

Bibi van der Zee

## A feminist's guide to raising boys

*Before I became a mother, I thought my feminism was a battle fought and won. But having three sons has challenged everything.*

It's always the things you think will be a doddle that end up causing most heartache. When I was asked to write about being a feminist and a mother to three boys, I imagined dashing off something witty, yet touching and wise, and never thought for a moment I'd end up losing my temper (several times) or in tears, or storming away from meals, and feeling like a failure. Did not see that coming.

- 5 How do you raise boys? My extremely authoritative sources for this article were: my friends; my children (I interviewed two of them, but the middle one refused and now says, "Is it a gender thing?" every time it seems funny); my husband; some brilliant books; and a huge number of conversations, including one in the pub with a friend who is, genuinely, a professor of feminism. In no particular order, this is what I learned.

### **Misogyny is a thing you can catch off the internet (and other weird things about being a 21st-century boy)**

- 10 We need to be as vigilant about this as we are about children watching porn. When Joe, now 13, my youngest, told me that 58% of rape accusations were false, I was stunned that he'd got it so wrong. We researched the statistics and found that it's more like 4-8%, at most. But if you dive into the web, you will find all sorts of fake news, anti-feminist bollocks – sites like Return Of Kings, which aim to "usher the return of the masculine man in a world where masculinity is being increasingly punished",
- 15 with stories about how jealous feminists put hardworking Formula One grid girls<sup>1</sup> out of a job. Here, knowledge is power: don't pretend these platforms don't exist – talk about them, fact-check them.

### **I've been a feminist all my life, but having children was the first time I fully understood what it was for**

- In the 1970s, from my child's-eye point of view, it seemed pretty much agreed that boys and girls were essentially the same; it was just society that turned us into "boys" and "girls". Simone de Beauvoir<sup>2</sup> had said: "One is not born a woman but, rather, becomes a woman," and the whole planet
- 20 had nodded in agreement, and that was that. As a teenager and self-proclaimed militant feminist, it was simple to fight the patriarchy; I just had to pick fights with my father. At university, I read and understood whole paragraphs of Elaine Showalter and Toril Moi<sup>3</sup>. In the early years of my career in journalism, being a woman was no brake on being able to work as late, be paid as little and drink as much as any of the male reporters I knew.

- 25 Then I had sons. It may sound naive, but I hadn't really thought about how that would work. I had a vague plan that my husband, Mike, and I would divide the labour, that it would be equal and fair, that I would raise a bunch of lovely equal-opportunity children and that my life would more or less carry on as before. Feel free to snigger – I deserve it.

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<sup>1</sup> *Formula One grid girls*: models promoting Formula One car racing

<sup>2</sup> *Simone de Beauvoir*: a French intellectual, writer and feminist

<sup>3</sup> *Elaine Showalter and Toril Moi*: critics and feminists

30 But he had a job, I was freelance. There was no question about whose work would take priority. No matter how much Mike pitched in, the day-to-day reality was me, at home, trying to hold back a tsunami of washing-up and laundry and mess and boys and nappies and Lego.

35 I loved being at home with the boys. But this was not what I had expected and at times I felt caged and desperate. In all my years of blithely touting feminism, I had understood it only in an abstract way. Now I got it, understood that because I was the one with the womb and the mammary glands, I would be the one carrying the children and then feeding them. It was a startling window into other times and worlds, where, if you had no birth control and your body belonged to your husband by law, then you could just be impregnated over and over again, sidelined and kept at home. Suddenly my feminism was visceral.

40 To be clear: I don't think you only understand feminism if you have children. But the embarrassing truth is that, in my case, this is what happened.

### **You have to talk to your sons and then talk some more. Be prepared to argue**

Looking back, there were a lot of things I should have talked more about to the boys. Many of my friends turn out to have strategised. One friend said: "Make it normal to bring up topics around the table – talk about Brett Kavanaugh<sup>4</sup>, the middle-class white male dominance of government, pornography, social media, talk about strong women and men." Someone else admitted to "constant nagging on my part about how to treat women, with the occasional lecture on systemic patriarchy".

45 Then there was the friend who admitted that her sons tended to be all, "There goes mum, banging on about feminism again, yawn." I thought that sounded more like my house, but when I talked to my boys for this article, it turned out I hadn't banged on as much as I thought.

50 In particular, I hadn't talked about the #MeToo Movement – partly, I think, because it had such a profound impact on me. Like so many women, I was forced to reassess experiences and ask myself why I had accepted certain things, even blamed myself for them. I don't think I realised how raw I was about it until we began to discuss it as a family. At one meal, when I tried to explain to a table of men and boys why #MeToo was a necessary act of mass civil disobedience, how the ideal of a rule of law actually shielded white men and protected the status quo, how most women who are assaulted never get justice, it all fell apart. The meaning of rule of law was explained to me. I lost it and walked away in tears.

55 But you know what? I don't regret it. Sometimes an argument should be that emotional.

### **I was guilty of unconscious bias**

When the boys were small, they were a little gang and I revelled in it. Mad-good company, sometimes best friends and sometimes worst enemies, a whirling cloud of fists and insults and laughs, like living with the Bash Street Kids<sup>5</sup>. (Me to Joe, our youngest, at some point in 2011: "I don't like your attitude, young man." Joe to me: "I love my attitude.")

65 Their boy-ness made me doubt what I'd always believed – that it's nurture, not nature, that underneath, all humans are basically the same. But it was impossible not to notice how differently they behaved to some of the girls we knew. Then, as they got older and we all emerged from the long tunnel of semi-delirious exhaustion, Mike and I began to see things differently. We watched a BBC programme about girls' toys and boys' toys. The producers dressed little boys up in girls' clothes and vice versa, then got unsuspecting members of the public to play with them and watched as they merrily handed robots and maths toys to the little "boy" and cuddly toys and dolls to the "girl". I

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<sup>4</sup> *Brett Kavanaugh*: American supreme court justice accused of sexual assault

<sup>5</sup> *The Bash Street Kids*: a comic strip in the British comic book *The Beano*

70 recognised how guilty I'd been of doing the same thing. I'd betrayed the bloody sisterhood – and I hadn't even noticed.

The funny thing is, I'd been a tomboy myself, not prone to wearing pink, more likely to climb a tree than talk about my feelings. In retrospect it seems weird that I didn't think *goodness, they're just like me*.

### **They seem to be turning out all right, considering**

75 Occasionally I felt outnumbered. The football years, in particular, when they'd play Fifa<sup>6</sup>, then go off to play it for real, then come back and watch more of it and the house would smell of mud and grass: those weekends, I felt as if I were in a 70s sitcom, getting their tea. I hate bloody football. None of them ever wanted to go clothes shopping with me. And they absolutely weren't up for a romcom<sup>7</sup> on a rainy Sunday afternoon either.

80 But my eldest son, Sam, now 17, likes to talk about films or tell me amazing facts about the stars and the universe. My middle boy is a great cook; we've spent hours covered in flour together. My youngest, Joe, is obsessed with music, and some of the happiest times of my life have been spent playing YouTube jukebox with him. They like some of the things I like and not others. It's almost as if they're... individuals?

85 Sam has as many female as male friends. He says boys and girls can do the same things. He'd be happy to stay home with his children if and when he has them, while his partner goes out to work.

I worried that the fact that I'd freelanced for years had made them think that Mummy works at home while Daddy goes to the office in the city. But Sam laughed when I suggested this. "If you'd really wanted to swap, you could have done, Mum," he said. "Dad would have been fine with that." And he's right.

90 They may yet turn out to be oppressive, patriarchal monsters, but the signs are pretty well submerged for now.

### **I am probably still getting everything wrong**

Why did I find this so hard to write? Because it involved admitting that I was naive, that I didn't put nearly as much thought into the business of rearing good feminist boys as it deserved.

95 What would I do differently? In the end, all you can do is look very, very hard at yourself sometimes and hope that you catch this stuff – your assumptions and gender biases and all the ducked conversations. Hug your boys a lot and tell them, often, how much you love them. Enjoy being with them. Not so long ago, I cornered my feminist professor friend in the pub for a rant that may have gone on for some time. After a while, she stopped me and said simply: "Surely your main responsibility is to make sure they don't turn out to be assholes?" (She used a shorter, pithier Anglo-Saxon word.)

100 On that basis, I have succeeded. I hope.

(2019)

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<sup>6</sup> a football game

<sup>7</sup> romantic comedy