

Same-sex Families and New Parental Models: Redefining Motherhood and Fatherhood Through Children's Picture Books

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Abstract

Family is one of the most common and influential topics in children's literature. However, depictions of families with non-traditional gender dynamics are still not common in picturebooks addressed to young audiences. In particular, fathers and mothers rarely counteract their gender roles; they usually fulfil socially constructed expectations linked to masculinity and femininity. Parental models are particularly influential in children's construction of gender identity. For this reason, it is fundamental to promote inclusive children's literature. This paper explores a selection of children's picturebooks from different countries in which where new parental gender dynamics are presented. The depiction of gender standards will be related to family structures: children's literature on same-sex families seems to be particularly effective in counteracting gender stereotypes linked to fatherhood and motherhood challenging traditional family structures and parental gender norms.

Gender Socialization and Children's Literature

1 Gender socialization (Stockard, 2006; Bussey & Bandura, 1999; West & Zimmerman, 1987; Burgio, 2015; Piccone Stella & Saraceno, 1996; Carter, 2014) has been widely studied by scholars from different fields, such as psychology, education, cultural and literary studies. Gender socialization is a multifaceted process that shapes men's and women's lives and influences their perception of what is socially and culturally 'acceptable'. Theories of gender socialization argue that this process starts from a very early age, when children learn what is expected of them by identifying with role performances displayed by agents of socialization. Some of the most common and influencing tools of socialization are family members, educators and peers, and media (Ulivieri, 2014; Burgio, 2015).

2 Thus, gender education is a lifelong, complex process which takes place in many contexts and through different tools. Male and female standards are passively learnt through various elements that build gender identity. From a very early age (3-4 years old) children express their need to label female and male roles as opposites, creating a strong dichotomy based on sexual difference. This leads to a stereotyped identity that usually does not differ

much from prevailing notions of masculinity and femininity in a specific society (Ulivieri, 2007).

3 Popular culture and media have an indirect but significant impact on this educational process: products addressed to children and young adults, such as toys, literature, cinema, cartoons, magazines, advertisements, videogames, and so on, create and reinforce gender ideals and promote male and female stereotypes. Moreover, most of the entertaining products offered to children are based on storytelling. Stories—even if narrated and disseminated through different media—are part of children's, teenagers', and adults' life and, consequently, children's and adults' narrations can be considered most powerful tools in silently promoting specific gender roles (Lopez, 2017; Biemmi, 2012; Witt, 2001; Seveso, 2000).

4 Considering the depiction of gender identity in children's books, and specifically in picture books (Faeti, 1995), most international studies on the topic agree that girls and women are usually underrepresented and seldom portrayed as relevant characters or protagonists. By contrast boys and men are particularly common in works for children and are usually presented as active, powerful characters (Biemmi, 2012; Trepanier-Street & Romatowski, 1999). Accordingly, men and women are portrayed as opposite poles with fixed identities that cannot be confused, mixed or questioned. Consequently, family structures are influenced by gender standards, as heteronormative families with specific dynamics and corresponding parental roles are seldom deconstructed in books addressed to younger audiences (Trisicuzzi, 2018; Alston, 2012; Tucker, Gamble, 2001).

5 Thus, picture books for children often present specific gender and family models that silently shape young people's ideals of masculinity and femininity, and of fatherhood and motherhood. In such literature, these gender stereotypes are indirectly transmitted to the next generations (Sunderland, 2011). Books that partially deconstruct stereotypes and fixed models, offering non-heteronormative identities, roles, and family dynamics, are necessary in order to build an inclusive, complex collective imagination, where masculinity and femininity are not perceived as an unalterable dichotomy. Picturebooks should thus show multilayered identities that go beyond established gender canons (Ulivieri, 2014; Bishop, 1990; Beseghi, 1994).

Learning to be Fathers and Mothers

6 Western societies are by now characterized by an openness to a plurality of family structures: not just nuclear, heterosexual families, but also single parents, divorced parents,

same-sex families¹, adoptive families, and so on (Contini, 2007). In addition, family dynamics have widely changed in the last decades: when in the 20th century women started to work outside their homes, family dynamics slowly transformed. In particular, in the last decades of the 20th century, familial roles became more fluid, modifying the traditional opposition of what is perceived as “masculine” or “feminine” within certain limits (Gigli 57).

7 Parental models – both literary and real – encourage a specific perception of what is culturally adequate for a woman/mother and a man/father. Gender dynamics of family life affect children’s perception of masculinity and femininity. As they are perceived as unquestionable model to follow, parents have a strong influence on youngsters’ construction of identity and self-awareness (Riva, 2011). Parents represent the first model children experience and imitate: for this reason, their roles in family life create specific expectations. Accordingly, both real and literary parents can contribute to a change of gender norms offering new possibilities.

8 However, children’s literature appears to be particularly conventional in portraying parental identities. A comprehensive study on the topic was carried out by DeWitt, Cready and Steward (2013), who analysed the evolution of parental figures in picture books for children over the last five decades. According to the authors

Traditional roles that involve nurturance and caregiving from mothers and providing from fathers continue to dominate children’s literature. Since little significant variance was found between any of the mother and father role variables across time, traditional role performance remains the norm. Little boys learn that nurturing and caring for children are not masculine traits. And little girls continue to learn that the broom, not the scalpel, is a woman’s future tool for success. (DeWitt, Cready and Seward 101)

9 Several studies (Biemmi, 2012; Brugeilles & Cromer, 2002; Adams, Walker, & O’Connell, 2011) noticed that fathers and mothers are characterized by opposing actions and habits: fathers are portrayed as being in the workplace, working in the garden, fixing objects in the home, reading the newspaper or watching TV, while mothers are presented as cleaning the

¹ I prefer to use the general word “same-sex families” rather than focusing on the sexual orientation of the parents. Families composed of two members belonging to the same biological sex will be considered, while other non-heteronormative families (e. g. different-sex partners with non-heterosexual orientations or transgender identities) will not be part of the analysis for lack of material regarding family dynamics and parenthood.

house, cooking for the family, or taking care of the children. This distinction is highlighted by both the narrative texts and the pictures (Trisciuzzi 2017).

10 In this literature fathers are traditionally portrayed as breadwinners who are not directly involved in their children's education and, for this reason, often have a secondary role in the plot. In the few cases where fathers are represented while nurturing their children, they do it for a specific reason: the mother is ill or is working. Fathers' attempts to substitute the maternal figure in children's literature is usually (tragi)comic: they manage to somehow accomplish the necessary tasks, but they cannot do it as well as the mother would. They are depicted as largely inadequate, funny, not keen on domestic chores and educational activities. Vice versa, mothers are represented as naturally gifted at taking care of kids: they are strict but tender, and ready to sacrifice their own desires for their children's wellbeing (Brugeilles, Cromer and Cromer 260-262). Thus, many books for young audiences reinforce the idea that mothers are more adequate to educate and take care of their children than fathers (Brugeilles, Cromer and Cromer 260).

11 In 2005, David A. Anderson and Mykol Hamilton analyzed 200 picturebooks and discussed common stereotypes linked to parental figures. Employing a quantitative approach, they found that mothers are represented in 64% of the selected works, while fathers in 47,5%. Moreover, half of the books analysed present just a maternal figure, while only 27,5% showed a single-father: fathers are more absent than mothers in children's fiction (Anderson and Hamilton 147). This tendency contrasts with the general trend considering male and female portrayals in children's literature: female characters (girls in particular) are largely underrepresented, while male characters (boys in particular) figure centrally. However, if we consider parental figures, mothers are far more common than fathers. The study also focused on the display of affection and emotions, verifying that affection—and mostly physical affection—is still quite uncommon in portrayed fathers, who are mostly depicted as physically detached characters. Finally, the study shows that mothers take care of children twice as much as fathers, nurturing babies ten times more often than fathers.

With the exception of hugging babies and carrying older children, mothers in these books performed every measured nurturing behaviour at least twice as often as fathers, [...]. In support of the hypothesis that fathers would be relatively hands-off parents, there was no action that fathers performed significantly more often than mothers, and fathers were never seen kissing or feeding babies. (148)

The same results were found by Brugeilles, Cromer and Cromer (262). Thus, mothers in picture books are still highly stereotyped and considered as keener in educating and taking care of their children, while fathers are still presented as absent or not involved in children's education and nurturing.

Modern Families, Non-Traditional Parenthoods

12 In 1996, Louise B. Silverstein argued that the depiction of stereotyped paternal (and maternal) roles in children's literature could be overcome by an increasing focus on same-sex couples (Silverstein 24-25). Sociological research on the topic since the eighties suggests that same-sex parents adhere less to traditional role patterns (McPherson 1993; Trappolin & Tiano 2015; Scallen 1981). In same-sex couples, gender roles are more flexible and, consequently, parental roles tend to mix: house labour and children's education are equally divided between the partners (Kimmel 2011; Bigner & Jacobsen 1989). Same-sex couples are slowly revising stereotypical notions of fatherhood and motherhood (Giesler 2012). As research suggests new family structures lead to new family dynamics, and new family dynamics lead to innovative, fluid parental roles, changing long-lasting gender norms (Gigli 2007).

13 As society is opening up to non-heteronormative family models, in the last decades, children's literature has started to turn to non-canonical relationships and dynamics. Children who are part of non-canonical families (single parents, adoptive families, divorced families, same-sex families, and so on) need to be represented in children's fiction in order to recognize their own experiences. Picture books with same-sex families may offer a new, innovative approach to gender dynamics, challenging heteronormative concepts of femininity and masculinity.

14 Jane Sunderland and Mark McGlashan carried out important research on this issue: they analysed picture books written in English representing same-sex families. Their study shows that, on the one hand, these books are particularly 'modern' in depicting 'taboo topics', while, on the other hand, some stereotypes still persist. Through a comparative analysis of female and male same-sex families in picture books, the study demonstrates that women are still strongly linked to essentialising notions of motherhood, while this 'natural' connection is not offered in all-male families. Thus, fathers (mostly presented as two partners with children) are not primarily defined by their parental role. The word 'father' appears far less than the word 'mother' in these texts. While mothers tend to be presented as educators or nurturing figures, fathers are more often shown while playing with their children. However, fathers in these books

have to perform maternal roles as well, and are at times shown while cooking, cleaning, washing the dishes, and so on. These features are not usually presented in picturebooks depicting heteronormative family dynamics, where fathers are seldom represented in non-canonical roles.

15 Picture books can thus be useful tools by including different family models and gender identities, and thus offer a discussion of gender norms and parental patterns within familial contexts. Same-sex families in picture books present parental figures that —despite some recurrent, stereotyped structures— foster new familial paradigms. Maternal and paternal roles partially mix in order to create new, fluid characters who are not constrained by strict gender models. In particular, paternal figures are the ones most significantly reconfigured. In the remainder of this paper, I offer an analysis of case studies of picture books for children to exemplify the considerations offered so far.

An Analysis of Case Studies

16 In what follows I briefly explore eight picture books, published between the years 1989 and 2015 with focus on same-sex families in order to understand which family and gender dynamics are presented by authors and illustrators through words and/or images. The analysis aims to give examples of the process of redefinition of parental and gender dynamics through a brief historical overview of the topic, from the Nineties to the present. The works were selected according to the following criteria:

- Picture books, as to say, books based on the cooperation of words and images in giving specific meanings to the storytelling;
- Contemporary picture books published in the last three decades;
- International books published in English;
- Books addressed to an audience between four to eight years of age;
- Books presenting male and female same-sex parenting, with a strong focus on parenthood and familial life.

17 All of the selected books could be labelled as ‘issue books’ since they explicitly present a simple plot that focuses on everyday life and potential problems of same-sex families, narrated from the child’s perspective and trying to normalize this reality: for this reason, they often select an overtly didactic approach, over-emphasizing the ‘problem’. The emphasis on

familial life in these texts enables an analysis of non-canonical approaches to parenthood ideals, and of the deconstruction of fixed norms related to fatherhood and motherhood.

18 The study does not claim to be comprehensive exhaustive, but rather intends to offer an overview of the strategies for redefining parental standards following different criteria of analysis based on some key principles relating to the representation of parental and gender roles:

- *Naming*: An analysis of how mothers and fathers are called by children and narrator will enable an assessment of naming as indicator of gendered differences in parental roles;
- *Affection*: The display of physical affection of same-sex parents between each other and towards their children in the selected picture books will be analysed
- *Household chores and familial tasks and activities*: The division of labour inside and outside the house will be investigated considering both domestic and educational aspects of familial activities.

***Heather Has Two Mommies* [1989] (2016) by Lesléa Newman and illustrated by Laura Cornell**

19 This work was one of the first picture books to present same-sex families to a young audience. The first version of the book was published in 1989, but in 2016 a second version, with changed illustrations was published. The protagonist Heather has two mommies, called Mama Jane and Mama Kate. The book tells the story of the young girl's everyday life and her first day of school, when she faces some trouble because of her family structure. Considering family dynamics, Momma Jane is a carpenter: a 'non-traditional' job for women. In their spare time, Heather and her mommies play baseball in the park or, when it is raining, stay inside and bake cookies, blurring the line between stereotypical gender norms. Education is an important consideration of both mothers: Kate and Jane tell Heather she has to go to school and help her deal with her first day. Physical contact is common: Heather lays down with her mothers, who hold her in their arms. In some cases, they are depicted while holding hands – for example on the cover of the book –, and in a specific passage the text tells that the two moms kiss Heather before leaving her at school: "Soon it's time for Mama Jane and Mama Kate to leave. They kiss Heather goodbye, and Heather cries. But only a little" (n.p.). Physical affection is displayed thus equally by both mothers, and their roles are not presented as masculine vs. feminine, but rather attempt to offer a more gender 'neutral' approach.

***Asha's Mums* (1990) by Rosamund Elwin and Michele Paulse, illustrated by Dawn Lee**

20 This book tells the story of Asha, an African-Canadian girl who also lives with two mothers. This 'controversial issue' work specifically focuses on problems related to growing up in a non-standard family. Asha has to face difficulties at school because her teacher cannot believe that she lives with two mothers. The girl risks not to go on a school trip because her permission form is signed by the women rather than by a mother and a father. Asha struggles to fit in with her class —some of her classmates are curious about her family— but her mothers manage to convince the teacher to reconsider his preconceptions. The cover of the book transmits a feeling of sadness since it shows the little protagonist looking worried, while the two mothers, who sit on the sofa reading, are relegated to the background. The mothers are usually called Sara and Alice by the narrator, and "mum" by the protagonist in the dialogues. Both of the women ironically define themselves as "mummy number one", mocking children's confusion about their roles within the family. Both wish to be 'number one', but they actually share household chores and responsibilities. Regarding physical affection, the two mothers kiss and hug the child, even if these episodes are described, but not visualized. Both mothers are represented in terms of typically maternal roles, with no reference to what is socially considered masculine/paternal behaviour: other roles they might perform do not emerge in the book.

***Daddy's Roommate* by Michael Willhoite (1990)**

21 In this book, the young, nameless protagonist has to face his parents' divorce. After the separation, the father – called "Daddy" throughout the text – moves in with his partner Frank. The boy spends every weekend with Daddy and Frank, who organize fun activities for the protagonist, such as visiting the zoo, going to the beach, and so on. The two partners organize their work at home on equal terms: Frank cleans the house and cooks, while Daddy irons and takes care of his plants; they both play football with the boy and observe nature together. Both partners are portrayed while hugging the boy or with an arm around his shoulder. Throughout, the book presents their identities as fluid rather than restrictively gendered. By contrast, the boy's mother is depicted in stereotypically traditional terms: in one of the few pictures focussing on her, she is baking a cake in the kitchen, wearing a pink apron. Significantly however, it is the mother who takes on the task to explain to the child Daddy's and Frank's relationship and their sexual orientation. This choice denotes the mother's importance in dealing with 'delicate' issues and in educating her child, even when the topic discussed directly regards the father. The book clearly shows the persistence of the power of the maternal stereotype despite the reconfiguration of the father figure(s).

***And Tango Makes Three* (2005) by Peter Parnell and Justin Richardson, illustrated by Henry Cole**

22 This book has been one of the most criticized and at the same time most celebrated picturebooks about same-sex parenthood. It is based on the real-life story of the relationship between two male penguins, Roy and Silo, who lived together in New York's Central Park Zoo. The couple built a nest and tried to hatch stones as a substitute for eggs. When the zookeeper gave an abandoned egg to them, Tango came to life. While anthropomorphic animals are a common feature of books addressed to children, this picturebook prefers a non-anthropomorphic approach. As a consequence, animals are depicted without specific gender characteristics, but with realistic traits that relate to their natural appearance. Even if Roy and Silo are identified as male penguins verbally, they visually appear like all the other penguins of the zoo, without, at least for human readers, recognizable markers of sex. The cover of the book presents the physical affection in the family, as the three members are shown standing close together, Tango being happy to be with her fathers. Different forms of physical interaction recur throughout the book. The presented division of labour corresponds to real-life, as both male and female penguins do take turns to care of their eggs. Parental roles are not divided in terms of sex or gender, presenting an egalitarian division of responsibilities.

***In Our Mothers' House* (2009) by Patricia Polacco**

23 *In Our Mother's House* tells the story of how the protagonists' family came into being. Two women fall in love and adopt three children from different countries. The book describes their joy when meeting them for the first time, their everyday life as a family and the troubles they face as a same-sex family (e.g. in the neighbourhood). Beyond these concerns the book presents a larger circle of life showing the three siblings growing up, getting married and having children of their own, closing with the two mothers peacefully dying together. Although the two mothers are characterized by very different and to some extent even opposed personalities, both women mostly adhere to familiar gendered role patterns: Mina is a pediatrician who loves to cook, while Marnie is a paramedic who cleans the house and likes to organize everything. The two mothers are often shown while doing activities related to the house, such as washing, cleaning or sewing, while the most prominent outdoor activity – building a treehouse – is done with the help of the entire neighborhood. The mothers are called by their first names and are often depicted while showing affection to the three kids: they both hold the children in their arms, hugging and tickling them. The two women's roles are presented as interchangeable, but stereotypically maternal, without questioning implied gender norms.

***Daddy, Papa and Me and Mommy, Mama, and Me* by Lesléa Newman and Carol Thompson (2009)**

24 The two books present two androgynous nameless children and their family-life, told in pictures and rhymes. *Daddy, Papa and Me*, presents a young protagonist growing up with two fathers (called Daddy and Papa). On the very first page he/she is shown running toward them. The two fathers are depicted on the right side of the double spread page washing the dishes together after breakfast. Throughout the book, chores and educational responsibilities are equally divided: Daddy teaches the protagonist how to draw, while Papa bakes a cake; Daddy plays with him/her, while Papa builds paper airplanes; Daddy teaches him/her how to sew, while Papa plays football with the child. Physical contact is often highlighted: already on the cover, the two fathers are holding the little protagonist. In the book, the fathers are shown resting against each other or sitting close on the sofa. Thus stereotypical concepts of (paternal) masculinity give way to more fluid and multifaceted readings of fatherhood.

25 In *Mommy, Mama, and Me*, the protagonist is brought up by two mothers (called Mommy and Mama), who – as in *Daddy, Papa and Me* - are presented holding the child on the book's cover. Their affection is highlighted by verbal and visual references to hugging or kissing the child. Throughout the book the two mothers are involved in a variety of interactions with the child: Mommy cooks, prepares snacks, combs the protagonist's hair, teaches him/her how to count etc, while Mama rocks her/him in the chair, rides the child on her back, plays hide and seek, prepares a bath full of bubbles, or reads a book. Although these roles seem interchangeable and balanced between them, both mothers still conform to stereotypical notions of maternity as they are both represented in tasks which are considered typically female, without negotiating them.

***A Tale of Two Daddies and A Tale of Two Mommies* by Vanita Oelschlager and Kristin Blackwood (2013)**

26 The young protagonist, a little girl whose name is not mentioned in the text, presents her life with two fathers, called Poppa and Daddy. The girl has to answer a lot of questions by her friends, who are curious to understand her family dynamics. The friends wish to know more about familial and parental patterns in relation to notions of femininity and masculinity. In the book, the two parents are not directly depicted: readers can never see their faces as the illustrator decides to only illustrate their feet and their legs, adopting the child's perspective. Consequently, affection is not directly portrayed since the two adults are not fully represented, but are simply hinted through the depiction of their lower bodies. Gender division of labour is

equal and fluid: Poppa and Daddy do not have gendered preferences regarding education or spare time: they both do domestic chores, they both take care of the girl's health and they both want to have fun with her, as is shown verbally and visually. Although fathers are not entirely shown, we can see the little protagonist engaged in different activities with them. For instance, Poppa braids her hair and builds a treehouse, while Daddy kills insects and helps the girl when she cuts her knee. The book creates a rhythm alternating between supposedly "feminine" and "masculine" role patterns in order to suggest that gender roles are flexible and not necessarily linked to sex. This also applies to the presentation of the young protagonist, who plays football, and refuses to be totally cast in outdated notions of femininity.

27 A complementary book was published by the same author and illustrator, showing a female version of the parental couple. In this case, the young protagonist is a nameless little African-American boy living with two mothers, who – like his female counterpart - answers the questions of curious friends about his everyday life. Like their male counterparts the two mothers, who are called Momma and Mommy, are only shown partially, readers can only see their legs, sharing in the child's eye-level perspective. The book explains how the two mothers equally divide household chores and education between them: they cook, go fishing, fix objects, teach the boy how to ride a bike, fix things, and so on. Both mothers are presented showing affection to the boy. Like the fathers in *A Tale of Two Daddies* the mothers in *A Tale of Two Mommies* represent a flexible concept of motherhood. The boy, too, is presented as counteracting gender stereotypes, for example, when he is shown riding a pink bike.

***Stella Brings the Family* (2015), by Miriam B. Schiffer, illustrated by Holly Clifton Brown**

28 This picturebook focuses on Stella who lives with two fathers (called Daddy and Papa) and is worried when her school organizes a party for Mother's Day. Her fathers manage to help her to explain that a family is composed of people who love each other, regardless of sex. Thus, Stella brings all the family to the party, even her grandparents. Although most of the book is set at the school, some scenes describe family life at home. Parental dynamics are presented as fluid: the two fathers wash the dishes together; they both cook and educate the child. In addition, both parents hug and kiss the girl, particularly when she feels sad. Physical contact is explicit in the cover, too: the fathers and Stella are portrayed together, holding hands.

Discussion

29 All of the books described so far present everyday life stories based on same-sex family dynamics. Most of the scenes presented in the books are set in familial contexts, but in addition the school is a recurring setting. The protagonists are mostly single children, only in one case siblings, who explain from a first-person narrative perspective or through the use of an external narrator's voice the dynamics within their families. Children are always the main focus of the narration.

30 In the books discussed, naming is a significant feature starting with the titles, where the characters are usually presented with reference to their parental roles, highlighting the specificity of the family structure. Parents are mostly called *momma*, *mummy*, *mum*, or *daddy*, *poppa*, *papa*, etc. However, in *Heather Has Two Mommies*, this is combined with their given name (Mama Jane and Mama Kate), while in *And Tango Makes Three* and in *In our Mothers' House* parents are called by their given names only (Roy and Silo, Marnie and Mina). So, parental figures are strongly linked to their roles, even if in some cases their personal identity is stressed through the use of their given names. Mothers seem to be more characterised as subjects through the use of their personal names rather than or in addition to their maternal roles, while fathers' names are usually not mentioned, except for anthropomorphic representations, focusing in this way on their parental duties more than on their subjectivity.

31 Affection is one of the central aspects highlighted in most of the books selected. All of the books present moments of physical affection, starting with the cover of the books, (except for *A Tale of Two Daddies* and *A Tale of Two Mummies*, where adults are not fully portrayed as they are represented through the depiction of their legs and their feet, with no hints about their faces). Generally, both parents seem to demonstrate the same amount of affection. Although fathers are usually 'distant' or largely absent figures in children's books (Adams, Walker, & O'Connell, 2011), in male same-sex family stories they are presented as caring, loving figures hugging and kissing their children. In these cases, fatherhood is reconsidered and reconceptualised offering a more caring, emotional portrayal.

32 As far as tasks and chores are considered, they are equally divided among parents in the selected texts: mothers and fathers perform a variety of different tasks with no particular stereotyped relation to gender roles. The books reject the representation of parental couples in terms of a gender binary, but rather mix diverse roles and features. Despite this change, there are still significant gender-related differences between books with male and female same-sex

parents. While books about two-dad families portray fathers performing traditionally female tasks (baking, sewing, washing the dishes, cleaning the house, educating or cuddling children), mothers in two-mom families are seldom linked to typically paternal roles. Mothers can be seen fishing or as a carpenter, but engagement in stereotypically ‘female’ actions for male parents is definitely more common than in stereotypically ‘male’ actions for female parents. Women are still perceived as natural caregivers (Sunderland & McGlashan, 2012, p. 202), with authors and illustrators still struggling to represent them in a different light.

33 Earlier picture books on the same-sex parents still present more stereotypical roles, while more recent works tend to be more open to emphasizing the fluidity of parental dynamics. In this set of selected texts fatherhood was the first issue to be taken up critically: both *Daddy’s Roommate* and *Asha’s Moms* were published in 1990, but the two books are based on a different approach considering parental standards: the former partially deconstructs them and offers new possibilities considering gender and parental roles, the latter offers an overtly traditional representation of motherhood that does not propose new dynamics, but simply represent typical traits of motherhood in Western culture.

Conclusion

34 Picture books for children which present non-heteronormative families contribute to including different family structures and identities into the collective imagination, but also function as a powerful tool in fostering new, fluid gender/parental role models that overcome limited concepts of masculinity and femininity. Same-sex parenting in picture books can serve to disrupt heteronormative family structures and parental gender norms, providing examples of a different division of tasks between parents.

35 Although there is a strong potential to re-conceptualise long-lasting gendered family patterns, these books focusing on same-sex parents still disclose decisive limitations with regard to changing notions of motherhood and fatherhood. While fathers are presented as deviating from the stereotype of the distant working dad, performing a supposedly maternal role, mothers are still linked to this maternal role as natural caregiver, struggling to redefine norms of femininity/motherhood.

36 To conclude, despite persisting stereotypes, this short analysis of eight picture books depicting same-sex parents, has shown the need for new parental models and gender relations.

In contemporary families, household chores are being distributed more and more flexibly, and “male” and “female” tasks and patterns of behaviour are increasingly interrelated and interchangeable. As picture books for very young children, the works discussed offer great potential to challenge stereotypical gender norms through their portrayal of non-traditional familial structures.

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