Slogans emblazoned on baby bibs marketed by a leading retailer tell a striking tale about the gender expectations parents face as they outfit their daughters and sons. “Glamour Baby,” “Daddy’s Princess,” “Born to Shop,” “Diva,” “Hot Babe,” and “Pretty Girl” adorn the girls’ bibs versus “Wild One,” “Little Toughie,” “All Star,” “Rebel,” “The Boss,” and “Trouble Maker” for the boys. An equally gender-marked array of shirts is produced by major companies. One store features tees for sizes six months and up announcing, for girls, “Little Angel” and “I’d Rather Be Shopping with Mommy” and, for boys, “Little Bruiser” and “Play All Day, Rock All Night.” Another store offers apparel sending similar gendered signals, this time in summer styles for preschoolers: “Poolside Princess” and “Beach Beauty” as opposed to “Shark Attack” and “Danger Zone.” Almost always the styles for girls are in shades of pink and the boys’ the requisite blue. When my twin sons were born, and throughout their early childhood, I avoided stamping them with these gender labels, selecting clothes and toys I considered neutral. Why be trapped by other people’s expectations and assumptions, I reasoned, when one can follow one’s own path?

That turned out to be much easier said than done, as eventually I faced a dilemma perhaps familiar to many readers. One day my spouse, having picked up our children at their kindergarten after-school program, reported that he had arrived at the school to find one of our sons sitting alone on the floor quietly crying. When his father asked what was wrong, he choked out that no one wanted to play with his kind of trading cards. Five years
old, my son and his twin brother had been asking for combat-oriented trading cards wildly popular with young boys at the time. I had objected to the cards’ emphasis on fighting, typical of boys’ peer cultures in the contemporary United States. My son replied that all the boys had these cards. I thought I had found a clever compromise when I told him he could bring some other kind of cards to play with at his after-school program, and sent him off with a brand-new deck of standard playing cards. He immediately discovered that these cards held no interest for his peers, leaving him alone to wonder why. Before this incident, I was pleased about my efforts to discourage gender-typed activities for my sons and gratified that they had wide-ranging interests unconstrained by traditional gender expectations. On that day, however, I thought hard about the price they would pay if they could not participate in the peer culture of their fellow boys. I soon relented, buying each the trading cards they wanted. This was but one in a long line of careful calculations I had made about their expression of gender in relation to the class- and race-specific gendered culture of their white, middle- to upper-middle-class environment. As a parent I had significant power in making those calculations, but my actions were inseparable from my children’s own desires and the social world around them.

Parents do not act alone in shaping their young children’s gender. The children themselves, plus a host of other factors including schools, peers, television shows, teachers, and video games, influence the process and do so in ways inextricably linked to the construction—and constraints—of race, class, and sexuality. This book focuses on the role of parents in constructing their children’s gender, exploring their thoughts, the attributes, interests, and behaviors they accept or discourage for their sons and daughters, their motivations for engaging in actions that reproduce or resist gendered outcomes, and their awareness of their own role in these processes. Although focused on parents, my analysis also emphasizes the context in which parents act. Many other studies have documented that parents of young children often behave in ways that encourage gendered patterns, reproducing gender as a social category in their selection of toys, clothes, and activities as well as their styles of play and emotional expression. Most of these studies rely on check-box survey questions or observations of what parents do in experimental situations, treating parents in isolation from
the broader social context and assuming that the motivations for their actions are either unconscious or based on their acceptance of the gendered status quo. Such methods can document the outlines of these practices but tell us little about the nuances of the process or the motivations and barriers shaping parental actions. Those nuances are crucial to understanding what I call the “gender trap,” a set of expectations and structures that inhibit social change and stall many parents’ best intentions for loosening the limits that gender can impose upon us. To more fully reveal the tensions many parents balance as they navigate that gender trap with and for their children, I draw on in-depth interviews I conducted with more than forty parents of preschoolers, children poised at the age when gender is particularly salient to their sense of themselves. The interviews include the voices of both mothers and fathers from a variety of class backgrounds, racial/ethnic groups, sexual orientations, and family types.

As I listened to these parents in their living rooms, at their kitchen tables, on my college campus, or at their workplaces, it became clear that they are neither passive conduits for social rules dictated by structures beyond their control nor completely free agents who can design the social worlds their children inhabit. Instead, they find themselves in the middle of a dynamic process of reproducing and resisting gendered patterns. Parents engage in this process in dialogue with powerful social institutions, in everyday interactions with those around them, and carrying the baggage of their own beliefs about gender. They re-create gendered structures, enthusiastically and hesitantly, directly and indirectly. They provide opportunities, reinforce or discourage outcomes, and model behavior in ways that shape gendered paths for their children. But many of these parents also creatively tweak and even revise those structures, making it up as they go along and responding to the feedback they receive along the way. The tweaking and revision is especially notable for daughters. I document a range of interests and attributes that parents consider unusual for girls, and that they actively seek to encourage, from sports participation to aspirations toward traditionally male occupations. They want these opportunities for their daughters, and most view their greater availability as a sign of positive social change. At the same time many parents see attributes such as nurturance and empathy for others, as well as interests in, for example, fash-
ion and appearance, as natural or inevitable in their young daughters. The combination of typical and atypical patterns these parents craft often leads them back into the gender trap, thwarting the very opportunities they seek to build. Undermining some gendered blueprints at the same time they reinforce others, they unwittingly solidify gendered divisions of labor and power in the workforce, the family, and civil society. For most parents, tweaking and revision are evident also in relation to sons but to a more limited extent. They teach their young sons some basic domestic skills and encourage empathy, even as they prepare those boys to compete in typical male domains and avoid expressing vulnerability. Beliefs about biology and fears about social costs pave the way toward the gender trap, narrowing the range of options many consider acceptable for boys. That narrower range also solidifies gendered divisions of labor and power in ways that advantage boys and men but also constrain them. For both sons and daughters, many parental actions and beliefs construct boys and girls as separate groups with different needs, interests, and capacities, reinforcing a binary approach to gender that may actually create what it purports only to reflect. Weaving these patterns together, I reveal the important role parents play in reproducing gendered power structures. But I also uncover the possibilities for sidestepping the gender trap and creating social change that are implicit in parents’ resistance, their ambivalence, and the complexities, tensions, and contradictions inherent in their beliefs and actions.

The Continuing Relevance of Gender

Why even think about gender as a trap? Some would claim that gender inequality is a thing of the past, and gendered childhoods more innocent fun than a foundation for inequality and constraint. In fact, a substantial body of scholarship documents the continuing relevance of gender as a social structure that limits opportunity, restricts individual potential, and distributes social resources unequally. Women remain disproportionately responsible for household labor and child care, even as their labor market hours have risen over recent decades. Their income for that time in the labor market continues to lag behind men’s, with women who are employed full-time and year-round earning about seventy-seven cents annually for
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every dollar a man earns. Inequalities in domestic responsibility and the gendered wage gap are connected as well, with even larger wage gaps evident among parents. This latter pattern is what sociologists Michelle Budig and Paula England call a “motherhood penalty,” as parenthood is associated with higher earnings among men but lower earnings among women. In a related pattern, experimental researchers have found that raters evaluate mothers less highly than women without children when asked to review resumes and make hypothetical hiring and salary decisions. For men, parenthood status does not affect ratings significantly. Both the gender wage gap and the motherhood penalty foster women’s economic dependence on men, and shape a particularly harsh economic reality for single mothers and their children, who make up an increasingly large share of households with children in the contemporary United States. The wage gap and motherhood penalty also shape the negative impact of divorce on the economic security of women and children. Regardless of parenthood status, men and women continue to be segregated into different occupations, with female-dominated occupations generally earning less. Currently women, on average, hold less authority in the workplace and fewer positions of power in formal politics than men in the United States, and people still tend to perceive women as less effective at leadership. Women are disproportionately affected by sexual harassment, sexual assault, and domestic violence. They are also more likely to suffer from eating disorders and a negative body image, complex phenomena with many contributing factors but outcomes that some scholars have linked to objectified and nearly unattainable media representations of the ideal female body. Media images continue to frame girls and women as more passive, whereas boys and men are represented as more active, authoritative, and in control. All these gendered patterns vary in important ways by other intersecting dimensions of inequality such as race and class, a critical topic to which I return later. But this broad overview documents persistent gender inequalities in the family, workplace, politics, media, and daily life, even while much has shifted in the social expectations for men and women.

This partial list of the constraints and limitations imposed on girls and women is one piece of the continuing relevance of the gender trap, but, as scholars increasingly emphasize, gendered patterns also place significant
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constraints on boys and men. The benefits that flow from these various inequalities come at great costs. Social expectations for masculinity that emphasize power, toughness, aggression, and emotional reserve all lead men toward a narrow ideal that discourages emotional expression, nurturance, productive conflict resolution, human intimacy, and personal well-being, and even results in shorter life spans for men than women. Some have argued that these social expectations also make it more difficult for boys and young men to succeed in educational settings. Emphasis on male economic achievement pressures men to select particular occupations and to suffer disproportionately if they are unable to fulfill expectations for supporting families. Media representations of the powerful male body increasingly mold how boys and young men view themselves, in some cases leading to a negative body image and troubling outcomes such as steroid abuse. These costs of masculinity are spread unevenly across subgroups of boys and men based on intersecting forms of inequality that I consider throughout my analysis of how parents navigate the gender trap.

Some readers may be surprised that in a book about parents with preschool-aged children, my examination of gender includes frequent attention to sexuality and sexual orientation. Here, too, decades of scholarship on gender leads to a clear conclusion: social expectations for gender are deeply intertwined with pressures toward heterosexual orientation, and social judgments about how well people meet gender expectations are linked to social assumptions about sexuality. This connection is especially marked for boys and men, who are often judged harshly for any deviation from socially sanctioned masculinity. As sociologist David Aveline concludes, “in Western cultural history . . . the link between feminine behavior and male homosexuality has long been ingrained in the cultural script.” Given continuing discrimination and prejudice against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people, this link figures centrally in the gender trap, reinforcing the constraints that gender expectations create for all people and multiplying the social obstacles faced, in particular, by those with non-heterosexual or non–gender-normative orientations.

It may be tempting to take gender categories for granted, to view them as preexisting facts around which we adjust our lives. But these categories and the expectations we hold for those who occupy them are better under-
stood as the products of a complex social process. Much of that process, the foundation upon which later gender differentiation and gender inequality are built, begins in childhood, with the capacities, attributes, activities, interests, and directions encouraged for boys and girls, and the interpretations that cast shadows or light on the social actions reproducing gendered childhoods. It is the continuing relevance of gender that motivates my interest in how parents participate in that complicated social process, how they reproduce but also resist the gender trap with and for their young children.

Rooted in Nature

Christine is a thirty-one-year-old, stay-at-home mother who identifies as working class. In a small house littered with toys and racks of drying laundry, and bustling with the cheerful thundering of her three children, this white, heterosexually partnered mother describes the contrast she sees between her son and daughter.

I didn’t want to track him one way, but I thought, “Well, he should have a truck.” . . . And we got the truck and he just sort of knew how to drive it around. . . . We put it down in front of him and he just instinctively knew what to do with it . . . He definitely likes the blocks, the trains, the trucks, the building. . . . He loves building. He’s practically built a house in his head. I know he’s got all these plans for all these things he wants to build. . . . I think it was just inside him. Then there’s my daughter, she’s in dance class and she loves that. And she loves dressing up. Being mother, you know, being sister. She’s very in tune with being a girl. . . . I wanted to make sure that she had a mix of toys too, that she didn’t have only dolls. But I also feel like if they show an interest in something then I want to encourage that. She showed interest in dancing and dolls, so we kept going with it.

Christine’s words echoed those I expected to hear from many parents I interviewed, a trap baited by beliefs about the innate foundations of gender and reinforced by relatively unconscious parental actions that reproduce
traditional assumptions. It turned out that this approach was evident for about one-fifth of my interviewees. For these parents, most gendered interests and attributes of children seem rooted in nature, essentially biological expressions.

Bruce, a middle-class accountant, offers a similar sentiment. Talking in the kitchen of his brick ranch home on a large corner lot, this forty-one-year-old heterosexually partnered Asian American father of two views his son’s lack of interest in his older sister’s toys as evidence of innate gender differences.

I think that is a lot of the hard-wired stuff. To even see it and for it to be quite prevalent and to not be interested in it, . . . I think that in a large way is innate. Certainly if there were any toys in his life first, it was the stuff that she was into because except for the generic, neutral baby toys, well, it was either that neutral stuff or the dolls and princess stuff geared towards her. So, he’d be looking at just those two things, and he was still able to not develop an interest in her stuff and instead developed an interest in trucks and trains and dinosaurs.

Both Bruce and Christine framed their analyses by comparing a son and a daughter, but other parents of only sons or only daughters also believed that nature dictates important aspects of gendered outcomes in childhood.

Crafted by Parents

Despite my expectation that most parents would view childhood gender patterns as natural, many parents saw gender-typed outcomes as socially produced by outside forces such as media, schools, peer pressure, and society in general. Others, whether reluctantly or routinely, reported that they themselves were a source of childhood gendering. For example, from the elegant leather sofa in his beautifully appointed home, Jerome, a thirty-two-year-old lawyer, spoke of his role in his son’s life. This white, upper-middle-class, heterosexually partnered father of one daughter and one son noted throughout the interview that his son shows some attributes he considers feminine. In a comment that echoes the scholarly literature on per-
ceptions of femininity and male sexual orientation, Jerome mentioned that he sometimes wondered if his five-year-old son might grow up to be gay. He explained his reaction to that possibility by saying, “If Jack were to be gay, it would not make me happy at all. I would probably see that as a failure as a dad, . . . as a failure because I’m raising him to be a boy, a man.”

To Jerome, his son’s masculinity does not unfold naturally; instead, Jerome feels responsible for crafting it. He wants his son “to be a boy, a man,” and considers heterosexuality one of the elements of successfully achieving that outcome. For some parents, such molding of their children carried less negative emotion and was more a matter of routinely steering them toward typical interests. Elaine, a briskly efficient, white, middle-class school administrator who asked to be interviewed over her lunch hour, talked about her nearly three-year-old daughter’s strong interest in baby dolls. Thirty-eight years old and a heterosexually partnered mother of two, Elaine saw herself and other family members as the source of that interest.

I cultivated it and her father cultivated it, and you know, her grandmother too. Yeah, we all have been socializing her that way. You know, we buy her pink and we buy her dolls and little purses, earrings and jewelry and pretty clothes and we go shopping, she loves to go shopping with mommy.

Although expressing some belief in a biological basis for gendered outcomes in childhood, Elaine recognized a social basis as well, including her own actions. This pattern was evident in about one-fourth of the parents I interviewed, who tended to view traditional gender patterns as socially produced, and saw that production as a routine and positive part of parenting.

Judged by Society

Parents’ role in crafting children’s gender felt more routine, even invisible, to parents whose children closely fit traditional gender expectations. But some parents reported feeling judged by others if they, or their children, did not seem to fit social expectations. Walt, an energetic sports en-
thusiast and father of twins, described his openness to field hockey and tap dancing as activities for his sons. This thirty-three-year-old African American shop floor supervisor, who is heterosexually partnered and identifies as working class, noted casually, “People think I’m crazy,” indicating his realization of the judgment that surrounds him. But he also made it clear that reaction does not bother him at all. On the other hand, Belinda, a thirty-eight-year-old, heterosexually partnered, white, middle-class, stay-at-home mother of a son and daughter, recounted feeling insulted by how friends and family reacted to the way she decorated her daughter’s room.

In fact, we have been accused of wanting a son because my husband and I were both military pilots and we didn’t know what we were having, a boy or a girl, with Elizabeth, she was first, and we decorated her room in primary colors. I heard they are more stimulating, so we wanted the idea of primary colors to be very stimulating and we did airplanes and helicopters because that was my husband’s and my love. And we were accused by several people of obviously wanting a boy and being terribly disappointed we got a girl. And, to me that’s kind of insulting because I am a girl and I was a pilot. Why should a girl not have an interest in airplanes and helicopters?

Belinda’s use of terms such as “accused” and “insulting” clearly conveys her belief that people are judging her for how well her parenting matches their gender-based expectations.

Another stay-at-home mother of two boys, Tanya, a white, upper-middle-class, thirty-four-year-old in a lesbian partnership, described how people reacted to her infant son’s clothing.

My partner bought Graham this pink sleeper, and I was furious about it. . . . It was like for when he was eight or nine months old. . . . People would see him in that, they’d think he was a girl. . . . And sure enough, there we were at my parents’, he had on his pink sleeper, and I came into the house and one of my [teenage] brother’s friends was over. He said, “Who is that girl your sister is carrying into the house?” and my brother freaked out, . . . and he just said, “That’s my cousin Sarah.” . . .
He wasn’t going to go into some long summation about how his crazy psycho lesbian sister-in-law bought his nephew that pink thing.

While expressing a deep desire to allow her sons a broader range of interests and attributes than stereotypically associated with boys and men, Tanya is also concerned about going “too far” and attracting painful judgments about herself and her sons. Along with about an eighth of parents I interviewed, she resists many gender-based expectations for her children but feels trapped into balancing that resistance with what she considers just enough gender typing to avoid social repercussions.

Tensions and Practices

These interviewees highlight some of the key ideas framing my analysis of how parents negotiate their children’s gender. Two tensions that rang through clearly were between biological and social explanations for childhood gender patterns, and between actions that reproduced versus those that resisted gendered expectations. These tensions were evident not just among the parents I interviewed but often within a specific parent’s reported beliefs and actions. The potential or reality of being judged by others was also a salient concern for a significant number of parents. As parents balanced these tensions and concerns, five configurations of parenting practice emerged that help to distill the range of approaches they took.

• “Naturalizers” interpret gendered childhoods as biological in origin and, though occasionally acting to adjust gendered structures, primarily reproduce them. Their concern about others’ judgment partly depends on whether their children display any gender nonconformity that makes the parents uncomfortable. Christine, the mother who saw her son’s interest in trucks and building, and her daughter’s preference for dolls and dance, as natural, is such a parent.

• “Cultivators” act in a way that promotes gendered childhoods for their sons and daughters. They interpret the origins of gender patterns as largely social and express little concern about the judgments of others. For them, reproducing gender is a routine part of parenting, not some-
thing that evokes anxiety or concern. Elaine, the mother who reported crafting her daughter’s interest in baby dolls, is a good example.

- “Refiners” highlight both biological and social forces in explaining gendered outcomes and act with roughly equal measures of resistance and conformity, always attentive to the actual and potential judgments of others. Belinda, who was criticized for decorating her daughter’s room in primary colors and a military theme, is a parent in this group.
- “Innovators” resist gendered structures for their children and are unconcerned about the judgment of others. Walt, who dismissed the claim that he was crazy for considering tap dancing and field hockey as activities for his twin sons, is one of the parents I profile as an Innovator.
- “Resisters,” while even more opposed to gendered patterns for their children, display significant concern about being judged by others. Tanya, the mother who was worried about her son wearing a pink sleeper, is a good illustration.

The parents I interviewed engage in a balancing act as they navigate the gender trap, juggling beliefs, actions, and motivations to improvise an approach to gendering their young children. Along the way they reproduce structures that constrain us all, but they also resist them; even parents I categorize as Naturalizers or Cultivators make some effort to revise gender expectations and question essentialist interpretations of gender. These parents, in talking about their experiences and outlooks, voiced neither a passive or inevitable reproduction of tradition nor spontaneous and unconstrained free agency, but instead portrayed a complex and dynamic process fraught with tension but also possibilities. These possibilities, however, were often stalled or narrowed by contradictions sometimes evident to parents but frequently not.

The Social Construction of Gender

My approach to thinking about gender is founded on the view that gender is socially constructed rather than biologically determined, and that gender relations are organized around power and the unequal distribution of social resources. This process of social construction is woven through
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individual, interactional, and institutional levels, and gender, as a socially constructed source of inequality, is inseparable from other forms of social inequality, including race, class, and sexuality. Most fundamentally, my approach follows other scholarly work which has demonstrated that gender is a social structure central to the organization of societies and a source not only of difference but of power. In the words of sociologist Judith Lorber, gender is “a binary system of social organization that creates inequality.”¹⁸ She elaborates:

As a building block of social orders, gender gets built into organizational structures, floods interactions and relationships, and is a major social status for individuals. Gendered norms and expectations pattern the practices of people in workplaces, in families, groups, and intimate relationships, and in creating individual identities and self-assessments. People’s gender conformity supports gendered practices and gender as a social institution; people’s gender diversity and deviance challenge it.¹⁹

Gender is not a straightforward amplification of underlying biological differences between males and females; rather, gender is constructed through social processes and enforced through social mechanisms. As Lorber observes,

Genes, hormones, physiology, and bodies (what are constructed as “sex differences”) are socially constructed as gendered in Western society; they are not the source of gender as a social status. The understanding of male and female bodies as intrinsically and consistently different and as the main marker of social status is not universal.²⁰

Certainly a number of fundamental biological variations are linked to physiology and reproductive capacities, but the extent and manner of their importance to the social understanding of gender have varied over time and place in ways that are inconsistent with the claim that biology completely determines gendered outcomes. Against a range of natural variation among individuals, social discourse constructs only two distinct and inter-
nally homogeneous categories. Sociologist Michael Kimmel views the biologically determinist account of gender as a “just-so story,” a “convenient, pleasant, and ultimately useful, fiction” that relies on a limited amount of selective evidence to reason backward and construct an elaborate justification for contemporary arrangements. In a classic synthesis of decades of scholarship, *Deceptive Distinctions*, sociologist Cynthia Fuchs Epstein argues persuasively that “social factors can account for most of the variation seen between men and women.”

Men probably will never be able to have babies, but they may be able to mother or teach young children as well as women do. Women may never win a weight lifting contest competing with men matched for weight and training, but they are fast catching up in marathon running and solving mathematics problems. It seems clear that intellectual capacity and emotional qualities are distributed through humanity without restrictions of sex any more than race or nationality. Believing, however, that men or women cannot develop certain mental or psychological attributes merely because of their sex can result in the patterns that people uncritically observe and believe to be inevitable.

This means, in exploring gendered childhoods, that it is not inevitable for girls to prefer pink and boys blue, or for boys to prefer baseball and girls ballet. Nor is it inevitable for girls to be quieter and more polite, and boys more rambunctious and assertive. Different male or female preferences and attributes are shaped and enforced by the social expectations surrounding children and their parents, and they seem inevitable only after they are socially constructed through the kind of reverse engineering that Kimmel identifies.

*Gender and Power*

From this perspective, gender is not just a source of difference but, more important, a source of power and inequality. As feminist legal scholar Catharine MacKinnon articulated more than twenty years ago, men are as
different from women as women are from men, a framing she argues obscures the more important distinction that men, as a group, are dominant over women.24 Though refined by later scholars to incorporate greater attention to variations among men and women, MacKinnon’s approach captures the fundamental assumptions of a power-oriented analysis of gender. Social scientists and activists have thoroughly documented gendered power and its associated inequalities in their myriad daily manifestations. The list of examples includes, at least, domestic violence, wage gaps, glass ceilings, occupational gender segregation and political power imbalances, divisions of household labor, constraints of body image and gendered patterns of self-esteem, sexual assault and violence against gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people, the feminization of poverty, eating disorders, steroid abuse, and gay youth suicide. These examples, which highlight power differences and inequalities, favor boys and men. Jerome, elsewhere in his interview, expands on his desire to raise Jack “to be a boy, a man.” He spoke candidly about moments when he was disappointed to see Jack cry or take a passive stance in conflicts with other children. Jerome emphasized the importance of seeing his son as powerful, “standing up and fighting” for what he wants and protecting his younger sister, Louisa, and other female peers. He actively encourages such behavior and discourages Jack from crying or accepting compromises in negotiations with other boys. These are the kinds of behavior that Douglas Schrock and Michael Schwalbe, sociologists of masculinity, refer to as “manhood acts.”25 Through these daily actions, boys and men are constructed as powerful enough to merit positions of control and influence in the workplace, families, and politics, whereas girls and women are constructed as more nurturing, fragile, and in need of protection. As Schrock and Schwalbe put it, “regardless of what individual males consciously intend, manhood acts have the effect of reproducing an unequal gender order,” one in which “women as a group are subordinated to men as a group, and some men are subordinated to others.”26 But along with the benefits that boys and men derive from gendered inequality, especially if they are also advantaged by inequalities of race, class, and sexuality, they face constraints from gendered structures as well. Boys and men are often discouraged from expressing the full range of human emotions, as they are channeled away
from intimacy with children and one another, and limited to a narrowly defined path. Most of the parents I interviewed seek to avoid that trap, hoping for at least a somewhat broader set of attributes and interests for their young sons. Many, however, prepare their boys to embrace some elements of masculine social power as well, whether because of the direct benefits of power for someone like Jerome or through fear of the judgments boys face if they fail to measure up to the expectations of others for a person like Tanya. It is my concern about power, inequality, and constraint that animates my interest in childhood gendering; my analysis of how parents navigate, reproduce, and resist the gender trap offers critical insight into the maintenance and revision of those structures.

**Self and Society**

Researchers often identify three levels at which the social construction of gender takes place: individual, interactional, and institutional. Sociologist Barbara Risman notes that “gender is, of course, socialized into our (individual) personalities, but it also sets the parameters for interactional expectations and is built into our social institutions.” Risman properly cautions us to recognize that “gendered selves”—meaning the individual internalization of gendered social expectations—are inextricably connected to interactional- and institutional-level processes.

Far too much explanatory power is presumed to rest in the motivation of gendered selves. . . . Even when individual men and women do not desire to live gendered lives or support male dominance, they often find themselves compelled to do so by the logic of gendered choices. That is, interactional pressures and institutional design create gender and the resultant inequality, even in the absence of individual desires.

All three levels figure prominently in my analysis of how parents navigate the gender trap. Individual-level preferences can be crafted by the kinds of things Elaine reports cultivating for her daughter—the pink, the dolls, pocket books and purses, jewelry and pretty clothes and shopping—
all of which become part of toddler Gabrielle’s gendered self. I offer many examples of institutional forces that also nudge parents toward the gender trap. Some involve parents consciously responding to such forces, as when Pamela—a thirty-six-year-old, white, middle-class, heterosexually partnered mother of two sons—discourages her four-year-old Evan’s interest in growing up to be a day care worker because “he could never support a family doing that.” Such practices, discussed more fully later on, are responses to institutional structures including occupational gender segregation, gendered wage gaps, and women’s economic dependence on men. Even if these structures do not shape Evan’s gendered self, and even if he continues to prefer a nurturing occupation such as day care work, they may well shape his sense of what is possible given the gendered structural expectations surrounding him in the adult world. My analysis also extends to parents who are not consciously thinking about institutional forces, yet such forces still play a role. For the young daughter who might be encouraged to follow her interest in child care, the low wages associated with that work may limit her ability to support herself, thus leaving her financially dependent on a man’s higher wages, even if her parents were not consciously intending to point her in that direction. Institutional forces intersect with the lessons parents offer in a variety of ways, often unintended.

The interactional level illuminates the importance of the social judgments many parents report feeling, underlining a dynamic social process through which the gender trap is reproduced and, equally important, potentially resisted and revised. Sociologists Candace West and Don Zimmerman stress this level of analysis, arguing that gender is a set of actions, an accomplishment forged in social situations as people interact. In their influential article “Doing Gender,” they present an approach that has generated debate and analysis ever since its publication.

When we view gender as an accomplishment, an achieved property of situated conduct, our attention shifts from matters internal to the individual and focuses on the interactional, and ultimately the institutional, arenas. In one sense, of course, it is individuals who do gender. But it is a situated doing, carried out in the virtual or real presence of others who are presumed to be oriented to its production. Rather
than a property of individuals, we conceive of gender as an emergent feature of social situations: both as an outcome of and a rationale for various social arrangements and as a means of legitimating one of the most fundamental divisions of society.29

Our actions are potentially shaped not only by actual interactions but also by our ability to adjust our conduct in anticipation of how others may react. In the terminology of West and Zimmerman, echoed throughout the literature that applies and expands their framework, we are accountable to others in our routine everyday interactions. “Accountable” is a term I use often as I explore the way my interviewees talk about social judgments. As Fenstermaker, West, and Zimmerman put it:

Insofar as societal members know that their conduct is accountable, they will frame their actions in relation to how they might be construed by others. . . . An individual involved in virtually any course of action may be held accountable for her/his execution of that action as a woman or as a man.30

Accountability, they argue, is relevant not only when people are crafting gender in accordance with the expectations of others but also when people resist or stray from such expectations. This claim, present in West and Zimmerman’s earlier formulation, is one that West and fellow sociologist Sarah Fenstermaker return to defend against criticism that it downplays resistance and social change. They argue that their focus on the process by which gender is accomplished places activity, agency, and the possibility of resistance in the foreground. As they point out, “within the dynamic nature of the accomplishment of categorical difference reside the seeds of inevitable change.”31 But any such change occurs within the context and constraints of accountability to gendered assessment. Just as Belinda feels accountable to her friends’ and relatives’ judgments about airplane mobiles in her daughter’s nursery, and Tanya feels accountable to her brother and his friends in relation to her son’s pink sleeper, gendered assessments surround parents daily, setting potential traps requiring careful navigation.
A final foundational idea that shapes my approach is intersectionality, the argument that gender, as a social construct, is inseparable from other social categories, including race, class, and sexuality. The various dimensions of social inequality that are built upon the categories and distribution of resources based on gender, race, class, and sexual orientation operate simultaneously in people’s lived experience. Gendered expectations may vary across social groups, as intersecting dimensions of inequality often create different opportunities and constraints for gendered selves and gendered interactions across social locations. A leading theorist of intersectionality, sociologist Patricia Hill Collins, notes that structures of inequality intersect and interact as “mutually constructing systems of power . . . that permeate all social relations.” For this reason I interviewed parents from a variety of social locations in relation to these structures of inequality, and I tried to be specific about the instances where gendered patterns were evident across social locations versus cases where they developed differently for different groups.

For example, Grace, a white, low-income, part-time custodian and single mother of four, said that she plans to warn her children that some jobs are better suited to men than women, based on her own experience of feeling exhausted by construction jobs for which she considered her body ill suited. As Grace teaches her children to shape their occupational aspirations around biological differences, she is clearly speaking from her class location as someone who has supported herself doing physical work—a specific intersection of class and gender. Meanwhile Tanya, the lesbian mother who “freaked out” about her son wearing pink, did so largely because of the scrutiny she feels her family faces regarding gender. In intersections involving less valorized social locations, such as those of lower income individuals, people of color, and gay and lesbian parents, there is a tendency to view gender as only one factor in the complex of class, race, and sexuality, whereas it is seen as the primary factor among white, middle- to upper-middle-class heterosexual people. These other dimensions of inequality, however, are relevant for all the interviewees. Just as a gay or lesbian parent may be uniquely constrained by
homophobic attitudes and heterosexist structures, a heterosexual parent is advantaged by those same social factors. Gender-studies scholar and activist Peggy McIntosh has captured this idea vividly: the advantages of being in socially valued categories fill an invisible knapsack of privilege that those of us in those valued categories carry along and benefit from daily.\textsuperscript{33} She also points out, however, that many of us simultaneously carry privilege and disadvantage based on our social locations. Although the lesbian mother I mentioned is constrained by her sexual orientation, she is also at an advantage through her status as a white, upper-middle class parent, secure financially, and free of the additional burdens of racism. Thus, even as my analysis emphasizes the ways in which parents reproduce and resist gendered outcomes with and for their young children, I imbue that focus with attention to intersecting inequalities and systems of power.\textsuperscript{34}

Parents, Children, and Gender

More than thirty-five years ago the literature on gender and parenting indicated that new parents often perceive male and female newborns differently, even when there are no actual differences in their appearance or behavior.\textsuperscript{35} More recent literature documents practices by which parents, from this first impression on, construct and reproduce gender as a social category through interaction with their children.\textsuperscript{36} Some researchers have highlighted subgroups of parents who actively seek to disrupt traditional gendered expectations for their children.\textsuperscript{37} Overall, however, the literature documents definite parental tendencies toward differential treatment of sons and daughters, which in some ways are especially pronounced among fathers.\textsuperscript{38} By observing parental behavior in experimental or everyday settings, scholars have established certain patterns. Parents tend to select gender-typical toys and activities for their young children, dress them in gendered clothing, and pick out gender-typed décor for their rooms.\textsuperscript{39} Parents also treat sons and daughters differently in their degree of vocalization to infants and toddlers, speaking more conversationally to girls and making comments or offering instructions to boys.\textsuperscript{40} In relating family stories, parents emphasize emotions with girls
and autonomy with boys. They also engage in more aggressive and challenging styles of play with their sons than with their daughters. Their expectations for their children’s household chores also differ by gender. Thus, even as they attempt to broaden the range of possibilities for their sons and daughters beyond what once was considered socially acceptable, parents still shape the gendered interests, attributes, and artifacts in their children’s lives through these various practices. Recent research also suggests that parenting advice books, although progressing somewhat with the times, still include gender stereotypical advice and limitations on the amount of gender nonconformity they recommend parents encourage or even tolerate.

Parents do not act alone, however. Their gendering actions must be understood in the broader context of interactional and institutional forces from media to schools to relatives, day care providers, even strangers. And along with this powerful array of social forces, children themselves play a key role in the gendering process. For well over a decade, researchers who study gender and childhood have focused on the power of peer cultures and have encouraged adults to recognize children as active agents rather than passive recipients of adult influence. As pointed out more than twenty years ago by Spencer Cahill, a pioneer of childhood studies, “by the end of the preschool age years . . . children are self-regulating participants in the interactional achievement of their own normally sexed identities.” As they attempt to understand their daily experiences, young children are alert to the interactional and institutional processes that reproduce gender structures, and most come to see their own ability to successfully achieve a “normally sexed identity” as part of navigating their peer cultures and the wider social world. While scholars continue, of course, to recognize parents’ influence in the gendering of their children—and this book explores that process from parents’ perspective—it is essential to keep in mind the agency of children as well as the myriad constraints surrounding parents. Like Christine, who reported following her daughter’s lead when she showed interest in dolls and dancing, the power parents have to channel opportunities for their children is limited by social factors and shaped by their children’s understandings.
Purpose of the Book

My goal in this book is not to treat parents in isolation nor to blame or judge them for their gendering actions. Rather, I hope to clarify the beliefs and motivations that shape their actions in the broader context of the social obstacles they are forced to negotiate daily, and thus to reveal gendered traps but also opportunities for social change. To this end, I created an open-ended opportunity for parents to talk about their children’s gender, building on previous research to consider parents as potentially able both to reproduce and reshape gendered childhoods, and to do so with explicit attention to the social forces constraining them. I interviewed forty-two parents about their beliefs, actions, hopes, and experiences in raising their sons and daughters, with interviews lasting from one to two hours and some more than three hours. A more detailed consideration of my research methods is given in the appendix to this book.

Because scholars widely agree that the preschool years are pivotal for children’s emerging gender identity and increasingly gender-typed behaviors, I interviewed parents who had at least one child between the ages of three and five. Given the important role children play in the process of gendering within families, I interviewed parents who were actively negotiating the age range in which their children were increasingly aware of gender expectations. Regardless of the number of children an interviewee had, the questions focused particularly on one child in that preschool age range. I interviewed about an equal number of mothers and fathers from an array of social locations, taking care not to rely on people I knew personally or networks too closely clustered around my college. An advantage of qualitative interviewing is the opportunity to adjust questions as one proceeds, framing new follow-up questions and seeking new interviewees to fill in gaps. I strove to gather an adequately diverse group of parents in terms of gender, race, class, sexual orientation, household configuration, and parental employment status. A chart summarizing the social locations and background information for all participants is included in the appendix.

Qualitative interviews offer depth rather than breadth, as they involve a limited number of people talking at length rather than a large number of people providing limited information. Although an invaluable method,
it is important to recognize its limitations. The data accumulated from a small sample may not necessarily be generalized to all parents, and it is important to be cautious in comparing across subgroups. It was essential, however, to talk to parents from a broad range of backgrounds so that the picture I paint is not based on one limited group of parents.

I began each interview by asking parents to recall a time before they were planning to have children and whether they preferred having a daughter or a son. Questions then explored the interests and activities of their children, as well as their thoughts about gender typing in childhood, described more fully in the appendix. Pseudonyms are used throughout, for parents as well as children, to ensure confidentiality. Small details have also been altered to further protect my interviewees’ identities; for example, job titles have been replaced with similar but distinct occupations. Specific names of organizations have also been changed.

Organization of the Book

After delineating the conceptual foundations for my analysis by tracing general distinctions in parents’ beliefs and actions in relation to gendered childhoods, chapter 1 focuses on parents’ recollected preferences for having a son versus a daughter. These recollections are laced with gendered expectations about their children, which I refer to as “gendered anticipation.” Biological and social explanations for childhood gender patterns are also discussed, including narratives about hormones, physiology, brain wiring, and other natural processes that parents relied on to explain gendered outcomes, as well as the myriad social processes contributing to gender. Chapter 1 also looks at parents’ actions in raising their children, outlining ways in which parents shape gender conventionally as well as their efforts to shift traditional gender expectations, avoid the gender trap, and loosen constraints on children. Five types of parenting practice that emerge from these tensions and motivations are presented. Here I detail the experiences of a specific group of parents, using the analytic distinctions I drew from the larger group to reveal configurations of practice.

Chapter 2 discusses the group I term “Naturalizers,” for whom gendered childhoods are biologically based and relatively unproblematic. Although
such parents see themselves as bystanders to a naturally unfolding process, they also report actions that produce the outcomes they believe are biologically determined. Within that overall tendency, these parents also attempt to smooth the sharp edges of gendered constraints, aiming to offer their sons and daughters a wider range of opportunities and to respect their children’s agency. The parents I refer to as “Cultivators” are the subject of chapter 3. This group views society, which includes themselves, as a key actor in shaping their children’s gender but also considers the process and outcome as relatively unproblematic. This group, too, while tending to reproduce gendered patterns, tries to adjust gendered constraints and broaden their children’s options. The “Refiners” are discussed in chapter 4. These parents invoke both nature and society, work to reproduce and resist gender expectations and do so while carefully considering people’s judgments of themselves and their children. “Innovators,” introduced in chapter 5, resist gender structures but ultimately are resigned to the inevitability of some gendering in childhood. “Resisters,” the final group and the topic of chapter 6, are even more resistant than Innovators but are more guarded, even anxious and fearful, about the social costs of straying too far from the gendered path.

My concluding chapter summarizes the patterns and themes detailed throughout the book, and highlights how my analysis contributes to understanding the role of parents in shaping gendered childhoods. By emphasizing both stability and the potential for change in gender structures, I hope to illuminate the limits and possibilities of parental agency in a way that proves useful to students and scholars, as well as parents and family advocates. Parents who wish to loosen the gendered constraints imposed on their children, and contribute to relaxing the broader structures of inequality interwoven with those constraints, can and do make a difference. But they do so within the confines of interactional and institutional forces. The potential role that parents can play, and the support they need both interactionally and institutionally in order to execute that potential, is highlighted in this book. Like the balancing act I attempted to craft in response to my son’s desire for combat-oriented trading cards, many of the parents I spent time with are improvising, juggling their own beliefs about gender, the judgments of others in everyday interactions, and the power of
gendered social structures. As they seek to avoid at least some aspects of the gender trap for their children, they also wander into and sometimes reproduce, wittingly or unwittingly, that very trap, stalling their own efforts. The barriers and pitfalls, as well as the possibilities for avoiding them, are illuminated by the nuanced analysis my interviews allow, as this group of parents offers critical insights into the continuing power of the gender trap but also the potential paths toward social change.