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MODELLING GENDER EQUALITY AT HOME

A Guide for Parents

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SEXUAL HEALTH
AND GENDER EQUALITY



Gender equality is such a hot topic these days, and rightfully so. According to the World Bank, there has been quite a lot of progress made, but we are still far off. 'The data show there has been great progress towards legal gender equality over the past decade. In 131 economies there have been 274 reforms to laws and regulations, leading to an increase in gender equality. This includes the 35 economies that implemented laws on workplace sexual harassment, protecting nearly two billion more women than a decade ago. But the average global score is 74.71, indicating that a typical economy only gives women three-quarters the rights of men in the measured areas.' [1] Even the countries that are in the top 10 haven't reached 100 - this effectively means that we have not reached true gender equality in any country in the world.

So how do we fix this? Obviously we need to continue campaigning, speaking to government officials, lobbying for change, and try to get more laws and regulations changed. But we also need to change mindsets. There are so many age-old ideas ingrained in every culture in the world that devalue women when compared to men.



I know, I know. We can't all go out and lobby our politicians. And many of them wouldn't listen anyway.

So what can we do? We can start at home and model gender equality. We can practice true equality at home, and model equal behaviour for our children, who will in turn go out in the world and do the same. After all, our children don't learn from what we say, they learn from what we actually do.

How do we model gender equality at home? I personally like UN Women's guidance [2]; they have provided 7 simple steps which absolutely anyone can follow. They're easy, impactful, and if we each even implement a single action from this list, we'd help make the world a more equal place.

Talk about it

I've said it before and I'll say it again: talking to your children about sexual health and gender equality is SO IMPORTANT!

Ukrainian singer Dmytro Shurov + X-Factor Ukraine judge says: "In my opinion, the best way to raise a child is by example as your child takes after you... I often talk to my son about gender roles because this topic is relevant.," Dmytro said. "People are born to be happy and all of us have equal rights. Everything starts with families: I think kids should get their parents' attention equally, they should see their father is not afraid to be weak sometimes, and their mother isn't afraid to be strong."

Share the care work

Domestic work has historically been a woman's job, because men went out to hunt or earn income for the household, so women stayed home to look after children and the home. These days, many households have 2 employed parents, but the household chores still fall to the woman, which makes no sense. Working full-time (or even part-time) and then coming home to manage a household is unreasonable (and exhausting!) to do on your own. Household tasks should be shared. So should parenting.

One of my favourite quotes about this is by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in her famous TED Talk 'We Should All Be Feminists' [3], where she says "What if the parents, from the beginning, taught both children to cook [sic]? Cooking, by the way, is a useful and practical life skill for a boy to have—I've never thought it made much sense to leave such a crucial thing—the ability to nourish oneself—in the hands of others."

Historically girls and women have missed out on important opportunities because they've stayed home to care for the family or home (or both!), such as missing out on an education or employment. This is unfair and isn't

really justifiable. Try splitting tasks between you. For example, if I do the cooking, my husband will do the washing up. Then another day, we might swap. Model that you are a team made up of two equal parts, and nothing less. Dividing tasks equally teaches your children that we are equal and that both men and women can do absolutely anything.

Embrace diverse role models

It's important to acknowledge success comes in all shapes, colours, genders, occupations, and so on. Not adhering to generic stereotypes when it comes to toys, colour preferences, occupations, clothing, etc., sends a powerful message. It also empowers your children to feel that they can be anyone or anything they want to be - and rightfully so!

Teach your kids to speak out

Young people around the world are stepping up for gender equality, and they should! When we empower and educate young advocates about women's rights, we are ensuring a better future for us all. Teach your children that it's good to stand up for what they believe in, and to call out discriminatory behaviour if and when they see it. This goes for someone treating them or someone else unfairly. Teach them that this type of behaviour can come from anyone, anywhere, and they can challenge it in a respectful way.

Fight stereotypes, including your own

A global study identified that children tend to internalise stereotypes by age 10. This can be particularly harmful when we teach our girls to be safe, modest, and do household chores or teach our boys to be strong, emotionless, and to play outdoors.

“We found children at a very early age—from the most conservative to the most liberal societies—quickly internalize this myth that girls are vulnerable and boys are strong and independent,” says Robert Blum, a professor at Johns Hopkins University and the director of the Global Early Adolescent Study. The study pointed out that during adolescence, the world expands for boys and shrinks for girls, and confirms this is the case all over the world, including Bolivia, Belgium, Burkina Faso, China, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ecuador, Egypt, India, Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, Scotland, South Africa and the U.S.. If children hear disrespect between parents, they will internalise this and grow up thinking this is normal. If they see or experience violence, this becomes normal behaviour in their minds. We all have predetermined unconscious biases.

For example, when I was growing up, menstruation was considered dirty and I was restricted from participating in certain activities or going to specific events when I was on my period. When I asked my mother why, she told me, ‘this is just what we do’.



It's important to challenge behaviours and societal expectations. Question things. If you can't find a good reason to support something, there probably isn't one. Be sure to teach your children that your family is a safe space for them to be who they are, to ask questions and to challenge things they disagree with (respectfully of course). Respect their choices, and teach them that it's OK to be different, and by encouraging a culture of acceptance. Celebrate differences and encourage children to think outside the box. Ask why. Ask why not. Encourage your children to do the same.

Stop the body shame

If you call yourself fat, or discuss the appearance of others, this type of behaviour becomes normalised in the eyes of your children. If you gossip about other people's appearances, your child will think it's OK to do so. If you judge people who have disabilities or are worse off than you, your child will think this is acceptable. Again, sometimes these are predetermined biases. For example, it's common for many women to think that birth by Caesarian section is 'the easy way out', and many women are proud of the fact that they never had to have one (and don't have any scars). Stretch marks are also considered by many to be unsightly. Imagine proudly declaring to your daughter that you are proud you have no birth scars and no stretch marks. Now imagine that your daughter grows up to have a Caesarian section (for whatever reason) and ends up with stretch marks due to the miracle of pregnancy (of course you stretch when you're growing and carrying a tiny human!).

Or imagine that you are unhappy with your weight or one of your features. Or the weight or features of someone else. And you are vocal about it. What if your child starts to believe this is normal? What if they end up having the same insecurities? Or worse, what if it becomes a mental or eating disorder?

Think about what you say to your children, including what you say about yourself. Imagine 20 years down the line... would you want your child thinking the same things that you are saying about yourself? Model confidence and that it's OK to be who you are and look the way you are. We are all unique and we come in all different shapes, sizes, and colours. This should be celebrated! Diversity makes the world a wonderfully interesting place, and we should enjoy it and not scrutinise our differences or our physical appearances. We're all equal, and it's important to recognise that even though we are all very different from one another.

Listen and learn from them

Children are innocent, they see the world with new wise eyes. They offer unique perspectives, and we should respect them and listen to them. It's incredible just how much we can learn from our young people. Just look at Malala Yousafzai, Anne Frank or Greta Thunberg. Young people can make a huge difference in the world. Just because we are older, it doesn't necessarily mean we are wiser. Listen to your children. Accept when they are right, and acknowledge when you are wrong. Be human, and most of all, demonstrate that you believe that they are equals as well.

Sources

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