

18 Easy Ways to Raise Feminist Boys

Babble

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Joanna Schroeder



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Do parents intend to raise sons who will grow up to be sexists or harm women? Of course not! Most parents hold their little baby boy in their arms and dream of all the good he might do for the world.

But we can't rely only upon our own dreams to help our boys grow into good men. After all, everywhere they look in society will be examples of how *not* to be a good man. They'll see violence committed by countless men in the media and hear their favorite comedians make jokes that harm women. They'll probably be told by at least one influential grown-up to toughen up or "be a man."

But there *are* ways parents can raise boys who will actively combat the toxic masculinity they will witness throughout their lives. Here are a few easy tips for how.

For young boys (ages 1-6) ...

1. Encourage him to understand a full range of emotions.

Too often, men aren't allowed to be sad, hurt, or fearful. This expectation is really bad for our boys, setting them up for [higher rates of suicide](#) and other mental health issues. So hug and snuggle your son, and let him cry when he needs to.

2. Buy him dolls.

Sit down with your son and dress, cradle, and feed the dolls together. This is especially important for dads. It's okay if dolls aren't your son's first toy of choice — their presence and your enthusiasm teach him that you believe nurturing is a natural and healthy part of being a boy.

3. Play house with him.

And let him play all sorts of roles. Ask him if he'd like to be the mommy, and you'll be the child. Let him decide what happens in the action, and never make him feel bad for wanting to play the sister, grandmother, or any other traditionally female role.

4. Let him wear all the colors.

Debunk the myth that there is such a thing as a "boy color." All colors are for boys and girls, and if you explain it simply, he'll see how silly the traditional rules are.

5. As a dad, model healthy behavior toward women and girls.

Dads (and stepdads, older brothers, uncles, and grandpas!), keep your negative comments about women's bodies or appearances to yourself, and obviously never disrespect or cause harm to a woman.

6. Arrange playdates with girls.

[Make playing with girls a normal part of your son's life.](#) After all, he will be in a future workforce full of women and will probably have a woman for a boss, too. He needs to know that girls are his equals and not just romantic partners.

7. Teach bodily autonomy.

Start early by teaching him that his body belongs to HIM and that people need his permission in order to touch him. Let him know he [never has to hug anybody he doesn't want to](#) and that he should not be touching anyone who hasn't given him permission.

8. Show him diverse images of families.

Seek out [books and media that shows all sorts of families](#), from same-sex parents to adoptive families to single-parent homes. Emphasize *love* as the central connecting factor that makes a family.

For grade-school boys (ages 6-11) ...

Along with continuing the lessons above ...

9. Teach him to deconstruct the media.

When he notices a sexy image of a woman or a beefed up photo of a man, ask him to talk about why the magazine or movie chose to have the model wear those clothes. Explain how photoshop is used to make these people seem "perfect" in a way that normal people simply cannot be. Ask him to think about whether the values being displayed match your family's.

10. Point out healthy relationship dynamics.

Praise your son when he's kind or thoughtful, and point out examples in the media of people displaying the kinds of friendships and romantic relationships you want him to strive for.

11. Let him express gender however he'd like.

It's okay for [boys to like nail polish](#) or wear a tutu. Explain to him that other people might not understand his choices, but that you'll always stand by him and his choices, and offer unconditional love.

12. Start teaching consent and healthy sexuality.

Talk regularly in an age-appropriate manner about consent, and [teach your child the basics of healthy sexuality early on](#). Remember, if they don't learn about sex from you, they'll seek the information elsewhere.

13. Ask your son to be aware of his surroundings.

Explain to your son that everyone has a right to a good experience when they're in public spaces. For instance, when he's being loud in a restaurant, ask him to think about whether everyone else wants to hear kids yelling during dinner.

14. Encourage him to read books featuring strong women and girl protagonists.

From *The Hunger Games* to [Mare's War](#), there are thousands of age-appropriate books your son will probably love that will encourage him to see the world through a girl's eyes, and exemplify strength and courage.

Adolescent and teen boys (ages 11-22) ...

Continue with the age-appropriate lessons from their younger years, but try these tips, too ...

15. Bust the myth that boys and girls are vastly different.

Sure, there may be common differences between guys and girls, but in general, people are the same. Explain that girls aren't mysterious and that most misunderstandings between men and women happen as a result of poor communication, not because we're from different planets.

16. Deconstruct porn.

Porn is a part of our kids' lives, whether we like it or not. Along with setting boundaries for your son, ask him to think about whether he thinks the images are realistic and to examine whether they're healthy for him, sexually, to consume. Ask him to consider how porn may harm women and girls, in some cases. For more on talking to your teens about porn, [read this guide](#).

17. Set boundaries regarding sexts or inappropriate images.

Your child will also, eventually, come across a sext or an inappropriate image from one of his peers. Be very clear about what you expect your son to do when he receives one of these, and also teach him how to respectfully send sext messages to consenting partners when the time comes. For more on teens and sexting, [check out my guide](#).

18. Explain clearly what you expect from his relationships.

Let your teen know that you expect all of his romantic and sexual interactions to be consensual. Teach him that asking for consent can be sexy and that nobody should ever be talked into or coerced into anything.

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Parents, What Would Your Kid Do?

[Christine Coppa](#)

"Parents, What Would Your Kid Do?" originally appeared on Asbury Park Press and was reprinted with permission.



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I remember my grade school cafeteria like it was yesterday. I went to a private Catholic school, so the space where

we ate lunch also doubled as the gym and the auditorium with a creaky stage.

The tables folded up for easy storage and there were no chairs — rather benches to sit on while we ate. In typical elementary school fashion, the girls sat together and the boys sat together — eating brown bag lunches or whatever the hot lunch was that day. My mom was a volunteer lunch lady.

Lunchtime was a social time more than anything. The room was filled with chatter and laughter and the crinkling of chip bags. In high school, girls and boys from different grades sat mixed together. It was a big deal if freshman were invited to sit with older kids.

Again, lunch period proved to be a time to socialize, catch up on homework, or study for a big test next period. I don't remember ever sitting alone at lunch, unless it was senior year and I chose to drive home to eat (read: nap) or pick up something at the deli.

One of the first things I ask Jack when I retrieve him from school is if he ate his lunch and how his day was. Jack mostly comes out of school happy and talkative. He's not the kid to say "good" when asked about his day or "I can't remember." Jack likes to paint a picture with words.

Often times I'm met with something like, "I got on blue today!"

Blue means he was a superstar student that day.

Or, "We played basketball in gym class and learned about Rosa Parks. She wanted to sit in the front of the bus with her friends but the police tried to make her move."

He tells me everything — even sings me songs he learned in music class.

Last Friday, I was particularly proud of Jack when he reported about his day as we walked to the car. He told me one of the girls in his class — we'll call her Ellie — was sitting all alone at a lunch table that was surrounded by other lunch tables filled with kids eating and talking. The image in my head of Ellie sitting alone made my stomach drop.

Jack usually sits with the boys and isn't a fan of the cafeteria food.

The image in my head of Ellie sitting alone made my stomach drop.

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"They give us fake pizza at our school, mom," was one of his first complaints when he started at his new school. We're pizza snobs. [We eat real pizza.](#)

On that day, pizza day, Jack did something that made me so, so, so proud. He saw Ellie sitting alone, grabbed his lunch sack and homemade sandwich, and joined her at the empty table.

He did this unprompted. I wasn't there to tell him to sit with her, and often times if a group of kids are playing at the park and I notice a solo kid, I always tell Jack to invite the child to play.

In the summertime on the beach, everyone is friends and Jack often plays for hours with kids, without even catching their names. Sand toys are mixed up, and we often come home with a shovel or sifter that isn't ours. It's great!

Jack told me they talked about Minecraft and ate — just the two of them. I know this meant a lot to Ellie because her mom sent me a text that night as Jack and I were sitting down to some leftovers and salad.

"Tell Jack thank you for being so kind to Ellie," the text read.

I showed Jack and he shrugged.

“What’s the big deal? She’s my friend and she was sitting alone,” he said. “Who wants to sit alone at lunch?”

It is a big deal, I explained to him — reminding him how he felt nervous his first day of school down the Shore, but how great it felt when a little boy named Jonathan said hello to him and asked if he wanted to be friends that day.

“Imagine if no one said hi that first day?”

His face got serious and I knew he got it.

“Imagine if everyone on your soccer team ignored you and never chose you as a practice partner?”

Here’s the deal: As parents, we can be on many ends of this story. We can have the kid that is excluded, the kid who is a bully, and the kid that does something about it.

I’m glad I know who my kid is — someone who sticks up for people — and I hope Ellie knows she’ll always have a friend in Jack.

Now my call to parents reading this: Share it with your children.

Tell them about this lunchtime scenario and encourage them to show compassion to someone who may be feeling left out. My heart crumbled to pieces thinking about Ellie sitting in that room all alone while EVERY OTHER KID had a lunch buddy.

It’s up to us to teach our children to do the right thing.

Recommended reading: [The Invisible Boy](#) by Trudy Ludwig.

Brian is in second grade and is mostly ignored by his classmates. No one ever wants to partner with him, include him in recess games, or sit with him at lunch. Then a new student named Justin arrives. Justin is Asian and brings a dish called bulgogi (Korean beef) to lunch. He eats it with chopsticks. The kids make fun of his lunch and call his food “booger-gi.” But you know who doesn’t rag on him? Brian. They become fast friends and suddenly Brian isn’t invisible anymore.

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5 Tips for Dads Who Parent Long Distance

[Curtis Colden](#)

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My parents were the first to divorce in my small town of Pleasant Ridge, MI. I was 9 years old at the time and I don't really remember it happening. I can vaguely picture my mom sitting us down in our den and telling us that Dad was moving out, but that he was still our Dad. I immediately ran off to football practice. Life was moving on.

Soon, my closest friend's parents split. I took him to Taco Bell, sat him down in a booth, ordered a Nacho Supreme, and explained all the benefits of the situation. Two Christmas mornings, two birthdays. Basically, more presents. Within a year, another friend suffered what was slowly becoming an epidemic. We took him to Taco Bell, ordered up a Nacho Supreme, and gave him the good news.

Even though my dad lived in the same town and taught in the same school district that I attended, I rarely saw him. He was dutiful. He showed up to football games, band concerts and plays, but he wasn't present in my day-to-day life. The year 1978 was a hard time to be a divorced dad. He remarried within a year of his divorce and my stepmother became his world. So much so, that the one evening a week the courts allowed me to be with my father was spent at the bowling alley for "their" bowling league. To be clear, they bowled in the league ... I was given a lane of my own at the end of the alley.

Cut to 30 years later and I'm now the dad who had to move out. And I vowed not to be my dad. I was going to be as present as I could in my daughter's life. And I was. But about a year after my own divorce was filed, my ex asked to leave the state so that she could open a bed and breakfast in New Orleans. I had ended our marriage because I wanted my daughter to have a happy father. Who was I to get in the way of my ex becoming a happier mother to our daughter?

There is a lot to be said about the downside of our social media-fed, online-addicted lives. But for me, my entire world with my daughter was opened wide because of the wonder of video chatting. I fly to New Orleans often to see her, and she spends her nine-week summer vacation with me here in Los Angeles, but our nightly chats on the computer keep me ever-present in her life. And it gives us such a wonderful connection.

In the three years that I've been communicating with my daughter over the Internet, I have learned quite a bit. If nothing else, I hope the following tips will at least get you started working toward positive and successful communication with your child, no matter how near or far he or she may be.

1. Make it one-on-one time.

No offense to anyone else, but this is your time with your child. If your situation is like mine, your ex is probably the center of your child's life during most of the day, so she will be a distraction during your Skype time if she is present.

Trust me. I originally thought it would be best to chat while my daughter was having dinner. That it would keep her focused. It did keep her in her seat for a good 20 minutes, but with her mother present I became an onlooker to their conversation. Now I choose to chat with her after dinner for a pre-bed story. And my ex likes the break. Win/win.

2. Start with a book or story.

In the beginning I would start our conversations by asking my 5-year-old about her day. Her reply was always "good." Or "I don't remember." I know she has an exceptional memory, it's just not interesting for her to talk about herself yet (I imagine that will come soon enough). What she wants is for me to do things for her. And reading a book or story is the best way to get her focused on me. When the book is done, you can talk about the story — what it meant and how it might hold a lesson for her day. The Q&A will come flowing after that.

3. Make up a signature sign off.

This is huge. It really helps to close up your time with your child and lets it happen naturally. Initially, when signing off, I would say, "OK. I've got to go now. I love you. I miss you." My daughter would naturally say "I love you" back, but then ask another question in an attempt to stall having to go to bed. But once, early on in our chats, she was being particularly funny and said, "Well ... Byyyyy-eeeeeeeee." And it stuck. When either of us says that (after acknowledging that we're done with the chat), it's easy to get "off the air."

4. Make a schedule.

When my ex and daughter moved out of the state, it took a while to realize that, like everything in a child's life, our chat time needed to be fairly consistent. We tried breakfast, but with me in the mix it became hard to get her fed, dressed, and off to school on time. It's hard enough for kids to get out the door in the morning without the distraction of an online conversation. We tried texting each other during the day when we had a few free moments, but that was hard to coordinate. Finally, we agreed that following dinner and before bath-time would be a good time to chat. We've kept it consistent and the results have been better for all of us.

5. Remember it's not the time, it's the effort.

Quite often my daughter will not be in a very talkative mood. It used to get to me. My ex would text, asking if I was available to Skype. I would hop on the computer excited, but my daughter wanted nothing to do with me. This was a HUGE let down and bothered me to no end. But I came to realize that just making contact was a very important part of our relationship. Even if it's just to say "goodnight" and "I love you." Her knowing that I am here — thinking of her and wanting to see her before she heads to bed — is extremely important, both for her and for me.

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