

## **Raising Children: The Feminist Way**

This is a brief practical guide to raising humane children, male and female, daughters and sons. The ideas contained here are not new, they are available in many other places, and I cannot take credit for them; they have been said before in parenting guides, feminist theory on girlhood, feminist theory on masculinities, as well as in attachment parenting and gentle parenting manuals for example. In many ways these suggestions are instinctive and common sense. The problem is, however, that our world is so rigidly divided along gender lines, and our brains so thoroughly washed in either pink or blue, that parents and carers have learnt not to trust their instincts and to assume instead that baby humans must be treated remarkably differently based on their sex. There are 24 suggestions in this list, I'm sure you could add more. I have included some examples or case-studies to show possible practical implementation of these suggestions.

A bit about me: I am not a parenting expert. But, I do have a professional background in youth and advice work with young men. I set up and managed award winning domestic violence prevention and anti-bullying programmes across all children and young people's settings (including Early Years) for a London Local Education Authority - Islington - and I advised on national anti-bullying policy and safeguarding. I have delivered training to teachers and whole-school staff, social workers, nurses and police. I am now an academic researcher in the area of feminist theory, gender and activism, with a PhD from the Centre for Gender and Violence Research at the University of Bristol. I have been involved in feminist activism for over twenty years; I founded the London Feminist Network in 2004 and revived the London Reclaim the Night march. I currently do a lot of research on masculinities and I work with several men's

organisations. I am a Senior Lecturer in Sociology at the University of the West of England in Bristol, and author of 'Radical Feminism: Activism in Movement' published by Palgrave.

I only have one child, my son is toddler age. I am a terribly impatient person and therefore parenting is often an effort for me. As is the case for all women, childrearing does not come naturally to me, though it may feel instinctive to some; parenting skills are however, unfortunately, not genetic nor predestined by sex. My partner and I are trying to raise our child as best we can in the world as it is; acknowledging that the world as it is, is imperfect, and so are we. While I know the world is imperfect, I do not have to accept that, nor do I have to remain silent about it and I hope to teach my child the same. I hope to raise him actively against much of the culture that he will be increasingly immersed in, because much of the culture tells him lies about boys and men and the biggest lie of all is that his future is written in stone. Boys will not be boys, they will be adults, carers, fathers, lovers, friends, colleagues; they will be human, like anyone else, and humane, if only we let them be.

Here is the full list for those busy parents that do not have time to read the rest!

1. Value and teach bodily integrity for themselves and others
2. Good male and female role models
3. Role models must include gentle and caring men
4. Role models must include strong and powerful women
5. Give them all the options in terms of clothes and colours
6. Give them all the options in terms of toys
7. Don't presume the sex of others
8. Facilitate and encourage children to express emotion, including crying
9. Swap round sex pronouns for characters in books, read a different version each time
10. Model egalitarian relationships between men and women & have male and female friends
11. Encourage your child to have male and female friends
12. Challenge prejudice and discuss that with your child
13. Teach them domestic work and make it fun and important
14. Teach them practical and DIY tasks and make it fun and important
15. Teach them caring for babies and animals and make it fun and important
16. Never use 'girl' as an insult, never use sexist language like 'sissies' 'playing like a girl'
17. Do not give a girl compliments that you would not equally give to a boy
18. Model dealing with conflict in ways other than violence or aggression
19. Do not normalise or glamourize weapons or violence, including in toy choices and clothing
20. Avoid heavily gendered children's TV shows
21. Seek out and employ female tradespeople if you can and let your child watch them working
22. Facilitate and encourage physical play and expression
23. Watch women in sport, including team sports like football and rugby
24. Give yourself a break

## **1. Value and teach bodily integrity for themselves and others**

Teach and model to your child that they have a right to control what happens to their body and what they do with their body, and that therefore this same treatment should be extended to others. Teach your child to be gentle to their body and to other people's bodies. Teach your child to expect this same treatment from others, including adults. Even small babies can be informed about what is happening, explain you are changing their nappy or touching their body because you are cleaning them, even if they can't even talk yet; this can only be good for communication skills and language acquisition as well, so can't possibly do any harm. As children grow into toddlers, ask them before passing them round for a cuddle with adults or before they are kissed by another adult. If they shake their head or move away, don't make a big deal of it, teach them that they don't have to be kissed.

Likewise, teach your child to ask others, children and adults, if they would like a cuddle before they cuddle them. Teach your child to ask animals and their humans before kissing or cuddling them as well, this is an excellent way to teach consent and bodily integrity for all living beings. It may sound bizarre, because we presume the animal cannot understand, but there is no harm in teaching your child to say to a cat or dog: "Is it ok me stroking you?" Then if the dog or cat shrugs away, this is a perfect opportunity to teach that sometimes not everyone wants a cuddle or kiss and that is fine, it doesn't mean they are angry or don't like you, they might just not be in the mood for a stroke right now.

When you are visiting Auntie Pankhurst's house, do not tell your child to go round and kiss and hug all the adults goodnight before leaving. Do not say anything like: "we are leaving soon so why don't you give Auntie and Uncle a kiss goodnight now".

What are you teaching your child? They do not have a choice about who they kiss or cuddle. Hugging and kissing is a chore and a duty. Showing affection is something expected of them and it doesn't matter if they do not mean it, enjoy it or feel it sincerely.

When you are visiting family or friends, ask your child if they would like to say goodbye to anyone, ask if they would like to give anyone a hug or a kiss before they go. Make it clear that the adults are welcoming of that too. "Would you like to give anyone a kiss or a cuddle before we go now?"

What are you teaching your child? That they have a choice about who they kiss and cuddle. Hugging and kissing is not a chore, or an expectation. They do not owe hugs and kisses to anyone. Hugging and kissing is not a duty, they never have to do it if they do not want to. Human affection is mutually enjoyed and genuine.

## **2. Provide your child with good male and female role models**

Because the world is sexist, racist, homophobic and unequal in so many ways, we have to try to provide balance to the dominant prejudiced messages children grow up with. Because women are most often shown in passive, caring roles or as victims or pretty objects in adverts, TV, film etc...and because women are statistically underrepresented in traditional positions of power, responsibility and authority, it is important to try and show your child examples of strong, powerful, physical, bold and accomplished women. If you are lucky enough to know strong, powerful, physical, bold and accomplished women then befriend them and have them round so your child can get to know them. Read your child stories about strong women and girls, choose books with tough female characters. Because the world is sexist, men

are most often shown as tough, violent, competitive, with weapons, powerful, dominant, practical, uncaring etc. So, it is important to show your child examples of confident, caring, gentle, nurturing, expressive men. If you know these men, bring them into your child's life. Basically, just try to bring good, kind, fun people of all sexes, ethnic identities, ages, nationalities, jobs and careers and sexual orientations into your life and into your child's life so they have a diverse plethora of good role models and can imagine what kind of adult they might grow into in the future.

Seek out children's publishers that show the diversity of life and stories which challenge stereotypes and prejudice – for example: Letterbox Library  
<https://www.letterboxlibrary.com/>

### **3. Role models must include gentle and caring men**

See above.

### **4. Role models must include strong and powerful women**

See above.

### **5. Give them all the options for clothes and colours**

Provide your child with a variety of options for clothing, colours and designs. While they are too young to express any opinion otherwise, dress them in a variety of clothes, fabrics and colours so they can feel and experience different textures and colours and materials. Actively buy clothes from both the sex-segregated aisles; buy 'girl's clothes' and 'boy's clothes' for your child and put them into a reachable drawer, basket. Encourage your child to choose their own clothes from a broad selection. Do not send the message that certain clothes or colours are out of bounds due to their sex. Although you may experience negative and hostile reactions from other adults (due to their own insecurities), I have done and would recommend, dressing a male baby in a dress, especially in the summer – why not? My son was

also dressed in vest and shorts two-piece sets that were from the girl's aisle, dungarees from the girl's aisle and leggings and tee-shirts that were also supposedly only for girls. He still has many 'girl's clothes' because for some reason companies assume that boys will not like butterflies, kittens, rabbits or the colour pink. He also has Paw Patrol tee shirts and trousers with diggers on.

It is a shocking fact that baby clothes appear to be sized differently by sex rather than weight. Baby girls' clothes are often tighter and smaller than baby boys' clothes in the same age bracket, they have tapered legs, puffed sleeves, sewn in darts on the waist and are often cropped and of thinner material. Think about the lessons we are teaching to our girls, actually sit and think about the sinister messages unfolding here on those shelves: that toddler girls are fat for their age, even as babies; that they should be delicate; that they should accentuate body shapes coded as feminine such as slim waists and wider hips; that they should expose more of their body than boys do, such as their shoulders, calves and stomachs; that their clothes are for show and not for practicality. Make sure your child learns that clothes are fun, expressive, colourful, practical, comfortable and model this yourself in what you wear.

Tell companies to get their perverted sexualised messages and violent stereotypes off of our babies and children. You can send this message to companies by not buying the awful clothing products that you will see in almost every children's clothing section.

It should not need saying, but do not dress your son in tops emblazoned with: future man of steel; I only date models; chicks dig me; ladies' man; born lazy; underachiever; trooper; I didn't do it; cheeky; tough guy. I'm sure you've seen plenty more of this kind of thing. Let's not dress our boys in clothes that label them as predatory, lazy, badly behaved sexists.

Do not dress your girl in clothes emblazoned with: princess; future footballer's wife; daddy's little princess; supermodel in training etc. Girls do not genetically have to be

dressed head to toe in pink frills. Don't put sexist labels onto your daughters, society will do this enough as it is.

Clothes for children should never be impractical or uncomfortable, this is perhaps the most important thing in my view. Do not dress girls (or boys for that matter) in tight clothes or frilly dresses that they cannot move properly in, ride a bike or climb a tree in. Do not dress girls in clothes that they have to condition their bodies and behaviour to fit into. For example, do not dress girls in dresses and then tell them to sit with their legs crossed or to stop hanging upside down on that climbing frame because everyone can see their pants. Unfortunately, girls have all their lives to be shamed about their bodies, to feel conscious about their bodies, to be scrutinised about how their body measures up to the plastic fantastic ideals that we see everywhere; don't start this any earlier than it has to start, and don't indoctrinate your girl into it. Mix up the clothes you make available to your child so that they grow up with as real a 'choice' as possible, in the very gendered circumstances of our world.

For more research on this, campaigns and parent's tips, see: Let Clothes Be Clothes  
<https://letclothesbeclothes.uk/>

## **6. Give them all the options in terms of toys**

Actively buy your child toys from both the sex-segregated aisles. Buy them 'boy's toys' and 'girl's toys'. Buy dolls for your boy and Lego for your girl, and vice-versa. This is not about "depriving" your boy of practical toys like building blocks and cars, nor is it about "depriving" your girl of dolls or toy tea sets. This is about expanding the options, not narrowing them down. This is about assuming that your child will be interested in all elements of the life and world they see around them. There is no biological reason why your boy might not enjoy playing with a doll, nor why your girl might not enjoy building a model digger. The world is full of exciting and important

objects and activities, let your child enjoy and experience them all and be careful not to send subtle messages about what society dictates is inappropriate or appropriate for them based purely on the lottery of their sex.

Remember that toys are also learning opportunities for your child. They are learning about spatial awareness, coordination, numbers, weights, sizes and a whole lot more. Do not limit these learning opportunities for your child. Girls will also enjoy learning how things fit together, boys will also enjoy learning how to pour a teapot. Learning should not be limited by sex. We know that girls are less likely to do science and engineering subjects, or skilled trades, in an increasingly automated world where machines are replacing physical strength and labour all the time. We know that boys are less likely to do care work, healthcare, animal care, fashion or hairdressing. Early on, we send messages to girls and boys about what their world can include, and what it cannot include.

These messages are not even covert or subtle, they've just become so normalised we stop noticing. Girls' clothes are allowed to have colours and small fluffy animals. Girls are allowed to play at designing clothes, dressing up dolls, painting their nails. Why are boys not allowed to be creative, expressive, colourful? Why might boys not want to design clothes or become a hair stylist, ballet dancer or make-up artist? Why might boys not want to be fathers or carers or nursery teachers one day, and therefore need to and enjoy learning how to care for dolls?

Similarly, it must do something to a boy's sense of familiarity and comfort with heavy plant machinery and racing cars if he has grown up seeing them on his sleepsuits and socks. It surely must help a boy's sense of confidence with practical tasks if he has grown up fixing Meccanno together with nuts and bolts and playing with a toy tool set. How many girls might have been astronauts, inventors, rally drivers or welders, if only their world had not been closed down? We should not deny these learning opportunities to girls. A few science fairs for teen girls at secondary school is already too late.

For research on the gendering of toys and why it should be avoided; plus resources and educational materials see: Let Toys Be Toys <http://lettoysbetoys.org.uk/>

Research into apprenticeships by the Young Women's Trust in 2016 found that: young women in engineering are outnumbered by male students 25 to 1; in construction, for every one woman there are 56 male students; in plumbing women are outnumbered 74 to one; young women are also paid less, seeing them lose out by around £2000 per year.

## **7. Don't presume the sex of others**

Because my son has long hair at the back, and sometimes wears pink clothes or shoes, everybody reads him as female. It is therefore difficult to tell the sex of someone just by looking at them, and arguably it is really nobody's business. We do not apply sex pronouns or terms to people we don't know. There is no reason to be constantly dividing humans up into one box or another, there are plenty of other ways to describe people.

By avoiding this gendering we can also open up possible role models and career options rather than narrowing them down. In the real world, jobs are gendered, women tend to do certain jobs (those considered feminine) more than men (those considered masculine) and vice-versa. We can't opt out of the world as it is, so our children will see this. They are getting messages all the time about which sex is most suited to which job or occupation or clothing style. It is pervasive, but we can try our best to offset it. By not calling a firefighter 'he' or a nurse 'she' we can apply some breakers to the tides of gender stereotyping.

When we constantly point out the sex of strangers, adults and children, we are sending the message that this is a very important coding practice and that sex is a necessary precursor before any other description of another person. Try not doing it.

Don't assume the sex of others, teach your children that this is not the most important thing about a person, or themselves.

When you are the playground, don't say: "oh let this little girl down the slide first" "that man is driving a digger isn't he" "say thank you to the lady for packing our bags".

What are you teaching your child? That it is necessary and important to apply a sex to everyone we meet, and reinforce this to them like some kind of affirmation. That to be sexed is to be human. That sex should be readable by others and commented on at every opportunity. That we should sort the people we meet into sexes and that sex is an important judgement about a person and their appropriate corresponding role and appearance.

When you are out and about, don't judge the sex of other people, use neutral descriptors instead. Say things like: "let this little person down the slide because they were here first" "oh look, the crane driver is going for their lunch now" "say thank you to the nice person for helping us with our shopping".

What are you teaching your child? That other people are people first, that we can describe them by their appearance, activity, job, relationship to us and that these are important. By not gendering everyone you see, you are also instilling that we cannot assume that crane drivers are men, that children dressed head to toe in pink are girls or that people who work in shops are ladies.

## **8. Facilitate and encourage children to express emotion, including crying**

Teach your child that emotions are natural, including sadness, frustration and anger. We have to learn how to express them, and acknowledge them, in ways that do not hurt us or anyone else – this is a journey that adults are still on too. Try to teach your child emotional literacy, there is nothing 'wrong' with emotions, they are normal and

natural. Model talking about, expressing and explaining your own emotions in non-threatening and age-appropriate ways.

Because our world is sexist, boys in particular will receive cultural messages telling them that crying or being sad is a sign of weakness and is to be avoided, parents must try to counter this. Never stigmatise your child for crying. Sometimes parents try to instil resilience in their children, often particularly so with boys, by discouraging them from crying or from getting upset over tripping up or falling off something. Parents will praise the child for not crying, for picking themselves up, for being “brave”, for carrying on. Why is it praiseworthy to hold in one’s emotions, why is it brave not to cry and therefore presumably weak to cry?

Children seem to throw themselves off things all the time, they appear to be quite hardy, but we still shouldn’t assume they are alright nor adopt a default position of minimisation! Usually the child is ok; when I ask my child if he wants a hug or if he’s hurt, nine times out of ten he says he is ok and will carry on. The point is that I did not need to tell him he was ok, tell him to get up, state that he’s not really hurt; he knows himself what the case is.

If your son falls over, or is frightened by something, do not say things like: “oh what a brave boy for not crying when you fell over just then” or “aren’t you brave for getting right back on that bike”, “look, I see x has fallen over but they’ve got right back up again”.

What are you teaching your child? That it is praiseworthy to hold in your emotions. That it is praiseworthy not to cry when you fall over or are frightened. That sadness and fear should be masked and suppressed rather than expressed. That boys are not supposed to cry.

If your son or daughter falls over or is frightened by something, check in with them to see if they are ok. Do not assume that they are not hurt, not upset or not shocked; you do not know how they are feeling in themselves. Enquire about your child's wellbeing in a non-judgemental and non-leading way: "Oh I see you've taken a tumble, are you hurt anywhere?" "Your foot has slipped on the pedal, are you ok, would you like a cuddle?" Accept their response neutrally "ok that's fine, on you go" "of course you can have a cuddle".

What are you teaching your child? That they are the expert on their own wellbeing, that you welcome them talking to you about their wellbeing; you are encouraging them to voice their concerns and experiences and explain them. That you care about them. That it is ok if they are hurt or upset. That hugs and physical care are available if they feel hurt or upset.

There is so much writing, art and research on the harms of gender stereotyping for boys and men. See the work of scholars such as: Tony Porter; John Stoltenberg; Michael Flood; Michael Kimmel; bell hooks; Cordelia Fine; Carol Gilligan; Grayson Perry; Jack Urwin; Chris Hemmings; Lynne Segal; Robert Webb. See organisations such as: A Call To Men UK; White Ribbon Campaign UK.

### **9. Swop round sex pronouns for characters in books**

Research finds that the characters in children's books, humans and non-human animals, are overwhelmingly male. Children receive messages about gender roles in the books we read them. Male characters are shown as active, physical and adventurous. Female characters are shown as in need of protection or as cheerleaders for male adventure.

Mothers are shown doing nurturing and caring work, while fathers are not. Mothers are shown cooking dinner, making school lunches, putting children to bed; until the father comes home from work. These very traditional pictures of the nuclear family do not reflect reality for a lot of people, for single parents, for grandparent carers, for foster carers, for gay dads and lesbian mums, for step-families.

Until children's publishing moves on from the fictional 1950s ideal, the easiest way to diversify stories, with pre-reading children, is to swap around the sex pronouns for characters in story books. Just try swapping all the 'he's' to 'she's' one night at bedtime, and do the opposite the next night. Or avoid stating the sex of the character at all, refer to them as "the fox said" "next, they tried the other door" or "the child then climbed..". This may seem ridiculous, unnecessary or over the top, but if it's unnecessary and makes no difference, then what's the harm? If children's books are not teaching children about sex and gender roles then it shouldn't matter which sex you assign to a rabbit or Goldilocks. If you think that children's books do teach children about sex and gender roles then you are acknowledging that gendering is taught and learnt, so if we want our children to have more options for expression instead of rigid rules, then we do have to shake things up a bit.

A report by *'The Observer'* with Nielsen research company found that in the top 100 children's books of 2017: lead characters were 50% more likely to be male; characters with speaking parts were 50% more likely to be male; male characters outnumbered female by nearly 50%; non-human characters were 73% male.

#### **10. Model egalitarian relationships between men and women & have male and female friends**

Try to teach your children that men and women can work together, respect each other and have close friendships together as equals. For heterosexual couples, the most obvious way to model egalitarian relationships between men and women is to

do this in your own relationship and in how you parent and enjoy life together. If you can, then show your children that you can be friends with and enjoy the company of both men and women. Tell children about your work colleagues and talk about other men or women at work who are your equals and who you work in partnership with as a unit or a team.

This sends powerful messages about who can be friends with who; it is a small rebuttal to all the societal myths that seek to divide up men and women. Such myths encourage us to believe that women are bitchy, that men don't find women funny or fun, that women are terrible bosses, that men find it simpler to be with men only, that women and men can't be friends without sexuality getting in the way etc. While mixing with other men only, or other women only, can be powerful, joyful and affirming sometimes, this should not be for the sake of segregation nor informed by sexist stereotype.

### **11. Encourage your child to have male and female friends**

Just as we adults should try to cross gender divides and challenge rather than accept stereotypes, we should also encourage and support our children to make and enjoy full friendships that are not limited by sex, or any other social fault line for that matter. Expect your child to have male and female friends; do not express surprise if your son has a close female friend or if your daughter's best friend is a boy. Avoid competitive games or activities where boys are pitted against girls. Avoid birthday parties or trips where only one sex is invited. Avoid and/or challenge children's settings that make the children line up or sit in queues or areas separated by sex. Avoid and/or challenge settings with really gendered uniforms. Don't teach our children that we are different species to be segregated.

Do not send subtle messages about who is out of bounds for friendship, everyone is a potential friend! Also, do not sexualise these friendships. It is inappropriate and

frankly creepy to sexualise our children's friendships. Time after time I hear adults saying things like: "he gets all the girls", "maybe those two will get married", "he's going to be a right heartbreaker", "she turns all the boys heads", "he's got a little crush". No!

To put this into perspective, we can do a little imagination experiment. Just imagine that I said these things about children, but assumed the child or toddler is gay or lesbian (incidentally, we don't know what intimate relationships our children may have when they are older, and we cannot assume their future sexual orientations, nor should we). "Ooh Jackson and Daniel are such good friends, I think they'll get married one day", "she's going to have all the girls chasing after her she's so pretty", "hasn't he got such a cute little crush, I think he fancies your son". No doubt most people would think this sexualisation of children and their friendships was a bit inappropriate – it is, and it still is even if we do it within the assumption of heterosexuality.

## **12. Challenge prejudice and discuss that with your child**

When you see or hear prejudice in the media, or from adults in groups or family gatherings, do not overlook it. If you feel safe and able to do so, then question and challenge others who voice racism, sexism, homophobia or any prejudice. If your child witnesses this exchange, then explain to them afterwards, or at home at the end of the day, why you challenged and what you think is wrong about the views expressed. In age appropriate ways, talk to your child about the fault lines that run through our world. Sadly they may hear, or be confronted with violent racism, sexism and homophobia from an early age; or hear this aimed at their parents or carers.

As lesbian parents, my partner and I have already had to have discussions with our child about how everyone has different types of families, and that some people have two daddies or two mummies. We have already had to gently broach the fact that

not everyone is aware of all the different types of families there can be, and that they might not be used to some types, because it is not like theirs. Sadly, such prejudices include offensive questioning about the right of lesbian and gay people to even be parents, and the type of parents they can be. Ironically, same-sex parents are blamed for homophobic bullying of their children for example, the cynical logic being that if we don't want our children to be bullied for having same-sex parents, then we shouldn't have children. This is a depressing state of affairs, it is a politics of resignation which accepts hateful, murderous prejudice as a fact of life and demands that individuals avoid it, rather than acknowledging that it is society that can and should change, for everyone's benefit. Meanwhile, Black parents and carers are forced to have discussions with their children about racism, the language they hear or that which may be directed at them, and the hostilities they face – including violence and exclusion, often this comes from institutions and from those in positions of power. Parents who use wheelchairs or canes or who are deaf or who have visual impairments are also having to talk to their children about the prejudiced language that may be directed at them – including offensive questioning of their parenting capacity.

Unfortunately, because our world is racist, homophobic & unequal in so many ways, families are having to have conversations about prejudice every day; don't let the burden for educating about a prejudice weigh on the shoulders of those most affected by it, when the reality is we need the very opposite to happen.

### **13. Teach them domestic work and make it fun and important**

All human beings live in communities of some sort or another. It is vital that we all learn how to look after ourselves and others; we all need care and we all need to care for others. This starts with family life in the home; so talk to your child about domestic tasks like washing up, hoovering or doing the laundry. Facilitate them to

join in with these tasks, including cooking. No matter how tired you are, try as best you can to teach children that these jobs are important and valuable, and possibly enjoyable! Teach them to enjoy being part of the family and contributing however they can.

Try not to give the impression that domestic tasks are dictated by sex. Those parents who are home most of the time might end up doing most domestic work in the home, but the other parent can still have a go at cooking a meal or cleaning the bath together with their child and talk about how important these contributions are.

Research consistently finds that women do more housework and childcare than men do; this is the case when women and men live alone, but the gender chore divide only gets wider when men and women cohabit. Our media and culture, especially adverts, disproportionately show women and mums as the doers of domestic tasks. It is therefore important to try to balance this one sided presentation; dads especially should take the time, if they can, to cook and clean with their child.

Be mindful of language, do not label jobs as belonging to one sex or another; do not designate certain jobs as one person's responsibility. For example never say that: 'daddy helps with the cooking on Sundays' or 'do you want to help mummy with the hoovering'. Such language teaches our children that cooking is actually mummy's job, and daddy just helps occasionally. It teaches children that it is solely mummy's job to do the hoovering, but that the child can help sometimes if they like. If everyone lives together in the family, it is everyone's job to look after the home and the family as best they are able.

The study into 'Gender, Ethnicity and Household Labour in Married and Cohabiting Couples in the UK' is an analysis of the massive British Household Panel Survey 2016 and finds that women do, on average, 70% of household chores. It is estimated that men spend around 6 hours a week on housework, compared to women's 14 hours per week.

#### **14. Teach them practical and DIY tasks and make it fun and important**

Let your children join in with practical jobs in the home and garden, or in the homes or gardens of families or friends, city farms, allotments or community gardens.

Counter the social messages that girls and women are naturally unsuited to practical and DIY tasks. No matter how you are feeling inside, even if you are nervous of loud noises or using power tools, try to instil in your child that practical tasks are nothing to be afraid of. Try to encourage them to be naturally curious and to have faith in themselves when it comes to practical jobs; because of sexism in our society, this is especially important for girls. Buy your girls toy tool sets, toy drills and hard hats, let them watch diggers in the road, take them go-karting. Hire female tradespeople for jobs in the home.

#### **15. Teach them caring for babies and animals and make it fun and important**

Let your children join in with all elements of family life. Facilitate them to join in with caring for younger siblings. Help them to join in with animal care, walking the dog or feeding the cat, taking pets to the vet. Because our society is sexist, children receive messages all the time that women are naturally suited to caring and men are not. It is therefore important to offset this as much as you can. Dads can teach older children how to care for younger children, explain how to bath a baby or change a nappy and do these things together. No matter how tired you are feeling, try to impress on children that caring for animals and humans is the most important job in the world, that it can often be fun and that it is not the preserve of one sex over another. Seek out children's settings that have male nursery teachers and childminders. Read your child stories about dads who are caring for babies competently, normalise the caring role and potential of men.

Teach your children to be kind to others, including animals. Teach your children that your companion animals or pets are part of the family, deserving of the same care and consideration. We teach our child that our cat is part of our family, and therefore that he has as much right as we do to sit on the sofa or to occupy that particular chair. We teach our child to ask the cat if he wants to move, to give the cat space if he has climbed up on his cat tower, to ask the cat if he wants to be cuddled etc (admittedly I am a 'crazy cat-person' so you may want to ignore this example!).

For more information on the importance of men in Early Years, see: Bristol Men in Early Years Network <https://www.bmiey.co.uk/>

**16. Never use 'girl' as an insult, never use sexist language like 'sissies' 'playing like a girl'**

This should not even need saying, yet these phrases are still said all too often in playgroups and playgrounds, coffee mornings and parent's groups. There is nothing wrong with being a girl, do not use this as an insult to throw at boys. This type of language is sexist and homophobic. Boys are taught that certain behaviours, emotions, styles and preferences are reserved for females and that anything associated with females and femininity is to be avoided before it taints or brings into question one's masculinity. When adults use 'girl' as an insult for boys, they teach boys that girls are lesser and inferior therefore who would want to be like that. This is not a healthy message for boys or girls and it limits and polices the behaviours, activities, emotions, styles and preferences of girls and boys. It stops boys from being emotionally expressive for example, it stops girls from enjoying physical activity. Do not use this kind of language and do not allow others to use it around your children. Complain if you hear staff in children's settings using this language. If you hear other children using this language, discuss this with your child and contextualise it in age-appropriate ways, explain why you do not use or condone this type of language.

Likewise do not instil patronising, paternalistic and stigmatising attitudes in boys. Do not teach boys that girls are inherently weak, passive and in need of protection from boys. Do not pretend that men are the natural protector of women, when all around the world the reality is the very opposite. Do not say things to boys like: 'let girls go first' or 'don't play racing with that girl because it's not fair on her' or 'don't hit girls'. There is no reason at all why girls should go through doors first, or sit up at the table first at a birthday tea party. Boys are not genetically better at riding scooters or playing with pull-back racing cars, and, anyway, there is no reason why individual children, of varying abilities, should not play at racing together and learn to share games, including the experience of not winning all the time. Finally, it is absolutely not ok to hit anybody, whether they are a boy or a girl, an adult or a child.

Treating people according to need is one thing, but treating them according to sex, based on assumption and stereotype, is quite another. There's nothing wrong for example with teaching your child to let someone who is using a wheelchair or someone carrying a young baby, onto the bus first, or give up a seat for them on a crowded train. That's being thoughtful, based on the fact that somebody might need a seat or space more than you do.

Do not use terms like 'mummy's boy' in a derogatory way. To suggest that somehow a baby or child can be 'too close', 'too dependent' or 'too attached' to one parent/carer or another is stigmatising of perfectly normal caring relationships. Do not critique children for 'still' being breastfed or for being 'too shy' or 'needy'. Children are individuals, they will want and need differing and varying levels of affirmation and affection.

### **17. Do not give a girl compliments that you would not equally give to a boy**

Do not give the sort of compliments to a little girl that you would not give to a little boy. If you would also compliment a little boy on his clothes, jewellery, hair or tell

him he is pretty, cute or beautiful in what he is wearing today; then fine, go ahead and tell that to a girl as well. Bear in mind that girls will be receiving messages all the time telling them that the thing they are judged on most is their appearance, this starts from a young age.

Girls are taught that their appearance is a site of women's power, one of the few sites of power that women have control over. The stereotypical lessons of femininity teach women that they can then use this kind of 'power' to manipulate traditional power, to influence the ones who actually have real power. Unfortunately, a lot of people believe these myths and they run deep. I've overheard people saying these things about toddler girls, such as: 'she knows how to get her own way doesn't she', 'she's going to boss the boys around isn't she', 'those boys don't stand a chance with her around' 'what a little flirt' etc. These are examples of how power for women is rooted in their appearance and their presumed level of attractiveness to men and to a presumed male gaze.

Given the onslaught of cultural messages about what femininity is and should look like, it is probably more important to compliment girls for things other than their appearance, and to compliment boys more for their appearance. Tell a boy he has lovely hair, or his shoes are great or that he looks beautiful in his outfit today. Why not? That this alone may feel uncomfortable for some people, illustrates the problem of the rigid policing of masculinity and femininity, and the underlying currents of homophobia and misogyny. We can start to cause ripples in those currents, by just changing the way we talk to children and the way we talk about them.

### **18. Model dealing with conflict in ways other than violence or aggression**

All of us, adults and children alike, get angry and irritable. This is inevitable. We get angry and irritable with family, friends, partners and our children. This is natural. We can try, as best we can, to model a range of possible ways to express these feelings,

ways that do not hurt or frighten ourselves or others. We should not hit our children, nor use violence against adults. Hitting our children teaches them that might is right, that power is something to use over others, that bullying is normal.

We can try to explain to our child that something is upsetting us or making us annoyed, we can explain and apologise for snapping or shouting at them; we can make it especially clear that it is not their fault. Do not make your child feel responsible for your emotions, or to blame for them. In age-appropriate ways we can explain why we had a row with our partner and reassure them that this is temporary and that their parents/carers/grandparents or mummy and grandma or daddy and auntie are both ok and still love each other.

Take a breath, leave the room if child is old enough to leave for a minute safely, ask a friend to babysit for the afternoon, eat chocolate. Parenting is hard. Relationships are hard. Not all the time of course, but some of the time, and sometimes due to the stresses and strains of life, this can go through phases where it feels like it goes on and on. It is challenging to model respectful relationships all the time.

I will admit to not being good at doing this. Before my child was born I was the sort of person who believed that raising your voice to someone is a form of violence, I pledged that my child would not even see a screen until he was 18 and we would live solely on organic lentils. In reality, sometimes I have to go into another room, away from my toddler, and gently bang my head against a wall while taking a few deep breaths. I do gaze at my phone checking social media while pretending to play with him. I've slammed doors and rowed with my partner in front of him. These are not examples of me living up to my own ideals; but ideals are aspirational targets, if we can meet them most of the time we are doing well.

**19. Do not normalise or glamourise weapons or violence, including in toy choices and clothing**

Why does this even need saying? Weapons kill and maim people and animals, that's not fun. Violence hurts, injures and kills people and animals, that's not for playtime. Why do we dress our boys like child soldiers, buy them punch bags, tell them to 'man up' and then hold our hands up in despair when the newspaper headlines are full of stories of men's violence and pain?

In our society weapons, war and violence are already glamourised, eroticised and normalised (these are wedded to masculinity in a particular way of course, and used to represent, promote and symbolise male power and virility). Our children will see this on magazine covers, TV, billboards, bus stop adverts, free newspapers, clothes store displays, toy stores etc. This is our problem to sort out. We can start by not buying toy machine guns for our toddlers, or dressing them up like a marine. When you really look at the messages we send to our boys, it is frightening. It is as if our faith in them is so reduced, so brutalised, that we really do see violence as some sort of developmental achievement and we proudly encourage and facilitate this in them.

From the world they see around them, children will ascertain what we value and what is valued. Children are not born knowing what a gun is, but probably from an early age they will see them, even in cartoons. Then, just as with all elements of adult life around them, they may want to play and experiment with toy weapons. As long as we have armies, and many films, TV shows, adverts, comics, toys and novels in honour of armies and soldiers, then some children will probably play at armies and soldiers. Some children will make pretend guns out of sticks, Lego, whatever – so what? That's imaginative play, it's not predestined military potential. We can try to provide a context for this play and discuss it with our children. We can teach our children to be aware of others, not to point sticks at others for example; in age-appropriate ways we can teach our children that weapons hurt people and not to pretend to point or use weapons against others, even if it is just pretend. We don't

need to freak out about their play, but we don't need to normalise and condone weapons either by buying them toy tanks, swords or violent computer games. This may be a drop in the ocean compared to the wider social messages they receive, but every drop matters and is worth doing.

See scholar and activist Tony Porter on the dangers of 'the man box'. The Pro-Feminist scholars like Porter always say that the three most dangerous words we can ever say to a boy are: Be. A. Man.

[https://www.ted.com/talks/tony\\_porter\\_a\\_call\\_to\\_men](https://www.ted.com/talks/tony_porter_a_call_to_men)

## **20. Avoid heavily gendered children's TV shows**

Unfortunately, most children's TV is heavily gendered, and, even if it isn't, the adverts are worse. Like with children's books, TV shows send outrageously gendered messages about what is appropriate for boys and girls, and what is not. Male characters wear blue, use weapons, are heroes. Female characters play supporting roles, wear pink, have tiny waists and huge long eyelashes (what is with the eyelashes, even on animals?!). If you have time, try to supervise TV watching with your child, and discuss what you see. If you have time then review a few episodes of a show yourself before letting your child watch it. Basically it's a minefield out there – good luck! Share tips about good shows with your friends, at playgroups, at the nursery gates.

## **21. Seek out and employ female tradespeople if you can and let your child watch them working**

Today there are plenty of female tradespeople, doing all sorts of tasks. If you employ work to be done in the home, try to find these women and let your child see them working. There is no reason why women cannot work as electricians, painters, plasterers, plumbers etc. Women are not weak. Women are not biologically incapable of using tools. Yet we know that in children's books and TV these sorts of

skilled trades are most often going to be portrayed as “men’s jobs” and, still, most of these jobs will indeed be done by men, although women’s representation is increasing. Seek out opportunities to challenge stereotypes and show your children the wealth and breadth of jobs and careers that are open to both sexes. Show your son that women are strong and practical and can use power tools. Show your girl that women are strong and practical and can use power tools. Why shouldn’t your daughter grow up to be a plumber? Like Rosie the Riveter said: We Can Do It!

Women on The Tools: [www.womenonthetools.org.uk](http://www.womenonthetools.org.uk) (Formerly known as Women & Manual Trades)

## **22. Facilitate and encourage physical play and expression**

There is a dangerous myth that only boys like physical or ‘rough and tumble play’ and that this is a natural, developmental need for male children, but not female children. I’ve been in playgroups, I’ve witnessed that an awful lot of children are physical, energetic and aggressive! A lot of girls seem to push and shove, grab and bite. Girls are just as likely to be clambering up the curtains as boys. Likewise, I’ve seen plenty of boys who are happy to quietly draw or push a toy pram round and round. My own son has been known to stand very still and put his hands on his head when other children go running past him! Children are all individuals, just like adults. This seems to be a fact that society struggles with. Let children express themselves physically, let them experiment with their own boundaries and those of others; let them see what their body is capable of doing and where it is capable of taking them. Do not limit this based on the sex of your child. It is time we stopped peddling caveman myths about our babies and dictating their play based on our own sexist assumptions.

Feminists are called man-haters frequently, but it is not feminists who are saying that boys are naturally competitive, aggressive or violent, that they can’t sit still long enough to hold a crayon or that they have an instinctive urge to play with guns. The

male foetus is not shaped like a gun; baby boys are born curious, gentle, adventurous and loving. To say that boys are naturally violent and aggressive excuses adult men who are violent and aggressive and provides an immutable biological base for the epidemic gendered patterns of violence in our communities and our world. It is patronising, deterministic and dangerous to write off our boys, to suggest they have less emotional capacity, less empathy; and, from toddler ages, to teach them to punch and fight, to dress them in camouflage, to give them toy guns. This patriarchal grooming is stark and upsetting, what's worse is that we've all accepted it as normal, such are the low expectations we have of the fullness and full extent of ourselves and our children.

Feminists have never said that men are biologically one thing or another, but simply that boys and men are human, with all the potential of anyone else. Our society, as it is currently, blocks this potential. It stunts boys' natural development as caring, responsible human beings, and, if we are to ever build a just society, we need to put the potential back. There is no better place to start this process than with our children.

See the writer, scholar and activist, bell hooks, on men, masculinity and love: "The Will to Change".

### **23. Watch women in sport, including team sports like football and rugby**

Because you cannot move in our society without seeing pictures of men playing football or other sports, your son will get plenty of exposure to the idea that men play sports, that men are active, that they use their bodies physically to achieve things and win. We see images of men leaping in the air, scoring goals, skidding along a pitch – covered in mud, sweaty, heroic etc. We see far less images of women in this way. Your child will see more images of women advertising perfume, clothes, beauty

products etc and those women's bodies will be shown as perfect, fragile ornaments for looking at, not bodies that run around and get muddy.

It is therefore important to try to balance this out. Watch women in sport with your child, watch women athletes in the Olympics, find out your local women's football team or rugby team and go to watch their matches if you can. If your child is interested in skateboarding or BMX for example, then find videos of girls and young women doing those activities. You will still have to hunt a bit harder to find videos and images of girls and young women in sport, which itself underlines the problem of representation here.

#### **24. Give yourself a break**

However you raise your children, there will be people on hand to question and criticise. Guilt is the curse of parenting, we feel this enough, without letting others add to it with their unsolicited observations. Everyone has an opinion on parenting, they like to hand it out to you, on the bus, in the supermarket, at the health centre. I assume that all parents do the best they can for their children and want the best possible for their children. Society does not help parents to achieve this, there is not enough support, not enough child-friendly places or activities, not enough free children's activities and childcare is too expensive. Schools are facing cutbacks, as is transport and housing, while food costs and bills continue to rise apace and wages stagnate. These are tough times, and all of this makes it harder to raise children.

Some people are blessed with family support networks and safety nets, others are not. All we can do is try to construct a community around us, of friends and allies and retain or rebuild our confidence and self-esteem so that we may provide this foundation for our children to grow upon.