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## Family as text: gendered parenthood and family display through home-school correspondence in Norway

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines how different Norwegian families display family and parenthood ideals in one of the most gender-equal countries in the world. Empirically, the article is based on an ethnographic material in the shape of so-called 'travel diaries'. The diaries are written by Norwegian school children and their parents with the purpose of describing how everyday family life unfolds. The diaries are analysed within a discursive framework and by the use of analytical concepts like display, performativity, text circulation, repetition, habit etc. We discuss how gendered family display are spatially and temporally organized. We argue that normative standards and cultural codes for what seems to be a 'good family life' are created and maintained by a kind of social circulation, and that the family is a place where gender relations confirm existing welfare state policy. Gender equality and reciprocity are central values doing parenthood, and further the family is a transmission-belt between private and public gendered subject positions. By displaying family *in* a text-correspondence, this article also reveals how mothers participate in the construction of modern fatherhood as an intimate caregiver.

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Child-centrism; equality; family-display; gendered-parenthood; text-analysis

### Introduction: establishing the understanding of home-school correspondence as gendered performativity and family display

Massey (1994) argues that there is an intricate and profound connection of space and place with gender and the construction of gender relations. Our aim is to explore, through a home-school correspondence, how gendered parenthood and family display are spatially and temporally organized (Felski 2000).

In 1997, a primary school reform was undertaken in Norway. One of the most significant changes was that first grade would begin when children

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were 6 years old. Previously, the school starting age had been 7. Great emphasis was placed on school preparations to receive these young children and for their encounters with the school. One measure was that the 6-year-olds would meet a class teddy bear, which after a lottery draw, would go home with each pupil overnight or over a weekend. The class teddy bear was equipped with a travel diary. In it, the pupil—with help from his or her parents—was meant to write what the teddy had experienced during the home visit. The following day, the travel diary was read aloud during school hours, and the teddy and the travel diary were put into the school bag of the next pupil. The arrangement of a class teddy bear going on home visits with 6-year-olds became a permanent feature at most Norwegian primary schools. This means that nearly every household in Norway that has had a member of 6 years of age since 1997 has ‘reported’ on his/her everyday life to teachers, classmates and classmates’ parents.

These travel diaries can say a great deal about the ideals of everyday life that circulate among families with children and between families and the school community, the contents of the stories as well as the special form of correspondence these travel diaries are. Some key issues in this article are to reveal 1) what families choose to expose about events of a rather ordinary day or weekend, 2) what these choices of ‘reported’ events tell us about family, parenthood and gender norms and 3) how these norms are reproduced and reinforced through textual circulation between families and between families and school.

By examining the diary texts for answers to simple questions on topics such as who is where, who does what, who is together with whom and how these activities are conducted, we analyse which gendered parenthoods (Morgan 1996) are expressed, and how they become apparent in family display (Finch 2007). We have deliberately chosen to use the term parenthood, rather than parenting, as our focus is not only on rearing practises; it is broader and ideologically intervened (Sparman et al. 2016).

Our research aims at uncovering taken-for-granted everyday ideals of gendered parenthood among Norwegian families. The diaries are analysed within a discursive framework understanding norms and ideals as local, circulating power (Butler 1994; Holloway 1998). Several feminists like Butler focus on doing-, not being gender, and how gender differ, transgress and change from the normal. We use her framework, but in an opposite way, finding it fruitful to *investigate* the ‘normal’ itself, *not* how gendered norms are reinforced and challenged, as Butler does. Exploring what *constitutes the ‘normal’* is quite different from starting from what is considered to be normal and natural. We use Butler’s (1994) concept of performativity for this purpose. Similarly, Finch (2007) states that in changing context people are in need of displaying family. Again, we use the framework in an opposite way. As we

see it, the travel diaries contain narratives about what is 'normal'—it is a unique textual corpus for studying the performativity and display of an idealized standard. *Family as text* is a key concept. It is not meant metaphorically, family is done and constructed through the textual correspondence.

### How home–school correspondence matters for family display: evidence from previous research

The sociologist Holter (1970) undertook gendered family research as early as the 1970s. Several researchers were inspired by her work, such as Moxnes (1989), who studied gender conflict in families, and contemporary researchers such as Ellingsaeter and Widerberg (2012), Vaage (2012) and Aarseth (2011, 2018) who are studying class, gender and families in the Norwegian welfare state. According to them new forms of cohabitation, vaguer class and gender distinctions and changes in Norwegian welfare schemes have all been proven to influenced family practices and ideals. For instance, a new pattern appears in Norwegian families, where parents largely collaborate on getting everyday life to go around in areas such as cooking, childcare and leisure organization. This is confirmed by the time-use-statistics that show that fathers' participation in everyday life is approaching mothers' (Vaage 2012).

These sociologists use interviews and statistical methods to investigate families. Gullestad, an anthropologist, is one of the first in Norway to use ethnographic fieldwork in family research. She is also a pioneer theorising home, gender and class in a spatial perspective. Her book 'Kitchen table society' (1984) explored how young town-house mothers work to get family life, part time jobs and other social relationships to hang together. Later (1993) she examined constructions of gender connected to home as a spatial place. Gullestad emphasizes that 'to Norwegians home is an important setting not only for family life, but also for social life' (1993, 134). She as many other family and gender researchers in Norway, have for a long time argued that home and family also are a public matter. The Norwegian government has supported and regulated family life in several ways. Among other things, child benefit for *all* children born in Norway and a state bank for housing giving cheap loans for families to be able to own their own dwelling were initiated in 1946. The Family Ministry was established in 1956 and changed its name to the Ministry of Children and Equality in 2006. In 2003 a political promise of full day-care coverage was established, and in 2018 97% of 3-5-year-olds attend kindergarten. In 1993, fathers were entitled to paid parental leave, and in 2019 maternity leave where expanded from 46 to 49 weeks with a minimum of 15 weeks reserved for mothers and 15 weeks reserved for fathers (Gullestad 1996; Ellingsaeter and Widerberg 2012; Aarseth 2018).

From our perspective, the public school's active correspondence with families, which we are examining, is another example of the state's involvement in homes and private life. Compared to other family and gender researchers in Norway – using data from statistics, interviews and fieldworks, we are using texts as data material.

Besides Gullestad (1984, 1993, 1996), few other family researchers in Norway have had a spatial perspective, and practically no geographers are studying home and family-life. Looking into a broader European research field, Holloway (1998) argues that parenthood and child rearing has not been a major focus of human geography. However, there are some important exceptions. Holloway herself has developed the term 'local moral rationalities of mothering' referring to ways in which different cultures produce moral and social understandings of the kinds of care that children need (1998). Harman and Cappellini (2015) examine middleclass mothers' narratives on their daily routines of preparing lunchboxes for their children. Their study understands lunchboxes as artefacts linking together discourses and practices of doing and displaying good mothering. In large parts of the Western world, sensitive parents who are intensively responsive to children's needs and feelings are held up as the ideal (Lareau 2011; Shirani, Henwood, and Coltart 2012; Vincent, Ball, and Kemp 2004; Weininger and Lareau 2003). Geographers like Valentine (2016) and Aitken (2018) have all studied children's geographies considering issues such as parenthood and children's vulnerability in public and private spaces. According to Aitken geographers differ from sociologists and anthropologists in seeing children rooted in space and embedded in places. Aitken and Valentine concern children's vulnerability globally as well as locally. Valentine underlines how parents determine their children's personal geographies in a gendered way. Our article does not cover a large geographical range, but instead focuses on small, local shifts in place and space and how these shifts organize gender.

Despite all these gender research on children and families, children's own conceptions of gender and family life have rarely been explored. There are, however, some exceptions. Haldar (2013) analysed children's conceptions of romance and family life in Norway. There have also been Norwegian studies of children's more general conceptions of family (Haldar and Waerdahl 2009; Waerdahl and Haldar 2013). In a broader context, some studies rely on children's own perspectives through interviews and texts exploring the gendered role of parents, norms of gendered parenthood and family life in general (Dannesboe 2016; Eldén 2016; Guerreiro, Caetano, and Rodrigues 2014; Wardman et al. 2013). Our analysis also uses texts written by children, but takes a slightly different perspective, not focusing on children's own cultures or children's conceptions about parents. Instead, we are highlighting expressions of parental gender roles in children *and* their parent's descriptions of

family life. Our study uses a *negotiated* textual material, texts written by children *and* parents.

A similar analysis has been performed by Hutchison (2012) using video footage that illustrates interactions between mothers and children from different social classes. One unexpected finding of that study was that mothers perform invisible schoolwork to enhance their children's education. A similar tendency is illuminated in our study. Many of our texts are written by adults, often mothers, pretending being six-year-olds. However, we do not highlight this as educational support, but rather its gendered effects. As co-authors of the teddy-entries, mothers often position themselves in invisible roles. At the same time, this creates a negotiated child–adult voice that gives these texts a unique look into families' everyday-life.

How we contribute to this research field, are by focusing directly on gender norms and family ideals, through examining *naturally occurring texts* about children's and their parents' domestic activities and the spatial organization of their activities in a local environment. Unlike studies based on interviews and observations, as are most studies explicitly considering children, family life and gender, our text-based method answers questions about gendered parenthood and family life without directly asking about it.

### **Families as text—theoretical perspective**

Foucault used the term 'normalization' to designate the establishment of norms; 'it is simply a matter of maximizing the positive elements, for which one provides the best possible circulation, and of minimizing what is risky and inconvenient' (Foucault 2007, 19). He (1991) developed a positive power perspective with the concept of 'governmentality' - decentralized power produced via circulation in relations.

Butler (1993), inspired by Foucault, contributed to the theory of self-presentation and discourse theory with a number of studies, especially concerning what a subject is and how it 'becomes'. According to Butler (1993) gender is something you constantly do and discourse is a kind of gender-sanctioned talk. She underlines that the way we talk about gender depends on context and cultural codes. Discourses are to some degree open or closed, and they allow more or less room for creativity. Butler (1993) names this process performativity, and claims that gender, ethnicity, sexuality and other identity markers are performative because they are situated in prevailing conventions. The subjects identify with the positions identified by the discourses so the body and the discourses merge (Butler 1993). To become a subject, one is constrained by a set of implicit and explicit norms (Butler 1997). Butler (1999) writes: '... performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the

context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration' (15).

Finch (2007) in part transfers the same reasoning to family research with her concept of 'display' – family is something you repeatedly do. Finch defines family display as: 'the process by which individuals, and groups of individuals convey to each other and to relevant audiences that certain of their actions constitute "doing family things" and thereby confirm that these relationships are "family relationships"' (Finch 2007, 67). She makes the simple but important point that families are not what their members imagine them to be, but what they seem to be for others, based on the information the families transmit through talk, written text and personal appearance.

Felski (2000) conceptualises everyday life as 'the most self-evident, yet the most puzzling of ideas. It is a key concept in culture studies and feminism and important reference point in other scholarly fields, part of a growing interest in micro-analysis and history from below' (15). She argues that everyday life is grounded in three key facets: time, space and modality, operationalized in repetition, home and habit. Felski argues further that every day with repetition, home and habit often involves assumptions about gender and women's to the modern world (2002, 18) She refers to Butler who has shown 'that sedimented practises are the means by which repressive regimes of gender do their work' (2002, 27). The teddy diaries are overloaded with domestic microscopic details, and we will organize our analyses in line with Felski's temporal and spatial key facets, to reveal textual gendered family norms.

Following Foucault (1991), Butler (1993), Finch (2007) and Felski (2000), we consider families and their gender identities to be constituted by place and situation, and family norms to be constituted by circulation. This article relates to families as textual situations, with the text's own premises and logic. The genre that inserts itself into the travel diaries provides space for certain ideals and omits others. By the circulation of the travel diaries as a home – school – home correspondence families are confirmed by their readers.

### **Who, what and how: method and analytical strategy**

We have a rich data material consisting of books from several places in Norway. In this article, however, we concentrate on 15 travel diaries with a total of 319 home visits reported from three schools' in Oslo. We received these anonymised travel diaries from teachers who had gathered approval from the families to use them for research purposes.

From a methodological constructivist perspective the travel diaries will be presented and analysed using four methods. The first is a governmentality

inspired (Foucault 1991) analytical description of the whole text-corpus, analysing what kind of home-school correspondence the teddy travel diaries are. We reveal the correspondence as power-texts and show how this textual correspondence works as self-governance.

The second method is a quantitative analysis based on a 'what' question. It consists of a content analysis - a research technique used to make replicable and valid inferences by interpreting and coding textual material. By systematically evaluating texts, qualitative data can be converted into quantitative data (Bengtsson 2016). We have counted the spatial and temporal contents most commonly mentioned. We ask, what children, mothers and fathers mostly do together, and when and where they do it. In an analysis of normative self-presentations, a frequency analysis can provide important contributions that a qualitative analysis of individual narratives alone would miss. What do most people find worthy of reporting? In this article, similarities as well as differences are of interest. Gullestad emphasizes the importance to design investigations of gender in a way that make explicit not only the differences, but also the sameness, the similarities and the commonalities of the genders (1993).

The third method of analysis is based on a 'how' question; how gendered parenthood and family ideals are expressed directly and indirectly in the text. We see all activities and events in the diaries as gendered, with devices and materiality imbedded. Some of these devices and materials are strongly gender instructive, whereas others are not (Latour 1987). Examples of classifications we use are time, space, togetherness, home activities, outdoor activities, preparing activities. This selection is based on which concepts are most commonly mentioned in the narratives. NVivo 12 is used to count the frequency of words and concepts, and in the coding of both the 'what' and the 'how' questions.

Last, but not least, we analyse the narrator or the narrative voice in the teddy diaries—the entity that carries the word in the narrative (Aaslestad 2009). Who is telling a story and how they tell it provides complex and intricate guidelines. First, we must distinguish between the author, who is the physical person outside the text that actually wields the pen and writes the story, and the narrator, who is the entity that leads the word in the narrative. We must also distinguish between the manifested, explicit narrator, referring to him or herself in the text, and the narrator that is hidden. A story may have an authorial narrator voice, when the narrator is outside the happening, and the story may have a personal narrator voice, when the narrator's voice is inside the happening. The narrative voice may assume a superior, all-knowing position and attach thoughts and statements to the various characters in the narratives: 'he', 'she', 'it', 'we' and 'they', or a position as the I-voice in the narrative. In particular, the use of 'I' and the dynamics of 'we' have consequences for our diaries and make them gendered.



Analysing these narratives in this way, we not only draw attention to what is told, but also to how it is told and by whom. This may elicit details and nuances of meaning that may otherwise have remained undetected.

## **Findings: family display through home-school correspondence**

### ***Family ideals***

#### ***The teddy diaries as text corpus reproducing family ideals through circulation***

The context and writing genre of the teddy-diary arrangements is as a whole a normative framework and a manifestation of display (Finch 2007). This special home-school correspondence works as decentralized governance (Foucault 1991). For instance, few directives are given by the school concerning the diary's narrative content. There is a short introductory text written by the teacher. The following is typical:

Hello, my name is Teddy, and I am a special friend of your class. This is my travel diary. I would be very happy if you would write and draw a bit of what 'the two of us' have experienced together in your home. I'm sure that Mum or Dad will help you. Regards, Teddy.

The teddy and the travel diary are intended to be a pedagogical method of offering the first graders a chance to talk about themselves and their families in front of their class. From the school's perspective, this method is intended to ensure that children are seen and heard, and to build bridges between the school and the home. According to the schools, having the teddy bear visit homes is very popular among the children. As Foucault argues, modern power is productive, not repressive, in line with this there is no steering intention in the teddy-diary-arrangement. It is rather a question of a management technology (Foucault 1991) arising in a pedagogical scheme intended to bridge the transition between family and school. Reflective control arises, where the control objective is in the control mechanisms – the family receive a stuffed toy 'without ears and eyes' and a book with blank sheets with the possibility to write whatever you want. You are, however, obliged to write something, and you know it will get an audience (Finch 2007). A 'teddy-travel-diary-management-goal' is installed in the family's self-management.

When the teddy travels between the families, all the families know what others before them have written, and that teachers and other families will read what they write. Thus, the teddy diaries can be read as a type of cultural socialization, an exchange of everyday ideals, and a confirmation of family habits by display (Finch 2007). Through this circulation between the homes via the school, the teddy diaries, which are intended to invite open

correspondence between the children's families and the school, exert a guiding and regulatory side effect (Dean 2009).

During the circulation among families, the travel diary continually becomes enriched and filled with norms and ideals like cultural cotton candy. The perceptions that are exchanged and reinforced are the most important content. Families present themselves to themselves and to others. A framework has been developed, and a form of self-expression influenced by preceding texts (James 2007). The framework becomes clearer as the diaries fill up, and the local norms (Holloway 1998) develop through textual circulation between families and families and the school.

It is striking how interactions between families construct a comprehensible framework within which everyone can express themselves. We find this local circulation effect in every travel diary. We assume that families document their ideals in the text by describing their everyday activities. This does not mean that the diaries in themselves manifest new norms and values or change the family's identity; rather, they illustrate how written self-presentations are part of a continuous effort to shape and confirm identity (Finch 2007). Narratives are not summaries of 'what people generally do', nor are they statements of moral rules about 'what people should do'. Rather they are stories through which people attempt to connect their own experiences, and their understandings of those experiences, to a more generalized pattern of social meanings about kinship (Finch 2007, 78).

#### *Family ideals revealed through frequency of 'whats'*

An effect of the books circulating is that the narratives' form and content seem to repeat themselves. Some words and phrases point out. They are mentioned very often and form a distinct family pattern, which together gives a striking script of ideals. These words and expressions coincide with Felski's (2000) everyday categories; repetition, home and habit. Family, however, is also constituted through relationships and evaluation. There is often something that is valued and something that is excused.

#### *How family works through relations*

'Together' is a word with high frequency, and relations stands out as a significant way of expressing family. Friends and peers are given extraordinary importance when the families are presenting themselves and writing about their everyday lives. Being with friends is a mundane, everyday activity for the children. An interesting consistent pattern is that only friends with the same sex are mentioned. In the stories it is not uncommon to write about having friends over, visiting friends as well as visiting a grandparent, all in the course of one day. There are also many activities mentioned as something you would do with a friend. Celebrating birthdays stands out as

something particularly worth mentioning. Every sixth diary entry contains a birthday party. Sometimes the teddy even attended two birthdays during one weekend, as in the following:

At 14.00 we went to Anna's grandparents, because we were going to Jenny's birthday afterwards. At the birthday party I had a great time, lovely cakes and many children who took good care of me. Sunday, I joined Anna on another birthday, and there were many who had dressed up in fancy dress there. That was fun!

Birthdays are a simple way of showing inclusiveness in networks. They are a good example of 'a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization' (Butler 1999, 15). To have many relations is in itself valuable. Relations to grandparents and especially peer relations is rendered as important, and facilitating peer relations is an expression of good parenthood. The family unity of child–mother–father, however, unquestionably stands out as the most important relation. Sometimes, there are two-person families, at other times extended families, but in the child–parent negotiated stories, the child–parent relation is always fronted as a significant relation in the everyday lives. The family is together in many situations. At home meals are of course important. More surprisingly bed, bedtime, sleep and sleeping are repeatedly mentioned in the stories. There are detailed descriptions of how and where the teddy sleeps several times in one story. The bed is where the children most often describe being, more than on the sofa, by the table, out in the garden and so on. Sleeping with the teddy repeatedly seems to be splendid and worth telling other classmates about.

We have eaten pizza, and a lot of candy. I took Litasbed, that's Alexander's cat. I tasted her food, that was really awful, Usj. Us boys (referring to Teddy and Endre) were both tired, as we stayed up playing Play station all Saturday night. So tonight, we had to go to bed early. So, we can be fresh and awake for tomorrow's school day. Regards Teddy and Endre.

Bedtime is an important marker of order. Parents reveal themselves to be respectable by mentioning that the children are put to bed. A bed is a powerful object to display care, security and closeness, and at the same time show how you set limits and do upbringing with warmth and loving authority. For travel diaries with accounts of home visits, it is astounding how many narratives mention being tired, sleeping or going to bed. Finch (2007, 70) writes about family relationship and highlights that intimate relationships are subject to change as the individual identities which they support are changing. The changes reinforce the need to display relationships and ways of being together which are meaningful at any given point of time. Being together at the bedside is a meaningful way of parenting six-year-olds and distinguish it from intimate relationships at a later time in the child's life. It expresses family relationships as temporal (Felski 2000).

**Table 1.** Family ideals.

		Count	
Relations	Visiting/Visit/Stayed/Birthday-party	373	
	Together	167	
	Bed/slept	194	
Repetitions	Came	276	
	Went	475	
	Eat/breakfast/dinner	214	
Space	Home	354	
	Forrest/Garden/Outside/Cabin/Boat/Tent/Ski/Bicycle/Walk	220	
	Shopping/Drive/Work/Doctor/Dentist/Hospital	91	
Evaluations	Time	154	
	Good	127	
	Enjoyed/Happy/Like/Great/Nice/Fun	333	
Organized activities	Dances/Handball	Girls	Boys
		19	3
	Football/Ice-hockey	7	25

### *Family as a transmission belt - cyclic repetition of back and forth*

While everyday life expresses a specific sense of time, Felski (2000) argues, it does not convey a particular sense of space. In fact, everyday life is usually distinguished by an absence of boundaries, and thus a lack of clear spatial differentiations. It includes a variety of different spaces (workplace, the home, the mall). In spite of these varied locations, Felski continues, several philosophers of everyday life focus on home as a privileged symbol. Like everyday life itself, home constitutes a base, a taken-for-granted grounding, which allows us to make foray into other worlds (Felski 2000, 22). The spatial ordering of the everyday is anchored in a sense of home Felski (Felski 2000, 18). From our diary book material, the word 'home' is mentioned 354 times, and is one of the most frequently used word. Home constitutes family. We shall, however, not pay attention to the home, but to family and parenthood done public. The vocabulary of modernity is a vocabulary of anti-home, Felski claims. It celebrates mobility, movement, exile, boundary crossing. It speaks enthusiastically about movement out into the world but is silent about home return (2002, 23). In the stories from the teddy diaries, however, there is no silence about returning home. There is a repetition of leaving home and coming back again that creates a cyclic movement in the stories. 'Came' is mentioned 276 times and 'went' is mentioned as frequently as 475 (Table 1). The family is shaped by the back and forth from home. There are some stories about exotic adventures, but as many stories are about mundane movements such as shopping, going to school and work. However, the most frequent stories are not exotic and not mundane, but about outdoor activities. Cycling, cross country skiing, skating and downhill skiing, sledding and playing in the snow, swimming, jumping on the trampoline and going hiking in the woods are mentioned often. These appear to be activities organized by the family and/or the children themselves. Quite often, someone is with the children, but it is not stated exactly who they are: 'In the

afternoon, we went to Trampoline Land' or 'On Sunday, we went to the ski slope'. Other times, it may be the parents together who take the children: 'We went to Dalen to go sledding: Dad, Mum, Teddy and I'. It often emerges indirectly that a parent has accompanied the child. 'On Sunday, we drove to Skogen to go skiing. Teddy sat up in my dad's knapsack'. The children also seem to do several of the activities on their own: 'We went out and rode bikes', 'Knut and I made a snowman and used raisins for eyes', 'When we got back to the house where we lived, Anne and I climbed the trees' or 'We went sledding a lot, too'. This gender-egalitarian family presentation shows that sports and outdoors activities are highly important ingredients of an exemplary parenthood and idealistic family life. The whole family walking in the forest is the best of the best.

On Sunday morning we didn't wake up before nine thirty. Today we have been out walking in the forest. Teddy found a wooden stick similar to the letter Y. In addition, we found three orienteering posts. Teddy enjoyed walking and it was nice that both grandma and grandfather took part in the trip. Teddy thought the weekend went by quickly, he looks forward to next time he will come with me home. Thank you for a good and cosy weekend! Hug from Josefine and Teddy.

This story is an exemplary parenthood-story because it combines outdoor activity with educational and constructive elements. We get an understanding that the family is active because they get out in the woods. We get associations of a sporty, but also curious and educational family, perhaps concerned with the attentive presence; they stop and take time to find sticks looking like letters on the road. Time is not neutral, time is exalted, long time is worthy, and short time is negative.

### *How family ideals reveal through exceptions and excuses*

It is useful to study the types of excuses made, and what is excused, as excuses and exceptions unfold norms and ideals. If families do not leave their homes at the weekend, an excuse is always given: 'We had to stay indoors the whole weekend because Lisa got a fever'. 'On Sunday, there was really heavy rain, so we just went on a little trip to pick mushrooms in the park', or 'Teddy and I were unable to do any outdoor activities this weekend, as I had sprained my foot at football training'. If we look at stories about bedtime, we also find excuses: 'Now I am very tired and Halvor and I will go to bed, a little late because of the birthday party' or 'The grownups forgot what time it was and so did we, so it was 10 o'clock (PM) before we got to bed'. Finch (2007) argues that stories about topics such as inheritance are often oppositional in the sense that they are about the negative behaviour of other people (selfish, grasping, uncaring), used to illustrate that this is not 'how my family' behaves. The stories in the teddy-diaries are not about other people. Here the opposition is made by reason for not following the norm,

and thereby expose good behaviour. Excuses are offered for not having been outside, not going to bed early, not having long quality-time together. While excuses are not offered for failing to complete homework, not tidying at home, not reading or not having been to the library. A clear ideal shine through; in Norway, a good family-life and a good childhood is cosy and take place outdoors together with others.

Another family ideal that shines through is sameness and equality. Mothers and fathers do much of the same, in a kind of organic turn-taking, but as often they do things together. Parenthood seems to be a collaboration, and then not built on complementarity, but on reciprocity. Also, when it comes to gendered activities for the children, it is astonishing how strikingly similar the family narratives are. In a very large number of cases, the child's name is the only interpretative key to gender. However, there are some exceptions. Organized leisure interests differ between girls and boys to some extent (Table 1). Football, ice hockey, handball, dance, gymnastics and theatre all reveal significant upbringing-differences in the narratives. It is worth noting the clear difference between the gender-equal activities that constitute family life in the narratives and the gender-different activities that characterize the organized leisure activities in the narratives. It seems easy to refer to football, gymnastics and ice hockey, as they are specific and visible activities. These activities often take place on fixed scheduled days, so if a child is chosen in the lottery to take the teddy home on a day when there is training, a game or a competition, then it is assumed that this will be included in the travel diary. The internal family life is probably slightly more flexible, and similarly distinct events do not stand out as topics of reports. The events and activities that are considered worth mentioning from home life prove to be largely gender equal. The exception is organized activities. And as known, the exception confirms the rule.

### *Gendered parenthood*

As Lind et al. (2016) argues, parenthood consists of much more than what you physically and mentally do for and with the child. We have pursued what mothers and fathers explicitly do in the narratives by counting the frequency they are mentioned. An interesting pattern is expressed. In the tally shown in Table 2, the mother is counted in 94 of the narratives, while the father is in 97. This frequency distribution exhibits gender-egalitarian family ideal. Mothers and fathers are almost equally present in the narratives, and their interactions with the children and the teddy are almost identical in terms of frequency. The mother provides transport to and from activities more often than the father, while the father cycles and attends sporting activities more often than the mother. Considering that these mother and

**Table 2.** Gendered parenthood.

		Mother	Father
Space	Participating in narratives	94	97
	Brings to school/activities	32	24
	Doing sporting activities	7	16
Home	Makes food/reads	10	8
	Public	6	14
Absent parenthood	Family shopping/Children accompany parents to work		
	Parents at work	4	2
Preparations	Parents away from child (dad, mum or both)	3	5
	Gives presents/prepares for sleepover/washes/prepare things	11	9
Praising	Quality-time/ Restaurant visits/Theatres/Film/Museum/Admired/praised by the children	23	22

father couples have not colluded on their presence and activities in the narratives—most do not even know about each other's existence, because the travel diaries are from different schools—it is remarkable how matching activities are distributed between mother and father. The norm of equal status of parents of small children is significant.

### *Absent parenthood*

Finch (2007, 78) argues that the importance of narratives generally is that they enable people to both formulate and communicate understandings of their own social world. In our case with teddy-diaries, as a special home-school-correspondence, the way mothers and fathers write about themselves as co-authors together with their children, is highly parenthood-relevant also when they are without their children. 'Friday mum and dad were away, so Tine watched Linn, me and Teddy' or 'In the evening we had a babysitter when mum and dad were going out.' These sentences emphasize that mom and dad have a life apart from being a parent. Other sentences emphasize that Mom and Dad have a job. This is also a way of displaying parenthood. They have an adult life. They are responsible breadwinners: 'Saturday, we came along to Dads job for a short trip. We folded paper planes while Dad worked.' 'We went to Mums new job. It was far away.' Felski (2000, 23) claims that modernity celebrates mobility, movement, exile, boundary crossing. In some stories though, mothers are presented, a little bit out of the ordinary: 'We have built a new hallway in the house and needed new closets. Teddy, Natalie and mum drove the car with a hanger to IKEA. Or this: 'Saturday it snowed heavily, and I shovelled snow together with Svein and his Dad. It was rather exhausting, but afterwards I got to try his Mums motorbike.' Butler states that if the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating,

in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style (1988, 520). By 'motorbikes' and 'hanger' a politically correct subversive gender is displayed.

### *How mothers construct family-oriented fathers*

194 stories are written in the pen by adults, 16 are written first by a child, then by an adult or vice versa. 30 stories are written by boys, 26 by girls. If we look at the narrator voices, however, most are written in I-form. In 97 stories, I-voice is added to the teddy bear, in 57 stories the girls have the I-voice, in 56 stories the boys have the I-voice. In 49 of them, there is a superior, all-knowing-position-narrator-voice. Every all-knowing-position-narrator-voice story except one are written by adults.

There are many reasons why this is interesting. The fact that the I-voice in the story never is an adult, but the author very often is a parent, makes this a special family display. The texts have children as model recipients, but they are written in a way directed at adults as meta-recipients. This hybrid transmitter and receiver creates a special access to a common family voice. The family as a community is constituted in the text.

Most often, it is clear whether the author of the diary text is a child or an adult. This is apparent from the handwriting as well as from the content and narrative style. Nevertheless, regardless of who actually wielded the pen, it is in many cases apparent that the child and adult have decided what to write together. There is a negotiated child–adult voice that characterizes the books. The texts are generally written with a view to being presented to six-year-olds. After all, it is the child who is responsible for the story in the classroom. However, there are several stories that are so long and depicted that we must believe that it is the teacher who ultimately reads the story in class. An adult perspective is also expressed several times through what one chooses to tell about or meta-communicate: 'Afterwards we went to Joakim who is Tages' friend, there we baked gingerbread cookies and drank gluwein (without wine).' In many cases, the narratives convey the mark of being written by a 'grown-up-six-year-old'. Parents, often mothers,<sup>1</sup> write stories with an I-voice delegated to the teddy or the child. This creates a unique merged family display.

In many stories, the mother seems to have a large degree of control over the narratives, but maybe not quite over the information imparted to readers. What emerges in many narratives is the invisible presence of the mother. She is included either in a 'we' in the narrative, she is the 'I' delegated to the teddy and the child, or she is the overarching all-knowing narrative voice. From that position, she directs and constructs narratives, for example, of a father who is present and takes initiative:

Hey everyone in Class 1A! The first week of school was super cool, so it was almost a little bit sad that it was the weekend. But I was certainly lucky getting to have



Teddy home the first weekend. After school on Friday, Teddy, my dad, Adrian and I went bowling. I almost won over Adrian, and Teddy tried as well, but had a small problem with holding the bowling ball with his paws. (...) On Saturday, the whole family went out on our new boat. We fished and fixed up a lifejacket for Teddy that was a little big, but he enjoyed himself, nonetheless.

There are very many cases of this type, where the father is present in the narrative, while the mother is the narrative voice included in 'we' or just a part of 'the entire family'. The father thus appears as often as the mother figure in the narratives. Yet, if we take the less visible participation through the author's role and narration, we see that the mother clearly plays a larger part. A clear gendered pattern is expressed. The fathers perform accountable activities with the children, while the mothers make participation possible and write about it. It is precisely because the mother is the co-author and sometimes the main author who writes the father into the narrative as an active caregiver, which reinforces what the ideals are in an exemplary way and put parenthood in a dialog with an equal-oriented welfare state (Sparman et al. 2016). The consistent pattern of mothers putting themselves in invisible roles and fathers into more visible roles, confirms to the values of the Norwegian family. It is likely that the mothers purposely overvalue responsibilities of father's and undermine their own tasks to approve family ideals. Gender equality is family display.

## Conclusion

Some key questions to answer in this article have been 1) what families choose to expose about the small and large events of a rather ordinary day or weekend, 2) what these choices of 'reported' events tell us about family, parenthood and gender norms and 3) how these norms are reproduced and reinforced through textual circulation between families and between families and school. To take the last question first.

Narratives depicting family ideals or gender norms are not sensational reading; they cannot and should not be, because if they were, such readings would not have been about normativity. Travel diaries contain narratives about what is 'normal'—the imitation and performativity of the standard (Butler 1997). The narratives must be read considering their role as home--school correspondence, and that's make them unique. They are simple, because they are meant to be about everyday events that any family can corroborate, because they are meant to be fun for small school children to listen to and because the assignment is imposed by the school. Besides, because the texts circulate amongst families, they tend to gain a repetitive form. This does not mean that the same content is written in all the narratives, but ideals tend to be repeated through a given diary-genre. In this way, the findings of this article are not striking because they disrupt norms

or are different, but because they are so similar and predictable. And because they consist of negotiated family-voices, a merge of adults and children, a child sensitive democracy ideal is revealed.

The travel diaries are also tangible representations of social circulation. And by these circulation norms and ideals become evident and taken-for-granted standards for the 'good life' are exchanged. Normative standards and cultural codes are created, reproduced and maintained by social circulation, and by this children at a very young age become part of producing textual family display and thereby being intertwined in monitoring and controlling their own behavior in a 'pleasurable' way through the teddy bear (Butler 1993; Dean 2009; Foucault 1991).

So, to the remaining two questions: What families choose to expose about the small and large events, and what these choices are telling about family, parenthood and gender norms. Much general research, and gender studies in particular, focus on difference, transgression and change from the normal. However, we see it as fruitful to investigate the normal and natural itself. We have to some extent used Butler's (1994) concept of performativity for this purpose, and especially Finch' (2007) concept of display. Analysing the teddy-travel-diaries' 'what's' and 'how's', we find that the authors of the teddy texts, discursively create an ideal parenthood of gender egalitarianism, reciprocity and sameness (Gullestad 2002).

As underlined earlier, Norway is characterized by gender equality. The home-school correspondence reflects this. Many families depict themselves as being equality oriented when describing rearing routine activities such as eating and sleeping, as well as when reporting leisure activities with their children. It seems to be an ideal that the whole family is together. Exemplary parenthood is to be parenting together, they visit friends and family together, they have meals together, they watch TV together and last but not least the family spend much time outdoors, for instance walk in the woods together. Despite this egalitarian togetherness, Norwegian families also seem to be situated in what Butler (1993) describes as prevailing conditions. Inspired by Felski's spatial perspective dividing in home and anti-home, these prevailing conditions appear more clearly. 'Organized-activities in public' such as football and ice hockey for boys and handball and gymnastics for girls, confirm all more traditional gender patterns. Here, the egalitarian ideal must be set aside. After all, the children shall stand in front of the classmates and the teacher to recount an entertaining, true and suitable story from the teddy's visit. The home-narratives are those where the authors are mostly in charge, and where they can easily report or underreport activities that offer a proper display for the children to present at school, while the reportable content of public activities are to a greater extent given. Good parenthood is expressed through these children's organized leisure activities, and a

significant rearing-ideal appear. The organized sports activities express the parents' ideals of active, healthy and enriching forms of peer-relations. As sports activities mostly are gender segregated, a homo-social reproduction is prevailing, however as a latent consequence.

Overall a healthy, ideal family is a 'transmission belt' between home and outside world. While bedtime and dinner routines at home may be about the closeness and intimacy. Outside world signifies autonomy and transition. Family is where you learn and negotiate these different aspects of modernity. An ideal family which is on display is a family which can balance home (intimacy) and outside (autonomy), and to do gender fluid parenthood is to display different subject positions in different spaces. Modern father- and motherhood is to balance childcare and being a breadwinner. Family is where you learn and negotiate these different aspects of modernity.

To conclude, text is a place where family is done (Finch 2007), and a home-school correspondence like teddy bear diaries expresses a child-inclusive reciprocal parenthood which confirms existing welfare state policy. As mentioned earlier, most family researchers use interviews, statistics and fieldwork. We will argue that texts reveal subtle, microscopic temporal and spatial gender-patterns that otherwise might be overlooked.

## Note

1. We know from the teachers that it is mostly the mothers who is the narrator, and often it is obvious as the father is the third-person singular in the story.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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