



‘I want to support her but also want to protect her’: The gendered parenting practices of LGBTQ+ parents

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ABSTRACT

Over the past decade, there has been a gradual shift away from traditional binary views of gender and towards a broader recognition of gender identities as existing on a spectrum. Despite this, public attitudes about gender diversity are nuanced and complex, and the greater visibility of transgender and nonbinary individuals has brought with it simultaneous acceptance and controversy. While some parents have become more open to their children subverting traditional gender norms in the context of these shifts, others remain concerned about potential negative consequences for gender nonconforming children. LGBTQ+ parents, in particular, remain under scrutiny for their gender/sexuality and ability to raise children. Little research has addressed the tensions that these parents experience when making decisions about the gender socialization of their children, and what exists suggests greater flexibility and openness among this parent population compared to heterosexual parents. The present study examines a unique group of LGBTQ+ parents ($N = 40$) who reported higher than average levels of investment in their child(ren)'s conformity to gender norms compared to a larger sample of LGBTQ+ parents. Specifically, this study aimed to understand (1) the factors and processes that contributed to relatively high levels of investment among these parents, and (2) the gender socialization practices they described engaging in with their children. Utilizing reflexive thematic analysis of open-ended survey responses, we identified three themes relevant to these aims: Balancing Internal Safety with External Risk; Navigating Individual Queerness in a Queer Family Context; and Children Lead, Parents Follow. These themes illustrate parents' concerns, hopes, and consideration of complex individual and systemic factors as they navigated the gender socialization process with their children.

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, there has been a gradual shift among scholars and laypeople away from traditional binary views of gender and towards a broader recognition of gender identities as existing on a spectrum (Ehrensaft, 2019; Rahilly, 2018). According to a Gallup Poll conducted in 2022, increasingly more individuals openly identify as transgender or nonbinary, including approximately 0.6 % of U.S. adults and 2 % of Generation Z (born in the late 1990s and early 2000s; Jones, 2023). As such, 1 in 4 Americans know someone who uses gender-neutral pronouns (e.g., they/them; Pew Research Center, 2021), and it is in part this familiarity with gender diverse individuals that has facilitated a shift in societal attitudes over time (Allen et al., 2022). Alongside these shifting norms, parents have become more open to and curious about subverting traditional gender norms and are increasingly seeking guidance on nurturing *gender diversity* – broadly understood as gender identities,

roles, and expressions that differ from the cultural norms that are prescribed to people of a particular sex (American Psychological Association, 2015) – in their children. As such, some parents are taking what has been termed a “*gender creative*” approach to parenting, such that they allow their children to explore and define gender without restriction (e.g., letting children choose their own clothing, even if it does not align with the norms associated with their gender assigned at birth; Ehrensaft, 2012, 2019).

Despite increasing societal acceptance of sexual and gender minorities, public attitudes about gender diversity are nuanced and complex, and the greater visibility of gender diverse individuals has brought with it simultaneous acceptance and controversy. For instance, individuals who defy traditional binary views of gender (e.g., transgender individuals, or cisgender people whose gender expression is nonconforming) still face significant discrimination (Grant et al., 2011; Hicks, 2012; Norton & Herek, 2013), and transgender (herein referred to

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as “trans”) adults continue to be persecuted across several domains, including in the workplace, healthcare, and legal system (Downing, 2013; Downing & Przedworski, 2018; Grant et al., 2011). Recent sociopolitical backlash in the United States has brought with it continued stigmatization of gender diverse groups, as gender diversity remains a subject of great political division and polarization (Goldberg & Allen, 2013; Parker & Brown, 2022). This scrutiny extends beyond the experiences of trans adults and encompasses debates regarding gender development in children, as well as related expectations of parents as they navigate these developmental milestones. Given the very real risks that trans and gender nonconforming people face, including children (e.g., risk of discrimination, rejection, and even violence; De Pedro et al., 2019; Lian et al., 2022), parents who value nurturing gender diversity may nevertheless have concerns about their children’s safety if they present as gender nonconforming, may face scrutiny if their own parenting practices are misaligned with their communities, and may experience tensions between their desire to support their children in being who they are and their desire to protect their children from stigma. As such, it is important to examine the complexities and challenges parents may face when deciding whether to affirm gender diversity in their children.

1.1. Gender socialization

Gender socialization is the development and internalization of beliefs, cultural expectations, and behaviors typically associated with an individual’s assigned sex (e.g., male, female) and/or gender (e.g., boy, girl). Key components of the gender socialization process include the development of one’s *gender identity*, or self-identification with one gender group or another, *gender roles*, or expectations of what people “do” to enact their gender identity in terms of behavior (Stockard, 1999), and *gender expression*, or one’s outward gendered presentation (e.g., in terms of clothing and physical appearance).

In infancy, children develop the ability to sort people into different groupings according to physical characteristics. For instance, infants begin to distinguish between male and female faces during the first few months of life, and most children demonstrate an understanding of basic gender stereotypes by the time they are 18 months old (Brown et al., 2020). As early as 2 years old, children begin to use gendered labels (e.g., boy, girl, man, woman) for themselves and others and can correctly identify their own gender (Brown et al., 2020). Indeed, the development of language influences children’s understanding of gender and allows them to organize information about gender into linguistic categories, though said categories are often limited to the binary labels used by the adults around them (Riggs, 2019). By age three, children tend to show strong preferences aligned with their identified gender and endorse stereotypes related to gender roles, toys, and activities (Brown et al., 2020). Early childhood marks a time of further development in this area, as children enter school and begin to show stronger preferences for their own gender expression and seek play with same-gender peers (Brown et al., 2020). Notably, children’s gender schemas do not typically include visual representations of genitalia, as they are not usually privy to this information about sex. Rather, children experience gender as a subjective “feeling” which is then reduced through language to one of two binary categories (“boy” or “girl”) which then either “fits” or does not “fit” that feeling (Riggs, 2019). Connections between sex (genitalia) and gender are drawn later, once children are influenced by cisgenderist societal assumptions that one’s gender is determined by assigned sex (Riggs, 2019).

While children’s beliefs about gender are shaped by many influences, including their peers, teachers, and community members, parents tend to be one of the first and most influential agents of gender socialization in a child’s life (Kretchmar, 2011; Leaper, 2014). Children often learn much of what it means to exist in the world as a certain gender from their parents, and parents (directly or indirectly) pass on beliefs, expectations, and attitudes about gender to their children. This socialization process

occurs in a variety of ways, including through parental stereotyping of certain toys as masculine or feminine and the subsequent reinforcement of play that aligns with these gender stereotypes, sometimes without the conscious intention from parents to do so (Brown et al., 2020; Seavey et al., 1975). Research shows that adults interact with infants differently and hold different expectations for child behavior as a function of the child’s gender label (Seavey et al., 1975). Further, the ways that adults speak to children, and the emotional valence with which they do so, varies by child gender such that parents tend to speak more, ask more questions, and discuss mental states (e.g., thoughts, emotions) more with young girls and gender-neutral children than they do with boys (Brown et al., 2020; Farrell et al., 2023).

There is some debate regarding the age at which children can cognitively understand their gender identity or engage in abstract thinking, as well as when or to what extent gender becomes “stable” in youth. This debate is particularly salient for trans youth, who tend to be subject to the concern from cisgender adults that they will change their gender identities over time and that supporting an identity that may later change will be harmful to them (Olson et al., 2022). However, some scholars argue that these concerns are rooted in developmentalist assumptions that influence adult perception of children’s ability to be “experts” of their own gender (Riggs, 2019), and emerging research indicates that trans children have similar developmental trajectories to cisgender children in terms of cognitive and gender identity development and benefit from the same level of social acceptance (Olson & Gülgöz, 2018; Olson, et al., 2015; Rafferty et al., 2018). Further, the idea that gender identity will at some point become “stable” and then remain unchanging across the lifespan neglects the conceptualization of gender as a fluid construct that can change throughout development and across one’s lifespan (Castañeda, 2015; Riggs, 2019). Regardless of whether a child’s gender identity aligns with their assigned sex at birth, their parents will likely play a large role in their gender development and socialization as well as in their experience navigating shifts in their gender identities over time.

1.2. Affirmation of child gender diversity

Parental support is associated with healthier psychological well-being among gender diverse youth, including reduced depression and anxiety symptoms, fewer suicide attempts, and higher self-esteem (Olson et al., 2016; Rafferty et al., 2018; Travers et al., 2012). The benefits of parental support extend to trans and nonbinary children as well as to cisgender children who resist gender norms (e.g., in terms of appearance or behavior). In general, access to gender affirmation (Rafferty et al., 2018), whether it be social, legal, or medical, is similarly associated with positive mental health outcomes, and often fosters a sense of pride and social acceptance among trans and nonbinary youth (Fontanari et al., 2020).

Despite being associated with a variety of positive outcomes, there are also potential risks associated with affirming a gender diverse child. For example, if parents disagree about how to approach a child’s gender nonconformity or diversity, the parent who takes an affirming approach may face custody challenges in court (Kivalanka et al., 2018) or allegations of child maltreatment (Ehrensaft, 2018; Margolis, 2016) by the other parent, amidst the tendency for family courts to be unfamiliar with gender nonconformity in children. In addition, families who affirm their gender diverse child’s identity may face bias and discrimination from members of their community (e.g., neighbors, family members) and in some states and communities will navigate anti-trans legislation and related discourse (e.g., bathroom bills; Abreu et al., 2022). Gender nonconforming children also tend to fare worse socially (e.g., at school; Braun & Davidson, 2017; Steensma et al., 2014) and are often subjected to frequent rejection and victimization (Rafferty et al., 2018). As a result of these external forces, even parents who strive to support their child’s gender diversity may feel hesitant to allow them to outwardly resist gender norms, especially outside of their home.

While these forces may dissuade parents from affirming gender diversity in any child, parents often face greater complexity when supporting nonconformity in their sons compared to their daughters (Kane, 2006). This is in part due to greater societal acceptance of masculinity and the tendency for femininity to be devalued, particularly when displayed by boys (Braun & Davidson, 2017; Connell, 1995). Indeed, gender nonconforming children who are AMAB (assigned male at birth) tend to fare worse than those who are AFAB (assigned female at birth) in terms of peer relationships and emotional and behavioral problems (Braun & Davidson, 2017; Steensma et al., 2014; Warren et al., 2019). As such, parents may feel more hesitant to allow their AMAB children to defy gender norms for fear of especially negative treatment from peers or other adults (Kane, 2006).

1.3. LGBTQ+ parents and gender socialization

Alongside the nuanced shifts in societal attitudes towards gender diverse individuals, LGBTQ+¹ parents have similarly become more visible, particularly in relation to how they parent their children (Macklin, 1980). Simply by existing, LGBTQ+ couples inherently resist conventional, heteronormative notions of what a family “should” look like (though attitudes about diverse family structures are also changing; Flores, 2019), and those who pursue parenthood are often forced to navigate societal heterosexism and negative perceptions of their ability to raise children (Goldberg, 2009; Kivalanka et al., 2018). That is, they may be subject to particular scrutiny given the long history of discrimination against LGBTQ+ people as parents, and the fears that they would “turn” their children gay or trans (Goldberg et al., 2024; Kivalanka et al., 2018). Importantly, these fears are unfounded, as few differences have been found in the gender or sexual identity development of children raised by LGBTQ+ parents compared to children whose parents are heterosexual (Goldberg & Sweeney, 2019; Golombok & Tasker, 1996).

The limited extant literature suggests that queer and gender diverse parents have a distinct perspective on the gender socialization of their children (Berkowitz & Ryan, 2011; Flanders et al., 2019; Sutfin et al., 2007). For instance, LGBTQ+ parents often provide their children with a variety of options regarding gender expression (Averett, 2015; Goldberg, 2009; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001), and trans parents have demonstrated a particular openness towards adopting children who are gender diverse compared to prospective parents who are cisgender (Goldberg et al., 2020). In addition, children of lesbian mothers tend to show fewer gender-typed behaviors compared to those raised by at least one father (Goldberg & Garcia, 2016; MacCallum & Golombok, 2004). Even still, LGBTQ+ parent families face unique challenges that may further compound the risks associated with supporting a gender diverse child (Goldberg et al., 2024). Importantly, minority stress is experienced at the individual, couple, and family level for LGBTQ+ parent families, and can influence family functioning and well-being in terms of parenting behaviors, feelings of legitimacy and cohesion, and child and family outcomes (Siegel et al., 2022). Stressors include experiences of homophobia at an individual and family level, as well as the need for parents to consistently assess whether it is safe to disclose information about family structure across contexts (Bower-Brown & Zadeh, 2020; Perlesz et al., 2006; Tasker, 2005). Children, too, often need to navigate

disclosure and manage stigma outside of the home. Indeed, children of queer parents frequently become “responsible” for educating other people about their parents’ identities or their family’s diverse structure (Zadeh et al., 2021).

Even within the LGBTQ+ community, attitudes towards gender nonconformity are not uniformly positive (Nagoshi et al., 2017). Indeed, experiences of exclusion or invalidation within queer spaces are common among trans and gender diverse individuals, particularly for those whose gender identity is fluid or exists outside of the gender binary (Farmer & Byrd, 2015; Nash, 2011), or who hold multiple minoritized identities (e.g., race, class; Knee, 2019; McCormick & Barthelemy, 2021). Many queer parents report feeling like they are “under a microscope” for their children’s gender conformity (Kivalanka & Goldberg, 2009; Kivalanka et al., 2018) and may feel pressure to socialize their children according to gender norms, particularly for their sons (Kane, 2006). In part due to these social pressures, not all LGBTQ+ parents endorse comfort with gender diversity, and some engage in highly normative gendered behavior within the home (e.g., the “Rozzie and Harriet” dynamic in lesbian-parent families; (Sullivan, 1996) and when interacting with their children (Bergstrom-Lynch, 2020; Downing & Goldberg, 2011).

In drawing from their lived experiences, LGBTQ+ parents may wish to foster a supportive, affirming environment for their children, while also being acutely aware of the risks associated with embracing identities and forms of self-expression that deviate from the norm. Given the varied experiences of sexual and gender minority individuals and broader societal ambivalence about childhood gender nonconformity, it is plausible that some LGBTQ+ parents may face greater uncertainty and less openness to gender nonconformity in their children as they work to balance a desire to both protect and support them.

1.4. Theoretical framework

The present study is grounded in Social Constructionism (Burr, 2015) and Queer Theory (Few-Demo, et al., 2016; Oswald et al., 2005). A social constructionist approach understands knowledge as subjective, developed in collaboration with others, and influenced by exposure to prevailing cultural beliefs. Through this lens, an individual’s understanding of gender does not develop in a vacuum and is instead affected by cultural definitions of masculinity and femininity, prevailing gender stereotypes, and interactions with others that guide our understanding of what behaviors are acceptable for members of different gender groups (e.g., men, women; Burr, 2015). As children develop their own sense of gender identity and expression, they are influenced by the way the rest of the world collectively conceptualizes gender. Parents, too, are influenced by socially constructed narratives about gender, and may feel pulled to adhere to cultural norms when raising their children. Within a family context, routine social interactions between family members (e.g., parents and children) can reinforce or challenge these cultural definitions and influence personal beliefs and conceptions about gender.

Queer Theory critically examines dominant heteronormative understandings of sexuality, gender, and family structures and deconstructs related binaries (e.g., male/female, heterosexual/homosexual, normal/abnormal families; Few-Demo, et al., 2016). *Heteronormativity* is the belief that heterosexuality is the default or “preferred” sexual orientation, and that sexual or marital relations are most natural or appropriate when between a man and a woman. As such, heteronormativity promotes rigidly defined family norms (e.g., a husband, wife, and 2.5 children), privileges heteros people in terms of power, status, and resources, and contributes to discrimination and prejudice towards individuals who do not fit neatly into said norms (Oswald et al., 2005). Simply by existing, queer families resist these expectations and are consequently subjected to prejudice and

¹ We understand that the acronym “LGBTQ+” is used in a variety of ways, and that the terms remain debated, including among the individuals they represent. This is perhaps especially true regarding the term “queer”. For the purposes of this paper, “LGBTQ+” is defined as any individual whose sexual and/or gender identity falls outside of the traditional binary, cisgender default. We decided to use this acronym (and not something different, such as LGBT) because the participants in our study self-identified using a broad range of terms, including “queer”, “genderfluid”, and many others. We believe the inclusion of the “Q” and “+” help represent this wide range of identities represented in our sample.

discrimination.² These fundamental assumptions posited by queer theory informed the development of the present study's research questions, which understand queer families as a natural variation of the human experience which inherently resist heteronormativity.

Finally, our research was informed by Ansara's cisgenderism framework, which argues that cisgender identities are valued and privileged over transgender identities (Ansara, 2012; Ansara & Hegarty, 2012). *Cisgenderism* assumes that cisgender identities are healthy and normal and that transgender identities are pathological. The cisgenderism framework also pushes against the transgender/cisgender binary that assumes people are either trans or cis, ignoring intersex people, people who are misgendered due to physical characteristics but would be labelled cisgender, and others who do not neatly align with this binary. Throughout our analysis, we were alert to these features of cisgenderism.

1.5. The current study

Little research exists regarding the perspectives of LGBTQ+ parents who have some investment in their child's conformity to traditional gender norms (Averett, 2015; Berkowitz & Ryan, 2011; Flanders et al., 2019). The current study therefore focuses on this under-researched group of parents, who may face unique tensions that impact their encouragement of conformity and may provide less beneficial support for gender diversity in their children than other parents. The goal of the present study is to better understand the nature of these parents' investment in their child's conformity to gender norms. In line with these aims, the current study aimed to address the following research questions:

- (1) How does a relatively invested group of LGBTQ+ parents describe investment in their child's conformity (or nonconformity) to traditional gender norms?
 - a. What factors contribute to high levels of investment in child conformity to gender norms among these parents?
- (2) Within this sample of relatively invested LGBTQ+ parents, what types of parenting practices and approaches to gender socialization do parents endorse regarding gender diversity in their children?

2. Methods

2.1. Data collection

Data from the current study were collected in the Spring and Summer of 2020. The current sample of 40 participants was drawn from a larger, anonymous survey of parents ($N = 540$) who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ+).

2.2. Screening and informed consent

The current study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Clark University. Study information was distributed via electronic mailing lists and social media pages aimed at diverse families, including LGBTQ+, adoptive, and multiracial families. In addition, recruitment efforts also targeted social media groups for parents and children who identified as transgender, nonbinary, or otherwise gender diverse. To meet initial criteria for participation in the larger survey from which participants for this study were drawn, individuals needed to (a) identify

² Not all LG families "queer" gender, sexuality, or family structures. To be visibly queer is to put oneself at risk (in terms of social status, potential for familial or social rejection, employment discrimination, etc.), and many people may choose to conform (e.g., a two-dad family referring to one partner as the "mom") or conceal their identities to avoid such consequences/risks.

as LGBTQ+ and (b) have at least one child 18 years of age or younger.

Potential participants were informed that participation in the study was completely voluntary, that they could leave any question(s) unanswered, and that they could drop out at any time. Survey instructions informed participants that upon completion of the survey, they would be directed to a second link where they could provide their e-mail address to be entered into a drawing for 1 of 25 \$25 Amazon gift cards and/or to receive information about study findings, with an understanding that email addresses would not be linked to their survey responses. All participants completed an informed consent form before proceeding with the survey.

In addition to the basic eligibility criteria, participants were excluded from the larger study sample if they did not complete the entire survey (i.e., dropped out early), provided suspicious, inconsistent, or questionable responses, or were expecting children (e.g., via adoption or pregnancy) but were not yet parents.

2.3. Sample selection

In conducting preliminary analyses on the larger sample of LGBTQ+ parents who completed the survey, it became clear that, in response to both closed and open-ended questions about their parenting practices, most parents in the sample endorsed having little to no investment in their child's conformity to traditional gender norms. In other words, most parents were open to their children behaving or expressing themselves in gender nonconforming ways. A much smaller group ($n = 40$) of parents reported that they were invested in their child's conformity to gender norms, and, in turn, were not particularly open to their children expressing gender nonconformity. Insofar as this desire for children to conform was atypical in the larger sample, as well as in the body of literature regarding LGBTQ+ parenting more generally, the authors decided to examine the open-ended responses of these invested parents more closely. As such, the qualitative analyses presented here focus on a sample of 40 participants we deemed "invested parents." In addition to the unique nature of these participant responses, focusing on a comparably smaller and homogenous sample of parents allowed for in-depth qualitative analysis (Roy et al., 2015).

2.4. Sample demographics

The sample for this paper is comprised of 40 LGBTQ+ parents who indicated relatively high levels of investment in their child's conformity to traditional gender norms. Most parents in the sample were White ($n = 32$; 80.0%), cisgender women ($n = 27$; 67.5%), and were partnered with other women ($n = 20$; 50.0%). When taking the gender identity of the partners of participants who completed the survey into consideration, a total of 4 participants (10.0%) were trans or nonbinary or had partners who were trans/nonbinary. While most parents were currently partnered (80.0%), others did not currently have a partner ($n = 4$; 10.0%) or were separated but co-parenting or living with a former partner ($n = 4$; 10.0%).

Participants largely described their communities as suburban ($n = 20$; 50.0%) and had a family income that fell between \$100,000 and \$150,000. The parents in our sample were also highly educated, as the majority had earned an advanced college degree ($n = 28$; 70.0%). Most parents had one (40.0%) or two (42.5%) children, though some had as many as six (2.5%). Though specific age data was not collected for each child, the age group with the greatest number of children represented were children between the ages of 6 and 10 years old ($n = 24$). While many families had older children, nearly one-third of the sample were parents only to children younger than 5 years old ($n = 12$, 30.0%). A full report of sample demographics can be found in Table 1.

2.5. Procedure

The current study focused on participant responses to a survey

Table 1
Demographic characteristics of participants.

Demographic variable	N	Percent
Gender		
Cis men	11	27.5
Cis women	27	67.5
Trans men	1	2.5
Trans women	0	0.0
Nonbinary, genderqueer, agender	1	2.5
Sexual Orientation		
Lesbian	18	45.0
Gay	13	32.5
Bisexual	6	15.0
Queer	3	7.5
Race/Ethnicity		
White	32	80.0
Hispanic/Latinx	2	5.0
Black	2	5.0
Asian	1	2.5
Multiracial	3	7.5
Child Gender		
Girl	31	41.3
Boy	35	46.7
Nonbinary/Other gender	2	2.7
Missing	7	9.3
Family income level		
Under \$50 K	2	5.0
\$50–100 K	8	20.0
\$101–150 K	12	30.0
\$151–200 K	5	12.5
\$201–250 K	4	10.0
\$251–300 K	4	10.0
Over \$300 K	5	12.5
Highest educational level		
Some college/an associate's degree	3	7.5
College degree	9	22.5
Master's degree	17	42.5
PhD/MD/JD	11	27.5
Community Type		
Rural	7	17.5
Suburban	20	50.0
Urban	11	27.5
College town	2	5.0

consisting of demographic questions, including items about gender, sexual orientation, education level, and income, as well as questions that broadly assessed family building considerations and parenting experiences. Each participant in the sample represents an independent family unit, and parents answered demographic questions about their child (ren) and current partner(s), if applicable.

2.5.1. Survey questions

Participants responded to two survey items about gender and parenting. Each of these items had both a closed and open-ended component such that respondents were first asked to choose from a predefined set of responses, followed by the opportunity to expand on these responses in an open-text format. The items were as follows:

- (1) “How invested do you feel about your child(ren) conforming to gender norms (e.g., wearing clothes stereotypical of their assigned gender, having interests stereotypical of their assigned gender, using a particular set of pronouns)?”
 - a. Participants were asked to choose from one of the following: *Very, Somewhat, Not really, or Not at all.*
 - b. In a follow-up open-response question, they were then asked to, “Please explain/give examples.”
- (2) “Have you approached parenting in such a way that encourages gender creativity or expansiveness?”
 - a. Participants were asked to choose from one of the following responses: *Very, Somewhat, Not really, or Not at all.*
 - b. In a follow-up open-response question, they were similarly then asked to, “Please explain/give examples.”

For the purposes of the present study, participant responses to both survey items were analyzed together.

2.6. Qualitative analysis

Written responses were examined qualitatively using Reflexive Thematic Analysis. Methods included building familiarity with the data, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2022). Our approach to analysis included inductive coding, which aimed to understand the meaning of what participants said explicitly, and deductive coding, which aimed to understand the meaning of participants' statements through the lens of social constructionism and queer theory. Throughout the findings section, we use participant quotes as evidence for our identified themes (see Table 2 for characteristics of quoted participants).

The analytic team included one graduate student and one faculty member, both of whom identify as White women. The faculty member is a parent of one nonbinary child and one cisgender girl, and the graduate student is not a parent. The graduate student completed all coding using NVivo, and the graduate student and faculty member then met regularly for several weeks to discuss potential themes.

All open-ended responses to two survey questions were read several times by the first author, who began to notice content that could be relevant to our research questions. The first author then began the process of rigorous coding line by line. Participant responses to both survey items were examined holistically, and responses from each participant were coded systematically such that each response was coded in its entirety before moving to the next participant's response(s). As initial codes were generated, the first author considered whether existing codes applied to the next chunk of data or if a new code was necessary. After coding all participant responses, the first author (a doctoral student) then met with the second author (an experienced researcher) to reflect on how the data had been coded, as well as the assumptions that were made while coding the data and things the first author may have overlooked during this initial stage.

Importantly, we did not use a codebook and did not “check” codes as in intercoder reliability; instead, this process was implemented in order to reflect on the coding process and to help the first author develop skills in coding and theme development. The coding process was iterative, and initial codes needed to be revisited and revised as the authors' active engagement with the data changed how they made sense of participant responses. We generated both semantic (descriptive) and latent (interpretive) codes. Examples of initial codes included “queer media”, which applied to parents who mentioned watching TV shows or movies or reading books that had LGBTQ+ representation with their children, “anti-pink”, which applied to parents whose responses were interpreted by researchers to devalue traditional expressions of femininity (e.g., the color pink, wearing dresses). Authors then reviewed the codes and reflected on ways they could be combined or collapsed to generate themes/subthemes. For instance, the codes, “kids naturally conform” and “cisgender default” were combined, along with a few other codes, to create the third theme, “Children Lead, Parents Follow.” Other codes were deemed unrelated to key findings and were discarded. Finally, authors defined and named the themes and articulated appropriate subthemes within them. Themes were viewed as actively constructed and developed by the research team, rather than something that was waiting to be discovered within the data.

Throughout the process of coding and theme development, we were mindful of the ways in which our own identities and experiences, as well as our perspectives on gender socialization, might shape our analysis. To attempt to mitigate these biases, we discussed them extensively and reviewed our perspectives on the data with our larger research team, which consisted of a diverse group of graduate and undergraduate students. Our efforts to make our biases more visible enhance the validity of the work. In line with Levitt et al.'s (2017) assurances of fidelity, throughout the data analysis process we considered how our

Table 2
Participants Quoted in Text.

Pseudonym	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Child(ren)	Child Age Range(s) ¹				Community
				<5	6–10	11–15	16–18	
Josh	Cis Man	White	1 boy; 1 girl	2	–	–	–	Suburban
Richard	Cis Man	White	2 boys; 1 girl	–	2	1	–	Rural
Elise	Cis Woman	White	1 boy; 1 girl	1	1	–	–	Suburban
Steph	Cis Woman	White	3 girls	–	2	1	–	Suburban
Peyton	Cis Woman	White	1 girl	–	–	1	–	Urban
Grace	Cis Woman	White	1 girl	1	–	–	–	Rural
Melanie	Cis Woman	White	2 boys	2	–	–	–	Suburban
Katherine	Cis Woman	White	4 children	–	–	2	1	Suburban
Levi	Cis Man	White	2 boys	–	2	–	–	Rural
Esther	Cis Woman	Black	2 children	–	2	–	–	Urban
Olivia	Cis Woman	White	1 boy; 1 girl	1	1	–	–	Suburban
Miguel	Cis Man	Hispanic/Latinx	1 boy; 1 girl	–	1	1	–	Urban
Nina	Cis Woman	Hispanic/Latinx	6 children ²	–	2	1	–	Rural
Jill	Cis Woman	White	2 girls	–	2	–	–	Suburban
Adrienne	Cis Woman	White	1 boy	1	–	–	–	Rural
Jay	Nonbinary	White	1 boy; 1 girl	2	–	–	–	Suburban
Emma	Cis Woman	White	1 boy; 1 girl	–	–	–	1	Urban
Lynne	Cis Woman	White	1 boy; 1 girl	–	1	1	–	Urban
Tamara	Cis Woman	White	1 girl	1	–	–	–	Urban
Jeanine	Cis Woman	White	1 boy	1	–	–	–	Rural
Laura	Cis Woman	White	1 boy	1	–	–	–	Rural
Yvette	Cis Woman	Multiracial	1 boy; 1 NB	–	1	1	–	Rural

Note. For participants who did not provide gender information for their child(ren), the total number of children will be listed. NB = nonbinary.

¹ For child age ranges, the number indicated denotes the number of children in the household within that particular age range. Age range data was not included in this table for children over 18 years of age.

² Gender and age information is missing for this participant's sixth child due to limitations of the survey.

perspectives on gender and parenting might influence our interpretation of participant responses. This was particularly salient when assessing researcher reactions to participant responses that indicated hesitancy or a lack of acceptance of gender diversity. Discussion of a compassionate understanding of these decisions on the part of parents was important, and a discussion of larger structural barriers and fears participants in this study were navigating was useful in maintaining a balanced perspective. We achieved utility by contextualizing our findings within their geographic, historical, and cultural contexts and in our discussion of regional differences, changes in attitudes towards LGBTQ+ people over time, and the influence of the political climate on parents' assessment of risk for themselves and their families (Levitt et al., 2017).

3. Results

Our goal in the current study was to answer the following questions: 1) How does a relatively invested group of LGBTQ+ parents describe investment in their child's conformity (or nonconformity) to traditional gender norms? Specifically, what factors contribute to greater levels of investment in child conformity to gender norms among these parents? 2) Within this sample of relatively invested LGBTQ+ parents, what types of parenting practices and approaches to gender socialization do these more invested parents endorse regarding gender diversity in their children? Regarding question 1, our findings suggest that considerations regarding their children's psychological safety (and need for authentic self-expression) were important to parents in this sample, but that parents also worried about the risks their children would face interpersonally and in their communities if they had nonconforming gender presentations. We also found that parents' relatively high investment in conformity was linked to their experiences and the meaning they made of living in the world as a queer family, with parents expressing concern that individual queerness in their children would validate hostile public stereotypes about queer parents. Regarding question 2, our findings suggest that these parents largely endorsed a child-led perspective on gender socialization, outsourcing the task of introducing ideas about gender diversity and flexibility to their children and positioning themselves as relatively neutral actors in their implicit endorsement of

conformity.

We organized these findings into three themes. The three main themes were: Balancing Internal Safety with External Risk; Navigating Individual Queerness in a Queer Family Context; and Children Lead, Parents Follow. Within the first theme, "Balancing Internal Safety with External Risk", are two subthemes that together capture the tensions participants experienced between "gauging external risk" and "valuing internal safety" when making decisions about the gender socialization of their children. The second theme, "Navigating Individual Queerness in a Queer Family Context", includes the sub-themes of "queer parent identities" and "public perception of queer families," which further illustrate the unique contextual factors LGBTQ+ parents often need to consider when raising children. The third theme, "Children Lead, Parents Follow," describes how these conflicting factors influenced the way participants approached gender socialization with their children. The three themes and their related sub-themes are described and discussed in detail below. Though not all aspects of each theme apply to every participant, the overarching themes and relations among them are reflective of this group of parents holistically.

3.1. Theme 1: Balancing internal safety with external risk

The first theme, "Balancing Internal Safety with External Risk," captures the tension that many parents described between their desire to support their child's internal psychological safety (e.g., their ability to freely express themselves or develop their identities without restriction) and their fear of perceived external risks and structures that could negatively affect their child's well-being (e.g., bullying, social rejection) should they not conform to gender norms. Though the specific set of factors each individual parent endorsed varied according to their context and family structure, across the board parents commonly had to decide whether to sacrifice one aspect of their child's positive/healthy development (e.g., social development, peer relationships) for another (e.g., gender identity). This theme consists of sub-themes that more closely examine the structural and context-specific factors parents weighed.

3.1.1. Gauging external risk

Across the larger theme of Balancing Internal Safety with External Risk, parents grappled with their desire to protect their children from harm with their hopes for them to live authentically and express themselves freely. As such, the sub-theme of Gauging External Risk describes how parents attempted to gauge external threats to their child's well-being according to a variety of factors, including characteristics of their child, family, and the larger community. One factor these parents considered was child gender as it relates to patriarchal norms. While the survey items did not specifically ask about how child gender shaped parents' investment in their child's conformity to gender norms, many participants mentioned the gender of their child(ren) in explaining their approach to socialization. Specifically, parents appeared to see nonconformity as riskier and less desirable for boys and as lower risk and more desirable for girls.

For instance, some parents acknowledged differing levels of comfort with their sons engaging in gender nonconforming behaviors compared to daughters who did the same: "We dressed our daughter in what is considered "boys" clothing because we thought that clothing was cute, but we did not do the same for our son" (Emma; cis woman, White, bisexual; White cis woman partner). Like Emma, multiple parents described an openness to their daughters wearing masculine clothing or participating in activities generally associated with boys. However, fewer said the same for their sons' clothing or extracurricular habits.

Parental reactions to gender nonconformity were complex regardless of child gender, and most reported similar concerns related to negative social consequences. However, the emotional valence of parental responses seemed to vary by child gender such that there was greater reticence of, or aversion to, nonconformity for parents of boys compared to girls. As parents described their sons, there was more reticence in the sense that some parents explicitly distinguished between wearing feminine clothes inside the house versus outside the house. None did so for their daughters. Jay, a nonbinary parent of two children (a boy and a girl), shared, "My son likes to wear girls clothes. We let him in the home. He hasn't asked to wear them outside."

Parents also expressed more conflicted feelings about their sons than their daughters. Many of them allowed their sons to express themselves with restrictions (e.g., only allowed in the home). In comparison, parental responses about daughters were less emotionally intense or averse. Instead, parents were more uncertain, and at times even prideful, of their daughters' gender nonconformity, perhaps reflecting the ways in which nonconformity for girls confers some degree of access to male privilege. For instance, Peyton (whose daughter is now a teenager) expressed enthusiasm about her child's interest in firetrucks as a young child:

We encouraged our daughter's love of firefighters when she was a preschooler—we bought her allllllllll the clothes and gear with fire engines, even though it was intended for boys. Once she transitioned to wearing skirts and dresses full-time at age 4 (thanks, preschool!), we still bought firefighter related fabrics and made her skirts and dresses with firefighters and fire gear.

Even after her daughter's interests shifted to more feminine forms of expression, Peyton described a continued interest in supporting other gendered interests in her daughter as she aged: "She was pretty clear from the time she was a little kid that she prefers feminine clothing, accessories, hair, etc., but we always leave the door open for a different expression, even today when she's 13." This openness was common among parents of daughters, who were more frequently positive in their framing of nonconformity from girls compared to descriptions of nonconformity from boys.

In contrast, Adrienne – the mother of a young son – shared, "I would honestly prefer that my child not be transgendered, but will support him with unconditional love in any case. I just have seen what a struggle that can be, with mixed results." While sentiments like Adrienne's were echoed across parents of children of all genders, they were particularly

salient for parents of cis boys. These reactions align with broader trends towards greater societal acceptance of gender nonconformity for children who are assigned female at birth (AFAB) compared to those who are assigned male at birth (AMAB).

Parents' perceived risk also varied as a function of community characteristics and the setting in which they were raising their children. For instance, some parents mentioned the demographic makeup of families in their area:

Given that we live in a rural area, we are the only same-sex couple in our area. As both of our children currently identify as their born gender (male), and both are currently interested in conventionally boy-associated activities, it is easier for them to appropriate the gender norm. – Levi (cis man, White, gay; White cis man partner)

For Levi, the advantages to his sons of conforming gender presentations and identities were magnified given the rural context in which they lived. Another father living in a rural community expressed similar views, noting: "We try not to engage in gender norming to the degree we can, but this is challenging because of the community in which we live, where gender norms are baked into the culture" (Richard; cis man, White, gay; White cis man partner). Understandably, parents like Richard and Levi who did not perceive their communities to be diverse or supportive of LGBTQ+ issues were either relieved that their children "naturally conformed" or concerned about the reaction of other people (if their children were nonconforming). The following quote from Emma, a cis White bisexual woman partnered with a White woman, illustrates how environments seen as safer for nonconforming people allowed parents to feel more comfortable supporting gender nonconformity in their children: "We are lucky that we have kids who mostly get positive responses from the world. It might be different if we lived somewhere other than [a large, liberal city in the Western United States]."

Parents also described perceived support, or lack thereof, from extended family or other community members as an external factor that shaped their investment in conformity. For parents who saw their extended family or other community members as unsupportive, supporting their children in gender diverse play or presentations was viewed as risky and exposing those children to potential social rejection. For example, one participant described navigating toy choices with a grandparent who rejected gender diverse play by their son: "We personally don't think much of it, but do have pressure from family. We asked for a kitchen for our son and my father said 'I'm not buying him a kitchen! That's a girls toy!'" (Jeanine; cis woman, White, lesbian; White cis woman partner). Another parent described how they changed their child's appearance to be more gender conforming around her grandparents, presumably to protect the child from negative attitudes or comments. This parent said, "I also notice that I dress my child more in "girly" normative clothing (dresses, specifically) when we see her grandparents. I find myself doing this more the older my daughter gets" (Tamara; cis woman, White, queer; White cis woman partner). Yvette, the mother of two children (1 son and 1 nonbinary child), expressed a similar sentiment about the limitations of what she was willing to support in terms of affirming gender nonconformity in her children due to concerns about negative reactions from other people:

I guess I just don't want/am unwilling to support some extremes at this point in their lives (hormones, binders, etc). Part of me doesn't want them to stand out too much in what society would see as a negative way. – Yvette (cis woman, Multiracial, lesbian; no current partner)

For all of these parents, making decisions about supporting their children's gender nonconforming play or dress involved careful considerations about the degree to which they believed they could expect positive responses from others.

Notably, intersections of race and gender further complicated the risk assessment process for some parents. For instance, Esther, one of

just a few Black participants in this sample, provided two seemingly conflicting responses regarding the gendered behaviors of her child. Regarding her investment in her child's conformity to gender norms, she shared, "I don't want my black son to wear a dress outside of home/school." In response to the survey item about gender creativity, however, Esther endorsed engaging in gender "creative" parenting practices, listing, "colors, clothing, [and] hair" as ways she allows her son to express himself freely. Notably, concerns about external risk may be particularly salient for Black parents of sons considering the greater levels of discrimination and physical harm faced by Black men, especially those whose gender expression is feminine, in the United States (e.g., due to racism and transmisogyny; Human Rights Campaign [Foundation, 2021](#)). Her responses suggest that both home and school are safe contexts, but that Esther is worried about the wider world. For parents raising children with multiple marginalized identities, concerns about the risks of gender nonconformity may be magnified by concerns about the risks of racism or other oppressive systems.

3.1.2. Valuing internal safety

The sub-theme Valuing Internal Safety demonstrates parents' care for their child's internal, or psychological, well-being. This care existed simultaneously with their concerns of external threats. Such care often manifested as a desire to support their child's autonomy and individual development and seemed to contribute to ambivalence regarding their investment in gender conformity – that is, these parents struggled to weigh concerns about external risk if their children were to engage in gender nonconforming behavior against concerns about the internal psychological risks to their children of feeling unsupported in their gender expressions and identities. Several parents emphasized positive emotions like happiness as desirable for their children. In addition, many participants emphasized the importance of their children being their authentic selves, as stated by Lynne (cis woman, White, bisexual; No current partner): "We talk all of the time about liking who you are and the gifts you have—not trying to be someone you are not or that does not feel like you." Similarly, another participant noted:

We would prefer that our son is not limited by or subjected to gender norms as long as possible (though knowing it is everywhere outside of our home) so he can develop in the way he is meant to and be his authentic self, without worrying about societal expectations. He loves playing with a doll and dancing. – Laura (cis woman, White, lesbian; Multiracial cis woman partner)

Despite their relatively high level of investment in gender conformity, these parents valued their children's ability to express themselves authentically and hoped that authentic self-expression would contribute to their experience of joy and other positive feelings. Rather than wishing to manage their child's gender presentation, parents in this sample generally appeared hopeful that their children would naturally orient toward a relatively conforming gender presentation so that their inner security would not be in conflict with external risks (of gender nonconformity).

In considering internal safety and the balance of authenticity against external risk, parents also considered their children's age and developmental status. For instance, some parents noted that their children were "too young" to be developing gender identities and suggested they were waiting until they got a little older to address the subject of gender with them more actively or directly. These parents seemed to believe that there were few internal psychological risks to their children of enforcing gender normativity, believing that their children were too young to hold nonconforming identities:

At this point as a young child I do feel strongly about her being a girl and understanding the world as female/male and gender norms in between. However, if that some point she starts to feel not right in her body or has concerns, we wouldn't hold her back from that and

would embrace whoever she needed to be. – Grace (cis woman, White, lesbian; White cis woman partner)

Given this parent's developmental expectations, the external risks of gender nonconformity easily outweighed the internal risks of parent-imposed gender conformity. Several other parents in our sample, all of whom only had young children (i.e., children 5 years of age or younger), similarly referenced their child's age as a reason why they had not yet addressed various gendered aspects of life with them.

3.2. Theme 2: Navigating individual queerness within a queer family

The second theme, which we labeled Navigating Individual Queerness within a Queer Family, illustrates the unique factors LGBTQ+ parents must consider related to (1) their own queer identities and (2) their participation in non-traditional or "queer" family structures. Many of these parents' experiences as queer individuals, as well as the perception of themselves and their children as "abnormal" within society at large, were on parents' minds as they navigated their approach to the gender identity and development of their children. These factors included the ways that parents perceived (a) their own gender and sexual identities and (b) public sentiment about queer families, which we have broken down into two sub-themes as illustrated below.

3.2.1. Queer parent identities

The Queer Parent Identities sub-theme illustrates how, in some cases, parents' experiences of gender and sexual identity development in their own lives contributed to greater ambivalence regarding their child's conformity to gender norms. For instance, some parents described their personal histories with bullying or trauma growing up and expressed a desire to protect their children from facing the same things they did. Josh, the father of two young children, shared:

I want our children to be free to engage in play etc. That is typically associated with a gender/gender role but I am also cautious and always thinking about the challenges I faced growing up gay. – Josh (cis man, White, gay; White cis man partner)

One parent noted, "I would...hate for him to be bullied, but I would never discourage who he is" (Jeanine; cis woman, White, lesbian; White cis woman partner). Another parent emphasized the desire to avoid passing their own trauma related to gender on to their children, noting: "I'm dealing with my own childhood trauma regarding gender and working not to saddle my children with it." – Jay (TNB, White, lesbian; Black cis woman partner).

The negative reactions these parents received for being queer contributed to reticence or fear that their children would experience the same difficulties they experienced if they did not conform to the norm, which may have contributed to greater levels of investment in conformity among these parents. At the same time, and consistent with the Valuing Internal Safety sub-theme above, most of these parents conveyed a desire to support their child's authentic selves. Consistent with [Goldberg \(2009\)](#), this desire was potentially in part because they also desired freedom of expression growing up and had a deeper understanding of the queer experience and pull to go against the grain:

I was non gender conforming when I was younger and got teased and so once I became a preteen I conformed. So for my daughter who is non-conforming I want to support her but also want to protect her. – Jill (cis woman, White, lesbian; no current partner)

In contrast, some parents' personal experiences of identity exploration contributed to greater flexibility with respect to gender nonconformity in their children. For instance, one participant shared that she became less invested in conformity to gender norms following her transgender partner's transition:

Although I really wanted a daughter, I find that I am less attached to her gender identity/expression. I think part of that is because my

spouse transitioned a few years ago—gender doesn't seem terribly important in the grand scheme of things when you love a person. – Peyton (cis woman, White, lesbian; White nonbinary partner)

Another mother's experience further exemplifies how parental identity exploration opened the door for more explicit, open conversation about gender identity and expression between her and her children: "We talk about gender fluidity and transgender situation in our home more so than our heterosexual peers. My wife leans more toward being gender queer versus cis gender and that has spurred a lot of discussion in our home about gender identity" (Nina; cis woman, Hispanic/Latinx, lesbian; White cis woman partner). In this case, the personal experience of parents proved to be a useful tool in understanding and navigating the developing identities of their children. Notably, despite this relative openness, Nina still endorsed a greater level of investment in conformity due to her fears of bullying: "I suppose it's fear of our children being bullied or targeted that causes us to conform to the norm."

3.2.2. Public perception of queer families

Within the theme of Navigating Individual Queerness within a Queer Family, several parents expressed concerns about the public perception of queer families and, consequently, their child's place within one. The sub-theme of Public Perception of Queer Families demonstrates how broad negative assumptions of lesbian and gay parents may compound perceived risks for these parents when rearing children who do not conform to traditional gender norms. As one example, one parent described feeling relief at their child's gender conformity due to concern that nonconforming behavior would contribute to social stigma against their two-mom family:

My children happen to be gender conforming. Although I hope that we would be accepting of less gender conforming behavior, I have a feeling that I would have experienced some shame/worry about people thinking less of two moms etc. With our first child, when gay parenting was less common, I felt more conscience of having a "perfect" child to show to the world that gay parenting was a good idea. By the time we had my son, seven years later, I was more mellow. – Emma (cis woman, White, bisexual; White cis woman partner)

Another parent, similarly, reported struggling with ambivalence as he attempted to balance his personal values with the potential negative public perception of his family and relative consequences for his child's social development: "I struggle with not wanting to stick to "norms" and having our children subjected to social challenges in school, etc., already having to be the ones with gay dads" (Miguel; cis man, Hispanic/Latinx, gay; White cis man partner). Parents often needed to take into account both their internal/personal feelings about queer identities (their own and their children's) as well as external, potentially negative assumptions or perceptions other people may have of their children due to their position as a child with queer parents. For many parents in this sample, investment in gender conformity was driven by a sense that their children would suffer greater external risk for gender nonconformity due to their status as children of queer parents.

3.3. Theme 3: Children lead, parents follow

The third and final theme, which we labeled Children Lead, Parents Follow, illustrates how the aforementioned factors influenced parents' attitudes and behaviors when navigating their child's gender socialization, expression, and identity development. To varying degrees, parents offered their children opportunities to explore their gender and expressed support (real or hypothetical) of gender nonconformity. However, parents generally defaulted to the assumption that their children would naturally align with traditional gender norms, and some expressed relief that this was the case. Katherine is one example of a parent who expressed relief at her child's perceived conformity:

I'm ashamed to say my children naturally conform to gender norms. It's one less thing for me to worry about. – Katherine (cis woman, White, bisexual; White cis woman partner)

Many parents in this sample expressed comfort with the idea of assuming their children would be cisgender and with selecting clothing and toys accordingly. For example, Olivia, a mother of two school-aged children (one boy and one girl), said: "I have to admit that we want our son to conform a bit, so that he doesn't face bullying. We generally try to be open to what he wants but we tend to buy him 'boy' clothes and toys (which he likes). I guess we are going with 'boy' things unless/until he tells us otherwise." Similarly, a parent of two children stated, "We use she and he and buy clothing associated with their birth sex but encourage them to play with whatever they wish, marry whoever they love and style their hair anyway" (Elise; cis woman, White, lesbian; White cis woman partner). These parents, like others in the sample, appeared to share an assumption that the expected outcome for their children would be a cisgender identity and that intentionally encouraging gender exploration would therefore be unnecessary or could even be more harmful than assuming a cisgender identity until or unless the child reported otherwise. While these parents expressed some support for their children's diverse self-expression, there were clear limits – for example, Elise above is the mother of two young children and, while she described support for their freedom of choice over toys, marriage, and hair styles, she was clear in her preference for pronouns and clothing which aligned with her children's sex assigned at birth, stating, "aside from clothing and pronouns, we don't assume anything."

Generally, parents expressed a practice of restraint in terms of their approach to their child's gender socialization. This practice was characterized by letting their child "lead the way" or by "not pushing them" to engage in cross-gender behaviors. One parent, Melanie, noted: "[we are] trying to have emotionally intelligent boys but don't push them and they seem happy as boys. Only 2 and 4 so it's early" (cis woman, White, lesbian; White cis woman partner). For this parent, it was important to allow any gender nonconformity to stem from the child's initiative and not from the parent's encouragement. Similarly, one father shared:

We don't 'push' them to be gender neutral – we allow them to pursue whatever activities or desires they want. However, they are taught that boys/girls can do 'xyz' and that while it may not be typical, everyone is different and chooses their own path and they can choose whatever they like." – Levi (cis man, White, gay; White cis man partner)

Another parent said, "All our children had an obvious preference for things related to their birth gender. We didn't specifically encourage "girl" colors or toys or movies. The kids chose favorites" – Steph (cis woman, White, lesbian; White cis woman partner). All of these parents express the view that it is important for children to be in the lead in exploring nonconforming gendered behavior.

If children naturally conformed to gender norms or did not actively pursue cross-gender activities or forms of expression, most parents in this sample did not express that they actively encouraged them to do so. However, many stated they would hypothetically be supportive if their children expressed these interests in the future. For example, Levi stated, "...if either of our children ever expressed any interest or desire to non-conform to gender norms, those changes would happen, and would be supported and tailored to that child's desires" (cis man, White, gay; White cis man partner). For Levi, as for other parents in this sample, this hypothetical support seemed to be accompanied by the assumption that children would express gender nonconforming desires on their own, should they be relevant.

4. Discussion

The present study sought to better understand the experiences of a unique subsample of LGBTQ+ parents ($n = 40$) who reported greater

investment in their child's conformity to gender norms than was typical for the vast majority ($N = 500$) of respondents to a larger survey. This group not only stood out within the larger sample but also diverged from existing literature about LGBTQ+ parents, which typically suggests that many LGBTQ+ parents are relatively less invested in gender conformity and more open to identity exploration from their children than heterosexual parents.³ We sought to gain a deep understanding of the factors that set a small group of parents apart and made them more hesitant than other LGBTQ+ parents to resist gender norms. We were specifically interested in how this group of parents described their investment in their child's conformity (or nonconformity) to traditional gender norms, in what factors contributed to greater levels of investment in their child's gender conformity, and in what types of parenting practices and approaches to gender socialization these parents endorsed.

Broadly, our findings suggest that these parents have a weak but meaningful level of investment in gender conformity in their children; they see gender conformity as an easier and safer path for their children than nonconformity but they are also concerned about the impacts on their children of feeling that their authentic selves are unacceptable, and they are eager to support their children if their children are active and agentic in claiming a nonconforming gender identity. Their parenting behaviors are shaped by this perspective, as this sample of parents generally provided limited opportunities for gender diverse play and clothing—especially for boys, who they perceived as at greater risk if they displayed nonconforming behavior—but expressed a hypothetical willingness to provide more expansive opportunities if their children sought them out.

Our findings are consistent with prior research suggesting that parenting poses unique challenges for LGBTQ+ parents, who must strike a delicate balance between supporting their children and shielding them from societal risks and oppressive systems (Grant et al., 2011; Kuvalanka & Goldberg, 2009; Kuvalanka et al., 2018). While oppressive structural factors influence all families to some extent, LGBTQ+ parents are distinctly affected by patriarchal and heteronormative norms as they navigate the gender socialization and development of their children. As queer individuals themselves, these parents naturally diverge from societal expectations outlined by these structures and are subject to heightened scrutiny and risk as they build their families. Indeed, some of our findings align with existing research concerning the calculations LGBTQ+ parents make about when and to what extent they should disclose their identities in different settings (e.g., schools, pediatrician offices; Bower-Brown & Zadeh, 2020; Perlesz et al., 2006). Perlesz et al. (2006) discuss the varied approaches lesbian parents take to disclosure; while some parents are open and proud about their queer family structures across contexts, others take more passive or selective approaches. Parents may choose not to disclose their identities for a variety of reasons, including to protect their families from negative attitudes or discrimination, or a desire to avoid having to “explain” or define their family dynamics in public. It is possible that the parents in the present study engaged in similar assessments of risk and made the distinction that some gendered behavior was only safe for their children within the home, and not outside of it.

Our findings suggest that factors outlined in our first and second themes—namely, balancing perceived external risks of nonconforming gender presentations against perceived internal risks of feeling unsupported in one's authentic gender expression, as well as navigating the complexities of individual queer identities within a queer family—contributed to variability in parenting as captured in the third theme. In other words, parents' fears and hopes for their children – internally, externally, and in relation to their family structures and personal

³ It is important to be clear that LGB individuals are no more likely than straight individuals to raise gender nonconforming children; however, they face particular challenges (and advantages) in doing so that justify studying these families as a unique group.

experiences with queerness – as well as the ways they balanced and ultimately made meaning about these factors, influenced their approach to parenting. For most parents in our sample, though, parenting decisions seemed to be oriented around a view that preferences for gender nonconformity should and would come from the child and need not be introduced by the parent.

Findings related to the third theme, “Children Lead, Parents Follow”, regarding a “hands-off” or child-led parenting approach to gender nonconformity suggest an underlying, implied belief among parents that providing gender conforming clothing and toys is a neutral act and providing nonconforming clothing and toys is an act of parental intrusion. In these assumptions, well-intended parents may view gender conformity as the “default”, and thus may not understand socialization into the gender binary as an active, non-neutral process that they themselves are participating in (Burr, 2015). Further, parents' hypothetical support of gender nonconformity, accompanied by a lack of active encouragement of their children to explore gender expression outside of the norm, relies on the assumption that their children would express these desires on their own, should they be relevant – which may not be the case depending on personality differences and comfort levels among children.

Parents in this sample lacked strong opposition to gender nonconformity; generally, they did *not* believe that gender conforming presentations and identities were the only acceptable options for their children. Rather, it seemed as if parents were open to a diverse range of gender expression but needed to constantly weigh a variety of factors against each other because of their position as parents who were LGBTQ+ and their own experiences of stigma, bullying, and trauma driven by queerphobia. This “cost-benefit analysis” led to ambivalence about whether to encourage or allow their children to present in gender nonconforming ways and led parents to view relatively passive discouragement of gender nonconformity as safer than embracing gender diversity. In short, our findings build on the mixed findings in prior research to suggest that there is no “one size fits all” approach to gender socialization among LGBTQ+ parents. While some (or even most) LGBTQ+ parents might feel compelled or empowered to push back against gender stereotypes at home, others may not feel as comfortable doing so, at least while they and their family are in the public eye. Gender and sexual minority parents are a heterogeneous group whose experiences as queer individuals, alongside other structural factors and variations in identity outside of sex and gender, complicate the decision-making process of how to engage with their child's gender development.

Differential reactions from parents towards their sons compared to their daughters were consistent with previous findings that supporting child gender nonconformity is often more complex for parents of boys than those of girls (Kane, 2006) as well as research illustrating worse socioemotional outcomes for gender nonconforming children who are AMAB (Braun & Davidson, 2017; Steensma et al., 2014; Warren et al., 2019). These outcomes are potentially related to existing patriarchal structures which label femininity as weak or wrong (Connell, 1995); thus, boys may face greater censure for signaling femininity in their presentations as compared to girls who signal masculinity. Indeed, existing research with same-sex parents has found that boys' behavior tends to become more masculine over time regardless of family type (Goldberg & Garcia, 2016), potentially a result of the stronger and more intense pressure on boys to conform to masculine gender norms compared to girls. Fear of their children experiencing retribution rooted in patriarchy could explain why parents felt less comfortable allowing their sons to express femininity compared to their daughters' alignment with more masculine interests, activities, or traits.

Insofar as parents are just one of many agents of gender socialization in a child's life, children may have received messaging about gender conformity in other contexts outside of the home, such as at school or daycare. These external influences may lead children to withhold complicated feelings about their gender identity or expression,

especially if their parents do not actively signal that doing so is acceptable (e.g., by engaging them in discussion/normalizing diverse identity development). Children may have been discouraged in other settings even if parents weren't discouraging at home (and parents being "neutral" or passive about gender diversity might not be enough to combat those outside messages). As such, we argue that it is important for parents to actively show support for, and encourage expressions of, gender diversity when interacting with their children, while also acknowledging that some LGBTQ+ parents may feel more hesitant to do so due to a variety of experienced stressors.

4.1. Implications for supporting families

Most parents in this study did not appear to have a strong active desire to force gender conformity on their children; in contrast, many simply seemed to hope that gender conformity would happen on its own and would feel right for their children. As researchers, we inferred that some (but not all) of the parents in our study believed it would be optimal for their children to naturally conform to gender norms, as it would protect their children from harm. Many parents in our study expressed hesitancy and uncertainty about their approach, endorsing a deep desire to protect their children from harms that they themselves had experienced as well as from harms that they felt responsible for due to their own queerness (that is, the risks their children might face due to having queer parents in a queerphobic society). This group of parents might be assumed to be experts in navigating queerness of all forms because of their own experience growing up queer, but our findings highlight the extent to which, like other parents, they could benefit from support thinking through gender socialization processes and understanding gender identity development. This support could come from a variety of sources, including other parents, therapists, teachers, and community members.

Parents in this sample generally grew up in a time in which public awareness and acceptance of queer identities was substantially lower than it is now; as a result, many of them likely lived the experience of coming into awareness of their own queer identities without explicit support for queerness in their families or communities of origin. This generational difference between parents and their children may shape the way that parents are thinking about gender nonconformity; that is, based on their own experiences, it makes sense that parents in our sample would see parenting for gender conformity as a relatively neutral choice. Given their level of investment in supporting their children, parents like those in our sample may benefit from support in considering the ways in which they may be reinforcing a gender binary in their homes by not actively pushing against traditional gender roles and the potential advantages to their children of greater active support for gender diversity.

All parents, including those who identify as LGBTQ+, should be made aware of the risks associated with a child whose gender diversity is *not* actively supported or encouraged, as well as the positive outcomes related to child gender affirmation and exploration (Olson et al., 2016; Rafferty et al., 2018; Travers et al., 2012). It may also be useful to educate parents about the developmental processes related to gender, including the utility (and limitations of) of language (Riggs, 2019), the fluid nature of gender development across the lifespan (Castañeda, 2015), and the reality that trans and cisgender childrens' developmental trajectories are more similar than they are different. Relatedly, it may be useful to push back against common cisgenderist narratives which state there are two binary categories of children that exist in the world: those who are "cis" and have "normal" developmental processes, and those who are "trans" and experience development pathologically/abnormally (Ansara, 2012; Ansara & Hegarty, 2012). Especially considering the up-and-coming nature of research regarding the care of transgender and gender diverse youth, increased access to information regarding child and gender development as it becomes available may also be useful in combatting common narratives regarding children's cognitive

abilities to "know" their gender, and related developmentalist assumptions that children are unable to have such expertise (Riggs, 2019). Parents such as those in our sample demonstrate thoughtfulness and care regarding their children's development and deserve to have the full picture of risk and resilience when making parenting decisions regarding gender socialization. At the same time, such support/education would be most useful if it was paired with a serious understanding and consideration of the very real risks these parents are navigating in raising their children as queer parents and the very real risks to gender nonconforming people in certain geographic areas.

4.2. Limitations and future directions

As the qualitative analysis performed for this study was centered on participant responses to brief survey questions, we could not probe for elaboration or ask parents follow up questions to provide clarity about their answers. Future research could benefit from in-depth qualitative interviews with LGBTQ+ parents to further explore their parenting approaches to gender. In several cases, the researchers needed to draw conclusions about participant intent and meaning according to limited (and sometimes seemingly contradictory) survey responses. For instance, some open-ended responses to survey items indicated a relative openness to gender diversity, while their responses to close-ended items indicated a level of investment in their child's gender conformity. For instance, while Laura (quoted above, on page 31) shared, she "would prefer that our son is not limited by or subjected to gender norms as long as possible... so he can develop in the way he is meant to and be his authentic self," she also identified herself as "Very" invested in conformity on the close-ended survey item. In other cases, participants' open-ended responses left us with more questions than answers: while Katherine (quoted on page 37) expressed relief that her children naturally conform to gender norms, she also described herself as feeling "ashamed" of this fact. There were multiple instances in which parents wrote seemingly conflicting statements which alluded to greater nuance in their experience navigating gender with their children, and this nuance was of great interest to us as scholars. However, the limited nature of our survey data made it such that we could not ask participants follow-up questions about their responses, and we were therefore unable to understand participants' full (and likely complex) experience, such as responses from Laura and Katherine suggest. Future research could benefit from in-depth interviews or focus groups with LGBTQ+ parents who describe ambivalence about, or some level of investment in, their children's gender conformity, to gain further insight into these complex experiences.

An additional limitation of the current study is that parents reported their children's gender identities (as opposed to children reporting how they identify themselves), which may have limited our understanding of the true range of gender diversity experienced by the children of participants in our sample. Further, we were missing gender data for 8 of the children represented by parents in our sample, which meant that we were not able to think as thoroughly about patterns related to child and parent gender as we could have if this information had been complete. We also only had age range data for children, so we did not know specific child ages.

Very few parents in our sample identified as trans or nonbinary – it is hard to say if these parents' experiences are distinct from sexual minority (same-sex) parents with such a small sample, however it would make sense that they have unique experiences related to their own gender identity development and potential experiences with transphobia. The parents that were in our sample did speak to these factors, which suggests diversity in the experiences of trans and nonbinary parents. Even among the few trans parents we surveyed, there were differences in how they responded to their own transness or a partner's transness and in how this translated to how they interacted with their child's gender. Findings also raise questions for future research regarding why these invested parents differ from less invested parents

who are LGBTQ+. While beyond the scope of the present study, comparative analyses could help better explain why perceived risk may be amplified relative to other LGBTQ+ parents (e.g., in terms of greater contact with negative experiences, more homophobia experienced, less support).

Another potential direction for future research is to ask similar questions among a more racially/ethnically diverse sample, or a more diverse sample in terms of class. Though more than half of the families represented by the sample had children of color ($n = 22$), this was not a primary focus of our analysis. It is important to note that considerations of external safety may be different for different participants according to the social positions they hold (i.e., gender, race, ethnicity, social class), and more diverse samples could illuminate unique considerations for parents whose children hold multiple minoritized identities. Indeed, the few participants who did hold these identities within our sample alluded to complexities that should be further explored.

Notably, most participants in our sample were White and upper middle-class. This is both a limitation of the present study and a potential function of the constructs being studied, such that viewing children as the expert of their own needs and allowing them to lead (e.g., when engaging in “gender creative parenting”) may be most culturally salient among White, upper middle-class communities. It is possible that a more racially diverse or working-class sample of queer parents might take a different approach to the gender socialization of their children, another avenue for important future research. Finally, the geographic distribution of parents in our sample was limited such that half of the represented families lived in suburban areas.

The present study examined the experiences of a distinctive subset of LGBTQ+ parents who demonstrated a heightened investment in their child(ren)’s conformity to gender norms. Results indicate that queer parents must grapple with and attempt to balance a variety of complex factors when navigating the gender development of their children, including their desire for their children to live authentically as well as their consideration of external and structural risks. Many parents took an approach of restraint regarding gender diversity in their children such that they assumed their children naturally conformed until proven otherwise. While these parents were not *against* gender nonconformity in their children, they also did not actively encourage gender exploration, either breathing a sigh of relief at their child’s natural conformity or waiting for their children to initiate gender nonconforming interests or behaviors on their own. Findings suggest that there is potentially deeper complexity to the decision-making processes of queer parents than what is represented by the extant literature. Seeing as LGBTQ+ parents are a diverse group of people who are simultaneously presumed to be experts on queerness and scrutinized for their parenting practices, it is important that they are given appropriate resources to understand the gender development of their children while also being met with compassion and understanding regarding the unique risks and tensions they face as parents.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A

A.1. Sex and gender terminology

The terms “sex” and “gender” are often used interchangeably; however, there are notable differences in how they are operationalized in the context of this study. For the purposes of the present study, **sex** is defined as a biological construct (i.e., based on chromosomal attributes – XX, XY, or something else) and includes categories such as male, female, and intersex. Sex is typically determined at birth and is commonly considered to be a binary construct (male/female), despite the existence of intersex individuals whose biological sex falls somewhere between or outside of this binary. **Gender**, on the other hand, is a social construct. In other words, one’s gender is self-defined and not determined by biology. Although many people are “assigned” a gender at birth according to their sex (e.g., babies who are determined to be male are often assumed to be “boys”), gender identity is determined by the individual and may or may not match one’s sex assigned at birth. We understand gender to be **socially constructed**, as opposed to an individual characteristic of a person which is created in a vacuum. Gender is developed in response to societal expectations and constructions of what it means to be a boy/girl/man/woman. We, along with many other gender theorists, further understand gender as fluid and ever-changing (as opposed to a fixed state); therefore, one’s gender identity may change over the course of an individual’s lifetime (Kretchmar, 2011). *Transgender* (AKA “trans”) individuals are those whose gender identities do not align with the sex they were assigned at birth, whereas *cisgender* individuals’ gender identities naturally align with their sex assigned at birth. Those whose identities fall somewhere outside of the gender dichotomy often identify as *nonbinary*.⁴ We will broadly use the term **gender diverse** to refer to individuals whose gender identity (i.e., the label they use) and/or expression (i.e., behaviors and physical presentation) does not align with societal expectations associated with the sex (and often, gender label) assigned to them at birth. This includes those who identify as trans, nonbinary, genderfluid, genderqueer, agender, and a variety of other labels,⁵ as well as individuals who identify as cisgender but whose behavior or gender expression similarly does not align with societal gender expectations. We will therefore use the terms “sex” and “gender” to refer to biological and social characteristics, respectively.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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⁴ Importantly, there is some overlap between individuals who identify as transgender and nonbinary, and a wide range of labels exist to represent numerous identities that are considered “gender diverse”. These identities fall outside of one’s sex assigned at birth and vary according to level of concordance or discordance with gendered societal expectations and traditional binary conceptualizations of sex and gender.

⁵ A complete list of self-reported participant gender identities is provided in Table 1.

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