

RESPECTFUL RELATIONSHIPS IV

The following article was written by Jane Gilmore and published in 'The Age'.

PARENTS WANT THEIR KIDS TO GROW UP FREE OF 'SISSY BOY' AND 'BOSSY GIRL' LABELS

It's something feminists have been talking about for decades, but according to a new report by Our Watch, the vast majority of parents want it too: raising children free of gender stereotypes.

Parents don't want their boys shamed for showing vulnerability, or being gentle and loving. They don't want their girls growing up thinking it's unwomanly to be fierce and ambitious. They want their children to be free to achieve and feel everything they can, because if you ask any parent what they want for their kids, most of them will tell you they just want them to be happy.

But, like the song says, you can't always get what you want.

Most of the parents surveyed for the Our Watch report were at least 25 years old, and they grew up in a world where gender equality was talked about, but rarely demonstrated. Their kids were born into a country where all the power groups – government, business, the justice system, music, movies and the arts – are still dominated by men. Men still earn around twice as much as women and violence is almost always committed by men. The source and cause of this can be traced back to the lessons learned in childhood.

Children learn about gender roles before they are two years old. The stronger those gendered role models are, the more entrenched the stereotyped expectations become. By the time they start school, five-year-olds already know that only "sissy boys" cry, and "bossy" girls are annoying.

Little boys learn the power of their rage and the danger of their vulnerability. Little girls know not to laugh too loud or shine too brightly. They learn the power and powerlessness of being pretty and the threat inherent in their own strength.

Parents who don't want those limitations on their children can do an enormous amount. They can teach their children that gender doesn't limit ability or define possibilities. It's an aspect of who you are but not relevant to what you can do.

We can teach our girls to take pride in themselves beyond how they look or their ability to nurture others. We can tell them to take pride in caring for themselves rather than sacrificing self for others. We can tell them that respect is the minimum they should expect from friends, colleagues and especially men. We can tell them that boys who hurt them, diminish their abilities or attempt to have power over them are dangerous, not exciting. We should be telling them their feelings are never frivolously irrational, their wishes are never irrelevant and their rights are always important.

Parents also have an enormous amount to teach their sons. We can tell them it's normal and healthy to cry, feel fear, show affection, ask for help and offer all those things to others. We can tell them that violence is not their only outlet for frustration, and that love is not about control. We should be teaching them that they are responsible for their own lives and that participating equally in the domestic and emotional labour of life is the norm for men.

We can show them that women and girls are not a mysterious unknowable other, they're people, of equal worth and ability, and that they have equal value as friends, co-workers, role models and inspirations.

And if we teach them these lessons well enough, they might believe us.

But we also need to make sure our children know that the world outside our homes doesn't always expect those things from them.

We need to live the ideas we want our children to grow up with, not just talk about them.