

Teaching Boys to Respect Women

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I reckon I've had about enough: The way that our kids treat each other, and, as a dad to 6 daughters, specifically the stories of everyday sexism I'm hearing—the blatant disrespect that boys are showing towards girls.

Highlights

1. Ultimately, regardless of everything that we say, it is what we do that makes the biggest impact on our sons' respectfulness.
2. Let boys know that pornography exists, that people might want to show it to them, that others might think it's funny, and that it teaches bad things.
3. We must teach our boys to be selfless and gentle, rather than selfish and entitled.

At its worst, this sexism manifests in atrocious stories of murderous husbands like the one who I won't name—the “man” who took the lives of his wife, [Hannah Clarke, and their three children](#), Aaliyah, 6, Laianah, 4, and Trey, 3. Here in Australia, we have read about this hideous crime every day for the past two weeks.

And yep, I know it's “not all boys.” I know that. But it's just too many. The stories I hear about on my Facebook feed, in my conversations with girls in schools, and in so many other contexts, it is clear that guys feel empowered to whistle, make unsolicited sexual comments, stalk, grope, and more. We still have a long way to go before we have taught our boys to be sufficiently respectful.

How do we move our boys beyond myopic selfishness? How do we teach them to be sensitive and respectful, compassionate, and kind? In the paragraphs that follow, I make some small suggestions.

Teaching Boys Ages 5 and Under

By Example. If we show respect, we will teach respect. This means we respect our children, we respect other adults, and we especially respect women. It means that we do not call girls or women names. We do not ever hit or threaten to hit girls or women. It means we listen to girls and women and respect their opinions. We don't talk over them. We are respectful.

Speak Kindly. This is pretty basic, but at this age, it's all it takes to show respect. Say "please" and "thank you." Never say things like "shut-up" or "get lost" (or anything worse), whether to a child or an adult, regardless of gender. Respectful speaking teaches respect.

Be helpful. Teach boys (and all children) to recognize when someone needs help or feels lousy, and show them how to help.

Teaching Boys Ages 5 to 12

The ideas from the previous age group are just as applicable for these boys. In addition, the following ideas are important:

Monitor Media. Violent media is increasingly normal and has an undeniable desensitizing impact on those who view it. Minimizing exposure to games and movies or TV shows that promote disrespect and inhumanity can help—whether it's *Grand Theft Auto* or *Game of Thrones*.

Pre-Arm Against Pornography. The average age of boys' exposure to pornography is 11. And we're not talking the 1980's *Playboystyle* pornography. We're talking hardcore, violent, objectively degrading content that teaches boys that women exist to be violently and sexually disrespected.

Let boys know that pornography exists, that people might want to show it to them, that others might think it's funny, and that it teaches bad things. Let them know it's not real.

Most of all, keep them away from porn and do not normalize exposure to porn as something "all the boys do." Such attitudes are part of the domestic violence and disrespect problem.

Talk About the Issues. When you see disrespect, talk about it. Ask your sons how it leaves them feeling. How does it make the victims feel? What are better ways of responding to it? Such conversations promote empathy and some perspective, and help our boys develop social awareness and conscience.

Teaching Boys Ages 12 to 18

In addition to all that is outlined above (particularly regarding media and gaming), our boys need to be taught the following in their teen years:

Teach Intimacy. Our sons should be learning about healthy relationships where people love one another and express that love in healthy, functional ways. They need to understand more than the mechanics of sex. They need to understand context and commitment. When there is no real commitment, guys think there are no feelings involved.

When we separate physical and emotional intimacy from one another, we provide fertile soil for sexual miscommunication and sexual coercion.

Teach Consent. Boys must know that they should not touch a woman without her explicit consent. They should not kiss her without her consent. They should absolutely not be intimate with her without her consent.

Our sons must understand that no means no. We should talk to our boys about scenarios where they find themselves at a party with a girl who is drunk and all over them. Is she capable of providing consent? What are the risks involved? What if she's only a little drunk, she gives consent, and then she changes her mind even though her pants are down and so are yours? Consent is a conversation that must be had—repeatedly.

Last point on this: consent is a low bar to clear. I consent to my kids taking \$50 from my wallet so they can go have fun with friends. But I don't like it. I'd prefer it was \$20. Nevertheless, I consent.

Intimacy should be about more than just, "Ok, since you really want it, and I want to prove I love you." It should be delightful, thrilling, and emotionally satisfying. We must teach our boys to be selfless and gentle, rather than selfish and entitled.

Set Clear Boundaries Around Porn

Let your sons know that porn is off limits. Teach them why. Currently, statistics suggest 99% of boys have viewed pornography by age 15. We must turn this around.

Call Them on Sexism

When I was younger, I regularly heard jokes about how "women should get back in the kitchen" and other derogatory remarks along similar lines. It was part of being male.

Well, folks, masculinity has changed. And it needs to change more. When you catch your boys criticizing women because of their math or driving ability, or for any other gendered issue, call them on it. Let them know sexism is not cool and it is not funny.

Ultimately, regardless of everything that we say, it is what we do that makes the biggest impact on our sons' respectfulness. What the blokes in your children's lives do will set the scene for ongoing behavior from your sons. Surround the boys you parent or the boys at work with good men. Be a great example.

These are our best options. Let's teach our sons well.

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