Gender Stereotypes in Children's Picture Books: A Contemporary Content Analysis

Laura Cutler & Martha Buell, University of Delaware

UNIVERSITY OF DELAWARE

Introduction

Children's picture books often serve as "windows and mirrors" for the youngest of readers. They offer children the opportunity to see themselves represented on the pages in front of them and also have the power to expose children to the lives of other individuals who may be unfamiliar to them. But what if the images presented in these books continually portray characters in stereotypical ways? What if boys are always seen as strong and adventurous and girls as passive and domesticated?

The lack of gender diversity in books published for young children has been well-established (DeWitt et al., 2013; Weitzman et al., 1972). These gender-stereotypical representations are especially problematic given that, prior to kindergarten entry, children have already begun to develop their personal gender identity, make gender distinctions based on how society classifies gendered roles, and have strong beliefs about behavior for males and females (Trepanier-Street & Romatowski,1999).

This study provides a contemporary content analysis of children's picture books as a means for determining if previous trends regarding gendered images and text are still evident in print media designed specifically for young children.

Methods

Sample:

Children's picture books published in America from the years 2000, 2005, 2010, and 2015 were sampled (*N* = 76). The books used for this study were those on the *Publishers Weekly* list of "Best Books" for the years mentioned above (*n* = 63), as well as Caldecott Medal and Honor winning books from those same years (*n* = 17).

Books from the sample that contained at least one gendered character (human, animal, or object) (*n* = 74) were coded using an instrument that analyzed the frequency counts of male and female characters, behaviors of main characters and parental figures, and activity level and location of characters.

Books of collections (e.g., series, poems, fairy tales, songs) (*n* = 12) were eliminated from the sample due to their unique format and the high numbers of main characters present in these stories. A 3-dimensional pop-up book was also eliminated from the sample for similar reasons. One additional book could not be located. This reduced the final coded sample to 60 picture books.
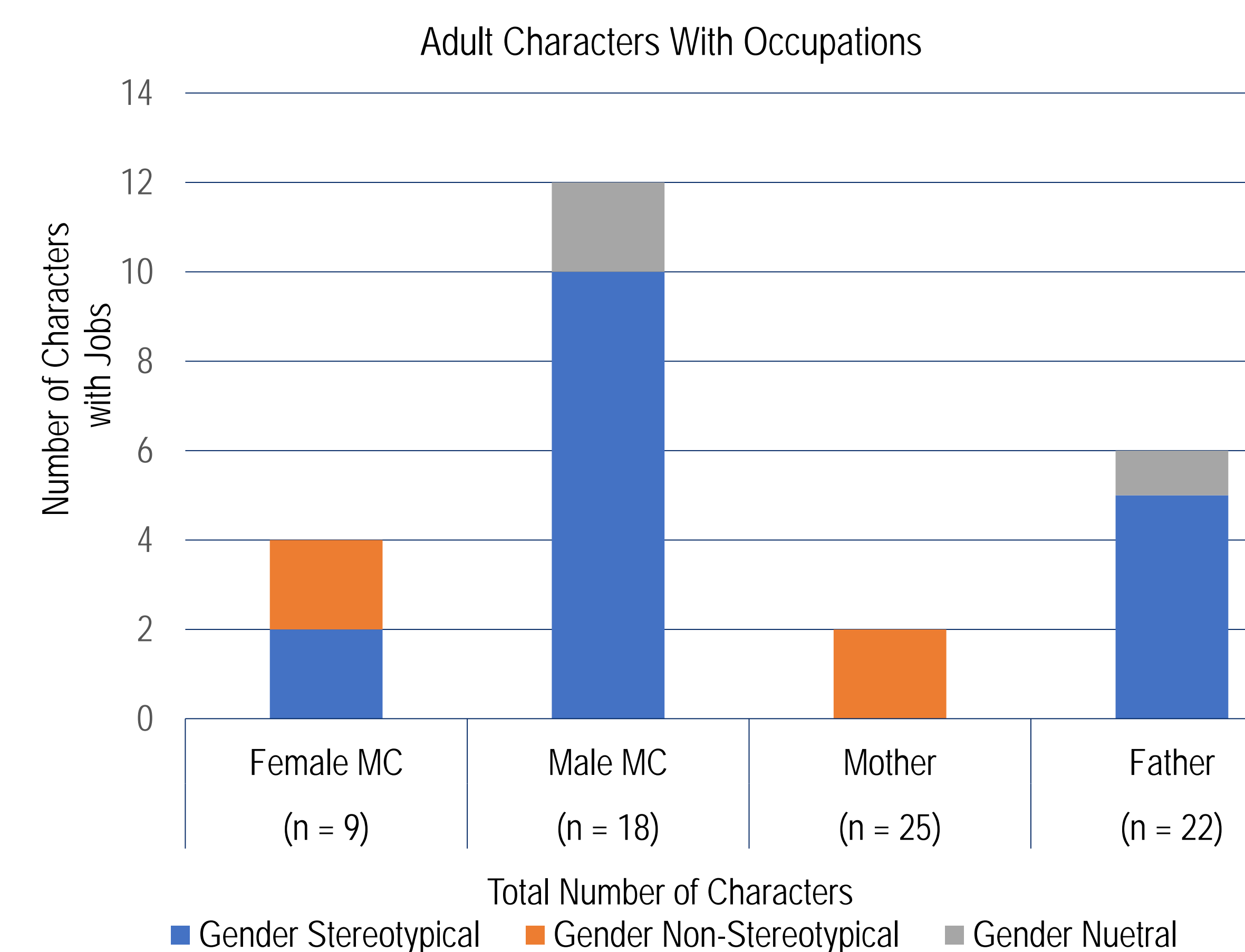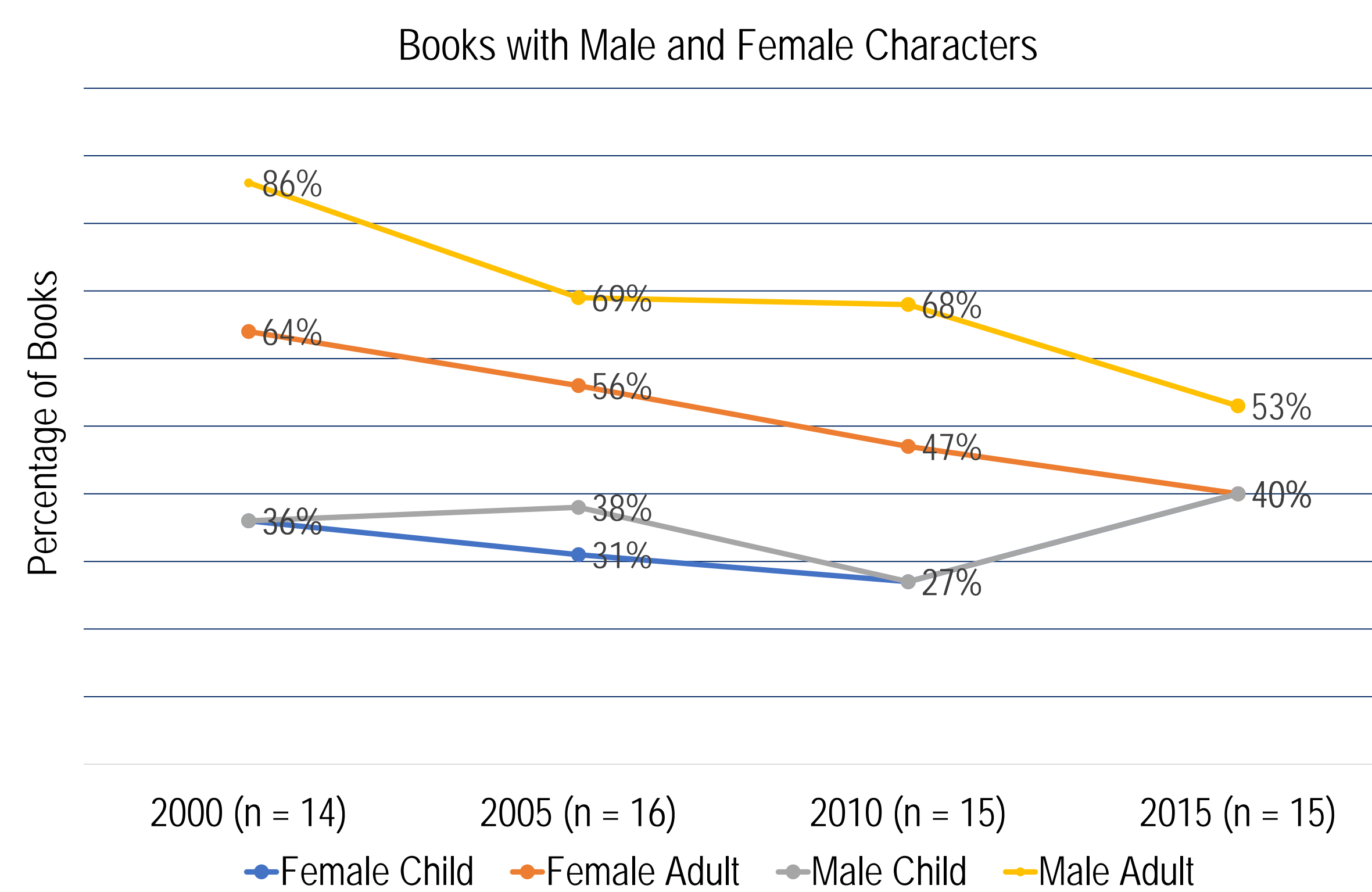
Coding Instrument:

A coding instrument developed by Cutler and Buell (2016) was used to analyze both the text and illustrations of each picture book. The instrument was based on previous research in this area (Anderson & Hamilton, 2005; DeWitt et al., 2013; Hamilton et al., 2006), and included frequencies of male and female main characters and total numbers of male and female characters. The location of male and female characters was also coded, as well as the types of behaviors displayed by main characters and parental characters. Behavior categories analyzed included: rescuer, disciplinarian, caregiver, nurturer, companion, and provider. A set of these behavior categories was established a priori and several additional categories were added as the instrument was refined.
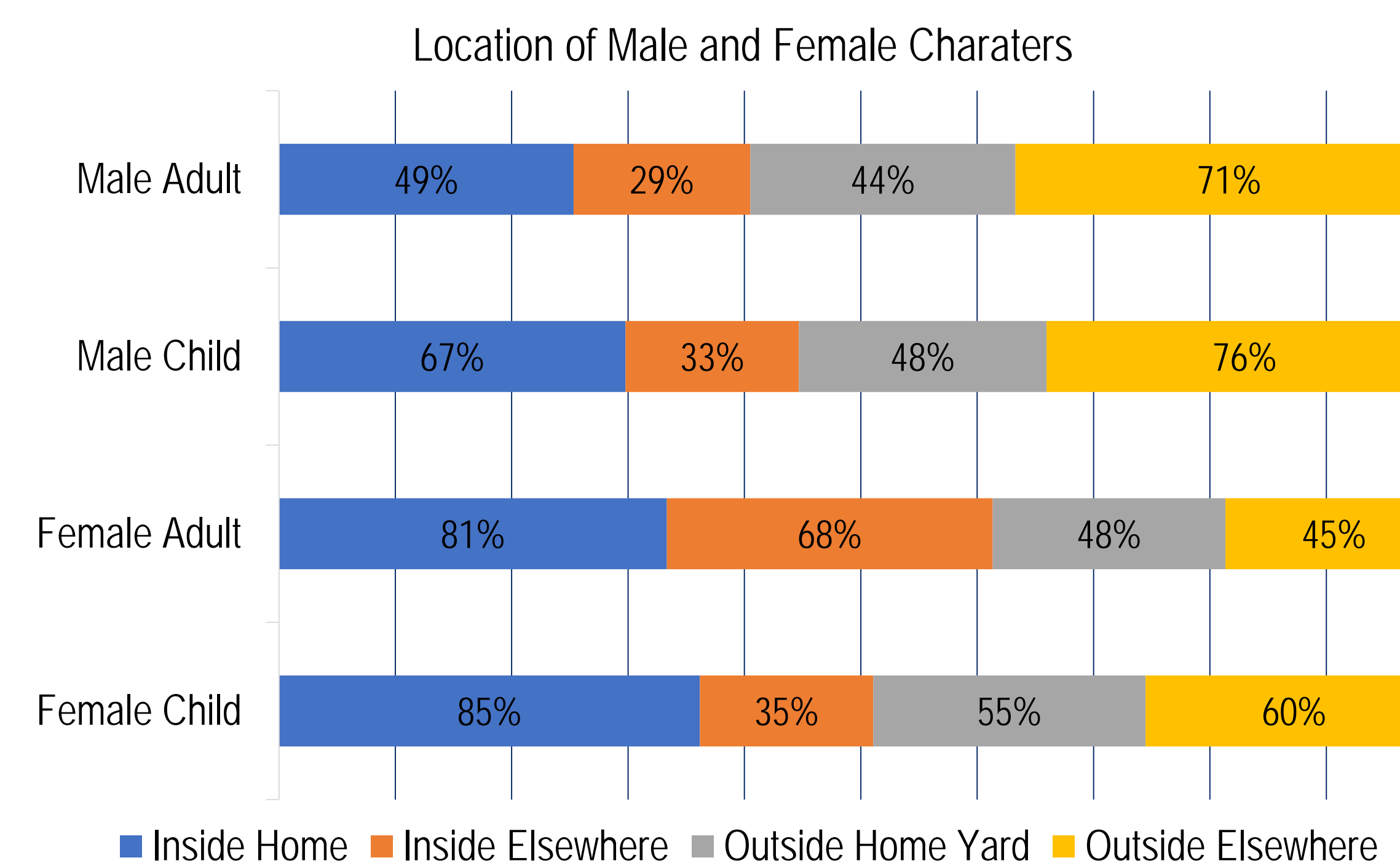
Research Questions

➢ Are male characters present more often in children's picture books than female characters?

➢ Are male and female picture book characters depicted in gender stereotypical occupations?

➢ Do male and female characters in children's picture books continue to portray gender-stereotypical roles and characteristics?
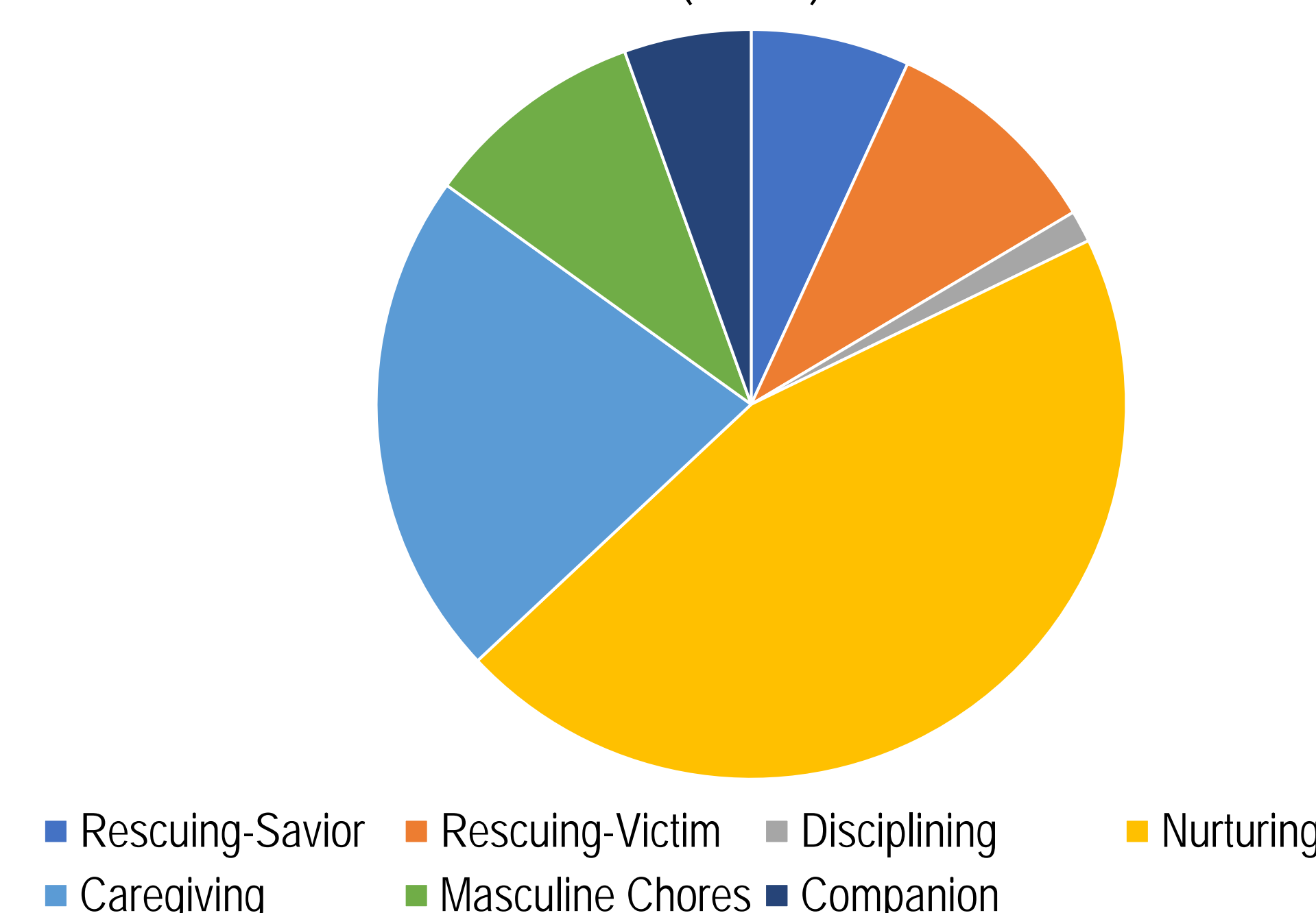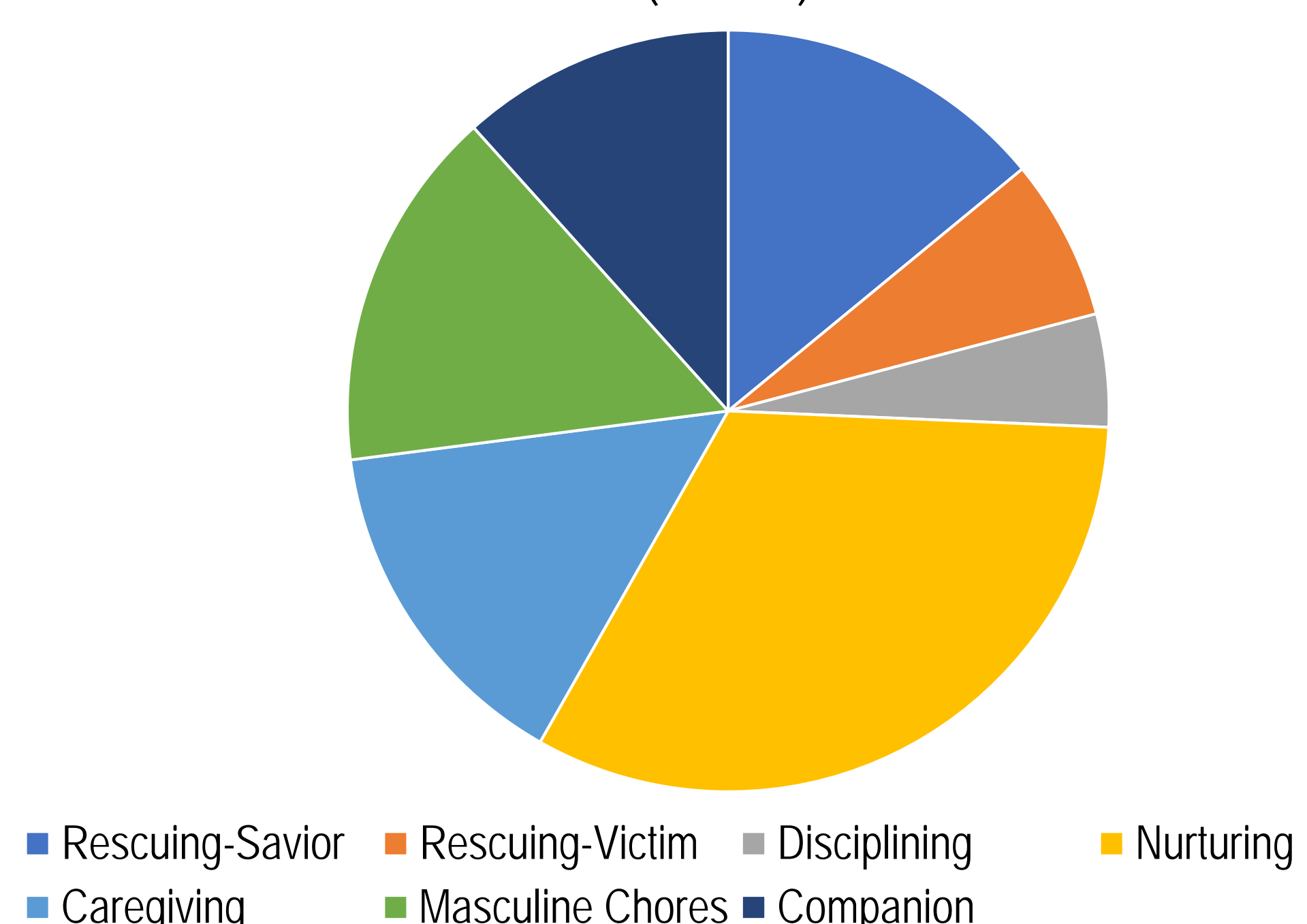
Results

Books with Male and Female Characters

Adult Characters With Occupations

Results (cont.)

Location of Male and Female Charaters

	Inside Home	Inside Elsewhere	Outside Home Yard	Outside Elsewhere
Male Adult	49%	29%	44%	71%
Male Child	67%	33%	48%	76%
Female Adult	81%	68%	48%	45%
Female Child	85%	35%	55%	60%

Female Main Character Behaviors (n = 73)

Rescuing-Savior · Rescuing-Victim · Disciplining · Nurturing · Caregiving · Masculine Chores · Companion

Male Main Character Behaviors (n = 129)

Rescuing-Savior · Rescuing-Victim · Disciplining · Nurturing · Caregiving · Masculine Chores · Companion

Conclusions

➢ Based on this sample, the overall number of adult characters is on the decline in children's picture books, while the number of child characters has remained constant.

➢ Male characters (adults and children) continue to outnumber their female counterparts. There were 25 female main characters and 44 male main characters in the coded books.

➢ Furthermore, six of the sampled books had *no* female illustrations, as opposed to only one book with *no* male illustrations. Additionally, nine of the books that had female illustrations depicted these females as "extras" in the story-they were not integral to the story. In only four of the books was this the case for males.

➢ When adult characters were present, they were often depicted as not having an occupation outside of the home. This was especially true for parental characters—while 59% of adult main characters were shown as having an occupation, just 17% of parents were portrayed as providers. In addition, no male adults were depicted in gender non-stereotypical occupations.

➢ In terms of the gender stereotyped behaviors displayed, 77% of female characters demonstrated the stereotypical female behaviors of nurturing and caregiving or being a victim in need of rescue, while only 7% were shown as rescuing others. This is in contrast with males who displayed a more balanced profile of both stereotypical male behaviors (29%) and female behaviors (48%).

References

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Contact Information

Laura Cutler, MA
Doctoral Student
Human Development and Family Studies
University of Delaware
Email: lcutler@udel.edu

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