

# How Feminist Mothers Can Raise Feminist Sons

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Elliot Rodger's shooting spree in Isla Vista sparked a national conversation about the pervasiveness of misogyny in American culture via the [#YesAllWomen](#) hashtag. And although it's clear that Rodger suffered from mental illnesses and was facilitated by easy access to guns, the guiding principles of his "manifesto" and the worldview that led him to target and kill young women are terrifyingly mainstream.

Sasha Weiss said it best [in the New Yorker](#): The [#YesAllWomen](#) conversation demonstrates that "Rodger's hate of women grew out of attitudes that are all around us. Perhaps more subtly, it suggests that he was influenced by a predominant cultural ethos that rewards sexual aggression, power, and wealth, and that reinforces traditional alpha masculinity and submissive femininity."

Like many of the other women and men expressing their outrage through [#YesAllWomen](#), I've been ruminating on the persistent belief that sexual aggression is a natural male condition for a long time. During my research for my graduate dissertation, which focused on sex ed in schools, I was flabbergasted at how often the question, "How do I say 'no' without hurting his feelings?" appeared in sex ed books and teen magazines alike. In college, I was perplexed at the number of programs designed to teach women how to defend themselves, walk in groups, and avoid date rape, and the lack of programs designed to teach young men to simply not sexually assault people. And as my career has developed, I continue to see how men who demonstrate aggression and volatility in the workplace are called passionate leaders, while women who do the same are called hysterical control-freaks.

But as I read through the insightful [#YesAllWomen](#) tweets, I thought not about my own past experiences with sexism, but about my son's future. I blinked and he was 18 months—I'll blink again and he'll be 18. As a feminist and as a mother, how will I raise my son to embrace equality and to rebuff a hyper-masculine culture that celebrates violence and shrugs off misogyny?

So I turned to the experts—hitting the books and soliciting more experienced parents for their advice. Specifically, I wanted to know how parents can set the stage when their sons are very young—establishing a healthy foundation for an open mind that thinks critically about the stereotypes around him. He's what I learned:

## 1. Start Early

Kids begin to notice gender differences in preschool. According to Lise Eliot, author of [Pink Brain, Blue Brain](#), gender awareness begins around two-and-a-half, when children can consistently identify a person's sex. Between three and five, the consciousness of gender transforms into solidified opinions, informed by the culture around them. So around three, children may be able to identify stereotypically "boy and girl toys," like cars and dolls, but will not strictly enforce gender conformity. By kindergarten, they're much more likely to chastise other children for nonconformity or outright refuse to play with cross-gender toys themselves.

What children begin to learn about gender at this young age will shape their worldviews later in life. Eliot points out, for example, that parents increasingly encourage girls to play with whatever toys they want, touting the "[you can be whatever you want to be](#)" message early on. But they are less flexible with boys and are more likely to discourage boys from playing with traditionally girl toys. By following this pattern, we send a message that upholds traditionally masculine roles—strength, physicality, aggressiveness—as [culturally superior](#) and traditionally female behaviors, like nurturing, as something that boys should avoid at all costs. It doesn't take long for boys to figure out which traits are valued.

Eliot recommends letting boys explore a range of experiences and play-roles with plenty of gender-neutral toys. She

also warns against over-emphasizing physical play with our sons. Parents tend to let their sons play roughly because “boys will be boys.” While it’s fine to let boys roughhouse, it’s important to help them learn empathy by talking to them about the feelings of the children they’re playing with and helping them understand how their actions affect others.

## 2. Keep it in Context

As our sons grow older, their ideas about gender and their relationships with women will change. Their preschool declaration that “pink is for girls” will transform into a middle-school belief that boys are more athletically gifted.

Instead of approaching discussions about equality as isolated “talks,” parents should address the issue in the moment, based on their sons’ evolving outlooks. For example, if your son makes a comment about a girl or woman that you feel uncomfortable with or an advertisement you’re watching together objectifies women, take that opportunity to discuss your own perspective and ask your son to express his own. Isolating these types of important discussions simply isn’t as effective—your son will tune out as soon as you sit him down.

Along the same lines, any effort to educate your son about equality has to include a focus on media literacy. Morra Aarons-Mele, founder of [We Are Women Online](#), a social media agency focused on connecting nonprofits to female audiences and mother of two boys (with another on the way), points out that “We can’t separate digital culture from ‘offline’ culture anymore. When our children are online or experiencing media, it needs to be closely monitored, especially when they’re young.”

In addition to monitoring, Aarons-Mele emphasizes the need for “teaching our sons about perspective-taking, because being a feminist is really all about being able to understand the perspective of another.” We need to talk to our sons about the way men and women are portrayed in television, movies, and advertisements, and we need to be ready to talk about the tough issues as our kids get older—like why and how advertisers objectify women to sell products, why so many movies cast women in stereotypical, supporting roles, and why video games glamorize male aggression and violence.

## 3. Remember That Your Family is His World

Our sons learn a lot about women, gender, and the relationship between the sexes within their own families. Your method for dividing up household duties, the way you talk to your partner, and the way you talk about yourself inform your son’s personal philosophies. This isn’t to say that all stay-at-home moms are destined to have sons who expect stay-at-home wives, but we can’t take for granted that our sons understand our personal choices. We need to deliberately explain the rationale behind our family dynamics and model the behaviors we want our sons to adapt.

For working moms, an important first step is keeping your “[working mom guilt](#)” in check. Your sons will notice that you express guilt about working and being away from the home when your husband doesn’t. Talk about why you work, your love for your work, and why some parents work and others don’t.

It’s equally as important to take a look at your division of household labor. Who’s doing all the cooking? Cleaning? Lawn-mowing? Are you requiring your sons and daughters to complete different tasks? You don’t necessarily have to abandon what works for you (I’ve never pushed a lawnmower in my life), but you should make an effort to talk about how your family’s division of labor is only one of many options. And it won’t hurt anyone to switch things up now and again and, of course, require your son to participate in tasks completed by both parents.

Finally—and this is a tough one—we have to request that our older family members with views that differ from our

own refrain from sharing them, or, if this isn't possible, we need to talk to our children about why we disagree with the opinions of their grandparents or great-grandparents.

We can't shield or insulate our sons from misogyny. Their peers, their educators, and the media they consume will hugely impact their perspectives and personality. While many other women and parents like me are inspired and energized by the #YesAllWomen hashtag and the number of other feminist conversations permeating the mainstream media, we can't leave boys out of this equation. It can't be a single-sex effort. We need to raise feminist daughters and feminist sons. We need to stop teaching our sons about "respecting women" through the lens of chivalry and start teaching them to respect all people through the lens of humanity.

**Photo of [mother and son](#) courtesy of [Shutterstock](#)**

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