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TEACHING YOUR CHILDREN ABOUT GENDER EQUALITY

A Guide for Parents

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Teaching Your Children About Gender Equality

SEXUAL HEALTH
AND GENDER EQUALITY

Gender inequality is a big problem which contributes to a disproportionate amount of responsibility in child-rearing and other domestic tasks, unfair wages and chance of employment or financial independence for women, harmful practices like female genital mutilation (FGM), child marriage, and even rape culture. According to the United Nations, Gender equality is not only a fundamental human right, but a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world.

Regardless of where you live in the world, gender equality is a fundamental human right [1]. Advancing gender equality is critical to all areas of a healthy society, from reducing poverty to promoting the health, education, protection and the well-being of girls and boys. Investing in education programmes for girls and increasing the age at which they marry can return \$5 for every dollar spent. Investing in programs improving income-generating activities for women can return \$7 dollars for every dollar spent. Basically, gender equality for women is good for everyone. Providing women and girls with equal access to education, healthcare, fair labour (and financial independence), and representation in political and economic decision-making processes will contribute to sustainable economies. True gender equality will benefit societies and humanity at large. Implementing new legal frameworks regarding female equality in the workplace and the eradication of harmful practices targeted at women is crucial to ending the gender-based discrimination prevalent in many countries around the world.

Until we treat women as equals, there is the issue of a superiority complex by many males - this is of course, not the case for all men but there is clearly an issue when one in five women and girls, including 19 per cent of women and girls aged 15 to 49, have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner within the last 12 months. Yet, 49 countries have no laws that specifically protect women from such violence. [2]

By not raising our children to think that all genders are equal, we are contributing to the problem.

Additionally, by raising boys to adhere to incorrect male stereotypical behaviours, we are encouraging them to bottle up their emotions, and by doing so, we are contributing to potential mental health issues or even encouraging (gender-based) violence. We should all aim to raise emotionally healthy boys and girls, and let our kids be who they are and who they want to be, instead of imposing incorrect stereotypes on them. We should forget what we think society wants them to be and just let kids be kids.

So how does one raise gender-neutral children without imposing typical (and harmful) gender stereotypes?

- **ALLOW YOUR CHILDREN TO FEEL THEIR FEELINGS:** Let boys be emotional and cry if they want to, let girls be brave and tough if they feel like it. Expression is key to healthy emotional intelligence. Don't stop your child from feeling what he or she wants to feel, so they don't end up keeping it all inside (which will inevitably implode or explode into a tantrum or other negative behaviour sooner or later). Bottling up your emotions long enough (or regularly enough) can even surface as violent behaviour down the line, which is dangerous for your child and for those he or she interacts with. And whatever you do, do not shame your kids for their emotions or their behaviour.
- **DON'T ADHERE TO TYPICAL GENDER STEREOTYPES:** Girls can wear blue, boys can paint their nails. Girls can play with dinosaurs or play football, boys can do ballet and play with dolls. Did you know that pink was considered a boys' colour during the Victorian Era? And blue was for girls and considered very feminine [3]. Do you know why it changed? An advertising campaign! It's all arbitrary and colours are not masculine or feminine. Let your kids wear what they like!
- **ENCOURAGE OPEN COMMUNICATION:** Ensure your child knows he or she can come to you if they're feeling something (anything!). And remember that communication goes both ways. It's OK to tell your child if you are feeling sad, angry, disappointed, etc. By showing your child that you feel and express your emotions, you teach your child and model normal behaviour.

- **TEACH YOUR KIDS TO BE EMOTIONALLY AWARE:** In addition to speaking about and experiencing their own feelings, it's important to teach your kids to be respectful of the feelings of others. Regular open discussions and engagement about our feelings, why and how we feel them, and to be respectful or act appropriately when others are having different emotional experiences is important (for example, our neighbour is sad because her dog passed away).
- **DON'T DISTINGUISH BETWEEN ROLES BASED ON GENDER:** raising babies? That's work for mothers AND fathers. Domestic work? That too. Executive positions? Men and women can be equally qualified for top roles. Of course you and your partner may choose to split these tasks, but do so in a mindful way so that your child knows that you aren't staying home to care for babies because you're a woman, or going to work and earning all the money because you're a man. Teach your kids that men stay home with kids, and that there are women executives too. Avoid referring to a job or duty as 'women's work' or 'a man's job'.
- **TREAT YOUR CHILDREN EQUALLY:** Don't praise your boy over your girl. Don't be protective of your daughter around boys who show an interest but encourage your son to date lots of girls. Don't joke about your son being a heartbreaker or ladies' man or joke about your daughter being banned from talking to boys until she's 35. Don't favour one child over another. It sounds simple, but gender roles are so ingrained in our societies and cultures that it's easy to send the wrong messages if we aren't careful and mindful of our own behaviours.
- **TALK TO YOUR KIDS ABOUT SEXUAL HEALTH:** Avoiding topics like sex stigmatises sexuality and the opposite gender. Kids are curious by nature, so if they ask you questions, speak openly and candidly (in an age-appropriate way). Make sure your children are aware that they are responsible for their actions and should respect the wishes of others (don't shame girls for what they're wearing and teach your boys about consent).

- **MODEL GENDER-EQUAL BEHAVIOUR:** If you and your partner/spouse don't treat each other as equals, you send a very strong message to your child that you are not equals. If you speak down to or abuse your spouse or partner, your child will think that's normal behaviour. If one parent does all the childcare or all the housework, this sends a very strong (negative) message to your child about gender equality. Remember that kids learn from what you do, not what you say. If you preach equality to your child but disrespect the opposite gender, your child will likely just learn to repeat what you're preaching but will learn that gender disparity is normal. By showing respectful behaviour to everyone around you, you can model positive gender-equal behaviour for your child.

Recommended Reading*

(kids' books that encourage gender equality)

- *Rosie Revere, Engineer*
- *Ada Twist, Scientist*
- Books from the *Little People, Big Dreams* series
- *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls*
- *Fantastically Great Women Who Changed The World*
- *Stories for South Asian Supergirls*
- *Women in Science: 50 Fearless Pioneers Who Changed the World*
- Any books featuring a female protagonist (Malala Yousafzai, Pippi Longstocking, etc.)

SOURCES

[1] Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls:
<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/gender-equality/>

[2] Gender Equality: Why It Matters:
<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/5.pdf>

[3] Pink used to be a boy's colour and blue a girl's – here's why it all changed: <https://www.businessinsider.com/pink-used-to-be-boys-colour-and-blue-girls-heres-why-that-changed-2017-10?r=US&IR=T>

***Gender inequality can impact anyone, regardless of gender but for the purpose of this article on raising children, I'm generally referring to boys contributing to a culture which normalises abuse towards women or girls.*

