

# Mother-Child Conversations about Gender



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*with commentary by*

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Willis F. Overton, *Editor*

# **MOTHER-CHILD CONVERSATIONS ABOUT GENDER: UNDERSTANDING THE ACQUISITION OF ESSENTIALIST BELIEFS**

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## ABSTRACT

The present study examines mother-child conversations about gender, to examine (1) children's essentialist beliefs about gender, and (2) the role of maternal input in fostering such beliefs. We videotaped 72 mothers and their sons/daughters (mean ages 2.7, 4.7, or 6.7) discussing a picture book that depicted stereotypical and counter-stereotypical gendered activities (e.g., a boy playing football; a woman race-car driver). Mothers and children also completed measures of gender stereotyping and gender constancy. Results indicate more explicit endorsement of gender stereotypes among children than among mothers. Indeed, mothers provided little in the way of explicit stereotyped input. Nonetheless, mothers expressed gender concepts through a number of more implicit means, including reference to categories of gender (generics), labeling of gender, and contrasting males versus females. Gender-stereotype endorsement from children emerged early (by 2-1/2 years of age), but also underwent important developmental changes, most notably a rapid increase between 2 and 4 years of age in the focus on generic *categories* of gender. Variation in speech (across individuals and across contexts) cannot be characterized along a single dimension of degree of gender-typing; rather, there seemed to be differences in how focused a speaker was on gender (or not), with some speakers providing more talk about gender (both stereotyped and non-stereotyped) and others providing less such talk. Finally, there were variations in both mother and child speech as a function of child gender and gender of referent. In sum, by age 2, there is much essentialist content in mother-child conversations, even for mothers who express gender egalitarian beliefs. Mothers' linguistic input conveys subtle messages about gender from which children may construct their own essentialist beliefs.

# MOTHER-CHILD CONVERSATIONS ABOUT GENDER: UNDERSTANDING THE ACQUISITION OF ESSENTIALIST BELIEFS

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## I. INTRODUCTION

### GENDER ESSENTIALISM IN CHILDREN

This *Monograph* examines essentialist concepts of gender in young children. Essentialism is the belief (often erroneous) that members of a category share an inherent, non-obvious property (essence) that confers identity and causes other category-typical properties to emerge (Medin, 1989). Essentialism is unlikely to be a wholly *accurate* belief system, yet it is pervasive in human thought (Gelman, 2003; Rehder & Hastie, 2001). It may be one of the central cognitive biases underlying stereotyping (Haslam, Rothschild, & Ernst, 2002). Gender essentialism includes a cluster of beliefs, including that observable gender differences are discovered rather than invented, biological rather than social in origins, unalterable rather than modifiable, mutually exclusive rather than overlapping, and predictive of a host of other non-obvious differences (Gelman & Taylor, 2000).

From an early age, children essentialize gender. Preschool children readily infer non-obvious characteristics of boys and girls based on their category membership (Gelman, Collman, & Maccoby, 1986). They exaggerate differences between the sexes,<sup>1</sup> for example, they deny or misremember gender anomalies (Liben & Signorella, 1987), at times assume that gender roles such as “mother” and “doctor” are mutually exclusive (Deák & Maratsos, 1998; but see Experiment 2), have strong affective or moral responses to gender anomalies (Levy, Taylor, & Gelman, 1995), and treat boys and girls as opposites (Martin, Eisenbud, & Rose, 1995). They also seem to assume an innate basis for gender-stereotyped traits (Taylor, 1996). These findings are consistent with other research demonstrating that preschool children hold essentialist beliefs about a range of natural categories, including animal kinds, natural substances, race, and personality characteristics (see Gelman, 2003, for a review). Indeed, children appear to be *more* strongly nativist and in some cases view gender categories as *more* fixed/immutable than adults (Taylor, 1996).

Although we suggest that *children* essentialize gender, we do not ourselves espouse essentialism as a true or accurate description of gender differences. Note that essentialism here is used in two distinct senses: as a

psychological construct used to characterize children's concepts, and as a metaphysical construct that makes certain assumptions about the structure of the world (namely, that male/female differences are immutable, rooted in biology, etc.).

How, when, and why children develop these beliefs about gender is a question of great significance for understanding social categorization and stereotyping. We emphasize that our claim is *not* that gender essentialism is accurate, but rather that gender essentialism is a psychological phenomenon. Children tend to essentialize gender, and the question of interest is why. Liben and Bigler (2002) review three classes of explanations that are most often provided: gender essentialism, gender environmentalism, and gender constructivism. An essentialist explanation presumes a powerful biological basis to sex and gender differences, which are then reflected in children's beliefs. A gender environmentalist explanation places great emphasis on environmental factors that model and teach gender stereotypes to children. Gender constructivism presumes that children are "active agents" (in Liben & Bigler's words) who create their own gender concepts, and do not directly reflect either biological differences or environmental messages.

We work within a gender constructivist framework. That is, we assume that gender differences are not located inherently or wholly within the individual (e.g., a girl is not born with a preference for dolls), nor are gender differences simply passively absorbed by children from environmental "input." Rather, children actively create (construct) their gender beliefs, making use of both social interactions and their own conceptual biases. Various scholars have made the important point that constructivism (or constructionism) stands in contrast to biological essentialism. For example, Bohan (1993) notes that, whereas essentialism locates gender in the individual, constructionism locates gender in social interactions. Likewise, Leaper (2000, p. 127) aptly notes: "The constructivist perspective has been compatible with the feminist argument that gender inequities are due to sexist practices rather than to inherent biological differences between women and men." However, we also emphasize that sexist practices alone do not yield gender essentialism in children; they interact with children's cognitive schemas and reasoning biases (Martin, Ruble, & Szkrybalo, 2002). Bussey and Bandura (1999) make the point that children do not passively absorb gender role conceptions from external influences, but instead, "they construct generic conceptions from the diversity of styles of conduct that are modeled, evaluatively prescribed and taught by different individuals or by even the same person for different activities in different contexts" (p. 689).

Within a constructivist framework, it is crucial to examine the messages that children receive about gender. Bohan (1993, p. 13) suggests: "Among



the most forceful of factors that shape our constructions of knowledge are the modes of discourse by which we exchange our perceptions and descriptions of reality.” Parents are an obvious starting point for understanding what messages children receive about gender. Most theories of gender role socialization begin with the premise that it is “the adults of each generation who pass on to each new generation of children, by means of teaching and example, the culture of gender—beliefs, myths, and rules of sex-appropriate behavior—that pervade the particular society in which the children are growing up” (Maccoby, 1998, p. 119). Surprisingly, however, when researchers have examined the relations between young children’s attitudes and those of their parents, often little or no relation is found (Maccoby, 1998; Tenenbaum & Leaper, 2002). This pattern would seem to contradict social-learning theories of gender development. On the other hand, there are various reasons why such a lack of relation might be found, even if social-learning theories are valid. For example, children’s perceptions of the environment may be more important than how the environment is objectively structured (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). Thus, we would not expect children’s concepts to mirror the input directly, but only as filtered through their perceptions. Maccoby (1998) suggests that, in its broadest sense, socialization involves not only direct influences of parents or other agents on children, but also the child’s own acquisition of stereotypes. In this view, once children know whether they are girls or boys and understand what is considered appropriate for their own gender, they can use this rich source of information to regulate their own behavior so that it fits with social standards. Children accomplish this by imitating and identifying with same-sex models, particularly those who are thought to be exemplary members of their own gender category.

A further possibility, one that has received less attention in the research literature, is that parents do play a significant role in gender-role socialization, but that they provide *implicit* rather than *explicit* messages about gender categories. Perhaps parents do not typically communicate their gender role beliefs to children in direct ways. That is, parents may only infrequently endorse gender stereotypes, whereas they may make frequent use of more implicit cues. It is therefore important to document the kinds of implicit cues parents provide (whether consciously or unconsciously) when talking to their children. Maccoby (1998) makes the case that in order to better understand the role that parents play in gender socialization, we need to turn to naturalistic situations, in which parents interact with their own infants and toddlers, and that we need to examine “what parents are talking to children about and what specific child behaviors they are responding to” (p. 122). Only then can researchers begin to investigate how such cues correspond to children’s attitudes.

## APPROACH OF THIS STUDY

The approach we take is to provide a microanalytic examination of parent-child talk about gender. By examining parent-child conversations, we are able to gain new insight on two distinct sets of questions: *First*, what are children's early beliefs? There is a rich literature on children's gender concepts at ages 4 and above, but much less is known about younger children and developmental changes in the early preschool years. Natural language conversations are a valuable tool for telling us about children's *early* concepts. Bartsch and Wellman (1995) propose that children's early conversations can be especially revealing of the conceptual distinctions they honor. Young children who may have difficulty with the demands of experimental tasks can demonstrate more capacity in conversation with family members.

*Second*, what information do parents provide? This is a piece of the broader question of where children's gender concepts and gender stereotypes come from. There are undoubtedly a broad range of social influences, including parents, peers, educational practices, media representations, and occupational systems (Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Calvert & Huston, 1987; Maccoby, 1998; Ruble, Balaban, & Cooper, 1981; Signorielli & Bacue, 1999). For present purposes we focus on parents, who are especially important in the preschool years.

As mentioned earlier, most prior work examining parental influences has focused on broad differences in parental beliefs, practices, and parenting styles. The view that parents play a significant role in shaping gender-typed behavior in their children is widely held among social scientists and the general public; however, converging evidence suggests that direct socialization alone does not provide an adequate account of gender development. Parents do seem to play a role during early development by offering gender-typed toys to children, by encouraging "sex-appropriate" play themes, and by engaging in more rough-and-tumble play with boys than with girls (Maccoby, 1998). However, parents show few differences towards sons and daughters on important global measures of behavior (Leaper, Anderson, & Sanders, 1998; Lytton & Romney, 1991; Maccoby, 1998). For example, they do not differ in how much they interact with their daughters and sons overall nor on amounts of positive, negative, or neutral interaction. They show similar amounts of warmth, affection, nurturance, and responsiveness, and are equally likely to be demanding, restrictive, or assertive, in their interactions with sons and daughters.

Although much of the prior work on the role of parental influences has focused on global measures of parental behavior, several of these studies include a focus on parental language. For the most part, studies that include a focus on language have examined language style, and how language is

used to socialize children. For example, parents speak differently toward boys than girls about emotions, with more talk and a greater range of talk about emotions when talking to girls than when talking to boys (Dunn, Bretherton, & Munn, 1987; Kuebli, Butler, & Fivush, 1995). Mothers also provide relatively more talk about positive emotions with girls, and relatively more talk about anger with boys (Fivush, 1989). They provide more explanations of scientific content in a museum setting when talking to boys vs. girls (Crowley, Callanan, Tenenbaum, & Allen, 2001), and more talk “of the type thought to facilitate cognitive development” when talking to boys vs. girls (Weitzman, Birns, & Friend, 1985). Likewise, there are interesting sex-of-child differences in how teachers talk with young children (e.g., teachers interrupting girls more than boys; Hendrick & Stange, 1991). In an important meta-analysis, Leaper, Anderson, and Sanders (1998) examined parental talkativeness, affiliative speech, and assertive speech. Across 25 studies, Leaper et al. found that mothers talk differently than fathers (e.g., more talkative, less directive), and that mothers use more supportive speech with daughters than sons. All of these important differences could influence children’s gender-related behaviors, attributes, and beliefs. For example, greater focus on causal explanations of science exhibits for boys vs. girls could contribute to gender differences in children’s interest and knowledge about scientific concepts (Crowley et al., 2001).

What is much less understood is what parents say to children *about* gender per se. There is little known at this point about how parents talk about gender categories to their children, and in turn how such talk might contribute to developing gender concepts. Talk about gender is potentially important in two ways: as a means of explicit expression of gender-stereotyped beliefs, and as a means of implicit focus on gender categories. For example, consider an excerpt from an infamous children’s book published in 1970 (Darrow, 1970), *I’m Glad I’m a Boy, I’m Glad I’m a Girl!*:

Boys are doctors; Girls are nurses.

Boys are football players; Girls are cheerleaders.

Boys invent things; Girls use the things boys invent.

Boys fix things; Girls need things fixed.

Boys are presidents; Girls are first ladies.

What makes this book so offensive as to lead to banishment from library shelves and to provoke one reviewer on [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) to call it a “horrible, sexist book!”? We suspect that the book offends precisely because it so effectively recruits *multiple* devices to portray and exaggerate gender differences. The author not only expresses stereotypical activities of boys and girls in ways that argue for girls’ passivity and helplessness, but also uses noun forms (“boys” and “girls” [in general]) which imply that these roles generalize broadly across an entire gender; a verb form (present,

non-progressive tense) which implies that these gendered roles are timeless, enduring, and unchanging; and contrasting couplets to suggest that male and female activities are dichotomous, polarized, and opposing. Without such devices, the power of the text diminishes. For example, consider the following:

Some boys want to be doctors or football players. I know a girl who needed something fixed. Another girl grew up to be a first lady.

This hypothetical text, although also expressing gender stereotypes, is not nearly as pointed in its portrayal of gender. Although Darrow's text is likely an extreme example, and we do not expect to find anything approaching the power of this text in the speech addressed to young children in this study (with a well-educated, middle-class U.S. sample), we also hypothesized that some of these devices would appear in the language that young children hear. We review both explicit and implicit functions of gendered language below.

## LANGUAGE AS A WINDOW ONTO GENDER CONCEPTS

Considering both explicit and implicit messages, there are several possible ways that talk about gender may be used to convey gender concepts. We review five possible sources of information, each of which has been identified in past research that is reviewed below: (1) endorsing or rejecting gender stereotypes; (2) providing gender labels; (3) contrasting males vs. females; (4) expressing gender equality; and (5) expressing generic categories of gender.

### *Endorsing (or Rejecting) Gender Stereotypes*

The most straightforward and direct way of conveying gender-typed information is to endorse gender stereotypes. A speaker can use language to express the belief that an individual of a given sex, or members of that gender category in general, are appropriate for a given activity. Likewise, a speaker can use language to express the belief that an individual of a given sex, or members of that gender category in general, are *not* appropriate for a given activity. A statement such as a boy saying, "I'm going to be a firefighter when I grow up," or the infamous talking Barbie who said, "Math is hard" are examples of stated gender stereotypes. Statements such as these can either reinforce or contradict parallel non-linguistic information in the environment (e.g., scarcity of women firefighters; girls performing just as well as boys in elementary-school math). Language may also make more

explicit and salient information that otherwise would not be represented in terms of gender.

Numerous studies have found that parents encourage gender-typed toy play, discourage cross-gender toy play (e.g., refraining from offering a doll to a boy), and reward gender-typed play (Eisenberg, Wolchik, Hernandez, & Pasternack, 1985; Fagot, 1978; Fagot, Hagan, Leinbach, & Kronsberg, 1985; see Lytton & Romney, 1991, for a review and meta-analysis). These studies often include both behaviors and language; for example, a parent's response might be coded as "positive," whether it is a smile, hug, or verbal praise. However, the gender-typing messages conveyed by language are not usually examined separately. Thus, to our knowledge it is not clear how often and in what contexts children receive these explicit gender-typing messages in parental language.

### *Providing Gender Labels*

Much work in the language development literature suggests that providing a label highlights categories for children (e.g., Baldwin, Markman, & Melartin, 1993; Gelman & Heyman, 1999; Waxman, 1999; Waxman & Markow, 1995; Welder & Graham, 2001; Xu, 1999, 2002; see Gelman, 2003, for review). Hearing a common label for objects highlights their categorical relatedness, and encourages children to treat instances as being alike in non-obvious ways. This is true for a wide range of labels, including words for animals (Gelman & Markman, 1986), trait labels (Heyman & Gelman, 2000), and gender labels (Bauer & Coyne, 1997; Gelman, Collman, & Maccoby, 1986). Therefore, use of gender labels is potentially an important means of emphasizing gender categories.

Clear effects of language are found when researchers have examined how children interpret different forms of reference to gender. Children interpret gendered labels as implying that an activity is exclusive to one sex (e.g., "policeman" is interpreted as exclusively male by school-aged children; Liben, Bigler, & Krogh, 2002), and they interpret generic use of the pronoun "he" as referring exclusively to males (Hyde, 1984). Interestingly, mothers display a male bias in labeling of gender-neutral animal characters in a picture book (DeLoache, Cassidy, & Carpenter, 1987). This finding suggests that mothers may use language in a way that highlights males more than females, contributing to a tendency for language to ignore women (Henley, 1989).

### *Contrasting Males vs. Females*

Young children have a tendency to treat categories as contrasting or mutually exclusive (Markman, 1989; Clark, 1987; but see Deák & Maratsos, 1998), and this is particularly so for gender categories (e.g., Martin, 1989;

Martin, Eisenbud, & Rose, 1995). In other words, children often seem to assume that if something is appropriate for girls, then it is not appropriate for boys, and vice versa. One way to convey this idea is by means of direct contrasts: X is for girls, not boys. Even 2-year-olds are sensitive to linguistic means of expressing such contrasts. For example, Waxman and Klibanoff (2000) find that providing a contrasting negative example helps children learn a new word (see also Au & Laframboise, 1990; Gottfried & Tonks, 1996). Interestingly, children provide contrasts for a variety of important concepts as early as 2 or 3 years of age (e.g., talk about mental states by contrasting belief vs. reality, Shatz, Wellman, & Silber, 1983; Bartsch & Wellman, 1995; reasoning about food, Nguyen & Murphy, 2003). Even adults sometimes treat graded categories as dichotomous (e.g., treating certain food substances as either wholly good or wholly bad; Rozin, Ashmore, & Markwith, 1996). Comparing instances may also help children align gender categories to enable a sharper contrast (see Gentner & Namy, 2000; Markman & Gentner, 2000, for fuller discussion of the importance of structural alignment more generally). Conversely, providing training with *multiple* classifications (e.g., sorting pictures of people by gender, and by occupation), which differ in structure from binary contrasts, leads to greater flexibility and less gender stereotyping (Bigler & Liben, 1992). Little is known, however, regarding when parents and children produce talk that contrasts boys with girls or men with women.

### *Expressing Gender Equality*

One can use language to convey that an activity is appropriate to both genders. This is the reverse of highlighting gender differences. Such expressions are a direct means of countering gender stereotypes. Past research has found that parents differ in the degree of positive or negative reactions they provide for gender-typed behavior (Leaper, 2002). These studies suggest that some parents tolerate cross-gender-typed behavior, and therefore may be endorsing gender equality. However, little is known about the frequency of such talk among parents or children.

### *Expressing Generic Categories*

In recent work on children's essentialist beliefs about animals, we have found that parents provide little *explicit* essentialist talk about categories (i.e., parents rarely if ever talk about non-obvious internal similarities, or innate capacities), yet they provide much *implicit* essentialist talk in the form of generic noun phrases (Gelman et al., 1998). Generic noun phrases express category-wide generalizations; they refer to a category as an abstract whole (Carlson & Pelletier, 1995). For example, compare the generic sentence "*Girls* play with dolls" with the non-generic sentence "*Those girls* are playing



with dolls.” In the first sentence, and in contrast to the second, “girls” refers to the abstract set of girls in general. Furthermore, generics typically refer to qualities that are relatively stable (non-accidental), enduring (not transient), and timeless (not contextually bound) (Lyons, 1977). Use of a generic thus implies that a category is a coherent, stable entity. In English, generic noun phrases are expressed with bare plurals (e.g., “*Bats* live in caves”), definite singulars (e.g., “*The elephant* is found in Africa and Asia”), or indefinite articles (e.g., “*A male goose* is called a gander”), and are accompanied by present-tense verbs.

Unlike utterances containing universal quantifiers such as *all*, *every*, or *each*, generic statements allow for exceptions. Whereas even a single counterexample would negate the generalization “All boys play with trucks”, the generic statement “Boys play with trucks” can persist in the face of counterexamples (Hollander, Gelman, & Star, 2002). Thus, we hypothesize that the dual nature of generics (as attributed to most members of a category but robust against counter-evidence) means that properties expressed with generics will be particularly persistent in children’s developing knowledge systems. Generics may highlight similarities among members of a gender category for young children and promote essentialist beliefs.

Children produce generics in spontaneous interactions with their parents as young as 2-1/2 years of age (Gelman, 2003; Pappas & Gelman, 1998). By 2 to 3 years of age, children also interpret generics differently from non-generics (e.g., “Do birds fly?” vs. “Do the birds fly?”). Importantly, prior work has found that when 4-year-old children hear generics, they interpret them as broader in scope than “some” but narrower in scope than “all” (Hollander, Gelman, & Star, 2002). For example, if asked about bears having white fur, they are most likely to say that *some* bears have white fur, least likely to say that *all* bears have white fur, and moderately likely to say that *bears* have white fur. Furthermore, when 4-year-olds hear new facts stated in generic form, they generalize the facts to new instances more broadly than when it is said to be true of “some” members, and less broadly than when it is said to be true of “all” members. Thus, generics appear to be interpreted as referring to general categories by preschool age.

Of particular relevance to the present context, studies that provide generic (category-wide) prompts to children about gender (e.g., “I think *boys* like the things in this box better than *girls* do”; “The game is for *girls*, like jacks”), lead children to modify their play behavior to conform to the gender stereotype (Bradbard & Endsley, 1983), to recall more information about toys labeled for the child’s own gender (Bradbard, Martin, Endsley, & Halverson, 1986), and to find the activity more attractive when labeled for the child’s own sex (Montemayor, 1974). However, such studies were not focused on the linguistic distinction between generics and

non-generics, and so did not provide a direct contrast between the two forms of speech.

At this point little is known about the generics that children produce or hear concerning gender (though see Gelman & Taylor, 2000, for a preliminary investigation of this issue). Some evidence suggests that among preschool-aged children, one or two instances can be sufficient to prompt a gender-related generic (Martin, Ruble, & Szkrybalo, 2002, p. 925). For example, Martin et al. describe an anecdote originally reported by Bjorklund (2000, p. 362), in which a child concluded "Men eat pizza and women don't" after a trip to a restaurant in which his father and another male ordered pizza and his mother ordered lasagna. At the same time, prior research suggests that there may be important developmental shifts in the relative importance of gender (category) information vs. individuating information, in how children reason about people. For example, Biernat (1991) gave children ranging from kindergarten age through 10th grade and college students descriptions of boys or girls with either stereotypical attributes (e.g., a girl who babysits) or counter-stereotypical attributes (e.g., a girl who plays baseball), and asked them to judge which other characteristics each child would have. At all ages participants used gender labels (whether the target child was a "boy" or a "girl"), but as children got older, they were increasingly likely to use individuating information (e.g., whether the child babysits or plays baseball). An examination of gender-referring generics in children's speech, and in the speech that children hear, is a needed next step in determining children's use of generic categories in the speech they hear and produce.

## STUDY OVERVIEW

To examine gender talk in mother-child conversations, we videotaped mothers and their young children (2, 4, or 6 years of age) discussing a picture book that depicted stereotypical and counter-stereotypical gendered activities (e.g., a boy playing football; a boy sewing). These interactions were transcribed, coded, and analyzed in fine-grained detail. Mothers and children also completed tasks that measured gender stereotyping and/or gender constancy.

These ages were selected for two reasons. First, during the preschool years, parental input is an especially important source of information to children (Sabbagh & Callanan, 1998). This is also true with gender-related talk. In their meta-analysis of parents' child-directed language, Leaper, Anderson, and Sanders (1998) find that variations in how parents talk to girls vs. boys was greatest for young children (infants and toddlers), when the highest rate of language learning is taking place. Second and equally



important, the ages from 2 to 6 years represent an important period for gender development. Knowledge of gender categories and stereotypes increases rapidly in the second year and continues to undergo significant changes during the preschool and kindergarten years. Traditionally, gender constancy, or at least knowledge of one's own gender, was thought to be a prerequisite for acquiring gender stereotypes, however, more recently, researchers have argued that only rudimentary, implicit gender concepts (e.g., discrimination between males and females) may be needed to get the process started (Serbin, Poulin-Dubois, Colburne, Sen, & Eichstedt, 2001). Most children correctly apply gender labels to themselves and others by the time they are 30 to 36 months—some by 24 months (Fagot & Leinbach, 1995)—and they are soon proficient at gender categorization (Johnston, Madole, Bittinger, & Smith, 2000; Katz, 1996; Leinbach & Fagot, 1986; Levy, 1999; Stipek, Gralinski, & Kopp, 1990; Poulin-Dubois, Serbin, & Derbyshire, 1998).

Toddlers also have at least an implicit knowledge of gender stereotyping, even before they acquire gender constancy, and understand that the characteristics associated with gender (e.g., activities, toys, occupations, hairstyles, and clothing) do not determine whether a person is female or male. Eighteen-month-old girls showed preferential looking for a face that matched the gender-stereotyping of a previously presented toy (Serbin et al., 2001). In addition to stereotyping toys, toddlers also have begun to form metaphorical gender associations, such as linking bears, fir trees, and the color blue with males (Eichstedt, Serbin, Poulin-Dubois, & Sen, 2000). By the preschool years, children have extensive knowledge about the characteristics associated with gender categories (Edelbrock & Sugawara, 1978; Kuhn, Nash, & Brucken, 1978; Ruble & Martin, 1998), and they make stereotypical inferences readily on the basis of sex (Bauer & Coyne, 1997; Gelman, Collman, & Maccoby, 1986).

One issue we can address in this study is what sorts of changes with age we find in children's and parents' talk about gender. For example, is there a steadily increasing amount of attention to gender, or are there sudden "jumps" over time? Does attention to gender show a monotonic increase, or does it peak and then level off or drop? Do changes in children's focus on gender correspond to change in maternal input? How do changes in gender constancy, or gender stereotyping on traditional measures, correspond to the talk between mothers and children? By studying three distinct age groups over this rapidly changing period, we can examine these issues.

The picture-book reading task was chosen as one that is a relatively unstructured, naturalistic, and frequent form of interaction, and therefore one that we hoped would enable a fairly representative sample of the conversations that mothers and children have about gender. Book-reading has