



## Article

# “My Mom Says Some Girls Have Penises”: How Mothers of Gender-Diverse Youth Are Pushing Gender Ideology Forward (and How They’re Not)

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**Abstract:** Despite a rapid rise in the public visibility of parents who are choosing to support their transgender and gender-diverse children in recent years, little is yet known about how these parents challenge the regulatory forces of hegemonic gender through their parenting. Based on semi-structured in-depth interviews, this article offers a comparative analysis of the ways that two groups of mothers—gender-expansive and gender-subversive—with differing ideological understandings of gender diversity resist the transmission of hegemonic schemas as they work to affirm their child’s sense of self. Drawing on Ridgway’s concept of gender as a primary frame, I identify a range of strategies used by each group and assess the potential for and limitations to advancing progressive gender ideology through trans-affirming mothering. While both groups contribute in powerful ways to trans-positive, gender-inclusive change, they do so through distinct parenting approaches that vary in their potential to undermine dominant gender ideology. While both groups of mothers resist the transmission of hegemonic gender beliefs in their parenting, the tactics and rhetoric used by gender-subversive mothers pose a more direct threat to the gender order than do those of gender-expansive mothers.

**Keywords:** gender; transgender youth; LGBTQ; childhood gender diversity; parenting

## 1. Introduction

Over the past decade the topic of gender diversity in children has gained significant public attention in the United States. This attention has brought broader social awareness to a seemingly growing number of children who identify with a gender other than that assigned at birth (i.e., transgender), or whose behavior and taste preferences persistently and insistently diverge from the expectations of their gender (i.e., gender-nonconforming). While this surge of attention comes on the heels of recent success in the LGBT movement more broadly [1], and with a shift away from reparative therapy practices by prominent psychologists, physicians and parenting “experts” [2–11], the visibility of childhood gender diversity can be largely attributed to the parents of transgender and gender-diverse<sup>1</sup> children who are publicly rejecting the enforcement of hegemonic gender norms (i.e.,

<sup>1</sup> The term gender diverse refers to children both whose interests and aesthetic diverge from that typically expected of their assigned sex, as well as those who identify outside of the gender binary entirely, including those who are agender (feel like no gender), bigender (feel like both a boy and a girl), and gender fluid (feel like a boy on some days, and a girl on others). Other terms used by parents to describe gender-diverse children include “gender-independent” and “gender-creative.” When speaking about gender-diverse children I use the pronoun and identity consistent with that child’s reported sense of self at the time of the interview, even when their gender status is perceived as “in flux” or “unsettled” by their parent. When quoting a parent or describing a parent/child interaction I use the pronoun and identity consistent with the parent’s report. In doing so, I follow Tey Medow’s [12] lead in balancing my respect for the child’s gender identity with clarity.

the most socially pervasive and strongly held beliefs about what boys and girls “are” or “should be” like<sup>2</sup>) in favor of parenting practices that foster greater freedom of gender expression [3]. As parents support and advocate for their children in social spaces that are structured by the gender binary, scholars question the impact that they are having on the landscape of gender more broadly (e.g., [12,14]). How, for example, are parents challenging the regulatory forces of hegemonic gender as they work to accommodate their child’s nonconformity?

Social scientists have long been interested in the extent to which parents can unsettle hegemonic gender beliefs for their children through childrearing practices that explicitly resist socializing children in accordance with traditional gender expectations [2,15–21]. These studies have offered valuable insights into the role that parents play in gendering their children, and highlight the limits and opportunities of “progressive parenting” to challenge dominant ideologies and practices. Despite their contributions to the field these analyses have been limited to families where *parents* are driving efforts to resist gender norms. The widespread public visibility of transgender and gender-diverse youth in recent years, however, has created greater opportunity to examine the agency that *children* have as active participants in this gendering process by prompting change in the ways that their parents understand and “do gender” within the family [22,23].

I draw on 36 semi-structured in-depth interviews with parents of gender-variant youth to conduct a comparative analysis of the tactics and rhetoric utilized by two groups of mothers—whom I refer to as “gender-expansive” and “gender-subversive”—differing in the ways that they understand and attempt to advance tolerance for gender diversity. My analysis illuminates a range of formal and discursive strategies for resisting the normative transmission and regulation of hegemonic gender ideology. All mothers represented in this study employ practices that move beyond those of traditionally conceived “gender-neutral” parenting which commonly seek to expand notions of what boys and girls can “be” or “do” to include trans-affirming understandings of gender that dismantle the necessary congruence of sex and gender. My analysis reveals distinct patterns in the trans-affirming practices used by each group that vary in their potential to challenge dominant gender logics.

### *Challenging Gender Logics: Opportunities and Obstacles*

Despite the increasing public visibility of childhood gender diversity in the US in recent years, little work has been devoted to examining the social processes and norms that are being navigated, contested and formed by these gender-diverse children and their parents. This is, of course, largely owing to the fact that until recently the idea of raising a child as transgender or gender-diverse was socially incomprehensible in the United States. Recent studies by Tey Meadows [12] and Elizabeth Rahilly [14], however, offer valuable initial insights into the ways that supportive parents of gender-diverse youth are navigating the gender-binary on behalf of their children. Both scholars focus on parents’ abilities to undermine the regulatory forces of the gender binary by rejecting the enforcement of hegemonic gender norms. These studies highlight the various ways that parents of transgender and gender-nonconforming youth widen gender possibilities for their children by reinterpreting familiar, accessible narratives and gender essentialist beliefs in new ways that have the potential to make social change when deployed in interactions with others.

While Meadow and Rahilly [12,14] add to our understanding of the ways that parents expand gender possibilities for their children, Kane [20,21] and Martin [2] both demonstrate that progressive parenting ideology is often undermined by social and cultural pressures to hold children, and sons in particular, to a measure of gender conformity. As Kane [20,21] notes, even the most ideologically

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<sup>2</sup> At their core, prevailing stereotypes of gender cast women as communal and men as agentic [13]. These stereotypes, which inform both descriptive and prescriptive gender schemas, are embedded with status beliefs that associate men and masculinity with higher levels of capability than women and femininity. Currently in the US, femininity is equated with passivity and “niceness” while masculinity is largely defined in the negative—as the unequivocal rejection of characteristics associated with femininity, which are less socially valued.

committed parents of sons in her studies felt some accountability to the regulatory forces of normative masculinity and compulsory heterosexuality, particularly when it came to the policing of activities or attributes that could be considered “icons of femininity,” such as playing with Barbie dolls, and wearing skirts, dresses, frilly clothing, or nail polish. These studies point to the countervailing social forces that impact parents’ efforts to parent in accordance with “progressive” or “feminist” parenting approaches by highlighting the ways that efforts to challenge dominant gender logics can be hampered by social pressures to conform.

Cecilia Ridgeway’s [13] theoretical concept of gender as a primary frame for coordinating social interaction calls attention to the competing forces that generate and restrict gender innovation. In elucidating the power of gender inequality to persist in the modern world, Ridgeway proposes the theoretical concept of gender as one of three primary frames, along with race and age, through which social life is organized and coordinated in the United States. Ridgeway notes that as a primary frame for structuring social life, gender operates as a background identity in peoples’ lives wherein dominant stereotypes about how men and women are or should be act as both descriptive and prescriptive schemas for coordinating behavior. As people draw upon stereotypes of gender to inform interaction, Ridgeway argues that advances in cultural beliefs about gender lag behind advancements in material culture. This lag in ideology means that as economic and technological advances allow for changes that should lead to greater parity between men and women, outdated gender stereotypes that associate men and masculinity with greater overall competence than women and femininity get reified and perpetuated. Further, as social actors continue to draw on such status beliefs to inform their ideas about themselves and others, the content of these gender stereotypes becomes embedded in the material aspects of everyday social life at the structural level as they are institutionalized by policies and practices that implicitly advantage men over women.

Notably, Ridgeway [13] observes that the social forces of the primary frame that inhibit gender progress in the face of material changes persist even in circumstances where social actors explicitly try to resist them. She notes that in efforts to construct new social forms and innovate ways of organizing, social actors regularly draw on familiar, already established institutional schemas from related settings to inform ideas of how to structure their efforts. Because gender operates as a background identity in all aspects of social life, however, the unintended consequence of this practice is that aspects of the established ways of doing things get inadvertently rewritten into new practices, even when the explicit goal is to change them. As a result, she notes that attempts at innovation often result in new cultural forms that inadvertently perpetuate aspects of the social forms that social actors are attempting to resist.

I use Ridgeway’s [13] conceptual lens to examine the potential for and limitations to advancing progressive gender change by two groups of mothers who have distinctly different approaches to understanding and supporting their child’s gender diversity: those who take a gender-expansive approach and those who are gender-subversive. I analyze a range of practices used by both groups, including “teaching alternate beliefs,” “making gender diversity visible” and “limiting heteronormative influences” to examine the extent to which hegemonic gender ideology is challenged and reinforced as these mothers work to make space for their child’s gender innovation within their homes. In many ways, the tactics of both groups prove successful for expanding their children’s gender options, particularly with regard to the normalization of transgender identities. In other ways, however, my analysis shows that in attempting to employ and disseminate trans-affirming understandings of gender, gender-expansive mothers often unwittingly perpetuate gender essentialist ideology and binary logics. While the tactics and rhetoric used by gender-subversive mothers go further to disrupt dominant gender schemas, their efforts are often encumbered by mainstream narratives of childhood gender diversity among other parents of gender-diverse youth that perpetuate core beliefs of hegemonic ideology.

## 2. Methods

This study, which is part of a larger project on parenting gender-diverse children<sup>3</sup>, draws on 36 semi-structured in-depth interviews with mothers of gender-diverse youth, who represent 35<sup>4</sup> cases of childhood gender diversity. The interviews were conducted over a 15-month period between January 2014 and April 2015, and lasted between one to two-and-a-half hours. While most interviews were conducted with a mother alone, fathers were also present for four of the interviews. No children were interviewed for this study.

Mothers responded to my request to speak with parents who are raising and supporting gender-nonconforming or transgender children. As such, this analysis is limited to only those parents who self-identify as supportive of their child's gender difference. The parenting types identified in this study are similarly limited by this recruitment choice. This analysis cannot speak to the other parenting styles that may exist among parents of gender-diverse youth not included in this sample. In particular, this study does not capture the experiences of the parents who succumb to pressures of prescriptive gender norms and reject, rather than embrace, the behaviors and preferences that conflict with the expectations of their child's assigned sex.

Due to the relatively small size of my target population, participant recruitment was opportunistic and achieved through a chain referral, or snowball, sampling method which has been proven to be useful in accessing difficult-to-locate or marginalized populations [24]. Research participants were recruited through three main forums: first, by sending email flyers to parent support groups for families with gender-diverse children located in the Sacramento region and the greater San Francisco Bay Area; second, in 2013 and 2014 at two different support conferences for parents of gender-diverse youth which are hosted on the West Coast annually by prominent gender advocacy groups; and finally, by writing a guest blog post about my research for an Internet blog authored by a parent of a gender-diverse child.

Despite attempts to recruit a diverse array of respondents, participants in this study are a largely homogeneous and socially privileged group. All mothers in this study are cisgender<sup>5</sup>, and the overwhelming majority are white, middle class, heterosexual and well educated. Income is widely distributed, ranging from less than \$30,000 per year to more than \$400,000 per year, though just over half of participants (55%) report annual household incomes of more than \$100,000. Of the 36 mothers interviewed for this study, 33 (92%) identified as white, two as Asian, and one as biracial (Asian and white). Out of concerns for privacy, one mother declined to state her race. Five (14%) are mothers of biracial children; 28 mothers (78%) are heterosexual; four are lesbian, and four are bisexual or pansexual. Three of the four bisexual or pansexual mothers are married to or partnered with men. Of the participants, 32 (89%) have attended at least some college. This demographic profile is reflective of the types of social privilege that would allow mothers to devote time to participation in research on their child's gender experience on top of the additional demands that navigating childhood gender nonconformity places on parenting labor. Additionally, the demographics of parents in this study are consistent with parents who would be in the best position to access the resources and information necessary to support and advocate for their child's gender difference.

Participants in this study are geographically diverse (four reside on the East Coast, eight in the Midwest, eight in the South, and 16 on the West Coast), though the majority of participants (44%) resides in California. All but one<sup>6</sup> of the women I spoke with is the biological mother of their

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<sup>3</sup> The interviews used for this analysis are still being used by the principal investigator as part of a larger study on the experiences of families of transgender and gender-diverse youth. As such, the data are not currently publicly available, but will be made so when the research project has been completed.

<sup>4</sup> In one instance, both mothers of a single gender-nonconforming child were interviewed separately.

<sup>5</sup> The term cisgender refers to a person whose assigned sex aligns with the gender they were presumed to be at birth (i.e., a child assigned male at birth, assumed to be a boy, and identifies as a boy).

<sup>6</sup> One parent is the same-sex spouse to the birth mother of the child, who was conceived using a sperm donor.

gender-diverse child. Mothers spoke of children ranging in age from 4<sup>7</sup> to sixteen years of age, with the majority of the children (25) being under ten years of age. Thirteen (37%) participants spoke of gender-diverse boys, thirteen (37%) spoke of transgender girls, and 9 (26%) spoke of transgender boys.

Following a grounded theory approach to research design [25], in which analytic themes and categories emerge from data rather than preconceived hypotheses, I created an interview guide that allowed participants to direct the conversation toward the issues and social spaces that affect them most deeply. Interviews were open-ended and followed Small's [26] method of sequential interviewing which employs case-study logic to identify mechanisms operating within particular social contexts with strong empirical reliability. In accordance with a grounded theory method approach to data management [25], I began analysis with an initial phase of open coding in order to identify emerging themes in the data. I then conducted two subsequent rounds of focused coding in order to flesh out particularly salient themes in greater detail and to identify meaningful relationships between codes and categories.

### 3. Results

Given that I was specifically seeking supportive parents of gender-diverse children for inclusion in this study, I was not particularly surprised to find that the majority of mothers represented in my sample self-identified as ideologically "liberal" or "progressive," and subscribe, at least in part, to alternative gender beliefs including recognition of the various ways that women are systematically disadvantaged by dominant status beliefs. Further, a number of mothers expressed their intention to be cognizant of gender stereotypes in their parenting even prior to having children. As Terra<sup>8</sup>, the mother of a gender-diverse eight-year-old boy put it:

I personally tried to be gender-nonconforming [as a child]...I never wanted to limit myself, and so, I guess, since I found that important for myself, I wanted to create that same kind of environment for my boys.

Despite their liberal leanings and intentions to raise their children according to progressive gender ideals, the majority of mothers I spoke with had little to no knowledge of transgender or gender-diverse identities, and subscribed largely to hegemonic understandings of gender prior to parenting their gender-diverse child. I refer to these mothers, who were exposed to transgender and gender-diverse identities largely through the labor of parenting, as *gender-expansive mothers*. Gender-expansive mothers, who make up the vast majority of my sample, developed a critical consciousness of gender and subsequently cultivated non-hegemonic gender beliefs *in response to* their child's preferences. In the following analysis, I compare the trans-affirming tactics and rhetoric used by gender-expansive mothers to those of another group: *gender-subversive mothers*. I use the term *gender-subversive* to refer to the mothers in my study who reported having subscribed to alternate gender beliefs *prior to* having children, and who explicitly work to undermine hegemonic gender in their parenting, not because their children are gender-nonconforming, but because they have an ideological commitment to resisting the restrictive forces of the gender binary that preceded their parenting experiences. Unlike gender-expansive mothers, all gender-subversive mothers I spoke with had at least some knowledge of transgender and gender-diverse identities prior to having children, though only a few had extensive knowledge on the subject.

In this section, I offer a comparative analysis of the ways that both gender-expansive and gender-subversive mothers affirm their child's gender diversity in order to examine the extent to which hegemonic gender ideology is both challenged and reinforced by these trans-affirming parenting tactics. Because gender-subversive mothers make up only a small minority of mothers, I do not draw

<sup>7</sup> In both instances the child was weeks away from turning five.

<sup>8</sup> All names are pseudonyms.



any conclusions pertaining to the strategies utilized by this group. However, their experiences provide an important contrast to those of gender-expansive mothers, drawing particular attention to the social limitations and challenges of resisting hegemonic gender through parenting.

### 3.1. Gender-Expansive versus Gender-Subversive Parents: Who Are They?

In full, I identify 30 mothers (83% of my sample) in this study as gender-expansive, and only six (17%) as gender-subversive. The disproportionate number of gender-expansive mothers compared to gender-subversive mothers is a salient, though not particularly surprising, feature of the sample. Although variation in gender identity and experience has long been acknowledged by anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists and other gender professionals, it has only been in recent years that gender variance, and childhood gender diversity in particular, has become part of public consciousness [23]. Further, as psychologist Diane Ehresnaft [3] points out, while cisgender people do gender at the risk of assessment, gender-diverse individuals do gender at the risk of being killed or injured. Given the high social costs of defying gender norms, it is not hard to understand why many parents would choose to socialize their children in accordance with social norms, even if the idea of raising a child in opposition to normative gender scripts was not outside their realm of comprehension. Of the gender-expansive mothers, ten are the mothers of gender-diverse males (33%), eight are mothers of transgender boys<sup>9</sup> (26%), and 12 are mothers of transgender girls<sup>10</sup> (40%). Among gender-subversive mothers, four are the mothers of gender-diverse boys (67%), one is the mother of a transgender boy, and one is the mother of a transgender girl (see Appendix A).

As a group, gender-expansive mothers tend to be well educated, with the majority (80%) of mothers holding a bachelor's degree or higher, though educational levels in this group varied significantly with some mothers having earned high school diplomas while others hold Ph.D.'s or professional degrees. While the majority of mothers in this study self-identify as "feminist" or "liberal", very few gender-expansive mothers reported having been explicitly exposed to gender theory or gender research as part of their educational experience. Gender-expansive mothers work in widely varied fields including early childhood education, science and engineering, and art. Prior to parenting their gender-diverse child, only one gender-expansive mother reported working in an area that specifically had a gender focus. The majority of gender-expansive mothers are heterosexual, though five (17%) are lesbian, bisexual or pansexual. All but two (93%) gender-expansive mothers are white.

Comparatively, the gender-subversive mothers I spoke with are exceptionally well educated, with all but one holding a master's degree or Ph.D. Further, most gender-subversive mothers have at least some academic background in gender or women's studies, with three of the six mothers holding master's or doctorate degrees in various fields with a gender focus (psychology, sociology and women's studies). Notably, four of the six gender-subversive mothers also engage directly with issues of gender identity or gender diversity in their professional lives as educators, therapists, or LGBT service providers. One is a college professor whose work focuses on LGBT equality, one is a therapist specializing in gender diversity, and one owns and operates a sex toy and gender modification supply<sup>11</sup> business that serves the transgender community. In other words, gender-subversive mothers represented in my study are engaged in the work of innovating gender in many aspects of their lives. Lastly, three gender-subversive mothers are members of the LGBT community and one mother is biracial (Asian and white).

Given social stereotypes that link lesbianism with politicized stances on gender and radical feminism, it is worth restating that mothers' sexuality is not correlated with parenting style in

<sup>9</sup> Meaning a child assigned female and assumed to be a girl at birth, who identifies as a boy.

<sup>10</sup> Meaning a child assigned male and assumed to be a boy at birth, who identifies as a girl.

<sup>11</sup> Such as flaccid penises (used by transmen to urinate standing up) and breast binders (commonly used by transmen to flatten and conceal their breasts pre-surgery).

this sample. Of the non-heterosexual mothers in this analysis, four are gender-expansive and four are gender-subversive. The equitable division of LGB mothers in each group underscores the fact that membership in the LGBT community does not necessarily coincide with an intent to disrupt hegemonic gender scripts, or greater knowledge of transgender identities. As Carla, the lesbian mother of a gender-independent child named Emmitt put it, “just because you’re in that GLBT [group] does not mean that you know what the other letters really mean.” Conversely, while lesbians are overrepresented among gender-subversive mothers in this sample, heterosexual mothers can also be gender-subversive parents.

### 3.2. Gender-Expansive Mothers: *We’ve Come a Long Way, Baby*

Consistent with gender and family literature on division of labor within the home [27–32], and in line with their general endorsement of hegemonic gender ideology, gender-expansive mothers in this study are overwhelmingly responsible for the care of gender-diverse children, even when their educational attainment, employment, or earnings exceed that of their partners. Further, reflecting their lack of exposure to diverse experiences of gender, whatever knowledge gender-expansive mothers did possess about gender diversity prior to having their child was often gained through media images or news reports where gender diversity is regularly pathologized, sensationalized, or used for comedic value. Despite having a gay brother, for example, Nancy, the mother of a transgender son named Jack, recalled that before having Jack, she did not really know anything about LGBT communities. Moreover, her only knowledge of transpeople had come from the film *Rocky Horror Picture Show* and media stories about “men who want to be women,” which often portray transpeople in an unfavorable light.

As a result, gender-expansive parents report having come to understand and support their child’s gender diversity *through* their parenting. Often referring to their experience as “child led,” these parents are prompted, and sometimes pushed, into adopting trans-affirming understandings of gender in response to their child’s persistent, insistent and consistent articulations that their assigned gender did not align with their sense of self. As Michelle, the mother of a transgender son named Zach put it, “[before] I thought sex was male or female! And I found out that gender is something completely different than sex...never in my mind could I understand that before, but now I do.” Kirsten, the mother of another young transgender daughter named Laila, similarly reflected on the ways that parenting her daughter led her and her husband to new understandings of gender, particularly regarding what boys and girls “are” or “should be” like:

[We know] you can have some male gender tendencies and some female gender tendencies and that’s normal. We learned that with Laila, you know? For anyone to look at her and think that there’s anything boy in her is just beyond us...but she is still very physical—she wrestles her brother, and she’s out there on the [BMX] track every night racing against boys...She’s taught us a whole lot. I would have loved to have been educated on gender before my first child was born.

Like Michelle and Kirstin, most gender-expansive parents self-identify as having come a long way in their understandings of gender as a result of parenting their gender-diverse child. Seeking to put their newly developed trans-affirming understandings of gender into practice in ways that will acknowledge and affirm their child’s gender, these mothers devise a number of formal and discursive strategies for “doing gender differently” within their homes. In particular, gender-expansive mothers make concerted efforts to move away from gender socialization practices that encourage conformity in favor of tactics that highlight diversity and challenge stereotypical gender beliefs. I identify two broad strategies—teaching alternate beliefs and making gender diversity visible—utilized by gender-expansive mothers to innovate gender within their homes.

### 3.2.1. Teaching Alternate Beliefs

One of the most prominent ways that gender-expansive mothers make space for their child's gender diversity within the home is to actively teach and disseminate alternate gender beliefs that affirm and acknowledge diverse experiences of gender. While this is accomplished in a variety of ways, I find that the most common is using language or rhetoric that supports and normalizes non-hegemonic understandings of sex and gender. Further, in communicating trans-affirming messages to their children, mothers draw on a number of gender schemas that challenge hegemonic gender beliefs to varying degrees.

Two of the most common changes used by parents to instill non-hegemonic gender beliefs include disrupting the congruence of sex and gender, and explicitly contradicting gender stereotypes. This includes talking about bodies and identities in ways that disrupt the notion that sex and gender necessarily align (e.g., verifying that some girls have penises and some boys have vaginas) as well as opposing hegemonic ideas about what boys and girls "are" or "should be" (e.g., affirming that boys can like princesses, or that girls are good at math). For example, when Olivia realized that a book about reproduction that she purchased for her six-year-old transgender daughter reinforced dominant gender narratives by limiting its discussion of biological differences between sexes to hegemonic understandings, she decided to "fix" the text as she read by adjusting lines like "girls have vaginas and boys have penises" to "*most* girls have vaginas and *most* boys have penises." By disrupting the notion that sex and gender are congruent aspects of identity, Olivia is rejecting core aspects of hegemonic ideology. Similarly, Jane reports that she has shifted the way that she speaks to both her gender-diverse son and gender-conforming daughter about gender in order to create an environment that fosters freedom of expression and identity for both of them within her home. Specifically, Jane attempts to disrupt gender stereotypes by using inclusive language that divorces sex and gender from individual interests or behaviors by using the kind of "[gender] supportive language that [she] wants the kids to hear," such as "colors are for everyone" and "clothing is for everyone."

Terra, who is similarly invested in affirming her gender-diverse son, Conner's, gender identity has created a gender "exercise" for them to do together to assure him that it is okay and, in fact, normal to have a wide variety of interests. She explained:

We make a list of things that are girlish and then make a list of things that are boyish. And then we [draw] him in the middle, [showing] that he's his own group. Then I do my own little diagram...that makes up me. I'm trying to get him to understand that we're all different...and that makes up what we are as an individual.

While Jane and Terra have similar goals in the way that they teach their children about gender diversity, their tactics are embedded in different understandings of gender, and as such, send significantly different messages. By using inclusive language that separates gender category from colors and clothing, Jane is promoting an understanding of gender that establishes gender as an aspect of identity independent from a person's interests or taste preferences—e.g., there are no "girl things" or "boy things," there are just "things," and they are available to anyone who may want to use them. This approach to teaching alternate gender beliefs challenges hegemonic gender ideology at its core by disrupting the notion that there is any one particular way that boys and girls "are" or "should be." In contrast, Terra's explanation of gender rests on the premise that there are indeed "girl things" and "boy things," but that people of both genders, in fact, enjoy them. The difference in this message may seem subtle compared to Jane's, but the way each mother frames their message promotes fundamentally different understandings of gender. Although she is sending the message that it is "okay" for a boy to like "girl things" and vice versa, Terra's explanations of gender reinforce the notion that there is a "normal" way to be a boy or a girl, even as she attempts to demonstrate that people regularly deviate from the stereotype of their gender. In this sense, Terra's explanation, while normalizing gender diversity to a degree, is more in line with hegemonic scripts than is Jane's. Terra and Jane's experiences demonstrate how gender-expansive mothers' attempts at communicating



trans-affirming beliefs resist hegemonic scripts to varying degrees. While all gender-expansive mothers I spoke with reported seeking to disrupt dominant gender scripts for their children, their efforts reflect considerable variation in the extent to which they challenge binaristic notions of gender more broadly.

Though not mentioned by any other mothers I spoke with, Terra utilized another interesting tactic in her efforts to help normalize Conner's gender that is worth noting. When eight-year-old Conner came home from school one day concerned about being a boy who loves the color pink, Terra suggested that they research the history of the color together. Much to Terra and Conner's surprise, they found out "that even through the 1820s [pink] was considered a very manly color." Here again, Terra utilizes a binaristic understanding of gender that maintains that some things are "girly" while others are "boyish" (e.g., pink is now considered a "girl thing," but it used to be a "boy thing"). As noted above, this tactic implicitly reinforces the notion of a gender binary. Using a historical lens to contextualize the contemporary gender stereotypes that equate the color pink with femininity in young girls, however, Terra challenges the presumption of any "natural" inclination to liking pink among girls. This detail makes this tactic particularly interesting because it explicitly acknowledges the social construction of gender, and in doing so undermines the assumption of gender essentialism upon which the primary frame of gender is built. In this teaching moment, Terra is calling attention to the existence of hegemonic gender schemas while simultaneously challenging the assumption that such schemas reflect "natural" or "innate" differences between men and women. By acknowledging the social and historically variable nature of gender norms, Terra opens up a valuable space for her and her child to critically examine the validity of dominant gender narratives, even as she reaffirms the existence of a two-gender system.

### 3.2.2. Making Gender Diversity Visible

Another tactic used by many of the gender-expansive mothers with whom I spoke was to increase the visibility of gender diversity within their homes by explicitly acknowledging variations in gender, both formally and informally, in their daily lives. Often, this practice first emerges as a byproduct of a mother's self-education efforts, and unfolds in conjunction with the mother's developing alternate gender beliefs. In seeking information for themselves, mothers become introduced to community resources including parent support groups or their local PFLAG chapters, where both they and their child are exposed to other individuals who experience gender in diverse ways. As a result, participation in gender diversity support groups or meetings contribute in a number of significant ways to a family becoming a gendering site of innovation.

Consistent with research on families of intersex youth [33,34], connecting with people in the transgender community through support groups is a significant mechanism through which mothers in my study learn to "do gender differently" [35] on behalf of their children. In attending meetings, talking with other parents, sharing resources, and hearing the stories of families or individuals who have gone before them, mothers of gender-diverse children develop and revise narratives that they use to affirm and validate their child's gender identity. Additionally, while support group meetings do often focus on the challenges of raising or supporting a child who does not conform to the gender binary, such groups also serve as powerful reminders to mothers that raising happy, healthy and well-adjusted and successful gender-diverse children is not only possible, but increasingly probable. For mothers whose exposure to gender diversity had previously been limited to media depictions of transgender people as deviant predators or victims of violence and discrimination, hearing positive stories of other children's successful transitions, or meeting transgender or gender-variant adults, helps to quell fear and affirms for parents that they are doing the "right thing" in supporting their child's gender preferences. For Jessica, the mother of a transgender daughter named Quinn, becoming involved in a local community organization that provides resources and runs parent and child support groups for families of gender-diverse youth was immensely reassuring, and solidified her resolve to adopt trans-affirming practices in her own parenting. She shared:

I feel so strong in what we are doing, and how we are supporting Quinn...[but] there was a time when I felt really alone. I had no transgender friends...I had never known, except for very tangentially, any transgender people. I said that to [the director of the resource center] in our first meeting and he was like “well now you do, and we are going to be with you.” And they have been.

Just as they act as important venues for parental exposure to gender-variant individuals, support groups and organizations are often the first context where children are exposed to other trans or non-binary people. Such was the case for Finn, whose mother Julia took him along for a parents’ support group meeting when he first began the transition to living as a boy. Julia recalls that the experience was a poignant one for both of them because it was there that Finn first met another transman. She recalled: “one of the women [at the meeting] was in a relationship with a transgender man. And so Finn was able to meet him...it was very affirming for him to know that he wasn’t the only one.”

Like Julia, other mothers report this type of exposure to transgender or gender-diverse people to be particularly significant for their children, not only because it affirms for them that their gender is “real” and shared by others, but also because it provides them with examples of life experiences and trajectories that align with their sense of self. I find that as mothers adopt new understandings of gender, inadvertent practices that increase children’s exposure to gender-diverse communities develop into concerted efforts to incorporate the acknowledgement of gender diversity into their everyday lives. Parents accomplish this in a variety of ways, including building gender-diverse social networks, employing rhetoric and practices that normalize varied experiences of sex and gender, and creating space for gender diversity in discussions of their child’s imagined future.

Many gender-expansive mothers I spoke with seek to build trans-affirming communities for their children by attending annual “family conferences” aimed at celebrating and affirming childhood gender diversity or by enrolling their children in special camps, playgroups, and activities specifically targeted at gender-diverse youth. For example, Monica and her family attend a gender-diversity family conference every year where both her transgender and cisgender daughters attend gender-inclusive camp programs with children and adults who identify and express their gender in a wide variety of ways. When she was eight years old, Monica’s transgender daughter attended Camp Aranu’tiq, a sleepaway camp exclusively for transgender and gender-variant youth ages eight to 18 years old. Describing the annual family conference as a “fantastic” experience for both of her children, Monica reflected particularly positively on the profound impact that attending Camp Aranu’tiq had on eight-year-old Madison:

[Camp Aranu’tiq] was transformative, actually. [Madison] came back...full of power, and [with] a new clarity in her eyes...for the first time in her life I think she could let that guard down and not be anxious [about being transgender], and that’s huge.

Like other mothers I spoke with, Monica perceives Madison’s ability to interact and bond with other gender-variant people as vitally important for instilling a positive self-image in her child. As other parents note, however, just knowing that they are not alone in their experience of gender can be a powerful confidence builder for gender-variant children who are being raised in and around people who largely identify as cisgender. As a result, parents I spoke with commonly found ways to normalize varied experiences of sex and gender in their daily lives.

The most common way that mothers normalize varied experiences of sex and gender within their families is by seeking out children’s books that discuss or feature gender-diverse children. Though still not overwhelmingly prevalent in children’s literature, books that acknowledge gender variance have become significantly more common in recent years. Often written by the parents of gender-diverse youth, most of these books seek to normalize childhood gender diversity for all children by explaining and validating transgender and gender-creative identities in simple, straightforward terms. For many parents I spoke with, such books prove helpful for validating and affirming a child’s experience

of gender, as well as for explaining and normalizing gender diversity for their cisgender children and friends.

Such was the case for Jeanne, who read both her kids the children's book *Be Who You Are* [36] on the eve of the day that her transgender daughter, Devon, would wear a dress to school for the first time. At that point in time, Devon was still identifying as a "boy who liked girl things," and Devon's older brother Austin was having trouble adjusting to his sibling's preferences. The book, which tells the story of a transgender girl who finds the courage to express who she is on the inside with the support of her family and friends, was a hit with both of Jeanne's kids. It was the first time that Devon had seen someone "like her" reflected in a story, and the narrative, which is aimed at educating cisgender children about trans identities, resonated with Austin, who has had trouble connecting with his sister. Jeanne recalled:

Austin, who's usually not at all empathetic towards Devon or thoughtful just said "Devon, this book—it's like it's about you!" and Devon [said] "Yeah, I know. It's like it's about me...I'm a boy on the outside, but I'm a girl on the inside."...And I'm [thinking] "wow this is amazing!" So Devon wore her dress the next day to school.

Though perhaps the strategy that is least often utilized, I find that several of the most ideologically progressive gender-expansive mothers work to normalize gender diversity by endeavoring to leave space in their child's imagined future for the possibility of a number of identities or experiences that could be open to their child. This tactic includes keeping their own minds open to a number of potential trajectories that their child's "gender journey" may take, as well as acknowledging the experiences of gender-diverse individuals in conversations where it may be easier to omit them. Jade, the mother of four-year-old gender-diverse Conner, lamented specifically that conversations about where babies come from have become "very complicated" in her home as she attempts to hold the possibility that Conner could grow up to be a woman open for him:

[When I hear] those conversations like "a boy can't have a baby," [I say to the kids] "well, actually, mama has friends who when they were born they had girl parts but they felt like they were boys, and so they now live as men, but they also got pregnant and had babies. So there are men who can have babies because they were born with girl parts."

The practice of "leaving space" for gender diversity in imagined futures in particular is an important form of gender innovation because it requires parents to actively and consciously resist the tendency to fall back on familiar schemas about a wide range of topics that are dominated by hetero and cis-normative narratives. As Jade notes, leaving space for experiences or life trajectories that contradict hegemonic scripts can be complicated and challenging because it requires parents to resist the ease of falling back on the socially dominant explanations for complicated issues like family, sex, and relationships. Such efforts, however, are crucial for creating gender change, because they challenge the heteronormative assumptions upon which the primary frame is built [13].

### 3.2.3. The Positive Impact of Gender-Expansive Mothering

As Karin Martin [37] demonstrates, when parents fail to acknowledge the existence of identities and experiences that fall outside of hegemonic scripts in their parenting practices, they contribute significantly to the reproduction of inequality by sustaining the invisibility of minority groups and experiences. As noted above, gender-expansive mothers began their parenting journey with negligible knowledge of gender variation, and approached the tasks of parenting with the implicit assumption that their children would experience gender as they themselves had. When they resist the tendency to fall back on hegemonic gender schemas in discussions of gender with their children, however, and act instead upon alternate gender beliefs that include non-binary and transgender identities, mothers are providing their children with powerful reference points for imagined futures that contradict hegemonic scripts.

Further, in normalizing varied experiences of sex and gender for their children, gender-expansive mothers are providing their kids with the knowledge and confidence to challenge dominant gender logics themselves in their own interactions with friends and family members. For instance, Laura, the mother of a transgender six-year-old daughter named Luca, noted that following a discussion about variation in sex and gender in their home, Luca's teacher informed Laura that she had heard Luca, whose transgender identity is not disclosed to her classmates, telling her best friend the truth about sex and gender alignment during a bathroom break. Laughing, Laura recalled:

I think it started with Luca saying "my mom says some girls have penises." And then her friend said, "well, my mom says that no girls have penises." So Luca said, "well your mom is confused."

Stories like this highlight the role that mothers' efforts at innovating gender play in validating gender diversity for their children. In disseminating trans-affirming understandings of gender to their children, and by normalizing gender diversity by making varied experiences visible in their everyday lives, mothers act as moral authorities who validate and legitimize alternative beliefs—for their own children, and for other children. Lucy, the mother to a six-year-old gender-diverse son named Logan, relayed that after he began wearing dresses to school regularly she was approached by a classmate of Logan's who wanted to verify with her that boys can wear dresses, but who also needed her assurance that it was still O.K. for him to wear pants. Continuing, Lucy recognized the impact that other mothers in her community are having as allies who disseminate trans-affirming beliefs to their own children in support of Logan. She recalled having recently been told by another mother that, after she confirmed for her own gender-conforming son that some boys do indeed wear dresses, he came home from school and said he had "shared [the] secret...that boys can wear dresses" with another little boy in his class. Reflecting on the experience, Lucy remarked: "Those are the life-changing stories, you know? Those are the people who are changing the narrative. Those are the people who are making the world safer."

### 3.3. Gender-Subversive Mothers: We've Got a Long Way to Go, Baby

Unlike their gender-expansive peers, who become gender innovators as a result of their parenting labor, gender-subversive mothers approach the labor of parenting *as* gender innovators. Gender-subversive mothers, who report having challenged dominant gender ideology in their personal or professional lives before having children, self-identify as having set out to intentionally disrupt hegemonic gender norms through their parenting. I identify six mothers in my sample as gender-subversive based on their self-descriptions of having deliberately resisted socializing their children into hegemonic gender roles. While many parents in my study self-identify as holding progressive views on gender and parenting with the intention of challenging stereotypes, gender-subversive mothers are far more explicit in their attempts to oppose dominant gender norms than are their gender-expansive peers. As Linda, the mother of a transgender son named Max, put it:

We intentionally raised kids...out of the [gender] box, and [we were] aware of gender expression. It became clear [early on] that we had two kids who pushed the envelope and who were not as confined by what society would expect from two—then we thought—girls.

Given their intention to disrupt gender norms in their parenting prior to having children, as well as their extensive backgrounds in the academic study of gender and work in gender-related fields, I expected to find that gender-subversive mothers similarly challenged gender stereotypes reflected in their organization of family life as well, particularly when compared to gender-expansive mothers. Interestingly, however, the daily tasks of child and homecare among gender-subversive families are often structured in ways that align with and reinforce dominant gender status beliefs implicit in the primary frame, just as they are in gender-expansive families. This finding aligns with past studies on parenting and family, which find that gendered divisions of labor persist even among couples that assert their commitment to an egalitarian approach to parenting and household labor [31,38–40].

Research on the division of parenting labor among lesbian couples similarly finds that the gendered connotations of hegemonic cultural schemas permeate structures even when sex difference cannot be used as an explicit basis for dividing tasks. Among lesbian couples, biological mothers take on more of the childrearing responsibilities than their non-biological parent partners [41–43]. With only one exception, gender-subversive mothers in this study take on the more parenting and childcare labor than do their male or non-biological co-parents.

Further, despite endorsing alternate gender beliefs that reject the notion of gender essentialism, several gender-subversive mothers understand their maternal care in ways that reinforce the assumption of women's natural caregiving inherent to the family devotion schema. Linda, for instance, attributes her greater involvement than her husband in Max's gender transition and care to the fact that as the mother she serves as the "heart and center of the family," saying of her role as a mother: "I feel like it is one of my most serious responsibilities, and my greatest privileges to be [the heart and center] for my family and all my children. And that they allow me to do that...I think is incredible."

That even gender-diverse mothers shoulder more of the care work than do male or non-biological co-parents, and are subject to interpreting their own maternal labor in hegemonic terms, speaks to the extent to which gender operates as a powerful background frame in people's daily lives. As Ridgeway [13] predicts, even the most resistant parents I spoke with cannot fully escape the power of the gender frame to structure their lives. Despite the tendency for their own lives to be organized in ways that align with the primary frame, however, I found that gender-subversive mothers understand their child's gender-nonconformity in significantly different ways than do gender-expansive parents. Specifically, they do not tend to think of their child's gender diversity as abnormal. As one gender-subversive mother put it "if you don't believe in gender roles, then how can you break them?" Moreover, few gender-subversive mothers feel the need to classify their child's identity (e.g., transgender, gender diverse) in the same way that other mothers do. Rather, gender-subversive mothers report being completely comfortable, and even enthusiastic, about their child's desire to break from social norms, and are often explicitly cognizant about the potential for their child to exist entirely outside the boy–girl binary.

That is not to say, however, that gender-subversive mothers do not recognize their child as gender-nonconforming. They certainly do—as is evidenced by their decision to respond to my call for participation in this study. Rather than personally endorsing the notion that their child's expression is atypical, however, gender-subversive mothers recognize that the dominant society regards them that way. In other words, while gender-subversive mothers do not share the hegemonic beliefs that lead transgender and gender-diverse children to be labeled as "nonconforming" they are acutely aware of those dominant gender scripts, as well as the potential social consequences for defying them. As Chris, the mother of a five-year-old "gender-independent" child named Kai, put it:

I feel a disturbing sense of comfort when I think he might be okay with...call[ing] himself a boy and identify[ing] as a boy...I would be sad at the triumph of hegemonic gender in my kid's life, but I would also be happy for how much easier life [is] when you conform to this [social] standard.

Consistent with their endorsement of alternate gender beliefs, gender-subversive mothers set out to create space for gender diversity in their homes. They approach this effort a variety of ways, including using similar tactics for making space for gender diversity within the home as those employed by gender-expansive mothers including teaching alternate gender beliefs and making gender diversity visible. For example, Chris reported that in an effort to address the lack of female representation in children's books, whenever she or Amanda read *The Three Little Pigs* to Kai "the one with a brick house is female." In an effort to expose her gender-nonconforming son, River, to greater variation in gender diversity, and offer him an outlet to express his gender with someone who he could connect with, Jill hired a drag queen to baby-sit who "put some of his drag queen clothes on and did [his own] makeup" while sitting for River.

Whereas gender-expansive mothers begin their efforts to normalize gender diversity as a response to their child's gender expression, gender-subversive mothers approach parenting with the intention of disrupting hegemonic stereotypes, often making decisions that support this effort even prior to their child's birth (e.g., not finding out the sex of the baby prior to birth to avoid the gendering of the fetus by family and friends, choosing a gender-neutral name, and choosing nursery décor and baby accessories that were either gender neutral or that mixed aspects of femininity and masculinity). As a result, children of gender-subversive mothers are given fewer formal lessons in gender diversity than are children of gender-expansive mothers. Rather, they are exposed to variation in gender expression and identity through interaction with diverse social networks that include queer and transgender individuals, and through home environments designed to encourage gender exploration. For instance, Jennifer, the mother of a transgender little girl named Charlie, noted that she and her husband made toys typically regarded as both masculine and feminine available to their sons, including Barbie dolls, dresses, and tutus—those icons of femininity that Kane [20] notes are often prohibited by even highly progressive parents as “too much” for sons. Jennifer said: “we encouraged [gender-fluidity]...We gave him [Charlie] lots of freedom to express himself.”

Further, because their efforts at cultivating home environments that encouraged and celebrated gender diversity began in their child's infancy or even before birth, it was difficult for all gender-subversive mothers I spoke with to pinpoint when exactly they began thinking of their child as gender-nonconforming. Often, they reported that it was easier for them to remember when they began to experience social resistance to their child's gender expression than it is to remember when their child began to develop their own gender-pushing tendencies. As Jill put it:

You know, it's really hard to say [when I started to think of River as gender-nonconforming] because we...have always been so intentional [about creating freedom around gender expression]...it was right about three, three-and-a-half [years old] that we started to get [disapproving] looks [from other people]. So it's [easier] for me to say when people started resisting, than it is [to say] when he started developing his own [preferences].

The extent to which gender-subversive parents have intentionally created space for their children to explore and “take advantage of the option” to express their gender in diverse ways, and the extent to which their perceptions of their child as gender-nonconforming are informed by social responses to their child as gender-deviant make the experiences of gender-subversive mothers an excellent substrate for examining the boundaries of the gender frame, and the limitations of resisting hegemonic gender through parenting. Their efforts go beyond those of gender-expansive mothers, and traditionally conceived “progressive parenting” advocates to include not only those tactics that widen gender possibilities for children, but also those that seek to limit exposure to hegemonic gender norms.

### 3.3.1. Limiting Heteronormative and Gendernormative Influences

While gender-expansive mothers focus their efforts at gender innovation largely on extending opportunities for gender diversity to their children, gender-subversive mothers commonly also employ strategies for limiting or restricting access to aspects of hegemonic gender that they feel may promote what they consider to be unhealthy types of masculinity or femininity. For example, Jill, the mother of six-year-old River, noted that she limits her children's exposure to aspects of children's culture that promote “hypermasculinization and violence” such as the “super-hero culture” that she believes encourages binary thinking by setting up good-guy/bad-guy dichotomies. Laughing, Jill noted that she also got rid of River's book on “opposites” when she realized that it too was reinforcing binaristic thinking. Chelsea, the mother of a gender-fluid child named Cash who “feel[s] like both” a girl and a boy, intentionally resisted pressures to dress Cash in clothing that she considered to be “typically” masculine as a baby, prohibiting in particular clothing with graphics or words that encouraged hegemonic masculinity, such as onesies proclaiming Cash to be “Papa's Little Football Star.”



Chris and her partner Amanda go even further in restricting their “gender-independent” son, Kai’s, clothing, discarding anything they feel may push him into the “narrow box of [hegemonic] masculinity” including clothing that features “sports or dogs or...navy blue.” As two of the most proactive gender-subversive mothers that I spoke with, Chris and Amanda engage in a number of other practices that they hope will ensure that Kai can “be who he wants to be.” At the time of our interview, Kai was still using the male pronouns he was assigned at birth but identifying and presenting as a girl much of the time, and in an effort to hold any form of identity or expression open to him in the future, Chris and Amanda reported “work[ing] hard to eliminate a lot of the gender crap” that pushes kids toward hegemonic gender expression from their home environment so that Kai can “express himself the way he wants to express himself.” To this end, their parenting approach includes not putting any restrictions on Kai in terms of gender roles and being “annoyingly conscious about never talking to Kai about what gender [he] was assigned at birth.” Speaking to their efforts at shielding Kai from what they consider to be unnecessary and potentially damaging policing of gender, Amanda recalled her reaction the first time Kai told her that he was a boy. She remarked “I was like, ‘Who told you that?! Where did you hear that?! That’s not for your ears. You’re a kid.’”

### 3.3.2. Responding to Cultural Limitations of Gender-Expansive Narratives

In accordance with their nuanced understanding of gender and their embodiment of alternate gender beliefs, gender-subversive mothers encounter limitations of resisting hegemonic gender in ways that gender-expansive mothers do not. A number of gender-subversive mothers express frustration with more “mainstream” narratives of childhood gender diversity among parents of gender-diverse youth which they perceive as focusing too much on moving children from one box to the other—effectively sustaining binary understandings of gender in the process. Others find that many of the resources available for kids who buck gender norms fall short of meeting their expectations for challenging hegemonic scripts. Amanda, for example, has grown increasingly tired of attempting to find books for Kai that feature gender-diverse kids like him that do not also subtly send the message that his gender is deviant. In her estimation, most books featuring transgender or gender-diverse children are written from “the perspective of a mortified parent who is getting over their shit and wants their kid to know...they still love them,” and the resulting books end up imbued with the parents’ lingering discomfort with their child’s gender diversity. Not exactly the message she wants to send to Kai. As she puts it:

I want him to see some reflection of him...rather than a book that tells him it’s okay to be like this. That’s the part that I really struggle with...the genre is dominated by stories that are a lot less about boys who wear dresses than about—“I wear a dress because I’m a girl...everyone hates me as a girl, but I found this one way to be happy...wearing this dress.” To me, these books are introducing the idea that what Kai is doing is wrong...What I want [is] a book [called] like *Who the fuck cares what your kid wears?* Or *You should do whatever you want regardless of what’s between your legs.*

Frustrations like Amanda’s accentuate the important ideological distinction between gender-expansive and gender-subversive mothers. While both groups are ostensibly working toward the same end goal of greater gender inclusivity, they begin the work of advancing that goal from different understandings of gender. Gender-subversive mothers embark on parenting already having well-developed alternate gender beliefs that include a consideration of the ways that binary gender logics contribute to inequality between men and women. As a result, many of the resources for trans children and their families, which are created by and for audiences who were previously unfamiliar with gender diversity, often fall short of meeting their expectations for disrupting the binary and true gender innovation.

Chris also expressed frustration with dominant narratives of childhood gender diversity that tend to classify children who defy traditional gender norms as transgender, without, in her view,

leaving sufficient space for non-binary identities or expressions. Reflecting on her and Amanda's interactions with other parents of gender-diverse youth via online social networks and trans-activist groups, Chris said:

It just seems [to us] like what's going on is [that in response to having a son who wears dresses, parents are saying] "My boy likes to wear dresses—Okay, he's a girl! Now you're a girl, I'm gonna call you a girl, and GIRL, GIRL, GIRL." ...It's cool [to be] cool with having a transgender kid...but it [jumping so quickly to a transgender identity] might also slip into [the attitude that] you have to pick one [gender] or the other as soon as possible, and cement this binary.

The concerns and frustrations of gender-subversive mothers illuminate the limitations of the narratives and gender logics commonly used by gender-expansive parents to inform their parenting strategies. Reflecting the newly acquired non-hegemonic gender beliefs of gender-expansive parents, much of the rhetoric and tactics frequently used to advance tolerance for gender diversity remains grounded in hegemonic understandings of gender that perpetuate notions of girl/boy dichotomies and the mutual exclusivity of sexes and genders. These discourses are presented as emancipatory, but for those parents who wish to truly unsettle hegemonic gender logics, they are not liberating enough. As gender-subversive mothers work to create environments for their children that leave the possibilities of sex and gender wide open for their children, they regularly find themselves butting-up against the boundaries of gender-expansive narratives. While the tactics and rhetoric used by gender-expansive parents do challenge some aspects of hegemonic gender ideology, including disrupting pervasive notions of what boys and girls "can" or "should" be, they still operate very much within the confines of a binaristic system.

#### 4. Discussion

In this article, I have offered a comparative analysis of two groups of mothers who are raising and supporting gender-diverse youth: those whose trans-affirming beliefs and efforts at gender innovation evolved in response to their child's nonconformity (gender-expansive) and those who report having held trans-affirming and non-hegemonic gender beliefs prior to having children (gender-subversive). While the nature of comparative analyses is to call attention to the differences between groups, in many ways, my analysis reveals more similarities than differences between gender-expansive and gender-subversive mothers. Mothers from both groups are pushing gender boundaries forward by introducing their children to alternative gender beliefs that have the potential to reduce the salience of gender as an organizing force in their children's lives. These include disrupting pervasive stereotypes about what girls and boys "are" or "should be" like (e.g., boys can wear dresses) and challenging the congruence of sex and gender (e.g., some girls have penises). Such practices surpass the aims and strategies traditionally endorsed by gender-progressive parenting advocates, which generally stop short of acknowledging trans identities and restrict traditionally conceived "icons of femininity" [20] to girls only.

Perhaps most importantly, however, both gender-expansive and gender-subversive mothers are contributing to positive gender change by acting as moral authorities who affirm, for their children and others, that experiences of gender that fall outside of hegemonic schemas are real and legitimate. This is a powerful message, and one that offers promise for moving gender ideology forward over time, particularly because it expands children's sense of what it means to "have gender" and their notions of what boys can girls "can" or "should" be, giving them the confidence to express themselves in ways that challenge dominant scripts, as well as the language to advocate for and disseminate trans-affirming understandings of gender in their own interactions. As a result, an increasing number of transgender and cisgender children alike will grow up having been exposed to alternate understandings of gender that encompass a wider array of gender possibilities than those offered by hegemonic schemas, and that could have profound impacts on future conceptions of "normative" childhood gender.

While all mothers in this study are working to resist the transmission of hegemonic gender in their parenting, however, my analysis does demonstrate that the potential for each group to disrupt dominant gender ideology varies. In particular, I find that the tactics and rhetoric used by gender-subversive mothers pose significantly more of a threat to hegemonic ideology than do those of gender-expansive mothers. In an effort to unsettle dominant schemas, gender-subversive mothers explicitly work to create home environments where children can develop a sense of self free from the prescriptive pressures of the primary frame. Their efforts, which often include avoiding exposure to hegemonic gender narratives and shielding children from aspects of hegemonic gender that they consider “toxic” or unhealthy, move significantly beyond those of gender-expansive mothers, who often endeavor to teach hegemonic gender norms even as they support their children in defying them. The tactics and rhetoric used by gender-subversive mothers also surpass those of gender-expansive mothers when it comes to reserving space for varied experiences of gender in their children’s imagined futures. By creating space for fluid or non-binary experiences of gender, and by working explicitly to limit their children’s exposure to hegemonic gender ideology, gender-subversive mothers are etching out social spaces where their children can embody a wide variety of gender identities—be they boys, girls, both or neither. In the process, these mothers challenge core aspects of the primary frame, which are built on essentialist understandings of sex and gender as mutually exclusive, and opposing, binaries.

In contrast, the tactics and rhetoric used by gender-expansive mothers pose less of a threat to the primary frame. Consistent with Ridgeway’s [13] theory of gender progress, my analysis shows that while they challenge many aspects of commonly taken-for-granted gender beliefs, it is not uncommon for gender-expansive mothers to fall back on socially dominant ideology that perpetuates gender essentialist ideas about the fundamental differences between boys and girls (e.g., sustaining the idea that there are things that are inherently boy or girl, versus rejecting the notion of sex-segregated interests completely). Further, even as these mothers work to advance trans-affirming understandings of gender and hold space open for multiple possible futures for their children, they often perpetuate the idea that sex and gender exist as mutually exclusive binaries. While many gender-expansive mothers recognize the possibilities that their little boy who wears dresses may grow up to be a woman or a gay man, for example, few seriously acknowledge the possibility that their child might grow up to be neither a man nor a woman—or both.

In examining the differences in gender-expansive and gender-subversive mothers’ ability to disrupt hegemonic gender schemas, it is important to acknowledge the variation in gender resources available to each group. While many participants in this study enjoy race, class and gender privileges that likely enable them to support their children in the ways described above, gender-subversive mothers are among the most privileged mothers in this sample. Compared to gender-expansive mothers, gender-subversive parents have spent much more time embedded in the discourses, literatures and communities that can serve as reference points and resources for critiquing the gender binary. Their disproportionately high levels of education, exposure to academic disciplines that directly acknowledge variation in gender as a normative part of the human experience, and engagement with LGBT communities in their professions no doubt contribute to their capacity to disrupt hegemonic norms.

To acknowledge that gender-subversive mothers may have greater access to resources that support their ability to undermine dominant gender logics, however, is not to say that they do not face obstacles in doing so. As they work to support their children, both gender-expansive and gender-subversive mothers struggle against dominant narratives that implicitly invalidate their child’s experience of gender. Beyond this, however, gender-subversive mothers also perceive themselves as being hindered by the confines of the “mainstream” narratives of childhood gender diversity among other parents of gender-diverse youth. For gender-subversive mothers, the common explanations and descriptions of gender diversity that they encounter in online support groups and support materials for families of trans youth fall short of meeting their expectations for true gender innovation. These narratives, which are often produced by and targeted at gender-expansive families, perpetuate aspects of hegemonic

ideology that gender-subversive parents consider harmful or untruthful by reinforcing binaristic notions of gender and reinscribing gender essentialist ideas into their trans-affirming narratives. As a result, the gender-subversive mothers represented in this study regularly report feeling frustrated with the dominant discourses of gender diversity that are espoused as liberating and inclusive but that still are not reflective of families like theirs.

By noting the points at which gender-subversive mothers bump up against the boundaries of mainstream trans-affirming narratives, this analysis highlights the limitations of current cultural understandings of childhood gender diversity, and identifies opportunities for further advancing trans-affirming understandings of gender. In particular, this analysis illustrates the limiting effects of tactics and rhetoric that inadvertently call attention to the fact that gender diversity conflicts with dominant scripts as they seek to affirm diverse experiences of gender. Trans-affirming children's books that center on the ability of gender-diverse youth to overcome bullying or social rejection in their journey to "be who they are" subtly reinforce the notion that non-hegemonic experiences of gender are deviant. Further, the experiences of gender-subversive mothers call attention to the extent to which "mainstream" discourses continue to draw upon frameworks of gender that are grounded in girl/boy binaries in their explanations of gender diversity. While these tactics open up space for the critical evaluation of gender by acknowledging the realities of living in a culture that adheres to the gender binary, they can also be limiting in that they maintain cisgender identities as "normal" experiences of gender. Moreover, when mothers fall back on their preconceived notions of gender as a binary to inform the tactics and rhetoric they use to affirm their child's gender (e.g., talking about gender in terms of "girl" and "boy" things and not acknowledging or leaving space for non-binary identities), gender-expansive mothers perpetuate the notion of gender as a binary.

It is also worth noting that while all mothers in this study seek to expand gender possibilities for their children by challenging gender stereotypes through parenting, the structure and function of their own lives continue to reflect hegemonic gender norms. Among nearly all participants in this study, mothers do significantly more childcare labor than do their child's fathers or non-biological co-parents—even in those families who are ideologically committed to challenging gender schemas. This trend, among both gender-expansive and gender-subversive mothers, emphasizes the power of gender to act as an organizing force in people's lives, even when their intentions are to resist the regulatory forces. In adhering to hegemonic scripts in their parenting and family structures, mothers in both groups perpetuate and reinforce gender ideology that cast women as natural caregivers, even as they attempt to widen gender options for their children.

## 5. Conclusions

This study contributes to emerging research on supportive families of transgender and gender-diverse youth that has only recently come into public consciousness. By focusing on variation in parenting style as it correlates to mothers' ideological understandings of gender among participants in this sample, I have highlighted a range of strategic practices for affirming and supporting childhood gender diversity and challenge hegemonic gender ideology to varying degrees. As noted in the methods section, however, this study is largely limited to the perspectives and experiences of white, middle-class, heterosexual and cisgender mothers. Future research that better incorporates the viewpoints and strategies of families from a diverse range of backgrounds would provide a more nuanced understanding of the ways that parents support their gender-diverse children. Future research on this topic should also seek to give voice to transgender and gender-diverse *children*, whose insights are crucial to developing a truly robust portrait of trans-affirming families.

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## Appendix A

**Table A1.** Participants, by parenting group.

Mother	Parenting Group	Child	Child Age at Interview	Child Gender
Carla	Expansive	Emmitt	7	Gender-diverse boy
Jade	Expansive	Conner	4	Gender-diverse boy
Lisa	Expansive	Dillon	7	Gender-diverse boy
Rachel	Expansive	Landon	6	Gender-diverse boy
Pamela	Expansive	James	6	Gender-diverse boy
Jane	Expansive	Kevin	5	Gender-diverse boy
Terra	Expansive	Walter	8	Gender-diverse boy
Carolyn	Expansive	Trevor	6	Gender-diverse boy
Vicki	Expansive	Ross	9	Gender-diverse boy
Lucy	Expansive	Logan	6	Gender-diverse boy
Beth	Expansive	Win	14	Transgender boy
Zoe	Expansive	Cameron	13	Transgender boy
Nancy	Expansive	Jack	11	Transgender boy
Kim	Expansive	Ben	14	Transgender boy
Michelle	Expansive	Zach	16	Transgender boy
Ashley	Expansive	Leo	11	Transgender boy
Paula	Expansive	Ted	14	Transgender boy
Julia	Expansive	Finn	8	Transgender boy
Olivia	Expansive	Sarah	6	Transgender girl
Alison	Expansive	Jenna	9	Transgender girl
Laura	Expansive	Luca	5	Transgender girl
Jessica	Expansive	Quinn	11	Transgender girl
Monica	Expansive	Madison	10	Transgender girl
Jeanne	Expansive	Devon	8	Transgender girl
Kirsten	Expansive	Laila	6	Transgender girl
Candice	Expansive	Zia	6	Transgender girl
Cassandra	Expansive	Kate	14	Transgender girl
Martha	Expansive	Phoebe	5	Transgender girl
Leslie	Expansive	Sami	6	Transgender girl
Bethany	Expansive	Abigail	7	Transgender girl
Jill	Subversive	River	6	Gender-diverse boy
Chris *	Subversive	Kai	4	Gender-diverse boy
Amanda *	Subversive	Kai	4	Gender-diverse boy
Chelsea	Subversive	Cash	7	Gender-diverse boy
Linda	Subversive	Joe	9	Transgender boy
Jennifer	Subversive	Charlie	6	Transgender girl

Note: \* Chris and Amanda are both mothers to the same gender-diverse child, Kai.

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