How to Raise a Feminist Son

We raise our girls to fight stereotypes and pursue their dreams, but we don’t do the same for our boys.

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JUNE 2, 2017

We’re now more likely to tell our daughters they can be anything they want to be — an astronaut and a mother, a tomboy and a girlie girl. But we don’t do the same for our sons.
Even as we’ve given girls more choices for the roles they play, boys’ worlds are still confined, social scientists say. They’re discouraged from having interests that are considered feminine. They’re told to be tough at all costs, or else to tamp down their so-called boy energy.

If we want to create an equitable society, one in which everyone can thrive, we need to also give boys more choices. As Gloria Steinem says, “I’m glad we’ve begun to raise our daughters more like our sons, but it will never work until we raise our sons more like our daughters.”

That’s because women’s roles can’t expand if men’s don’t, too. But it’s not just about women. Men are falling behind in school and work because we are not raising boys to succeed in the new, pink economy. Skills like cooperation, empathy and diligence — often considered to be feminine — are increasingly valued in modern-day work and school, and jobs that require these skills are the fastest-growing.

In her new book, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, the Nigerian-born author, gives instructions for raising a feminist daughter. But how can we raise feminist sons?

I asked neuroscientists, economists, psychologists and others to answer that question, based on the latest research and data we have about gender. I defined feminist simply, as someone who believes in the full equality of men and women. Their advice applied broadly: to anyone who wants to raise children who are kind, confident and free to pursue their dreams.

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**Let him cry**

Image
Boys and girls cry the same amount when they’re babies and toddlers, research shows. It’s around age 5 that boys get the message that anger is acceptable but that they’re not supposed to show other feelings, like vulnerability, said Tony Porter, co-founder of A Call to Men, an education and advocacy group.

“Our daughters are allowed to be human beings, and our sons are taught to be robotic,” he said. “Teach him that he has a full range of emotions, to stop and say, ‘I’m not angry; I’m scared, or my feelings are hurt, or I need help.’”

Give him role models

Image
Boys are particularly responsive to spending time with role models, even more than girls, research shows. There is growing evidence that boys raised in households without a father figure fare worse in behavior, academics and earnings. One reason, according to the economists David Autor and Melanie Wasserman, is they do not see men taking on life’s responsibilities. “Put good men in the space of your son,” Mr. Porter said.

Give them strong female role models, too. Talk about the achievements of women you know, and well-known women in sports, politics or media. Sons of single mothers usually have a lot of respect for their accomplishments, said Tim King, founder of Urban Prep Academies for low-income, African-American boys. He encourages them to see other women that way.

Let him be himself

Image
Even as adult gender roles have merged, children’s products have become more divided by gender than they were 50 years ago, research has found: pink princesses and blue trucks, not just in the toy aisle but on cups and toothbrushes. It’s no wonder that children’s interests end up aligning that way.

But neuroscientists say children aren’t born with those preferences. Until the mid-20th century, pink was the boy color and blue was for girls. In studies, infants have not been shown to have strong toy preferences. The difference, according to researchers, emerges at the same time that children become aware of their gender, around age 2 or 3, at which point societal expectations can override innate interests. Yet longitudinal studies suggest that toy segregation has long-term effects on gender gaps in academics, spatial skills and social skills, according to Campbell Leaper, chairman of the psychology department at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

For children to reach their full potential, they need to follow their interests, traditional or not. So let them. The idea is not to assume that all children want to do the same things, but to make sure they’re not limited.

Offer open-ended activities, like playing with blocks or clay, and encourage boys to try activities like dress-up or art class, even if they don’t seek them out, social scientists say. Call out stereotypes. (“It’s too bad that toy box shows all girls because I know boys also like to play with dollhouses.”) It could also improve the status of women.
Researchers say the reason parents encourage daughters to play soccer or become doctors, but not sons to take ballet or become nurses, is that “feminine” equals lower status.

Teach him to take care of himself

“Some mothers raise their daughters but love their sons,” said Jawanza Kunjufu, an author and lecturer on educating black boys. They make their daughters study, do chores and go to church, he said — but not their sons.

The difference shows up in the data: American girls ages 10 to 17 spend two more hours on chores each week than boys do, and boys are 15 percent more likely to be paid for doing chores, according to a University of Michigan study.

“Teach our sons to cook, clean and look after themselves — to be equally competent in the home as we would
expect our daughters to be in the office,” said Anne-Marie Slaughter, chief executive of New America, a think tank.

Teach him to take care of others

Women still do more of the caregiving — for children and for older people — and the housework, even when both parents work full time, data show. And caregiving jobs are the fastest-growing. So teach boys to care for others.

Talk about how men balance work and family, and how sons and not just daughters are expected to care for parents and relatives when they’re old, Ms. Slaughter said. Enlist boys’ help making soup for a sick friend or visiting a relative in the hospital. Give them responsibilities caring for pets and younger siblings. Encourage them to babysit, coach or tutor. One program brings babies into elementary classrooms, which has been found to increase empathy and decrease aggression.
When possible, resist gender roles in housework and child care among parents. Actions speak louder than words, said Dan Clawson, a sociologist at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst: “If the mother cooks the food and cleans the house and the father mows the lawn and is often gone from home, lessons are learned.”

Also share some of the breadwinning. Men raised by mothers who worked for at least a year around the time their sons were teenagers were more likely to marry women who work, one study showed. Another found that sons of women who work for any amount of time before age 14 spend more time on housework and child care as adults. “Men who were raised by employed moms are significantly more egalitarian in their gender attitudes,” said Kathleen McGinn, a professor at Harvard Business School.

Encourage friendships with girls
Research at Arizona State University found that by the end of preschool, children start segregating by sex, and this reinforces gender stereotypes. But children who are encouraged to play with friends of the opposite sex learn better problem-solving and communication.

“The more obvious it is that gender is being used to categorize groups or activities, the more likely it is that gender stereotypes and bias are reinforced,” said Richard Fabes, director of the university’s Sanford School, which studies gender and education.

Organize coed birthday parties and sports teams for young children, so children don’t come to believe it’s acceptable to exclude a group on the basis of sex, said Christia Brown, a developmental psychologist at the University of Kentucky. Try not to differentiate in language, either: One study found that when preschool teachers said “boys and girls” instead of “children,” the students held more stereotypical beliefs about men’s and women’s roles and spent less time playing with one another.
Boys who have friendships with girls are also less likely to think of women as sexual conquests, Mr. Porter said.

Teach ‘no means no’

Other ways to teach respect and consent: Require children to ask before they touch one another’s bodies as early as preschool. Also, teach them the power of the word no — stop tickling them or wrestling with them when they say it.

Model healthy problem-solving at home. Children’s exposure to divorce or abuse has been linked to poor conflict resolution in future romantic relationships, said W. Bradford Wilcox, a sociologist and director of the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia.

Speak up when others are intolerant
Say something when you see teasing or harassment, and role-play with boys so they can intervene when they see it, Ms. Brown said.

Speak up when they’re inappropriate, too. “Boys will be boys” is not an excuse for bad behavior. Expect more of them. “Be vigilant in redirecting conduct which is demeaning, intolerant, disrespectful, offensive,” Mr. King said.

**Never use ‘girl’ as an insult**
Don’t say — and don’t let your son say — that someone throws or runs like a girl, or use “sissy” or any of its more offensive synonyms. Same for sexist jokes.

Be careful with subtler language, too. The research of Emily Kane, a sociologist at Bates College, shows that parents enforce traditional gender roles for sons mostly because they fear those sons will be teased. “We can all help by avoiding judgment, and avoiding small, everyday assumptions about what a kid will enjoy or be good at based on their gender,” she said. Boys who get teased could say, “No, anyone can play with beads,” or “I am not a girl, but do you think they’re worse than boys?” said Lise Eliot, a neuroscientist at Rosalind Franklin University.

Read a lot, including about girls and women

Image
You've probably heard that boys excel at science and math, and girls at language and reading. Stereotypes can become self-fulfilling. Mothers talk more with daughters than sons, according to a meta-analysis by Mr. Leaper. Fight the stereotype by talking to boys, reading to them and encouraging them to read.

Read about a wide variety of people, and stories that break the mold, not just those about boys saving the world and girls needing to be saved. When a book or a news item fits that mold, talk about it: Why does the mother in the “Berenstain Bears” always wear a housecoat and rarely leave the house? Why does a news photograph show all white men?

“That should start at 3, when they really pick up stereotypes and notice them,” Ms. Brown said. “If you don’t help them label them as stereotypes, they assume this is the way it is.”
Raising a son this way isn’t just about telling boys what not to do, or about erasing gender differences altogether. For instance, all male mammals engage in rough-and-tumble play, Ms. Eliot said.

So roughhouse, crack jokes, watch sports, climb trees, build campfires. Teach boys to show strength — the strength to acknowledge their emotions. Teach them to provide for their families — by caring for them. Show them how to be tough — tough enough to stand up to intolerance. Give them confidence — to pursue whatever they’re passionate about.