

Evidence Paper

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Challenging gender stereotypes in the early years:

the power of
parents



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Acknowledgement of Country: *Our Watch acknowledges the traditional owners of the land across Australia on which we work and live. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people past and present, and we value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures, and knowledges.*

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Executive Summary

Introduction

Parents and children alike are immersed in a social and cultural environment that produces and perpetuates gender stereotypes – clothing, toys, television shows, books, friends and extended family members all communicate messages, explicitly and implicitly, about what is considered ‘appropriate’ for girls and boys. While this wider context has a significant influence on young children’s developing understanding of gender, research confirms that families, and in particular parents, are young children’s first and primary source of information and learning about gender.¹

This is why Our Watch, with support from Australian accessories brand MIMCO, has chosen to focus on the potential for parents of young children to challenge restrictive gender stereotypes and roles, a key driver of violence against women. Parents of young children can play a powerful role in helping to drive the generational cultural change required to see an end to violence against women.

The survey

In early 2017, Our Watch conducted a survey to ask parents of children from 0 to 3 years old what they think about gender equality and violence against women, how they divide key household tasks and childrearing responsibilities within their family, and whether they believe that gender has an impact on their children.

The findings

The survey found that the majority of parents believe that girls and boys should be treated the same in the early years. However, there are some complexities in the findings, as parents may also inadvertently or subtly reinforce gender stereotypes and differential treatment of girls and boys. The survey showed that parents of young girls were more comfortable with the idea of them engaging in masculine-typed play, such as playing with trucks, whereas parents of young boys had lower levels of comfort in regard to their sons’ participation in feminine-typed play, such as playing with dolls. Furthermore, more mothers were comfortable with the idea of their child acting in opposition to gender stereotypes than fathers, for example, more mothers than fathers were comfortable with the idea of their young sons crying when feeling sad.

The survey also revealed that the majority of parents want to be equally involved in their young children’s lives, indicating that the previously very rigid gender stereotypes related to care-giving are shifting in today’s society. This finding highlights an important role for government, workplaces, media and others to play in helping to support these aspirations, by enabling parents to practice and promote greater equality in caring for children. We all need to support parents to create and model an environment for their children that promotes gender equality and gives children the freedom to be themselves.

Importantly, the survey showed that the majority of parents want to take action to challenge traditional gender stereotypes. There are a number of ways in which parents of young children can do this, such as by being aware of the ways they may unintentionally and subtly reinforce gender stereotypes and by modelling gender equality and respect in their own relationships.

Implications for primary prevention

The survey suggests there is a positive role for Our Watch and others to play in supporting parents of young children to practice putting such strategies in place as a way to both support their aspirations of gender equality for their children and help challenge the rigid and harmful gender stereotypes that drive violence against women.

Introduction

Our Watch believes that parents of young children have a unique opportunity to help prevent violence against women by modelling respect and equality in their relationships, challenging rigid and harmful gender stereotypes and promoting diverse interests, opportunities and experiences for all children.

In early 2017, Our Watch conducted a survey as part of developmental research to understand attitudes towards gender equality and gender stereotypes amongst parents of 0–3-year-old children and to explore the role parents can play in preventing violence against women by challenging rigid gender roles and stereotypes and modelling equal and respectful relationships. This paper provides an overview of the main survey findings and discusses the key results within the context of international literature on early childhood, gender and development, and parenting.

Background

We can change the story that currently sees one woman murdered every week by a current or former partner.² Violence against women is preventable. While the drivers of violence against women are complex, international and national evidence shows that factors related to gender inequality are the most significant and consistent predictors of violence against women.¹ One of these specific factors is rigid gender stereotypes.

Parents ability to effect change against restrictive gender stereotypes, roles and identities is significant for children in their early years.

Gender stereotypes influence the way that children develop and engage with the world. From a very young age, children begin to learn about the attitudes, values, skills and behaviours that are seen as 'normal' or 'acceptable' for their social context and begin to shape or express their identity and preferences accordingly so that they can 'fit in' and be part of a social network.⁴ For example, in accordance with established gender stereotypes associated with masculinity, boys may learn that it is 'not okay' to cry (or that they can only cry in rare circumstances or in private). Such messages may be received in multiple ways, including from family, friends, in early childhood education and care, at school, and from television.

Upholding or supporting rigid gender stereotypes can potentially hamper both girls' and boys' development and inadvertently shape their later career prospects,⁵ their ability to process emotion in healthy ways⁶ and their capacity to engage in equal and respectful relationships.⁷ More broadly, adhering to and reinforcing gender stereotypes perpetuates a historical system of gender inequality that creates specific issues for both women and girls, and men and boys, and results in women and girls typically facing greater disadvantage. The kinds of behaviours and attitudes that lead to one in three Australian women experiencing physical violence in their lifetime are a product of this entrenched system of inequality.⁸

Gender stereotypes have an influence on all of us – how we behave, what we wear, the interests we have, and how we relate to one another are all influenced by our society's ideas and norms about gender. Our families and friends, workplaces, communities, media, advertising and other forms of popular culture all communicate messages, whether explicitly or subtly, about the roles men and women should play in relationships, communities, the world of work, their typical traits, and even how and when they should express emotion.

Expectant and new parents are bombarded with messages promoting gender stereotypes too – baby nursery items, clothing, and toys are usually coloured 'blue' or 'pink' to signal that they are meant for either a boy or girl. On learning that parents are expecting a boy, acquaintances or even strangers may talk fondly of a future of dirt, football and grazed knees, or in the case of a girl, may laugh about how the soon-to-be father will have to fend off boys during her teenage years. Extended family and friends will ask little boys about what sport they like, and praise little girls for how 'cute' or 'pretty' their outfit is. This is the environment in which we are raising children. For parents committed to resisting such

gender stereotypes, it can be a constant challenge to provide their children with the space to explore a variety of interests free from the judgement of others.

While children's understanding of gender is influenced by a wide range of sources, research shows that parents who are young children's first and primary source of information and learning are the most influential when it comes to gender socialisation.⁹

Children learn about gender from observing their parents and how they interact with each other and other adults. This is why it is important for Our Watch to highlight the potential for parents of young children to assist in driving generational cultural change. Parents can role-model respectful relationships and gender equality when they make decisions about who does what parenting and household tasks, when they show how these tasks and roles are valued in their family, and when they demonstrate shared decision-making.

A note on parents

Families and parents come many forms – they may be heterosexual, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans or gender diverse, be single parents, have biological children, adopted children, donor children, be kinship carers, have custody of children, be foster parents or step parents or be anyone else with the primary responsibility of bringing up a child.

Our Watch acknowledges that all family and parent types can raise healthy, happy children – the sexuality or relationship status of a parent or care-giver is not the determining factor.

The majority of literature reviewed for this paper, however, related to heterosexual parents. Furthermore, 87% of those surveyed by Our Watch identified as being a heterosexual coupled parent. As such, the majority of discussion and examples included within this paper reflect this parent form.

Language

'Parents' is the term used throughout the report to refer to the diverse range of care-givers who hold the primary responsibility of bringing up a child.

'Mothers' is the term used to refer to those identifying as a female parent or guardian.

'Fathers' will be the term used to refer to those identifying as a male parent or guardian.

'Children in the early years' refers to children aged from 0 – 3 years of age.

'Parents of young children' refers to parents of children aged 0-3 years.

In responding to survey questions parents were asked to think about their youngest child aged 0-3 years.

Parents whose youngest child was a boy aged between 0 – 3 years are referred to as 'parents with a son', 'fathers with a son' or 'mothers with a son').

Parents whose youngest child is a girl aged between 0 – 3 years are referred to as 'parents with a daughter', 'fathers with a daughter' or 'mothers with a daughter').

About the survey

Our Watch developed the survey, modelling several of the questions on a survey of parents of young children administered by Zero Tolerance, a Scottish non-profit organisation.¹⁰

Research company, Ipsos Australia, was commissioned by Our Watch to conduct the survey in January 2017. Only parents or guardians of a child (or children) aged 0 – 3 years were eligible to complete the survey. Respondents who failed to ‘meaningfully’ complete the survey (i.e. took too little time and/or did not answer any open-ended questions) were not included in the survey analysis. The survey received a total of 858 valid responses.

Profile of respondents

- Most survey respondents were mothers, with 65% of respondents identifying as female and 34% as male. Close to three quarters (74%) of respondents lived in major cities.
- Respondents were drawn from across Australia.

Table 1 below outline respondents’ State/Territory of residence:

STATE/TERRITORY	NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS
New South Wales	269
Victoria	235
Queensland	169
South Australia	61
Western Australia	84
Tasmania	20
Northern Territory	4
Australian Capital Territory	16
TOTAL	858

- Close to half (48%) of respondents were aged between 25 and 34 years and just over a third (36%) were aged between 35 and 44 years.
- 41% of respondents had two children, 38% had one child, and 21% had three or more children, with all having at least one child aged between 0 – 3 years.
- 87% of respondents identified as living in a “two parent household, male and female partners, with children” and 9% identified as a “single parent with children”. Same sex partnered parents made up 2% of respondents, with a further 2% reporting that they and their child/ren also lived with others (such as friends or grandparents).

Discussion

This paper draws together the key survey findings, including statistical results and comments made by survey respondents, along with references to international literature on early childhood, gender and development, and parenting.

The majority of parents want their young children to experience gender equality

The survey found that 92% of parents agreed that it is important to treat girls and boys the same in their early years. Furthermore, 79% of parents would like to challenge the restrictive gender stereotypes that surround their young children. These results show strong support among parents for the principle of gender equality, together with a willingness to take personal, practical action to challenge the kinds of gender stereotyping that create inequalities for their children.

Gender stereotypes impact young children in a variety of ways

Whilst 79% of parents would like to challenge the restrictive gender stereotypes that surround their young children, the survey also found that 58% of parents believe that their young children are not influenced by gender stereotypes. However, international literature shows otherwise, with substantial evidence showing that children are influenced by gender stereotypes from a very young age.¹¹

Children become aware of gender from an early age as they observe, learn, test and practice,¹² although these processes are different for every child, as children learn at different rates and in different ways, depending on their abilities, experiences and social contexts. Very young babies begin to observe and adopt messages about gender that filter through their early life, and from approximately one year of age infants typically learn to differentiate between women and men, establishing gender categories in the process.¹³ Children can become aware of gender stereotypes from around 18 months old¹⁴ and typically, before the age of two, are conscious of the social relevance of gender.¹⁵

Children typically start to learn 'gender appropriate' and 'gender-role' behaviour at around the age of two¹⁶, and can usually identify their own gender by age two or three,¹⁷ when they tend to also have a growing understanding of some of the social meanings associated with gender categories, roles and stereotypes. This is a time when children test and practice their developing understanding of gender, often becoming what has been referred to in the literature as 'gender detectives'.¹⁸ This means they look for evidence that confirms their increasing understanding that boys and girls, and men and women, have different roles, interests, and skills, and that these tend to be valued differently.

Gender typing is the process of identifying with gender roles and stereotypes. Between the ages of two and three, gender typed preferences in play and toy selection typically come to the fore.¹⁹ This includes socially learnt ideas about dress, toys and play; for example, girls showing a desire for pink toys while boys actively avoid them.²⁰ This is a period in which girls and boys typically begin to self-select activities or toys that are socially associated with their gender.

Research shows that, as a child's own gender identity begins to develop, they also start to identify as belonging to a particular group, and this tends to result in:

- A greater motivation to be like other members of their group.
- A heightened awareness about, and memory for, information perceived to be relevant to their own gender.
- An increased interest in activities perceived to be relevant to their own gender, and a preference for peers of the same sex.²¹

During this period, children can also begin to adopt gender stereotypes,²² testing and putting into practice their what they have observed and learnt about gender from the broader environment. During this period, children may be observed judging and interacting with others based on gender stereotypes – believing that gender stereotypes are rules that they and others should conform to.²³

As noted above, the survey results reveal an interesting variation in views on this issue. They show that while parents agree that gender inequality exists, and would like to challenge the restrictive gender stereotypes that surround their young children, they also don't believe that their own children are influenced by gender stereotypes (61% of fathers and 56% of mothers).

There may be a number of reasons for this. It may be that parents recognise and understand gender inequality in society broadly, but do not see it as so relevant in the private domain of their own families, or that they are unsure exactly how gender stereotypes impact young children.

Reflecting on the survey findings in light of current research, suggests that there is an opportunity to deepen public engagement on this issue and to provide parents with the knowledge, tools and skills that can help more effectively promote and encourage the environment of gender equality that a clear majority expressly want their children to experience.

The broader social environment influences both parents and children

The social and cultural environment in which today's children are raised is highly gendered – baby nursery items, nappies, clothing, toys, books, and even the crockery children eat from are overwhelmingly designed for either boys or girls. Parents are faced with either blue or pink change table covers – unless they want to spend a lot more time hunting for a 'gender-neutral' coloured one.

Communities are involved in maintaining and reinforcing gender stereotypes in many 'everyday' ways in which they interact with parents and expecting parents. Family, friends and colleagues ask expecting parents whether they know the sex of their unborn baby, and it is now common for baby showers to include a 'gender-reveal' element, where the sex of the baby is unveiled (with pink or blue ribbons or balloons) to both the expecting parents and attendees.

Similarly, young children themselves are exposed to a wide range of comments and interactions that serve to subtly reinforce and perpetuate gender stereotypes. Children engaging in behaviour or activities that are seen as inappropriate for their gender may be redirected to more 'gender

appropriate' behaviour. This can be as simple and subtle as directing a girl's attention towards dolls or fairy toys (i.e. by saying "I think you might like these"), but questioning a boy's interest in the same toys (i.e. by asking "are you sure you want to play with that?") or discouraging a girl from raising her voice by calling her "bossy", while encouraging much noisier, even rowdy activities among boys. Such messages come from a variety of sources including parents, extended family members, carers, educators and other children. It is the repetition of these messages, both over time and in interactions with different people, that instils a sense of what boys and girls 'should' do and like – an understanding in other words, of what activities, behaviours and characteristics society considers 'gender appropriate'.

This is the highly gendered social environment in which parents today are raising children, one that in turn influences the way parents engage with their children. Literature shows that even when parents believe that children should be treated the same, regardless of gender, they may not actually raise their children in this way.²⁴ Like others within the community, parents often unconsciously communicate social norms and common beliefs about gender appropriate behaviour to their children. Research shows that "parents are more likely to provide toy vehicles, action figures, and sports equipment for their sons; and they are more likely to give dolls, kitchen sets, and dress-up toys to their daughters".²⁵ Indeed, it is very difficult for parents to resist and challenge a culture in which the impact of gender stereotypes and roles on young children is so pervasive.

Many parents face practical challenges when putting gender equality into practice in their household

A large majority (86%) of the parents surveyed agree that, in two parent households, it is important for both parents to spend equal time with their children. Significant numbers of men and women commented that, aside from the period in which a mother may breastfeed, both parents are equally capable of caring for children in their early years.

However, parents also frequently acknowledged that it can be challenging to put such arrangements into practice:

"I do agree but unfortunately life doesn't allow this, someone has to work, so one parent will always have less time." – Father of two

"If both parents are the caregivers, who's the wage earner?" – Mother of one

These comments suggest that, while many heterosexual-coupled parents believe that both men and women should spend equal time with their children, their ability to put this principle into practice is often limited. This is largely the result of broader social and economic systems and structures that typically result in men being higher income earners, combined with cultural expectations that a 'man's role' is that of 'breadwinner', and a woman's is that of primary-carer of children – expectations that themselves reflect powerful and entrenched gender roles and stereotypes.

Some parents' comments reflected these broader social and cultural dynamics:

“The father usually earns more, so it makes sense for him to go back to work.” – Father of two

“Men are working long hours, where women can, at some workplaces, access more flexible arrangements.” – Mother of three

Literature shows that parental leave provisions are one of the most effective policies in encouraging men’s caregiving and promoting greater equality in the household, workplace, and society as a whole, especially when implemented alongside broader strategies to redistribute care work.²⁶ Research from countries such as Canada and Sweden highlights that factors such as paternity and paid family leave, and ‘family friendly’ workplace policies that regulate working hours, all support men’s greater participation in care work.²⁷ At the same time, existing gender stereotypes can also influence men’s interest and willingness to use such policies and opportunities, indicating that shifts in attitudes about gender roles need to occur in tandem with ‘family-friendly’ workplace initiatives.

There are of course many families in Australia who have negotiated parenting arrangements that do not conform to dominant ideas about gender roles and have challenged the systems that commonly reinforce these roles in order to do this. For example, some heterosexual women earn more than their male partner and undertake a greater proportion of paid work, and in other families both partners participate relatively equally in part-time employment and part-time care-giving. Some families involve extended family members or childcare services in the care of their young children to enable both parents to engage in paid employment. Some of the parents surveyed in this project reported a variety of such arrangements:

“I raised five children while my wife worked full time and I had no problems with that.” – Father of five

“I (myself) took 6 months off each time to care for my children in the first year of my child’s life... I think it is important that men are encouraged to take time off to bond with their kids, it is important to establish a strong bond.” – Father of two

“We both work, we use nannies and childcare to allow us to both work to assist with bills, etc.” – Father of three

Accounts such as these shows that some families are already opting for creative parenting arrangements that try to meet the needs and wishes of family members, regardless of socially expected gender roles and the economic systems that reinforce these.

Many of these ‘non-traditional’ approaches to arranging and managing parenting and household tasks and finances can serve as visible examples that challenge rigid gender stereotypes, providing children with a range of different relationship models. For example research shows that in families where men are more active and have a greater role in caregiving, children learn that caregiving and nurturing behaviour can be associated with fathers and male figures.²⁸ Furthermore, men who take an active role in caring for children can help broaden rigid ideas about men’s roles and responsibilities, enabling children and others to question and challenge restrictive gender stereotypes.²⁹ Fathers therefore have a particular opportunity to challenge the gender stereotypes their children

are otherwise exposed to, by taking on a significant and active role in household tasks and care-giving, and role-modelling equality in their intimate relationships with women.

The survey showed that there is strong support among mothers and fathers for both parents (in a two-parent household) to spend equal time caring for young children. This indicates that the very rigid gender stereotypes previously related to caregiving are shifting, and that in today's society, both women and men increasingly want to be equally involved in their children's lives. There is an important role for government, workplaces, media and others to play in helping to support these aspirations, thereby enabling parents to practice and promote greater equality in caring for children.

Parents and communities can help reduce the impacts of gender stereotypes on children

The survey findings suggest several opportunities for parents to challenge the negative impacts of rigid gender roles and stereotypes on young children, to model and promote gender equality, and to support a wider range of experiences and opportunities for both young boys and girls.

The findings also suggest that, through the ways that they interact with both parents and young children, members of the broader community can also play an important role in reducing the impact of gender stereotypes on children. Some specific ways in which parents and communities can support and model gender equality are discussed below.

Through their influential role in the development of a child's identity, and their expectations and beliefs about gender, gender roles and gender relations, there are many opportunities for parents to address the gendered drivers of violence against women – in line with the primary prevention approach outlined in *Change the story*. These include:

- Fostering positive personal identities by encouraging and supporting strengths and interests in all activities, without regard for gender stereotypes; teaching children how to recognise stereotypical and potentially damaging messages; and teaching children how to process all their emotions in healthy ways.
- Challenging gender stereotypes by drawing attention to them in their families, and considering how gendered roles and stereotypes are reinforced on a day to day basis.
- Strengthening positive, equal and respectful relations between and among women and men, girls and boys by modelling equal and respectful relationships and drawing attention to depictions of equal and respectful relationships in media and books.
- Promoting and normalising gender equality in both their public and private lives
- Challenging any conversations or depictions in media that appear to condone violence against women
- Promoting women's independence and decision-making in public life and relationships.

The period of learning during early childhood provides great opportunity for parents to challenge gender stereotypes and promote gender equality to support children to freely and fully determine their own interests and preferences.

Taking care to avoid inadvertently reinforcing gender stereotypes

While this survey found that the majority of parents want girls and boys to be treated the same in the early years, and over three quarters also want to challenge the restrictive gender stereotypes that surround their children, it also suggests that these same parents are likely to be subtly reinforcing gender stereotypes with their children in ways they may not be aware of. For example, parents' responses to the questions about their level of comfort with boys and girls engaging in specific kinds of play, and their attitudes and responses towards girls and boys crying when they feel sad, suggests a level of adherence to the idea that certain activities and certain ways of expressing emotion are more 'gender appropriate' than others. This finding is consistent with research that shows, even when they are not overtly expressing them, parents may subtly reinforce gender stereotypes,³⁰ and may not be aware that they are treating girls and boys differently.³¹

To support parents in their desire to challenge gender stereotypes, it may be helpful to assist them to reflect on some of the ways in which they may be inadvertently or subtly reinforcing such stereotypes, and to consider how they might instead be able to help counter and provide alternatives to the gendered messages that children receive from their broader environment.

Supporting a range of choices and experiences for both daughters and sons

The survey results show that in some ways parents are comfortable with their children engaging in a range of types of play, including some that are not traditionally 'gender appropriate'. For example, parents with daughters are comfortable with the idea of them 'playing with trucks' – an activity traditionally associated with boys. Conversely, parents of boys are comfortable with the idea of them 'playing with kitchen sets' – an activity traditionally previously associated with domesticity and femininity – although one around which the social norms have recently shifted perhaps because of the rise of cooking shows with both male and female participants, and the many high-profile male chefs.

In other ways however, parents' level of comfort with their child engaging in different types of play appears linked to their beliefs about what is 'gender-appropriate' or seen as a socially 'acceptable' activity for their son or daughter. For example, fewer parents of girls are comfortable with the idea of their daughters engaging in play involving wrestling – an activity that is stereotypically masculine. Fewer parents of boys felt comfortable with the idea of their sons 'playing with dolls', compared to parents of girls.

These results suggest that in some ways parents have become more open to their children engaging in a range of different types of play, including those that were not previously considered to be gender appropriate (such as girls playing with trucks and boys playing with cooking sets). However, clear limits to this flexibility still exist, with fewer parents feeling

comfortable with their daughters engaging in play that is potentially physically aggressive, and far fewer being comfortable with their sons playing with dolls.

Furthermore, it seems that while in recent times, attention and effort has focused on encouraging girls to develop a range of interests and skills, and challenge rigid, limiting feminine roles and stereotypes; a similar approach has not been adopted with boys. Indeed, research shows that parents of girls welcome what they perceive as gender non-conformity among their young daughters, but this is not the case for parents with sons.³² Parents tend to be more concerned when their sons engage in feminine-typed activities than when their daughters show interest in masculine-typed toys and experiences.³³ Research also shows that fathers, more so than mothers, tend to hold more rigid expectations for sons than daughters.³⁴ Our survey clearly confirmed both these trends. This certainly limits boys' opportunities and experiences, and has particularly negative implications for those boys who wish to pursue interests and experiences that do not conform to traditionally 'masculine' roles and stereotypes.

Parents' comfort with their daughters exploring a diverse range of activities and toys is perhaps linked to a growing discomfort with the increasing degree to which girls' experiences are gendered today. Numerous blogs and articles within popular culture are dedicated to addressing the concerns of parents exasperated by pressure for girls to embrace only 'pretty pink things'. However, simply rejecting or avoiding toys or clothes because they are perceived to be too 'girly' or feminine can also be problematic. De-valuing such items (such as pink toys) inadvertently results in the de-valuing of femininity and girls, and ultimately sends the message to both girls and boys that "girl stuff is lame". The challenge for many parents is therefore, how to resist the problematic aspects of rigid gender stereotypes (for example, the implication that girls should wear 'pretty, pink and frilly' dresses because their worth is judged on their appearance) without simultaneously devaluing femininity, roles and activities traditionally associated with women, and ultimately girls and women themselves.

Supporting more fathers to challenge gender stereotypes

One scenario that produced a larger divide between parents with a son and parents with a daughter was 'Boys playing with dolls'. It was also noticeable that fathers, more so than mothers, were less comfortable with the idea of their son playing with dolls. Fathers with a son were also less likely to feel comfortable with the idea of him crying (75%) compared to both fathers with a daughter (84%) and mothers generally (87%). This suggests that fathers tend to hold more rigid views about gender roles and stereotypes than mothers.

This finding is consistent with existing literature that suggests men typically have greater support for 'traditional' gender stereotypes and roles than women.³⁵ For example, the National Community Attitudes towards Violence Against Women Survey found that a higher proportion of females (39%) than males (21%) were classified as 'high' on the Gender Equality Scale (i.e. they demonstrated strong support for gender equality).³⁶ While men typically indicate greater support for 'traditional' gender stereotypes and roles, they are also more likely than women to believe that gender equality already exists or that the obstacles that once made it harder for women than men to get ahead are now largely

gone.³⁷ This difference was directly reflected in this survey, with 70% of men agreeing that there is currently equality between men and women in Australia, compared to only 54% of women.

It is therefore particularly important to find ways to help more fathers to become aware of, and challenge, rigid gender stereotypes and their influence on their children. As the survey showed, a significant number of fathers already want to do this, with 72% reporting that they would like to challenge the traditional gender stereotypes that surround their young children.

Communities supporting parents to act

Given how pervasive gender stereotyping is, it takes continued effort and constant reflection for parents to challenge and resist them or soften their impact on children. Yet this is possible. Many parents already actively challenge gender stereotyping where they see it – both in conversations with their children, in their own parenting practices and relationships, and by advocating to major retailers for change (e.g. ‘No Gender December’³⁸).

Communities as a whole need to identify ways to better support parents in these challenges, building on their existing strategies, and helping create a society where all children feel free to be themselves. As Emily Kane (2013) writes:

“Individual parents can try to create a less constraining world for their children, but only if the rest of us suspend our judgments, applaud their efforts, and seek to interrupt the everyday teasing and more significant bullying that are too often ignored in children’s daily worlds.”³⁹

Modelling equal and respectful relationships between men and women

The survey results echo national research, which show that (in heterosexual-parent relationships) female partners are responsible for, and perform, most household and care tasks.⁴⁰

The most recent Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) study found that in households where men are the main breadwinners, they do 14.5 hours of housework a week compared to the 27.6 hours undertaken by the woman in that household.⁴¹ In these households, women do 28.9 hours of childcare, and men do 12.7 hours. In households where men and women earn roughly equal incomes, men do 28.3 hours of housework and childcare, whereas women do 45.5 hours.⁴² Where women are the main breadwinners within a household, men do an average of 17.6 hours a week of housework, while women do 21.5 hours.⁴³

The survey findings in relation to who undertakes the household tasks and majority of care-giving reflect these national findings and suggest that women and men in heterosexual parent relationships are still influenced by traditional gender stereotypes. The issue of who is more likely to take on the greater caring role and day-to-day management of the home is intimately linked to ideas about gender, and particularly about ‘women’s roles’. Indeed, as the national research shows, even when women are engaging in more paid work than their male partner, they still tend to do most of the housework and unpaid caring work.⁴⁴

The survey results regarding how parents make important decisions regarding their young children and finances also indicate that some heterosexual coupled parents are making these decisions in accordance with what they perceive to be 'traditional' gender roles i.e. that the woman, as the primary carer, is best placed to be the main decision-maker in relation to the children, and that the man, because he earns more money, should oversee the household finances. However, these dynamics can be complex. For example, when electing to comment on who makes most important decisions regarding the children, several women who identified that decision-making was "shared equally or done together" noted that they tend to do most of the research or thinking to inform the final decision-making process:

"I minimize the choices (down), and then we choose together from those top 3." – Mother of two

"I research my options, then discuss with my partner to see if he has any objections to the decisions I want to make." – Mother of two

This suggests that there is perhaps more to the story behind parents reporting that decision-making is shared or that one partner is the main decision-maker. There are complexities to the ways that heterosexual partners both perceive and do their decision-making that are not fully captured by a survey such as this.

The distribution of tasks, decisions and responsibilities within heterosexual parent relationships can have an impact on children – with children constructing their own understandings about gender by observing how their parents interact and what they do.⁴⁵ For this reason, paying greater attention to the way they share these tasks and decisions is one way in which parents can actively model equality and respect in their relationships. As a first step, this may require more active reflection on, and shared discussion about, who is doing what in the family and how this is perceived and valued by other family members. This might then enable a discussion about how family and household responsibilities and decisions might be shared and/or valued more equitably.

Working to create greater equality in relationships takes continued effort and reflection, particularly given that our broader culture, workplaces and systems are still evolving to allow for those who want to break out of rigid gender roles, and to reflect changing social norms. Importantly, many heterosexual coupled parents are already successfully working toward, and living in, families that try to overcome the traditional gender roles and stereotypes that can lead to gender inequality. Despite the challenges, these families continue to navigate a way forward to a society based more firmly on gender equality – not just as a principle, but as a lived practice with potential benefits for both children and adults.

Conclusion

Parents and children alike are immersed in a social and cultural environment that produces and perpetuates gender stereotypes – clothing, toys, television shows, books, friends and extended family members all communicate messages, explicitly and implicitly, about what is considered most ‘appropriate’ for girls and boys.

While this wider context has a significant influence on young children’s developing understanding of gender, research confirms that families, and in particular, parents, are young children’s first and primary source of information and learning about gender.⁴⁶

International literature shows that young children are already observing and learning, beginning to develop an understanding of gender roles and stereotypes, and putting these understandings into practice for themselves.⁴⁷ Yet this survey showed that 58% of parents with children in this age group believe that gender stereotypes do not impact their children.

Because the foundations for gender stereotypical beliefs and behaviours are created in early childhood, parents can play a key role in supporting their children’s ability to freely and fully determine their own interests and preferences, regardless of gender or social expectations.

While the survey showed that 92% of parents believe girls and boys should be treated the same in the early years, it also indicated that the level of comfort many parents report in relation to their young children engaging in a particular activity is related to whether that activity is considered gender-appropriate. This finding is consistent with research that shows that even when parents believe that children should be treated equally, they may act or communicate in ways that inadvertently contradict this belief.⁴⁸

Literature also shows that fathers tend to be more likely than mothers to want to uphold ‘traditional’ gender stereotypes, including by treating girls and boys differently.⁴⁹ The survey affirms this finding, showing that fathers are less likely to feel comfortable with the idea of their sons playing with dolls, or crying when sad, compared to mothers.

The good news is that 79% of parents want to take action to challenge traditional gender stereotypes. This preliminary research also suggests several ways that parents can do this, such as by being more aware of how they unintentionally and subtly reinforce gender stereotypes and by modelling gender equality and respect in their own relationships.

Implications and next steps

The findings from the survey and research review suggest not only that most parents want to challenge the negative impacts of rigid gender roles and stereotypes on their young children, but also that the period of early childhood provides a significant window of opportunity for them to do so, as it is the time when children's ideas about gender are first developing.

By supporting parents to challenge gender stereotypes and model and promote equality for their children, we can all help create a society that provides the widest possible range of experiences and opportunities for boys and girls, one in which our youngest generation can grow up being free to explore and be whoever they want to be.

Recognising parents' appetite to challenge gender stereotypes in their children's lives, and their significant power to do so, Our Watch have developed the Because Why campaign for families who want children to learn, explore and develop all the skills they're interested in without the limitations that come with gender stereotypes.

www.becausewhy.com.au

Appendix A

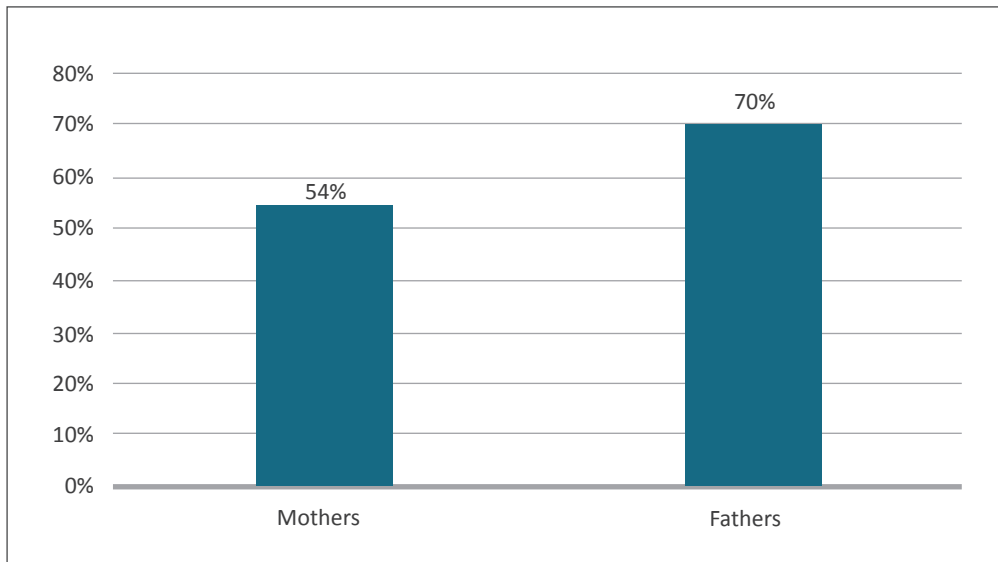
Quantitative survey results

The following provides a snapshot of the survey findings:

Parents' attitudes towards gender equality and violence against women

- 92% of mothers and 85% of fathers agreed with the statement, "Violence against women is a serious issue for our community".
- 95% of parents agreed with the statement, "Everyone has a role to play in preventing violence against women".

Figure 1: Parents who agree with the statement "there is equality between men and women in Australia"



Parents' views about whether boys and girls are treated differently

- 90% of parents agreed with the statement, "It is important to treat boys and girls the same in the early years".
- 85% of fathers and 76% of mothers agreed with the statement, "When it comes to child-rearing, I believe most parents treat their daughters and sons equally in Australia".

Parents' role in challenging gender stereotypes

- The majority (79%) of parents agreed with the statement, "I would like to challenge the traditional gender stereotypes (for example, that boys shouldn't cry and girls shouldn't be bossy) that surround my young child/ren".
 - 72% of mothers strongly agreed with wanting to challenge traditional gender stereotypes, compared to 54% of fathers.

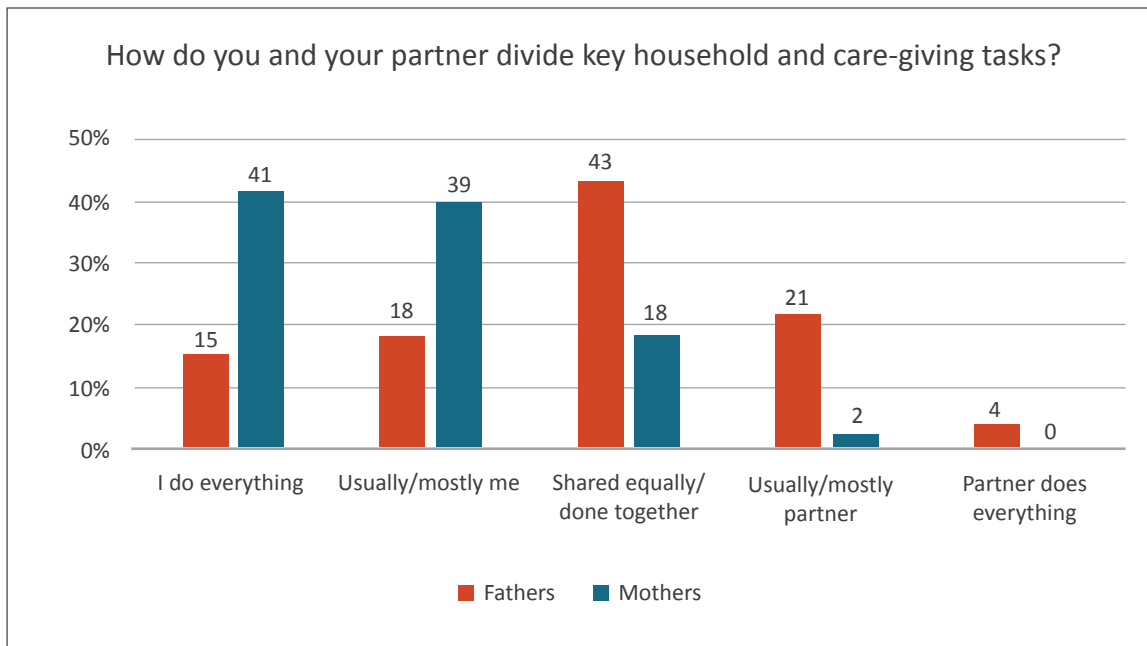
How parents divide household and parenting tasks and decisions

Parents were asked to identify how they and their partner (if applicable) divided the following key household and care-giving tasks: (1) Preparing food for children, (2) Cleaning the house, (3) Washing children’s clothes, and (4) Taking care of children. For each of the four tasks, parents were asked to identify a ‘division of labour category’, that is, whether they felt the task was: (a) done entirely by the respondent alone, (b) usually or mostly done by the respondent, (c) shared equally between the respondent and their partner, (d) usually or mostly done by the respondent’s partner, or (e) done entirely by the respondent’s partner.

- Mothers were more likely than fathers to report that they do all (41% of mothers compared to 15% of fathers) or most (39% of mothers compared to 18% of fathers) of the key household and care-giving tasks.
- Fathers were more likely to report that tasks were shared equally or done together (43% of fathers compared to 19% of mothers).
- On average, 79% of mothers either solely or mostly undertook the key household tasks associated with child-rearing (i.e. preparing children’s food, cleaning the house and washing children’s clothes) and taking care of the children.
- On average, 43% of fathers identified that the key household tasks and taking care of the children was shared equally or done together.

Figure 2 below shows the average percentages calculated for each division of labour category of all four key household and care-giving tasks combined, for both male and female respondents.

Figure 2: Division of household and care-giving tasks



The survey findings showed significant differences in men’s and women’s perception about who completes household and care-giving tasks, with a large discrepancy between the percentages of women who reported that they either exclusively or usually complete a task, and the percentages of men who reported that their partner either exclusively or usually completes that task, as shown in the table in Table 2.

Table 2: Breakdown of division between household and childrearing tasks

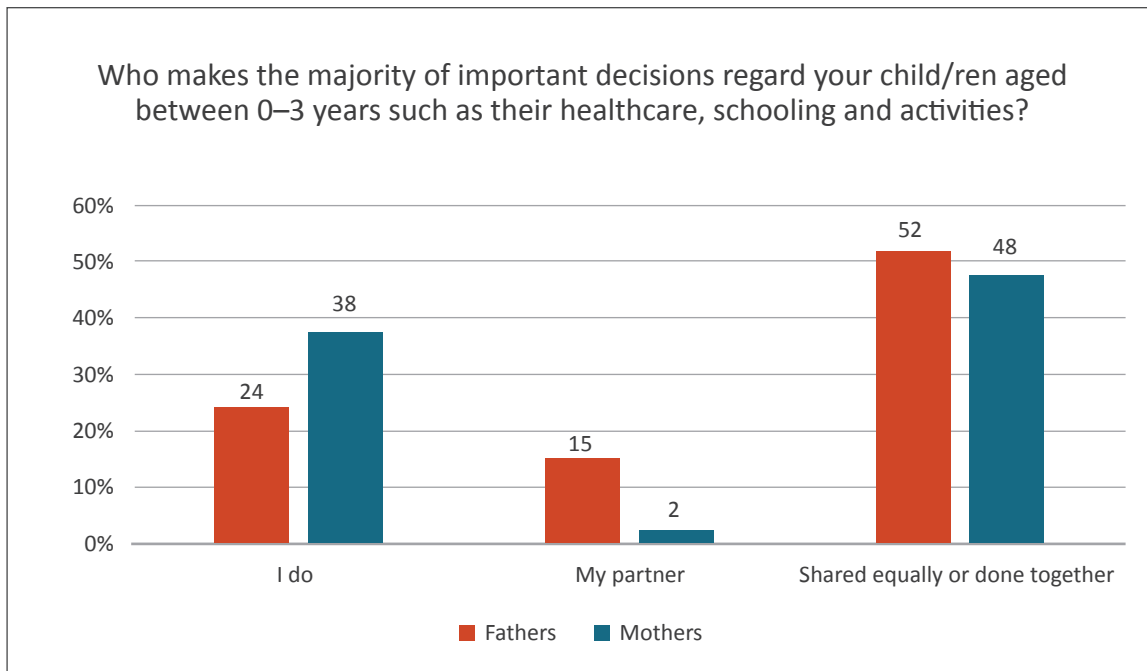
Response	Preparing food	Cleaning the house	Washing the children’s clothes	Taking care of the children
Mothers: “I do” or “usually / mostly me”	86%	75%	87%	69%
Fathers: “my partner does” or “usually / mostly does”	25%	21%	32%	19%

Parents were also asked to identify who makes the majority of important decisions regarding their young children (e.g. decisions about children’s healthcare, schooling and activities), and regarding large household purchases and finances. The results are represented in figure 3 and figure 4:

Important decisions regarding children aged 0 – 3 years:

- 49% of parents reported, “My partner and I equally share important decision making”.
- 38% of mothers reported that “I do” in relation to making the majority of important decisions regarding their children, whereas only 15% of fathers reported “My female partner” makes the majority of these decisions.

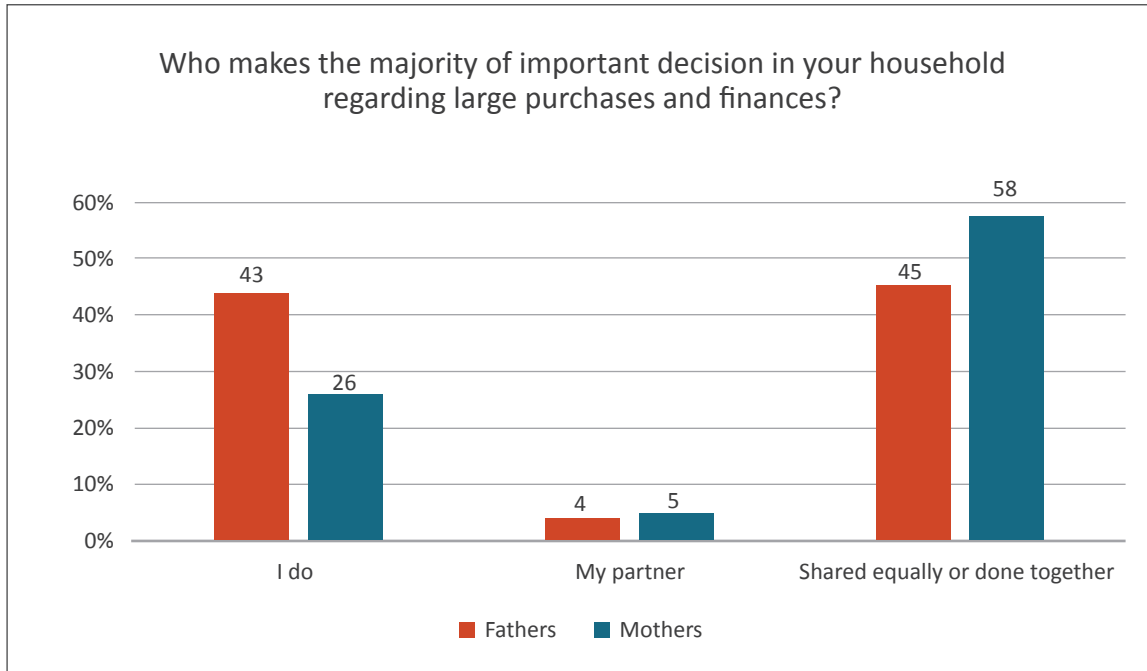
Figure 3: Decision-making regarding children



Important decisions regarding large household purchases and finances:

- 54% of parents reported that “My partner and I equally share important decision-making” in regards to large household purchases and finances.
- 43% of fathers and 26% of mothers reported, “I do” in relation to making the majority of these decisions.

Figure 4: Decision-making regarding large purchases and finances



Parents’ views on gender roles and parenting

- 59% of parents agreed with the statement, “I believe it is more important for the mother to stay at home to care for the children in the early years than the father”, with 41% of parents disagreeing.
- 85% of parents agreed with the statement, “In two parent households, it is important for both parents to spend equal time caring for the children in the early years”.

Parents’ views on how gender stereotypes influence children

When parents were asked, “Do you believe that your child/ren (aged 0 – 3) is/are influenced by gender stereotypes?” 61% of fathers and 56% of mothers reported “no”.

Parents were asked to identify whether they believe that gender stereotypes affect girls’ and boys’ potential wellbeing and success. The results are represented in figure 5 and figure 6.

Figure 5 and figure 6 show a number of differences between the views of mothers and fathers on this issue:

- Mothers were more likely than fathers to report that gender stereotypes have a negative impact on children (on boys, 52% of mothers compared to 34% of fathers; and on girls, 51% of mothers compared to 35% of fathers).
- Fathers were more likely than mothers to report that gender stereotypes have no impact on children’s potential wellbeing and success (on boys, 32% of fathers compared to 22% of mothers; and on girls, 35% of fathers compared to 23% of mothers).

Figure 5: Gender stereotypes and their effect on boys' potential wellbeing and success

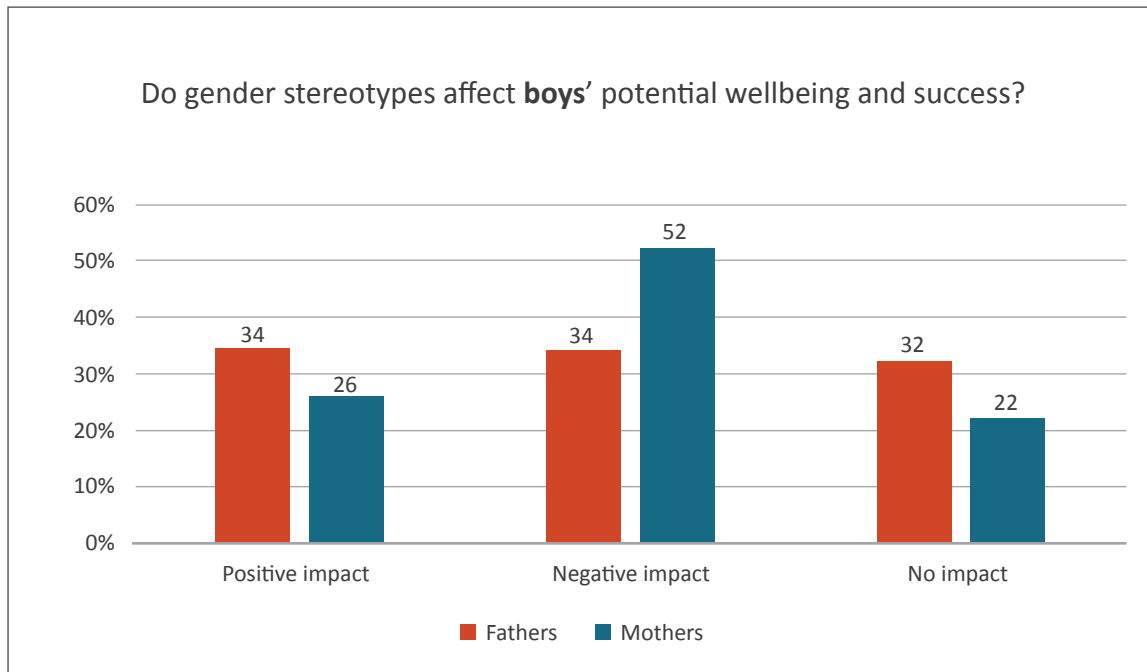
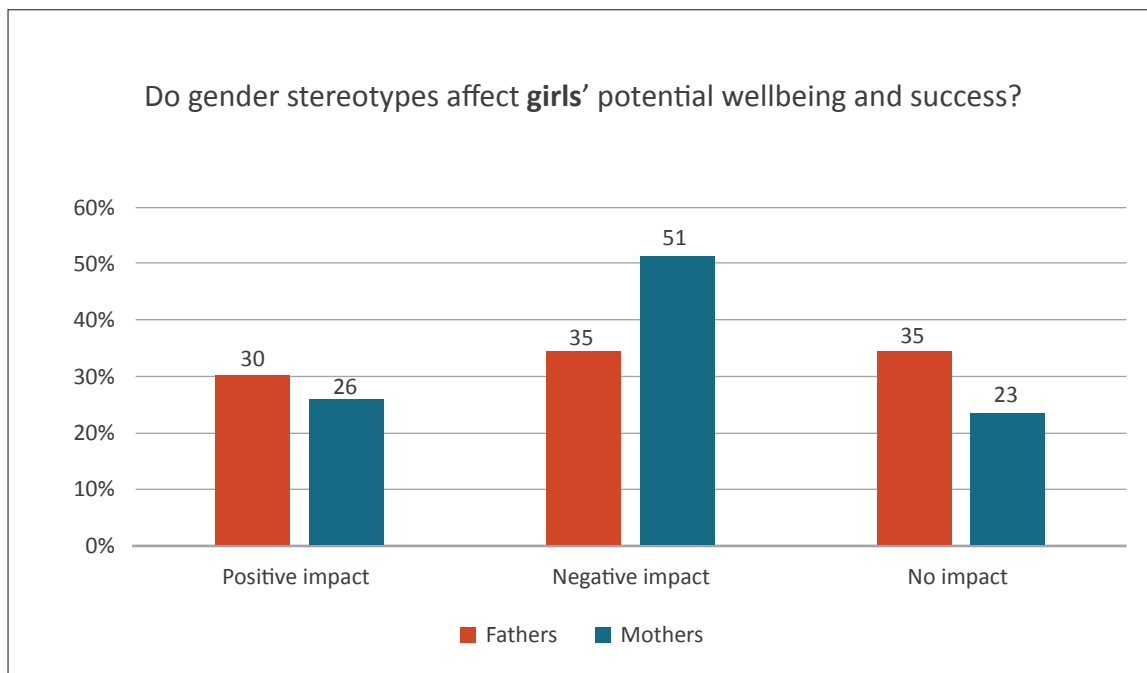


Figure 6: Gender stereotypes and their effect on girls' potential wellbeing and success



Parents were asked to identify whether they believe that gender stereotypes affect men's and women's future relationships with the 'opposite-sex'. The results are represented in figure 7 and figure 8.

- Mothers were more likely than fathers to report that gender stereotypes have a negative impact on a person in relation to their future relationships with the 'opposite-sex':
 - 49% of mothers and 30% of fathers reported that gender stereotypes have a negative impact on men and their future relationships with women.

- 47% of mothers and 33% of fathers reported that gender stereotypes have a negative impact on women and their future relationships with men.
- Over a quarter of parents (28%) reported that gender stereotypes have a positive impact on both women and men in relation to their future relationships with the opposite sex.
- 30% of parents reported that gender stereotypes have no impact on women in regard to their future relationships with men, and 29% reported that they have no impact on men’s future relationships with women.

Figure 7: Gender stereotypes and their perceived effect on men in their future relationships with women

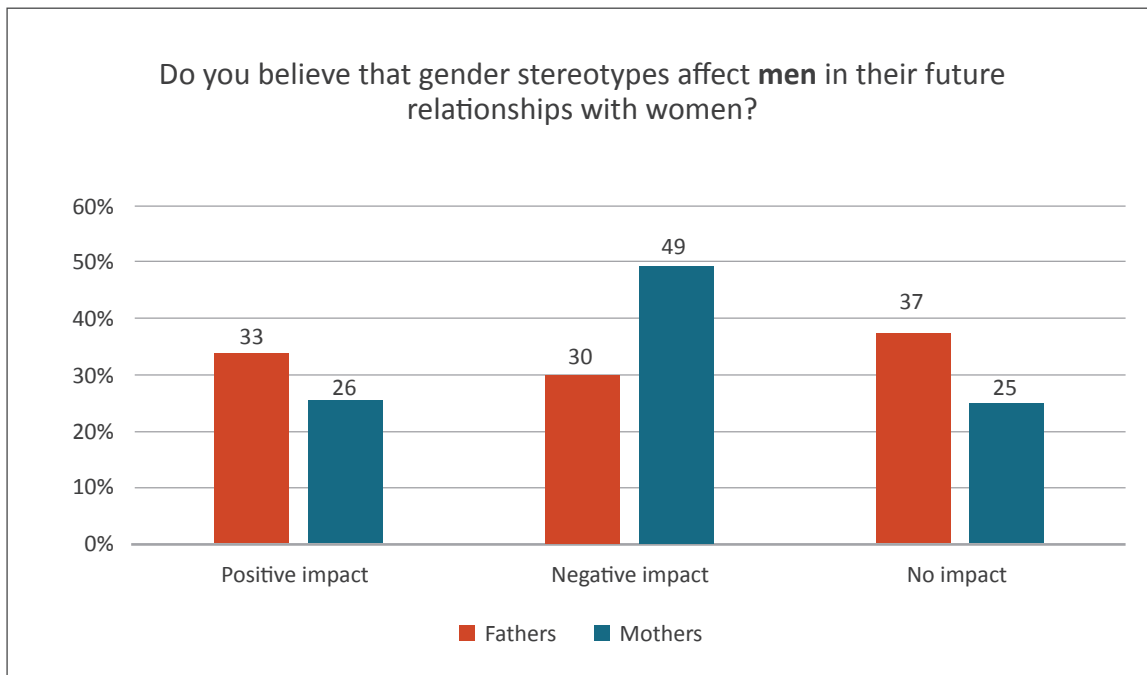
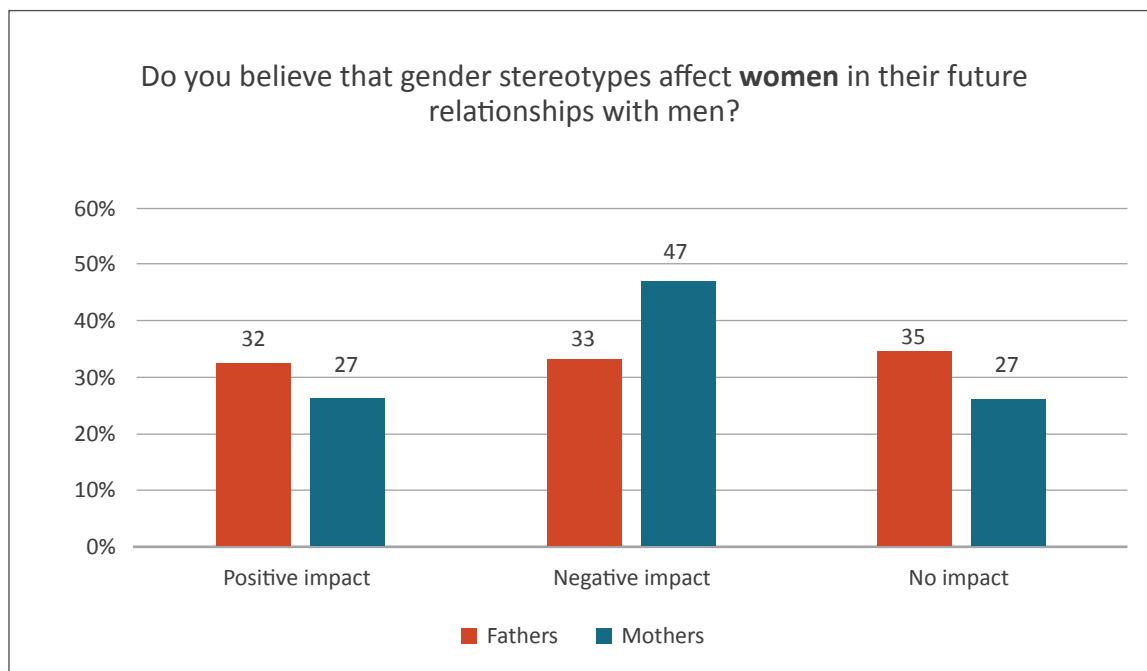


Figure 8: Gender stereotypes and their perceived effect on women in their future relationships with men



Parents’ attitudes to children engaging in different types of play

Parents were asked to consider their youngest child engaging in a variety of play activities and identify their level of comfort using the following options: “very comfortable”, “comfortable”, “neutral”, “uncomfortable”, and “very uncomfortable”.

The graph below (figure 9) shows the percentage of parents who identify being “comfortable” or “very comfortable” with their child engaging in each activity.

As figure 9 shows, both mothers and fathers are less likely to feel comfortable with their child (regardless of gender) wrestling.

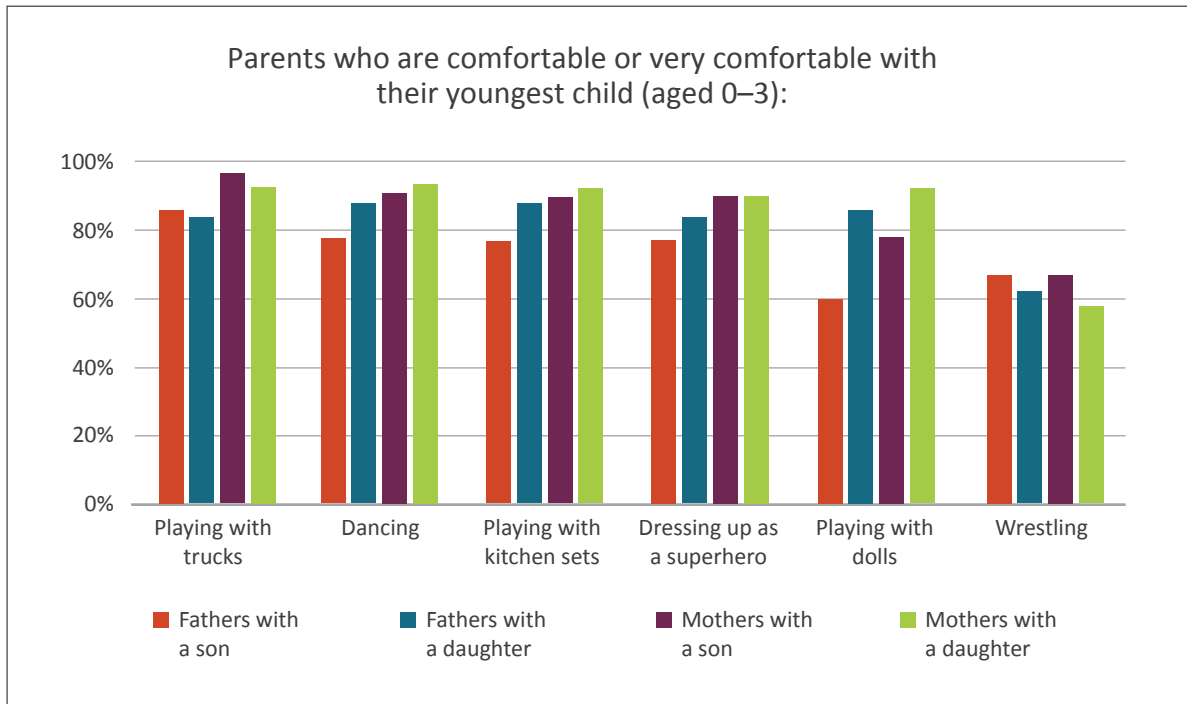
Parents with a 0 – 3-year-old daughter

- A high percentage of parents with a daughter were comfortable with her dancing (91%), playing with dolls (89%), playing with trucks (88%), playing with kitchen sets (86%) and dressing up as a super-hero (86%).
- Fewer parents of a daughter were comfortable with the idea of her wrestling (61%).

Parents with a 0 – 3-year-old son

- A high percentage of parents with a son were comfortable with him playing with trucks (91%), dressing up as a superhero (85%), playing with kitchen sets (82%), and dancing (78%).
- Fewer parents of a son were comfortable with him playing with dolls (69%) and wrestling (67%).

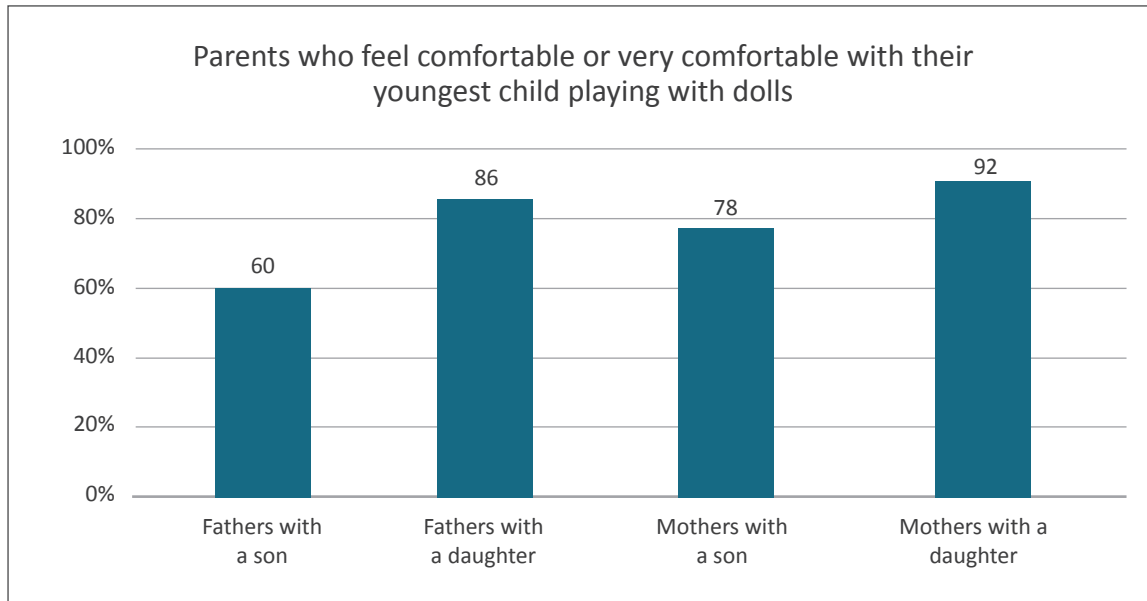
Figure 9: Parents’ comfort with their youngest child engaging in a variety of activities



With regard to ‘playing with dolls’ Figure 11 shows:

- Fewer parents of sons were comfortable with the idea of him playing with dolls, when compared to parents of a daughter.
- The majority (86%) of fathers with a daughter, compared to 60% of fathers with a son, reported feeling comfortable with the idea of their child playing with dolls.
- The majority (92%) of mothers with a daughter, compared to 78% of mothers with a son, reported being comfortable with the idea of their child playing with dolls.

Figure 10: Parents who feel comfortable with their youngest child playing with dolls



How comfortable are parents when their sons and/or daughters cry?

Parents were asked to identify their level of comfort (ranging from “very comfortable”, “comfortable”, “neutral”, “uncomfortable”, to “very uncomfortable”) in regard to their youngest child “crying when they feel sad”. The results showed:

- 87% of mothers with a son reported feeling comfortable with him crying when he feels sad. 75% of fathers with a son identified feeling comfortable in this situation.
- Fewer fathers with a son were comfortable with the idea of him crying when he feels sad (75%), when compared to fathers of girls (84%). There was no difference between the responses of mothers with a son and mothers with a daughter.

Appendix B

Alternative text for figures

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Table one below outline respondents' State/Territory of residence:

STATE/TERRITORY	NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS
New South Wales	269
Victoria	235
Queensland	169
South Australia	61
Western Australia	84
Tasmania	20
Northern Territory	4
Australian Capital Territory	16
TOTAL	858

The table shows the state or territory of residence of the survey respondents.

269 of the respondents were from New South Wales; 235 of the respondents were from Victoria; 169 of the respondents were from Queensland; 61 of the respondents were from South Australia; 84 of the respondents were from Western Australia; 20 of the respondents were from Tasmania; 4 of the respondents were from the Northern Territory. The total number of respondents was 858.

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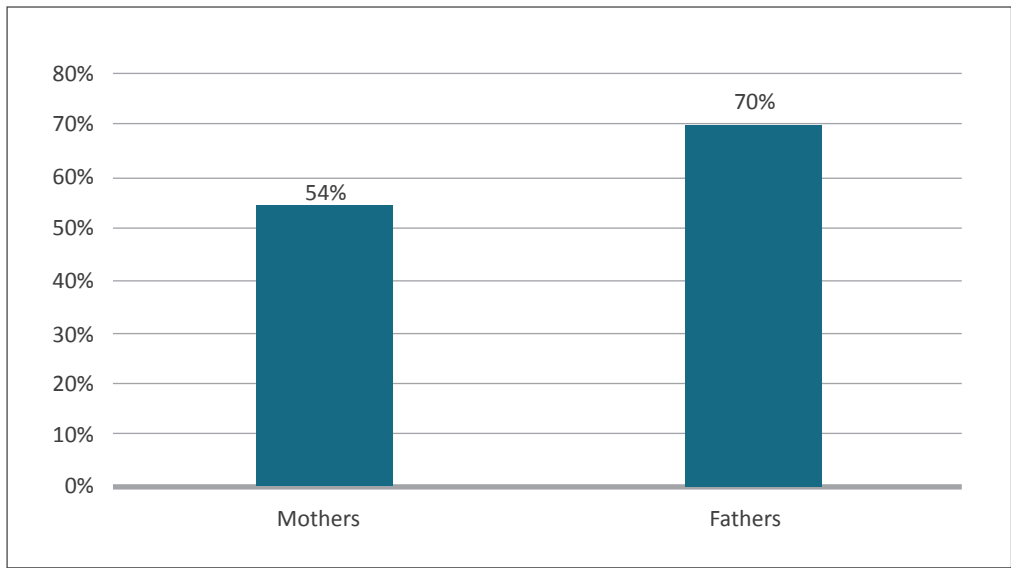


Figure one shows a bar graph with the percentage of parents who agree with the following statement: "I believe gender stereotypes limit a child's potential and life choices", 70% of parents agreed strongly, 20% of parents somewhat agreed and 10% of parents disagreed.

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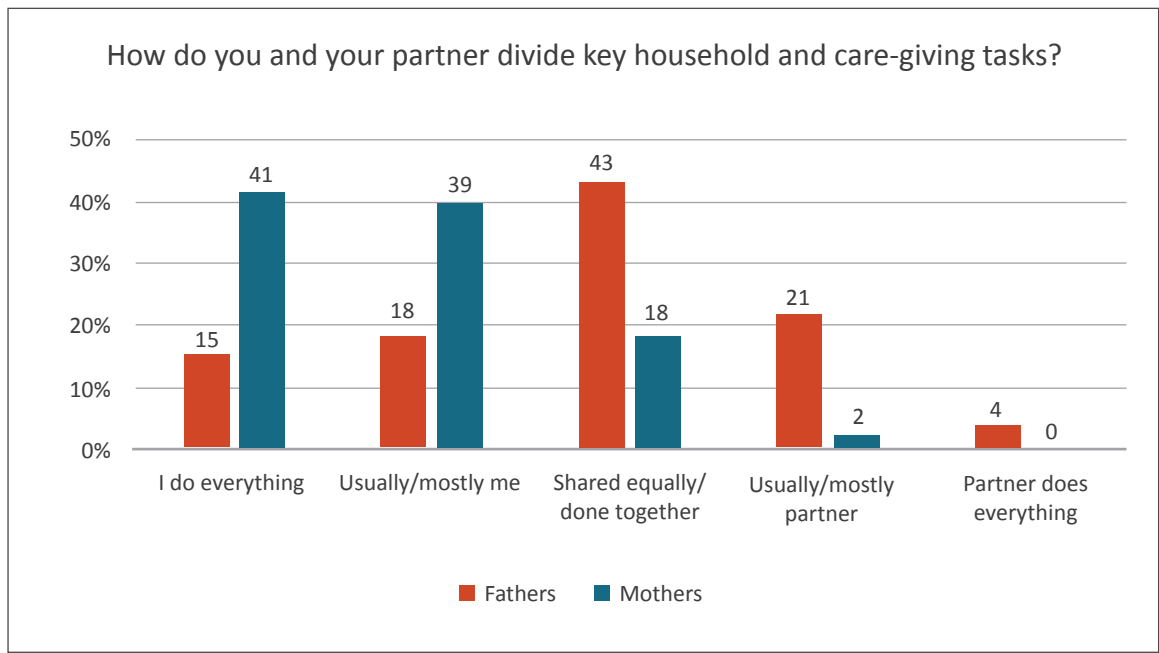


Figure two shows a bar graph with the average percentages calculated for each division of labour category of all four key household and care-giving tasks combined, for both male and female respondents. It shows that 15% of fathers and 41% of mothers indicated that they do everything; 18% of fathers and 39% of mothers indicated that it was usually/ mostly me; 43% of fathers and 18% of mothers indicated that the tasks were shared equally/done together; 21% of fathers and 2% of mothers indicated that it is usually/mostly the partner and 4% of fathers and 0% of mothers indicated that the partner does everything.

Response	Preparing food	Cleaning the house	Washing the children’s clothes	Taking care of the children
Mothers: “I do” or “usually / mostly me”	86%	75%	87%	69%
Fathers: “my partner does” or “usually / mostly does”	25%	21%	32%	19%

Table two shows the breakdown of division between household and childrearing tasks. 86% of mothers responded, “I do” or “usually /mostly me” to the task of preparing food, with 25% of fathers responding, “my partner does” or “usually/mostly does.”

75% of mothers responded, “I do” or “usually /mostly me” to the task of cleaning the house, with 21% of fathers responding, “my partner does” or “usually/mostly does.”

87% of mothers responded, “I do” or “usually /mostly me” to the task of washing the children’s clothes, with 32% of fathers responding, “my partner does” or “usually/mostly does.”

69% of mothers responded, “I do” or “usually /mostly me” to the task of taking care of the children, with 19% of fathers responding, “my partner does” or “usually/mostly does.”

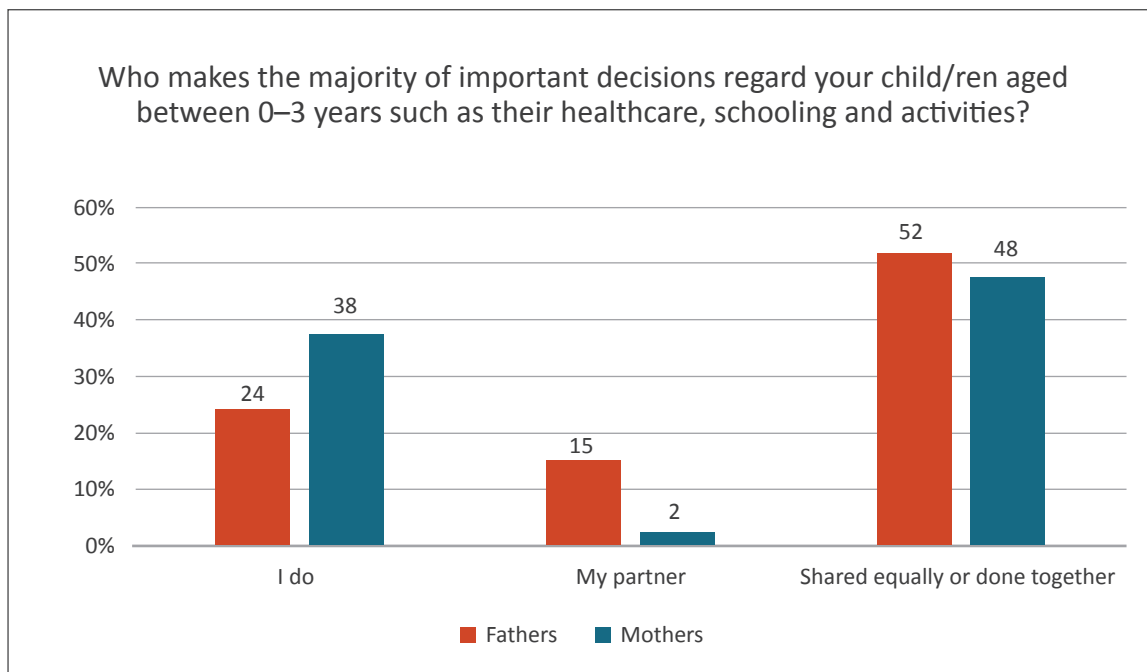


Figure 3 shows a bar graph summarising the data from the question “who makes the majority of important decisions regarding their young child/ren aged between 0-3 years such as their healthcare, schooling and activities”. 24% of fathers and 38% of mothers indicated that they made the majority of important decisions. 15% of fathers and 2% of mothers indicated that their partner made the majority of decisions. 52% of fathers and 48% of mothers indicated that the decision making was shared equally or done together.

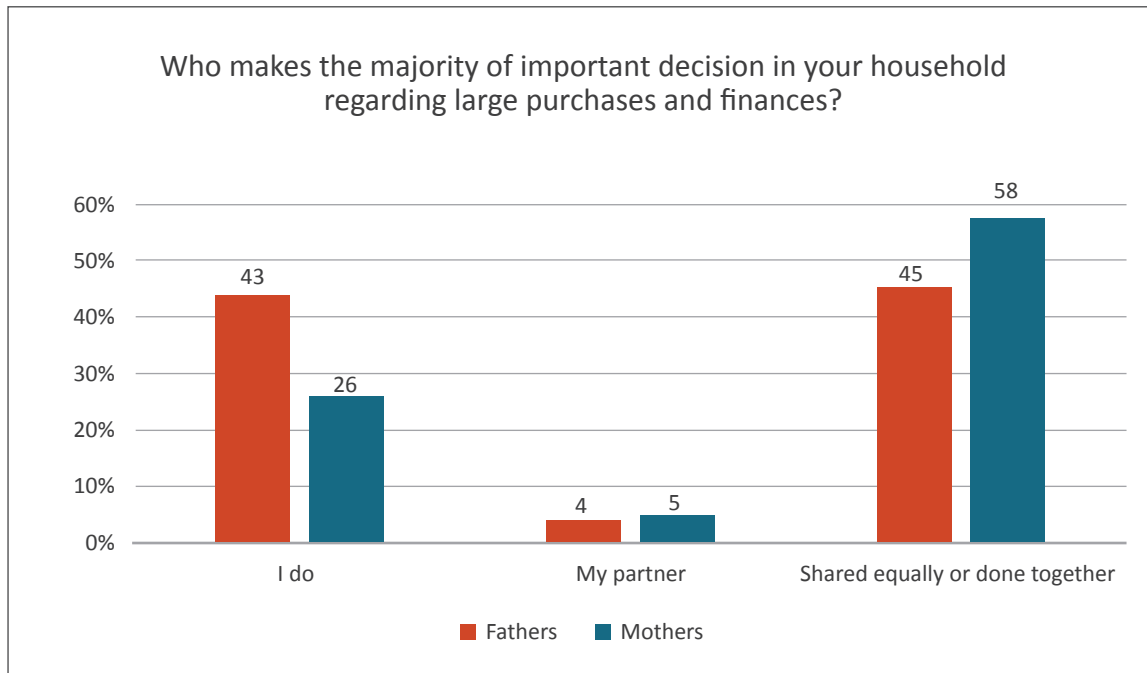


Figure four shows a bar graph summarising the data from the question “who makes the majority of important decisions in your household regarding large purchases and finances.” The graph shows that 43% of fathers and 26% of mothers indicated that they made the decision, 4% of fathers and 5% of mothers indicated that their partner made the decision and 45% of fathers and 58% of mothers indicated that they share the decisions equally or do them together.

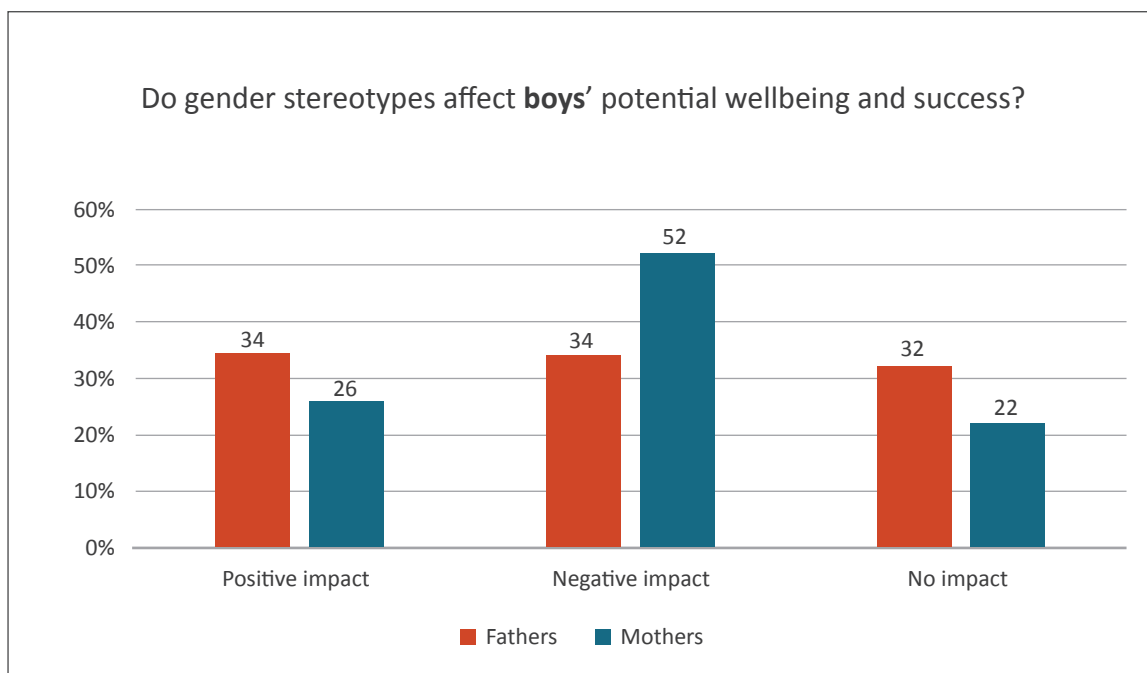


Figure five shows a bar graph with parent’s responses to the question “Do you believe that gender stereotypes affect boys’ potential wellbeing and success”. 34% of fathers and 26% of mothers indicated that gender

stereotypes have a positive impact on boys' potential wellbeing and success, 34% of fathers and 52% of mothers indicated that gender stereotypes have a negative impact and 32% of fathers and 22% of mothers indicated that gender stereotypes have no impact.

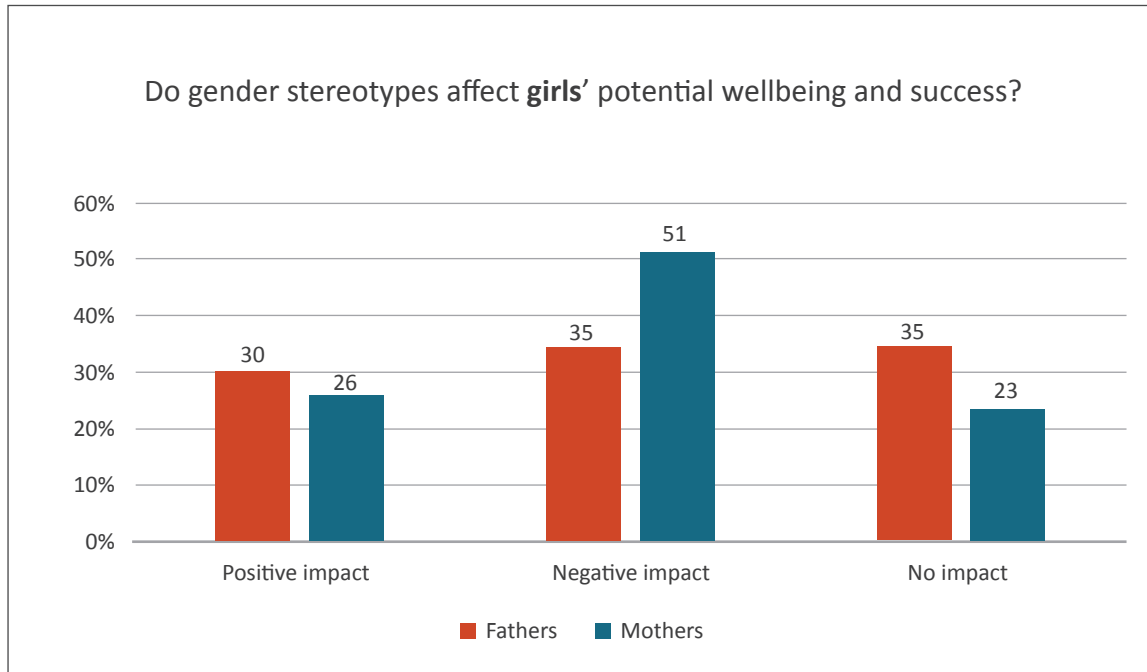


Figure six shows a bar graph with parent's perspectives on if they believe that gender stereotypes affect girls' potential wellbeing and success. 30% of fathers and 26% of mothers indicated that gender stereotypes have a positive impact on girls' potential wellbeing and success, 35% of fathers and 51% mothers indicated that gender stereotypes have a negative impact and 35% of fathers and 23% of mothers indicated that gender stereotypes have no impact.

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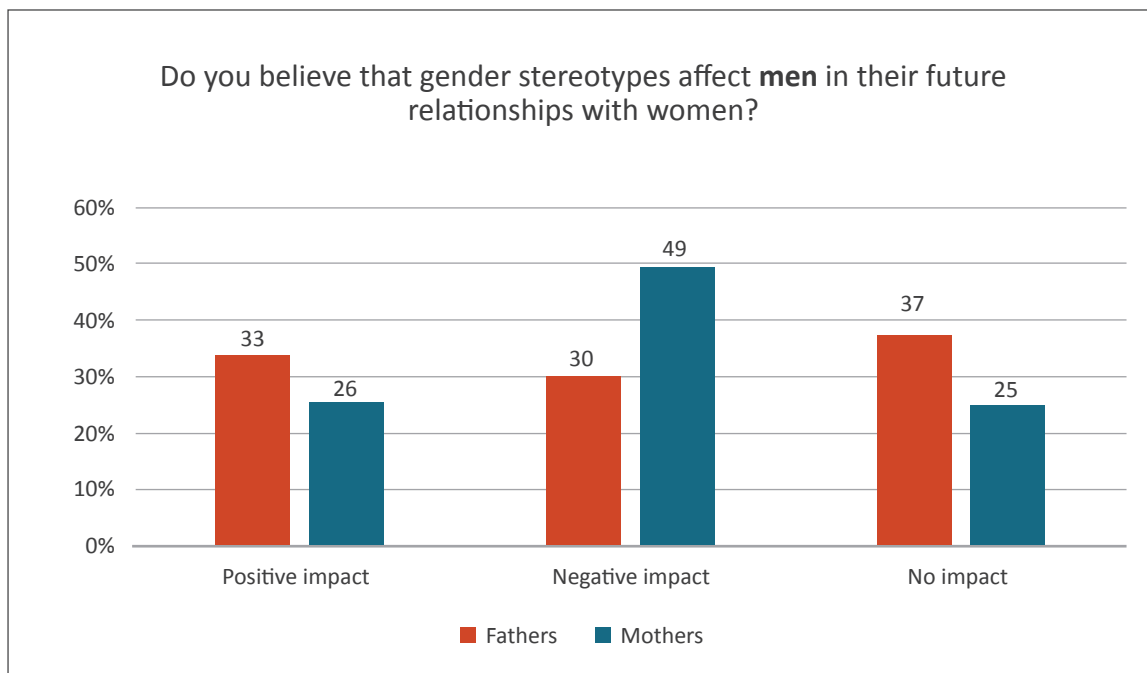


Figure seven shows a bar graph with the percentage of parents who believe that gender stereotypes affect men in their future relationships with women. 33% of fathers and 26% of mothers believed that gender stereotypes had a positive impact. 30% of fathers and 49% of mothers believed that gender stereotypes had a negative impact and 37% of fathers and 25% of mothers indicated that gender stereotypes had no impact.

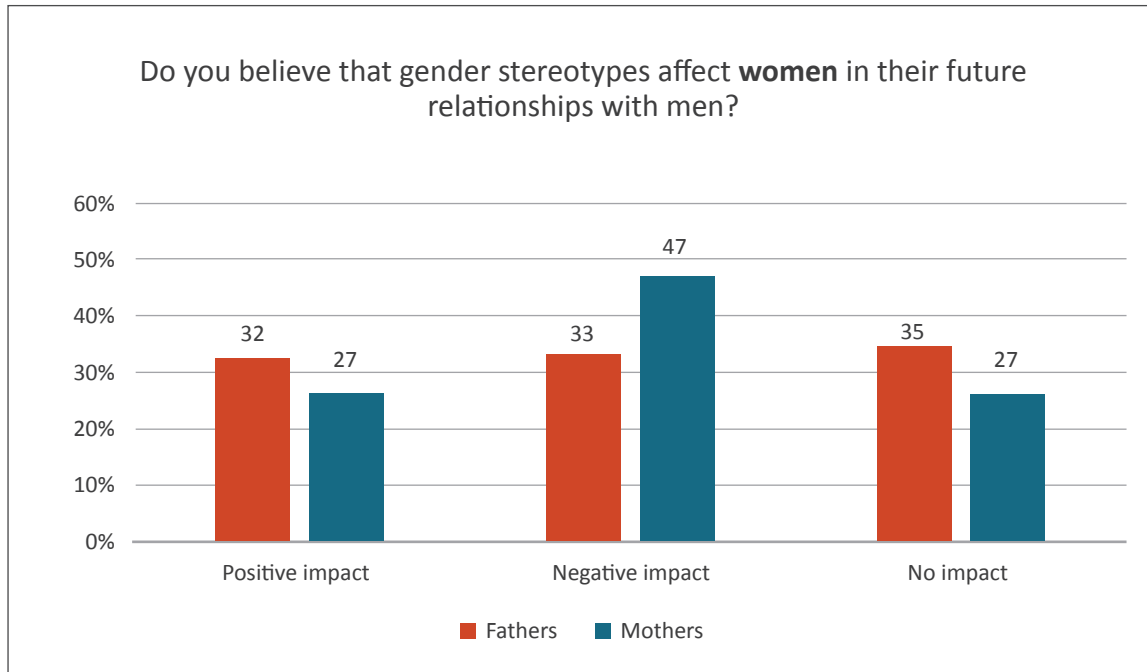


Figure eight shows a bar graph with the percentage of parents who believe that gender stereotypes affect women in their future relationships with men. 32% of fathers and 27% of mothers believed that gender stereotypes had a positive impact. 33% of fathers and 47% of mothers believed that gender stereotypes had a negative impact and 35% of fathers and 27% of mothers indicated that gender stereotypes had no impact.

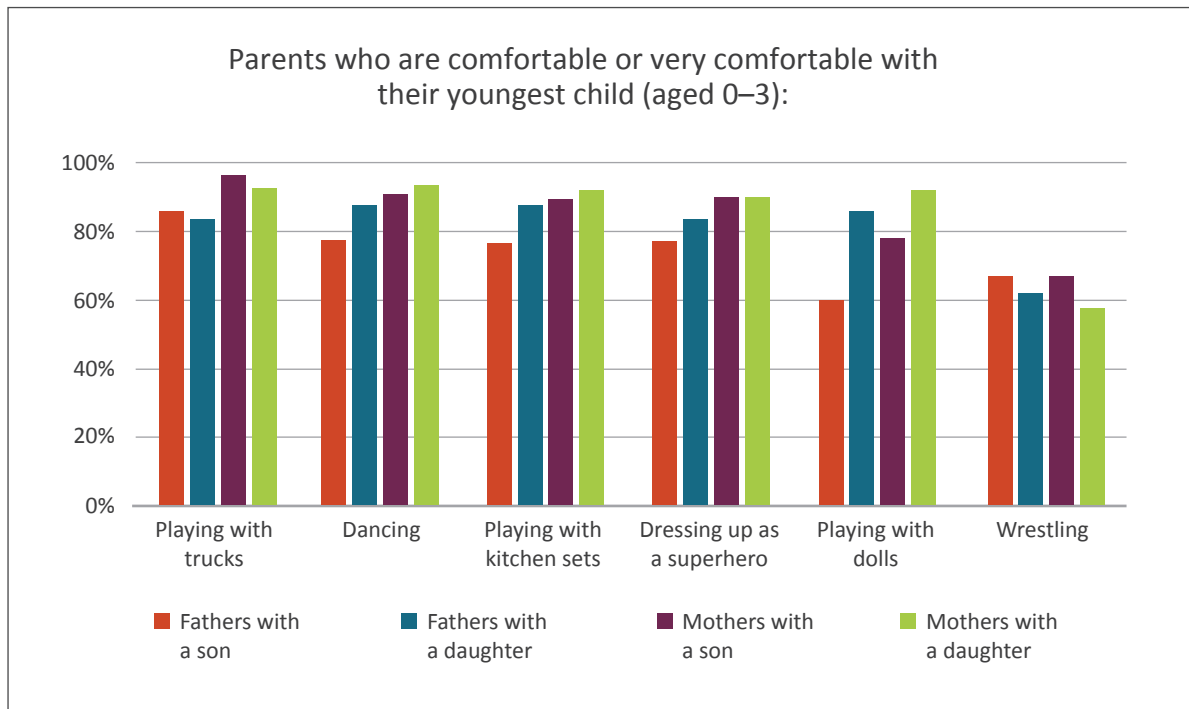


Figure nine shows a bar graph with the percentage of parents who were comfortable or very comfortable with their youngest child (aged 0-3) playing with trucks, dancing, playing with kitchen sets, dressing up as a superhero, playing with dolls and wrestling.

In relation to playing with trucks, 86% of fathers with a son were comfortable or very comfortable, 84% of fathers with a daughter, 96% of mothers with a son and 91% of mothers with a daughter.

In relation to dancing, 79% of fathers with a son were comfortable or very comfortable, 86% of fathers with a daughter, 88% of mothers with a son and 91% of mothers with a daughter.

In relation to playing with kitchen sets, 76% of fathers with a son were comfortable or very comfortable, 86% of fathers with a daughter, 88% of mothers with a son and 91% of mothers with a daughter.

In relation to playing dressing up as a super hero, 76% of fathers with a son were comfortable or very comfortable, 82% of fathers with a daughter, 89% of mothers with a son and 89% of mothers with a daughter.

In relation to playing with dolls, 60% of fathers with a son were comfortable or very comfortable, 86% of fathers with a daughter, 78% of mothers with a son and 92% of mothers with a daughter.

In relation to wrestling, 67% of fathers with a son were comfortable or very comfortable, 62% of fathers with a daughter, 67% of mothers with a son and 59% of mothers with a daughter.

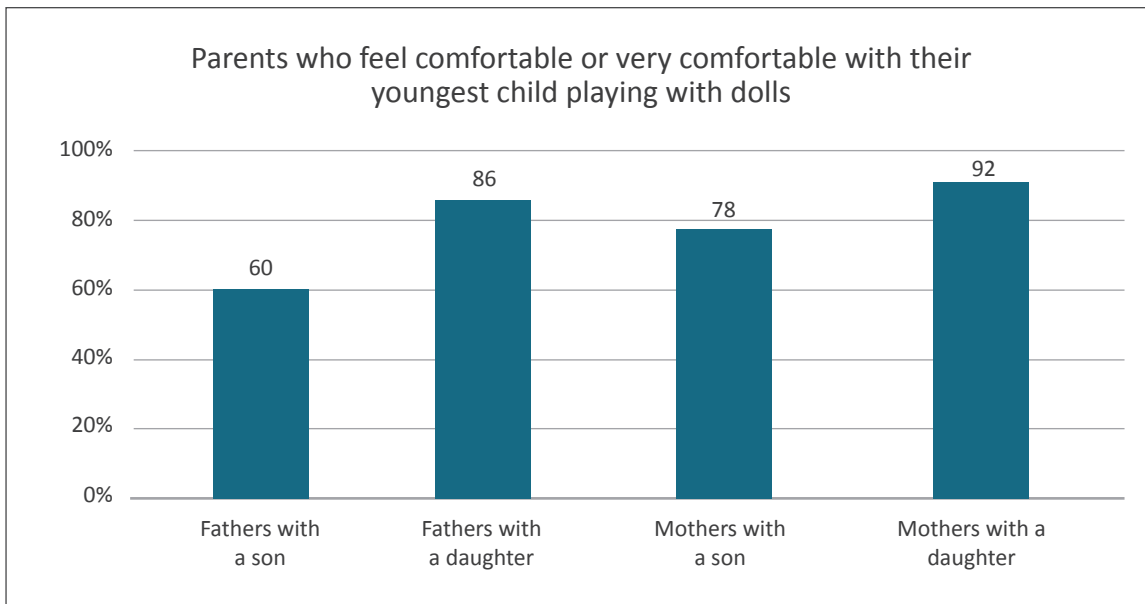


Figure ten shows a bar graph demonstrating how comfortable or very comfortable parents felt with their youngest child playing with dolls. 60% of fathers with a son felt comfortable, 86% of fathers with a daughter, 78% of mothers with a son and 92% of mothers with a daughter.

Endnotes

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