

## **Feminist Moms and Sons**

### ***Making A Difference***

When I first conceived this article a few years ago, I thought writing about feminist mothers and sons would pertain to non-sexist parenting, and the influences of the media, school, peers, family, etc. With the article finally being born (deliberate choice of words), I've found it goes much deeper than that. In the past, it seemed feminist scholars studied and wrote more about their challenges to the institution of motherhood rather than looking more specifically at the mother-child relationship. That appears to be changing. Study of the mother-son relationship is very close to my heart as I am the mother of two sons, Eric, age 18, and Jeremy, age 15.

In September 1998, I attended a fascinating conference, "Mothers and Sons Today: Challenges and Possibilities." There were speakers and participants from Canada, the United States, Britain, Australia, and Israel. Many aspects of the mother-son relationship, and women's roles as mothers and non-mothers were discussed. While there were many references made to the mother-son relationship as portrayed in literature, I found the personal stories more riveting.

One of the most difficult things for mothers (and fathers) is worrying about keeping their children safe. Whether it is protection from the neighbourhood bully, or to the extreme, literally keeping them alive, we worry.

Mothers feeling responsible for their sons' survival was dramatically outlined by Amia Lieblich from Jerusalem who discussed the mother-son relationship in the shadow of war. "To put it into a historical context, if God had asked Sarah for her first born son, rather than asking Abraham, the answer would have been 'No'," Leiblich stated in discussing Israeli Jewish mothers' reluctance to follow the tradition of sending their 18-year-old sons to war. (Girls are sent to the army at the same age, but they do not face combat duty,

so have a much higher rate of survival than do 18-year-old boys.)

Joyce King, an educator and sociologist from the United States, spoke of her difficulties in allowing her children to stay in the public school system with their neighbourhood peers. The violence is so prevalent in her neighbourhood; her son is the only one from his Grade 8 public school class left in the area. “The rest are either dead from gang violence, or in prison, as a result of being in a gang and getting into trouble,” she says.

King is a black woman and very proud of her African-American heritage. To keep her son safe, she sends him, and her daughter, to a private school where most of their classmates are white. She also has them schooled in their African-American heritage by a neighbourhood scholar after their other studies are finished. She does this to help “recuperate their cultural consciousness.” King noted that the decision to use private schools did not come easily. She has faced criticism from her community, and from other black scholars at the university where she teaches. “When our young men are protected by their mothers who are faced by institutional racism, an anger surfaces in them, and we can teach them to use that anger to turn it to a creative force and something positive comes from that.”

Throughout the conference, it was noted that roles and relationships between mothers and sons change as the boys grow to manhood. Indeed, Adrienne Rich (1976) noted more than 20 years ago, in her book “Of Woman Born” that in order to be “strong”; boys must “grow away” from their mothers, especially if she is a strong woman. Otherwise, he will be seen to be a “sissy.”

Marni Jackson, author of the book *The Mother Zone* (1992), was one of the keynote speakers at the Mothers and Sons conference. She disagrees with Rich. She noted that “mothers may think that we must let go of our sons in order for them to become men.” Jackson says her theory is simple: “The closer and more physical the bond between a mother and son is from the beginning, the greater the independence both will enjoy later on. In many ways, the message of our culture to the mothers of boys is not to hold, but to withhold. But by trusting ourselves, listening to our kids, and resisting those messages, we can begin to discover the true contours of the relationship between mothers and sons.” Jackson has a 15-year-old son, and she says it has not been easy letting him find his own way, and make his own decisions. She says she has had to renegotiate their “closeness contract” in order to respect his need for privacy more.

But even when we do trust our kids, and ourselves, we look for support from others and we are devastated when we don’t find it in the one place we thought we would from other feminists. Fiona Joy Green, another presenter at the conference, stated that in her research through the Women’s Studies Program at the University of Manitoba, she finds a lack of support in raising sons in a “feminist mode” within the feminist community itself. In her research, Green finds that feminist mothers often find “a lack of support for decisions that cast their children as outsiders . . . for example, for supporting non-athletic boys, or boys with longer hair.” “There is still an assumption,” she says, “that

boys who do not fit the ‘masculine’ model will be ousted by their peer group and by adults, and to conform to this ideal is still very important.” Green notes that another area where feminist mothers lack support or where they are open to criticism, is when they are judged to be teaching, or expressing ideals that counter those that are presumed to be feminist.

I have encountered this when I tell people that Eric is going to learn to design video and computer games, which he loves playing, and is very good at. These games are often criticized for being too violent, and anti-female. How can I, as a feminist, and a pacifist who has preached non-violence, accept this material being brought into my home, and support his choice to become more enveloped in that world? The easy answer is that as a mother, I support my children in all of their choices, and the right to make those choices, even if I don’t agree with them. That’s part of mothering. The trickier answer is that I accept it because I respect their critical thinking skills, and the fact they know fantasy from reality. There have been some games which I have out-and-out banned because of their overtly violent nature, and lack of story development.

Fortunately, I have only had to do this a couple of times, when the boys were younger. If I question a game, we discuss its merits as far as the boys are concerned, and look at it critically together. To try and “get into their world,” I have played a few of the video games. I wanted to see what the attraction was. I was thankful to find out it wasn’t the fact that Lara Croft, the hero of “Tomb Raider,” a strong, and capable woman, performs all of her deeds dressed in short-shorts and a halter top, showing her ample bosom. The attraction of that game, for all of us, was the challenge of moving from one level to the other, getting past a number of obstacles, and enemies, while developing strength and skill. I couldn’t get past the first level, because I could never get all of the buttons co-ordinated to move the character the way you want her to go, but I found it challenging just the same. A bigger challenge for my sons was teaching me to play.

In playing the games, I found great variety—everything from sports to road races to “strategy” military-style games. Our discussions of these games (and the movies and television shows they watch) showed me young men who do respect women, and their abilities. They see women in leadership roles, even if the context is one I don’t necessarily like. (being a “commando”). Eric feels that if women want to be in the military, and can pass basic training, all options should be open to them. Fortunately, he sees this is not the case, and there is need for change.

Media aside, there are a number of things in the outside world to which our sons will be exposed, and perhaps influenced by. Whether these influences—peers, other family members, and school—wind up having more influence on their value system than do their parents, especially their mothers, is still debatable.

Green says that feminist mothers try to balance their philosophies with the pressure the children feel from the outside world. She adds that having open

discussion with our children, especially our sons, about the variations of understanding the world, and what is harmful to people, and what is not so harmful, is often at the heart of a feminist mother's parenting.

She adds that while mothers may have strong influence in their son's lives when the child is young, fathers have more influence, as the boy grows older. There are great variations in terms of support the feminist mother receives here, from non-existent, especially if the father is not present in the home, to a true and equal sharing of parenting responsibilities and teachings. Our sons have an involved, loving father who supports my feminist principles when they make sense to him. At other times, compromises are reached and differences in attitudes discussed. He has accompanied them to films we might have otherwise forbidden and then they have a discussion about it. All of this gives the boys good role models for healthy relationships.

While it may not be as strong as feminists perceived it to be, there is support for feminist mothering from other feminists. Hence the conferences on mothering. Also, Mothers Are Women (MAW), a non-profit feminist group based in Ottawa advocates for all mothers, and particularly for the concerns of those who have spent, or are spending, some length of time at home as primary caregivers. Lisa Zanyk, Sue Robins, Stephanie Lienert, and Roxanne Higgins are MAW members who shared their thoughts on feminists raising sons. These women are involved with their community, some are writers, and all are politicized about changing the world for women who choose to be at home with their children.

Lienert, whose son is 21 months old, says that she has heard some feminist moms desiring a daughter, in front of their male children, which, to her, is as sexist as fathering desiring sons over their daughters. "I feel this only leads to low self-esteem, misogyny, and possible gender confusion. A male child brought up in a loving, approving, respectful household will most likely grow up well-adjusted, healthy and very feminist (humanist)."

Zanyk is the mother of two sons, and a daughter, ages ten, eight and six respectively. She worries that her "actions contradict my feminism" because she is in the more "traditional" role of mom at home. Zanyk says she is determined that her sons will not be men who "power trip or prey upon women." She talks to them, and her daughter, about sexual discrimination, stereotyping, and looking at a wide range of options for studies in school and the future, including being at home with children.

Robins says that at the tender age of five, her son Isaac tells her the "difference between boys and girls is that girls wear lipstick and boys don't, and that girls can do whatever boys do, and boys can do whatever girls do." She feels that if he can always keep that last statement in mind, he will "grow up to be a good man."

Higgins says that even though her son Brendan is only two, she has already been faced with what she says is her biggest challenge: "buffering the perceptions of the world. So many people are quick to set boundaries for him in 'boys

do this, they are fast at climbing, slow at toilet training.’ Even feminist acquaintances do this.”

Higgins also makes reference to American author and psychologist William Pollock talks about the “boy code” in his book, *Raising Sons*. His studies, says Higgins, show that boys hurt as much as girls [emotionally] but it is a more cloaked or covert way. This “boy code,” however, does not impede boys progress in the workforce—it is their membership card in a way.

“How do you become a member if you haven’t been given the “boy code” test (i.e., girls aren’t included in this club)?” Higgins asks. “We unfortunately don’t grow out of this ‘playground contest stuff’ as adults. It becomes imprinted on our identity, which we carry into the boardroom in adult life. As we tell our children, can’t we all learn to co-operate rather than compete with each other, and try to learn from each other?”

British sociologist Janet Sayers noted at the conference that when we teach our sons to deal with all kinds of emotions, including anger, fear, and rejection, we teach them to learn compassion for others as well as themselves, and they do not feel as threatened by others anger towards them.

Letty Cottin Pogrebin, author of *Growing Up Free* (1981), and *Family Politics* (1985), notes there is a positive effect on young men and women of today from non-sexist parenting, and from feminism. When interviewed for this article, she said, “There is an ethos of ‘I can do, and be, anything I want’ with young men going into helping professions and music, and young women going into science and body building, without feeling they have to justify, or explain, their choices. There is progress in the sense of entitlement they feel.”

At the “Mothers and Sons” conference, there was much discussion not only about how we thought we had influenced our sons, but also how they had shaped us. One woman told how her son admonished her for being a “wimp” when it came to standing up for herself at home instead of wanting to always be the peacemaker.

*I have no trouble standing up for myself at work and in the community, but on the home-front, it seems to be a different story and my son was the one who had to point that out to me. I suspect a lot of women find themselves in that position because of our socialization, but if we want our sons to respect us as feminists, and regard women as equals, then we have to change that behaviour.*

If our daughters feel entitled to do, and be, whatever they want, do our sons see this as the girls “catching up” to the male advantage which they have always had? I wonder about this with my own sons. They just don’t seem to “get” feminism. They question the need for conferences called “The Power of Women” or symposiums for “Today’s Female Entrepreneurs” which I have attended in the past year.

When I try to explain (going into my “feminist tyrant” mode—Eric once

said that, I think meaning “tirade”), that men already have power, and have a long established role as entrepreneurs, it does not ring true for them, because that is not their experience. They see that getting established in business should be the same for men and women, and if there are difficulties, they should each get equal help. “Things like jobs and training should go to the best qualified person, and if there is a problem getting that training, then you go back to the schools, and fix that, rather than just hiring a woman because you are ‘supposed’ to,” Jeremy says.

So the challenge remains to explain patriarchy to our sons, where it is not recognizable to them, but also to ourselves. Have enough battles on the feminist front been won that patriarchy is not as dominant as it once was?

For many years, women who declared themselves feminists often left out “mother” in their self-definitions, perhaps fearing rejection from other feminists. That is changing, which is good for our daughters, but moreso for our sons. If they know that “feminist mother” is not a contradiction in terms, that will bode well for their future relationships with women and with their sons and daughters.

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