

Teaching Our Sons Not to Be ‘That Guy’

We can't change history, but we can teach our boys these important lessons.

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I'm loving this.

As a therapist, a sex educator, and a woman with her own #MeToo stories, I am excited by the global loosening of tongues we're experiencing these last few months. Triggers and upset aside, we are certainly on the brink of change—assuming we don't do the womanly apologetic retreat and give into the #notallmen and #femininismsucks brigade.

We do know it's not all men. But it's still too many men. And we continue to raise these men. We're doing that. Together. Where are we going wrong?

I'm all for solutions. A lot of us at this stage are aware of phrases like “toxic masculinity” and “rape culture” and that's great! But awareness ain't the be all and end all. What if we push the boat of awareness out a bit further?

How do we undo what we've done?

We can't change history, we can't turn off the internet, we can't control what people do to each other, to us, to our kids. But there is a *lot* we *can* do.

Actually, I think we're already doing part of it. We are speaking out. As more and more of us do, we are being heard. Men and boys are starting to see that women experience the world quite differently. Which is great. But I am also mindful that this is triggering, scary, and difficult for a lot of men and women. This presents huge and scary challenges for parents. That's the bit I'm thinking about right now.

How do we raise sons not to be *“that guy”*?

At the core is a pretty simple reframe: we need to move away from teaching girls to protect themselves and towards teaching boys to not assault.

If I had the ear of every parent-of-a-son, I'd ask them to please do these things:

1. Teach boys that boys and girls experience the same emotions. It is only the expression of emotions that society has trained them to do differently. There is no credible evidence to support the myth that we are “hardwired” differently from birth. Stop with the “boys will be boys”.

2. Teach kindness. Start with his toys and games. And as he grows, kindness to animals, children, and adults. A lot of our sons are watching and playing games for hours, every day. Games where cruelty is associated with fun. Games that teach “cruelty is fun”. Your twelve year old may be playing a game (which I won't name but you all probably know it) where he can rob and then shoot a prostitute. Nice.

3. Teach him how to comfort, and to express his natural ability for empathy.

4. Teach him to walk away from any situation where he is being devalued or abused. It's OK for a man to leave a fight or an abusive situation. And we absolutely must teach that to our sons.

5. Teach him not to “manspread”. So if you see your son taking up two seats because he's let his legs fall open, taking up two spaces with his gear on a gym bench, spreading his arms across a table and blocking off his sister—bring this to his attention. Show him that the message he is giving essentially is, “I don't respect your space and I am more important than you”.

And if you're a Dad reading this—have you ever noticed yourself do this? Maybe you just realised it now. Please don't feel shame, but maybe stop doing it?

6. Teach your son that women enjoy sex, and that female sexuality is real and fun and good. And equal. Teach that sex is not to be “given” by women to men, and it's not

to be “taken” by men from women, or from each other. Challenge your son when you find him watching online material (because you likely will!) that is more abusive in flavour than erotic. Boys are accessing explicit material now that pairs cruelty, shaming, and violence with eroticism. This is dangerous.

Telling them “that’s just fantasy sweetheart” is absolutely not enough. Any normal boy will then assume that fantasizing about hurting women is erotic and enjoyable—you can see how this will become problematic. Many of your son’s female friends will already have been sexually assaulted- 97% of them by males, 21% of whom are under the age of 18. Again, teach your son not to be that guy.

7. Teach your son that sexual assault means *any* unwanted physical contact of a sexual nature. Any. So forcing a girl down onto the ground in a schoolyard, or the back of a club, or onto a couch at a party and kissing her against her will, counts. Putting his hand up her shirt if she tries to shove it away—even if she’s laughing. Forcing a girl’s hand onto his penis and telling her to give him a handjob outside the teenage disco counts as well. Unless she wants to—that’s different. But they gotta find out if she wants it.

8. Teach boys that girls laugh things off to protect themselves. If you’re a woman, you’ll know that. I heard a psychologist laughing away a radio presenter’s lewd and disrespectful comments on the radio last night. We all have our ways of keeping ourselves safe. It’s not okay that we have a need to develop these strategies.

9. Teach your son that healthy sexuality isn’t shameful. Shame triggers self-loathing and is at the root of many relationship difficulties. Your son deserves to enjoy sex and sensuality. Sex and masturbation are supposed to be fun!

10. Teach him to value and celebrate his body. I am uneasily aware of the mounting pressure on boys and young men to push themselves physically to match the ever more sculpted “ideal” male body image. But we often miss that, because we are so focused on girls’ self-esteem. Boys are just as vulnerable to judgment, even if there isn’t as much out there. Yet.

11. Encourage him to call out his friends’ sexist or aggressive or disrespectful behaviour whatever it is—sexist comments, behaviour, online or in real life.

12. Encourage him to follow pro-equality accounts on social media. Start with this site! But it’s not the only one. Some of them teach through irony and are really quite funny—if not somewhat jolting! Find ones that are funny and/or teen-friendly. @Manwhohasitall is a great one that I use a lot in my work with boys.

13. Teach him to notice women being overlooked or interrupted. Whether it’s on TV or radio interviews—or if you notice it in your own home! Believe me, you’ll get a chance several times an hour.

14. Be aware of how (differently) you greet his female and male friends—or yours in front of him. Do you tell the girls they look great? Call them cuties or sweeties? Please don't feel bad if you do, but feel okay about changing it. They will (all) learn from you!

15. Teach him that consent isn't necessarily about hearing the words “yes” or “no”. Girls might freeze when they are in a situation they are uncomfortable with. They may have been assaulted before and not have the strength to talk about it, or the awareness to call it assault. This is because sexualized behaviour has become normalised to such an extent for teens now that they think it's normal to feel uncomfortable. And they might think it's normal that they are expected to perform acts they may not feel ready to participate in.

In my practice, I see this being driven by the flavour of porn the boys are watching—and coercing the girls to watch, too. Unless we tell them this is not normal healthy sex, they won't know. Sex education is still abysmal in this country. So we must step up and start talking to our kids!!

So please, teach him to seek explicit, enthusiastic, and active consent before they proceed together with the girl or boy they are with. Teach him to constantly observe the other person's body language for the hesitations that mean “no”.

16. Teach him to be more creative with their insults. Some insults that people use—bitch, cunt, whore, slut, pussy, girly—are heavily gendered words and reinforce sexism and abuse. There are many other options—figuring them out might be fun family time for all of you! (Just be ready to hear them during a fight and maybe rein them in a bit.)

17. Teach him to be mindful of where he is in relation to a woman or girl walking by herself. Teach him to slow down or cross the street, to show her she is safe. It's a sad reality that every woman feels that prickle of fear and the responsibility to be vigilant when alone. The boys and men around us can help with that by just being aware.

18. If you have weird relatives with poor boundaries who descend at Christmas and family gatherings, call out any poor behaviour in front of your kids. Ask them to leave if it's really creepy. This will teach your kids to feel okay about doing the same.

19. and 20. When you're old and wrinkly and sitting back watching a gorgeous new generation, listen. Listen for things like, “Imagine! In the early 2000s, women were still scared, shouted at, pawed, groped- on streets, in schools, and in their homes! They weren't paid equally, heard equally, and they did far more housework than their male partners! How weird was that??” And sit back on your little solar powered rocking chair and smile, knowing that you were part of the change that made it possible for them to feel valued, equal, and safe.

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