this technological confidence. (p. 147, original emphasis)

A book in which gay boys are not only given space, but celebrated as legitimate and intelligible children would be a space in which the category ‘boy’ is not simply broadened out to include gay boys, but one in which the very terms upon which we seek to define boyhood are radically remade so that certain supposed biological ‘facts’ are not seen as leading ‘naturally’ to certain behavioural outcomes. Likewise, a

mainstream (as opposed to gay-specific) parenting book that celebrates gay households as a *conducive* space in which to raise children would be a book that actually follows through on the logic promoted by all of the current books on fathering boys: if so many boys need male role models, why can some of these not be gay men, and how may a gay-headed household indeed be an entirely appropriate place in which to raise boys (gay or otherwise). Setting research agendas on boys and fathers thus requires not simply reflecting or indeed reifying current social norms around boys and masculinity, but instead requires interrogating those norms, and opening up the field to examinations of the sexual and gender politics that are currently so deeply (and yet most often unquestioningly) embedded within it.

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