



Equal  
Community  
Foundation



# RAISING BOYS RIGHT

A Practical Guide  
For Nurturing  
Respectful  
Young Men

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# Introduction

In a world where the burden of safety, equality, and respect often unfairly falls on women, it's crucial to recognise that true change begins with how we raise the next generation. This guidebook is dedicated to shifting that narrative, focusing on how we can raise boys and young men to be more than just allies.

It emphasises nurturing respect, empathy, and proactive attitudes in boys from a young age. The goal is to empower them to actively contribute towards dismantling gender discrimination.



The World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Report 2023 highlights a concerning trend: At the current pace of progress, it could take approximately 131 years to achieve gender parity. This emphasises the need for more urgent and effective measures to address systemic inequalities.

Through this collaboration between The Better India and Equal Community Foundation, we offer a practical, age-appropriate framework that equips boys with the tools, language, and values to champion equality, understand consent, break free from harmful gender stereotypes, and challenge toxic masculinity.

The intent of the guidebook is not to simply prescribe solutions but instead to spark debate and, in doing so, ensure steps towards an equitable world.

# Toddlers Under 5

## Laying the Groundwork for Lifelong Empathy



This chapter will focus on ways to build empathy and emotional regulation in children from an early age. Many children engage with peers their own age for the first time during their toddler years.

So, for parents, teachers, caregivers, school counsellors and others who influence young children, it is crucial that we guide them through this learning phase in the right way—encouraging healthy emotional expression—especially when it comes to difficult or ‘big’ feelings.

*Unfortunately, societal norms often dictate how we ‘correct’ or ‘discipline’ toddlers.*



Right from babyhood, there can be subtle differences in what we ‘allow’ our young boys to get away with as compared to how we correct young girls or even how we ask our boys to be less expressive in tune with the adage ‘boys don’t cry’.

Becoming cognizant of this bias and reflecting on it consciously is the first step in the process of changing these outdated gender norms.

# What Needs Your Attention:

## Beyond 'boys will be boys': why teaching empathy is important

"He bit my daughter on her chest," Carissa George, a mother to a four-year-old shares, recalling one particular playdate when a little boy let his excitement get the better of him. "When I alerted the child's mother to this, she casually responded, 'He does the same with his sister at home'."

Carissa is bemused at how "bullies" get away with their behaviour under the garb of 'boys will be boys'. "They are not held accountable for their actions," she adds.

A read between the above lines gives us an insight into Carissa's pain point — boys may be excused for their aggressive behaviours since social norms suggest that boys are 'aggressive' and girls are 'gentle'.

While some research does discuss the differences in play styles of boys and girls contrasting between an 'aggressive play style' vs a 'smoother play style'; it's important to acknowledge that discouraging behaviours that are aggressive is an important step in teaching boys how to respond to their negative feelings. <sup>[1]</sup>

Empathy is an acquired skill at this age — and something that we teach children by modelling it to them or explaining the outcome of their actions — and how they have 'hurt' someone else.

At this stage, if we simply excuse the aggression by saying 'Oh, this is his usual behaviour', as was the case in the example above, we are setting up a young boy for poor relationships throughout his life. He is bound to fail to learn how to express his feelings without using aggression.

## Why are some toddlers more empathetic than others?

The answer, studies suggest, is rooted in complexities revolving around psychosocial development at that age. When a two-year-old sees his mother crying, he may offer her a toy he's been playing with or a cookie he's been nibbling. <sup>[2]</sup>

He is giving his mother something that he knows has made him feel better when he has cried. It is unclear, however, whether the child understands what his mother is feeling, or is simply upset by the way she is acting, much in the way a puppy will come up and lick the face of someone who's crying. <sup>[2]</sup>



## When clichés become the bedrock of behaviours

American psychologist Eleanor Maccoby insists the weight of the argument cannot fall solely upon the boys. Words of encouragement and critique by parents and guardians have a role to play in the gender constructs that children draw on. <sup>[1]</sup>

*Think back to when society branded a boy 'sissy' for engaging in gentle play, or when a girl's strength drew her nicknames of 'tomboy'.*

This impedes the child's ability to explore their play style. In response to positive or negative reinforcements from their peers and mentors, toddlers begin to play in a way that aligns with these expectations.

To this end, as they grow up, Maccoby says each sex develops stereotypes about the other group that create separate worlds of meaning and friendship. <sup>[1]</sup>

## Questions To Consider



How do boys react when a girl is upset or happy?

Are they learning to share equally with girls as they do with boys?

How do they express themselves when they feel irritated, annoyed or disagree with a girl?

# Encouraging Empathy Through Play: Simple steps to nurture respect and understanding

---

1

## *Teach consent in play:*

Encourage children to ask before touching or using others' toys. Teach them to respect when others say "no". This will set boundaries early on.

2

## *Help children accept a 'No':*

Model and practice situations where your child hears "no" and learns to accept it without frustration, helping them understand that it's okay when things don't go their way.

3

## *Use storybooks with diverse characters:*

Introduce books that feature characters from different backgrounds, experiences, and emotions. This helps children understand diverse perspectives and builds their ability to empathise with others.

4

## *Encourage imaginative play:*

Through role-play and pretend games, children can explore emotions, problem-solving, and different points of view, which deepens their understanding of others.

**So, how do we impart this important lesson and ensure that we move past social constructs that hurt both genders?**

# A Simple Checklist for Teaching Empathy



## *Acknowledge their feelings:*

When your child is upset, show that you understand how they feel. Use empathetic phrases like, "I know you're upset because you want that toy right now, but let's take turns."



## *Talk about alternatives:*

After a difficult moment, calmly discuss what could have been done differently. Ask, "What could we do next time to make sure everyone feels good?"



## *Teach body language and facial expressions:*

Use pictures (flashcards) to help your child recognise emotions. Ask, "How do you think this person is feeling based on their face and body?"



## *Role-play different scenarios:*

Act out simple situations, like sharing or helping a friend, so your child can practise understanding others' emotions.



## *Model empathy in everyday moments:*

Show empathy by helping others when your child is watching. For example, "Let's help that child pick up their toys."

# Expert-Approved Strategies to Help You:

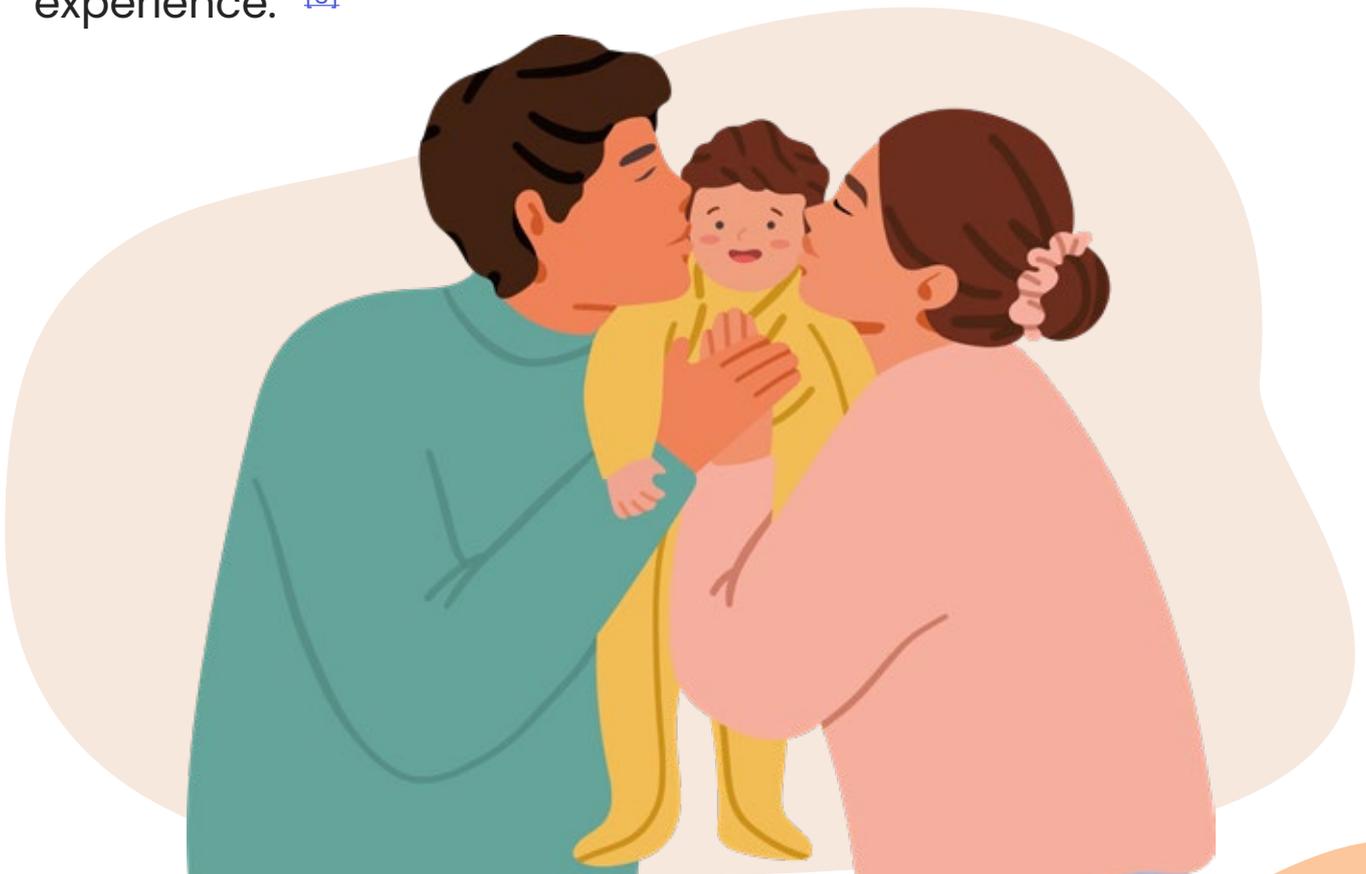
## Teaching empathy: how emotional regulation shapes playtime

“To empathise with someone is to understand what he is feeling or, more properly, to understand what you would feel like if you were in his situation. It is an extension of self-concept,” one study pointed out. [\[2\]](#)

In terms of play, experts say the concept of sharing is observed to be more challenging for children than some other forms of prosocial behaviour.

But that is no excuse for aggression.

The key lies in good parenting. “Children who are exposed to positive emotional expressivity, discourse about emotions, and positive acceptance of emotional displays in the home, exhibit higher levels of social-emotional competence than do children whose parents avoid focusing on emotional experience.” [\[3\]](#)



# Using Games to Encourage Emotional Regulation in Toddlers



## Emotion Sorting Game:

Create cards with various emotions displayed through words and images. Ask your child to sort these cards into categories like 'happy', 'sad', 'angry', etc. This will help children recognise and understand emotions.

## Emotion Colour Wheel:

Create a wheel with segments coloured differently (e.g., red for anger, blue for sadness). Have kids associate their feelings with the colours on the wheel to enable them to easily identify emotions.



## Emotion Story Creation:

Encourage children to think of a story or scenario around a specific emotion. They can either draw or write the story, focusing on how the characters feel.

## Feelings Charades With A Twist:

Let your children act out an emotion and the scenario that might cause that emotion. The game will enhance their emotional intelligence.



## Weather Report Emotions:

Ask children to describe their feelings using weather-related language, like saying they feel 'sunny' when happy or 'stormy' when angry. Using these metaphors may make it easier for them to express emotions.

## Toddlers aren't confined to stereotypes; adults are

Pooja Marshall, founder of InBloom Waldorf Kindergarten in Bengaluru has had a front-row seat to play sessions among children aged one to six. She identifies the premise around gender dynamics in play. "Girls and boys are wired differently," she says.

But she contests the rhetoric that gender is the reason for their behaviours. "As toddlers, they are not even conscious of their gender; it is something they discover over time."

She continues, "I have a little girl in my preschool who screams and bangs her play blocks when someone attempts to take them; while one of my boys will sit in a corner and cry if the same happens with him."

This is where her reluctance to attribute specific behaviours to genders stems from.

## Respect is a two-way street

Stereotypical traits of gender develop with time; it is not something children are born with. As for consent in play, Pooja says, "Respect is a two-way street. Every child should be taught that they need to ask for something in order to have it. And if the answer is a 'no', then they need to wait their turn."



# Children Aged 5–9

## Raising Respectful Boys: The Blueprint for Teaching Kindness, Consent and Dismantling Bias



### *Is kindness inherited or learnt?*

This chapter will explore strategies for teaching boys to respect girls as equals and to build kindness, understand consent and respect healthy boundaries.

It will equip teachers and parents with hands-on approaches to help children appreciate teamwork, consider girls' perspectives, and recognise that everyone deserves respect, regardless of gender.



# What Needs Your Attention:

## Helping children understand and respect boundaries

Encourage your child to express their feelings and consider the emotions of others. For instance, you might ask, “How do you think Ruhi felt when you took her toy?” This prompts them to think about the impact of their actions.

Similarly, you can have conversations about their own experiences. Ask your child how they feel when their sister or friend won't let them play with a toy they like or share their snacks, and then discuss how they might feel if the roles were reversed.



Healthy boundaries are an important part of how children learn to feel secure in their relationships and comfortable in their own skin.

For example, Dielle DSouza, a parent to twins, is already teaching her two-year-olds about boundaries during playdates with their cousins. As her toddlers grow and their friend groups expand, she knows they must learn this skill early on.

Dielle shares, “We feel modelling behaviour is the ideal way to do this. So if they say “no/stop/enough” when we’re tickling them, we’ll stop and point it out—“I stopped because you said so.” This simple practice helps her children understand the importance of speaking up for themselves and seeing that their feelings matter.

## Why should we start teaching consent to children as early as possible?

Kareena Vindaik is another mother who is all for teaching young children to advocate for themselves when someone is crossing the line. She recounts a cultural children's programme that she attended with her three-year-old. "While most parents joined later, their kids were left unattended; naturally, my daughter made new friends," she shares.

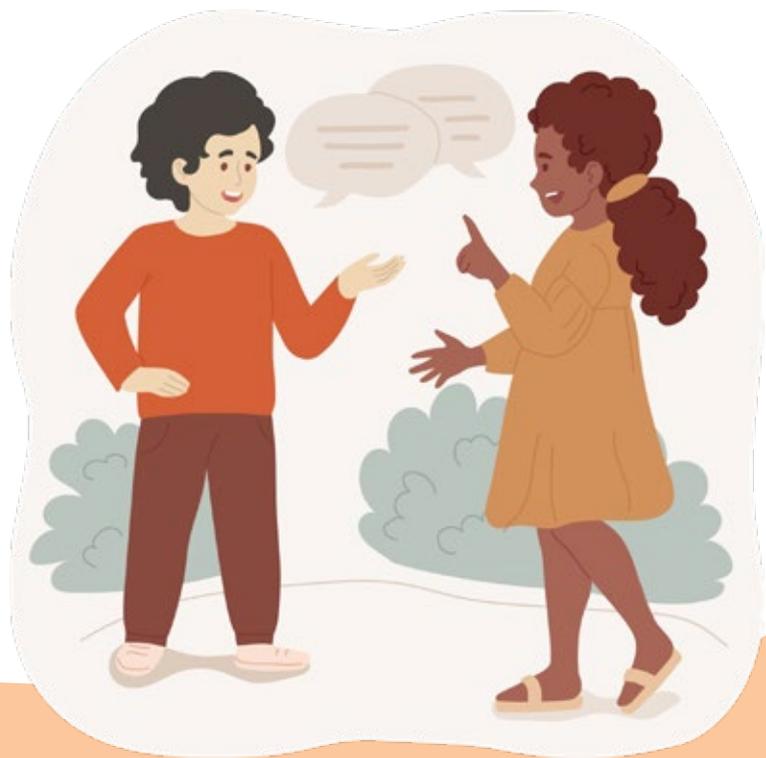
But the innocent playing soon took a nasty turn. "I was startled when a little boy approached my daughter, started picking her up several times and playing with her vigorously."

While Kareena's first instinct was to "freak out", the last thing she wanted was to be termed "another overdramatic mother". "So, I took the boy aside and firmly told him: "Not right, play properly'."

Alarmed at first, the boys became cognisant of their actions but were back at their antics when no one was looking.

The news these days is rife with conversations around consent and boundaries, but in Kareena's opinion, the roots of these societal ills trace back to childhood.

***"The basics need to be addressed. Something as simple as "Can I hold your hand?" before you touch someone during play, goes a long way. Start there."***



## Questions To Consider

*Do young boys understand that girls' personal boundaries should be respected?*

*Are they asking for permission before touching someone's belongings or giving hugs?*

### **Expert-Approved Strategies to Help You:**

#### **What are some practical ways to teach 5–9-year-olds about consent and respecting boundaries?**

##### **> Teach kids about permission in play**

**Example:** During playtime, teach children to ask for permission before touching others, sharing toys, or joining a game. For example, they can say, “Can I give you a hug?” or “May I use this toy?”

##### **> Explain the concept of personal space**

**Example:** Use a hula hoop to explain the concept of personal space. Let children understand that everyone has an invisible bubble around them that should be respected.

##### **> Use fairy tales and children's stories to highlight negative behaviours**

**Example:** Read familiar fairy tales like Goldilocks and the Three Bears to explain boundaries. Point out how Goldilocks entered the bears' home without permission and why that was wrong.

## > Address children's emotional outbursts

**Example:** Use feeling charts or emoji cards to help children identify and express their emotions. Ask them how they feel when someone doesn't respect their boundaries or when they make someone else uncomfortable.

## > Help them channel aggression in positive ways

**Example:** Introduce activities like squeezing stress balls, colouring, and dancing or crafts which involve tearing papers as safe ways to release frustration or anger.

## > Use drawings to teach them about boundaries

**Example:** Have children draw two circles—one representing things they're okay sharing (e.g., certain toys or snacks) and one representing things they don't want to share (e.g., their favourite stuffed animal or toy items). This exercise makes boundaries concrete and visible to them.

## > Call out negative behaviours in cartoons

**Example:** While watching cartoons, pause when you notice disrespectful behaviour (e.g., a character hitting or teasing another) and ask the children what they think about the situation. "Was that a kind thing to do?" or "How would you feel if someone did that to you?"

## Guiding discussions on consent

Borrowing from her experiences of teaching third and fourth graders at a low-income private school in Mumbai, Teach For India fellow Apoorva Sekhar remarked that though too young to be exposed to media, her class' minds were already being shaped by violent narratives portrayed online and on TV.



In her efforts to foster a consent-positive culture – an open, tolerant, and progressive attitude toward consent, boundaries, personal space, and bodily autonomy – in the classroom, Sekhar turned to the board. [4]

“I drew a stick figure with a circle around it and told our students that the circle represented my personal space, including everything that belonged to me, such as my bag, my dupatta, my phone and so on. [4]

***We translated this idea into concrete actions like: no one can touch didi without didi’s permission or no one can touch didi’s phone without taking didi’s consent. [4]***

I told them that each one of them had their own space. And nobody can enter that space without their permission.” [4]

This was followed by some self-reflection where the class was urged to think and share instances where they might have violated someone’s personal space and reframe healthier alternative scenarios.

## Be explicit in your examples

Apoorva cautions that while emphasising the need for consent, also broach the topic of misusing this right. “We discussed the importance of asking for permission before playing any game, which involved touching and contact. In other scenarios where they would say “no” to eating healthy food or attending classes, we would ask them if that is related to their personal space. This exercise made it easier for them to differentiate between different situations and where their consent is important.” [4]



# A Simple Checklist To Help Your Little Boys Learn About Boundaries and Consent

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## *Teach self-respect:*

Example: Encourage your child to share their feelings, saying things like, "I feel upset when you take my toy without asking."

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## *Teach saying "No":*

Example: Role-play scenarios where your child practices saying "no" in a safe environment, such as declining to share a toy when they don't want to.

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## *Accepting "No":*

Example: When your child hears "no" from a friend, discuss it by saying, "It's important to respect and accept their choice. How would you feel if someone didn't listen or respect your 'no'?"

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## *Establish clear guidelines:*

Example: Create simple rules at home, such as "No yelling in the house" or "Ask before borrowing someone's things," and discuss why they're important.

---

## *Encourage empathy:*

Example: Ask your child how they think a friend might feel if they were left out of a game, guiding them to consider other's behaviours.

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## *Model behaviour:*

Example: Demonstrate boundary-setting by saying things like, "I need some quiet time right now" to show how to express personal limits effectively.

# What Needs Your Attention:

## Breaking the silence on bullying and building kindness as a skill

One in every five students is said to be a victim of bullying. The statistics are worrying, but action is minimal. Why?

Studies point us in the direction of schools in India that “witnessed bullying incidents but accepted it as a minor violence incident”. <sup>[5]</sup> We’re urged to look beyond the muddled lines that distinguish ‘normal’ teasing from bullying.

Defined as “a subset of aggressive behaviour that refers to repeated, intentionally aggressive acts against someone who cannot easily defend themselves”, bullying is a fast-spreading social concern in schools. <sup>[5]</sup> You’d think parents would take it seriously.

The most common forms of bullying are verbal bullying, making fun of one’s physical appearance, followed by physical bullying. Unfortunately, it is only the last subset that gets attention.

The internet has been privy to many accounts of bullying shared by worried parents, who are clueless about how to react. One parent recalled how her daughter was bullied to such an extent that she began experiencing stomach aches from fear.

The girl, as her mother shared, struggled to stand up for herself, and instead endured endless taunts before her stress finally culminated in a physical reaction — sickness. <sup>[6]</sup>

Another parent recalls how her daughter faced severe bullying starting in middle school due to her weight, appearance, and introverted nature. <sup>[6]</sup>

Children are often reluctant to involve their parents for fear of being made fun of for “not handling it themselves”. However, this mother found herself wishing, in retrospect that she had intervened and sought action against the bullies.

## Questions To Consider

What behaviours are considered as bullying?

Why is a child bullying others?

How does bullying make someone feel?

## Expert-Approved Strategies to Help You:

### What are some practical ways to teach 5-9-year-olds about bullying and kindness?

#### > Use children’s stories to highlight what bullying is

Use a story like *The Ugly Duckling* to explain how the duckling feels when others are unkind. Ask children how they think the duckling felt and why it’s important to treat everyone with kindness, even if they seem different.

#### > Conflict resolution is key in cases of bullying

Create role-playing scenarios where children play out common conflicts, like two kids wanting the same toy. Guide them on using words to solve problems, teaching phrases like “Can we take turns?” or “Let’s find a way to share.”

## › Implement kindness-related activities

Introduce a 'Kindness Box' in the classroom where children can leave notes about bullying they've seen or experienced, or even highlight acts of kindness. This allows children to speak up safely and anonymously.

For younger children, use a sticker chart or a 'Kindness Star' system where children get rewarded for showing kindness, helping others, or resolving conflicts peacefully. Praise small actions, like including someone who feels left out, and make it a classroom norm to celebrate positive behaviour.

## › Clear consequences for bullying behaviour

Explain that when someone is being mean repeatedly, it's bullying, and there are always consequences. Create a visual 'Bullying Stops Here' poster that outlines what will happen if someone bullies, like missing out on playtime or talking to a teacher.

## › Teach kids how bullying is different from 'innocent fun'

Talk about how teasing becomes hurtful when it happens over and over again, or when it makes someone feel bad. Role-play situations where kids can practice asking, "Is this fun for everyone?" to help them check in during play.

## › Teach kids the art of "stop it"

Encourage children to practice saying "Stop, I don't like that," in a firm but respectful voice. You can turn it into a game where kids practice responding to different teasing scenarios with "stop it" and help them understand that it's okay to ask for help from an adult if it continues.

# On Teaching Children About Kindness

## Approaching different situations with tact

~~"Look at how nice your friend is being. You should do the same."~~

**"It's important to be kind to everyone, even when we're upset."**

~~"Just say sorry."~~

**"If you hurt someone's feelings, we can say sorry."**

~~"You have to always be kind."~~

**"Sometimes we make mistakes, but we can always try to be kind."**

## Ask the bully 'What's wrong?'

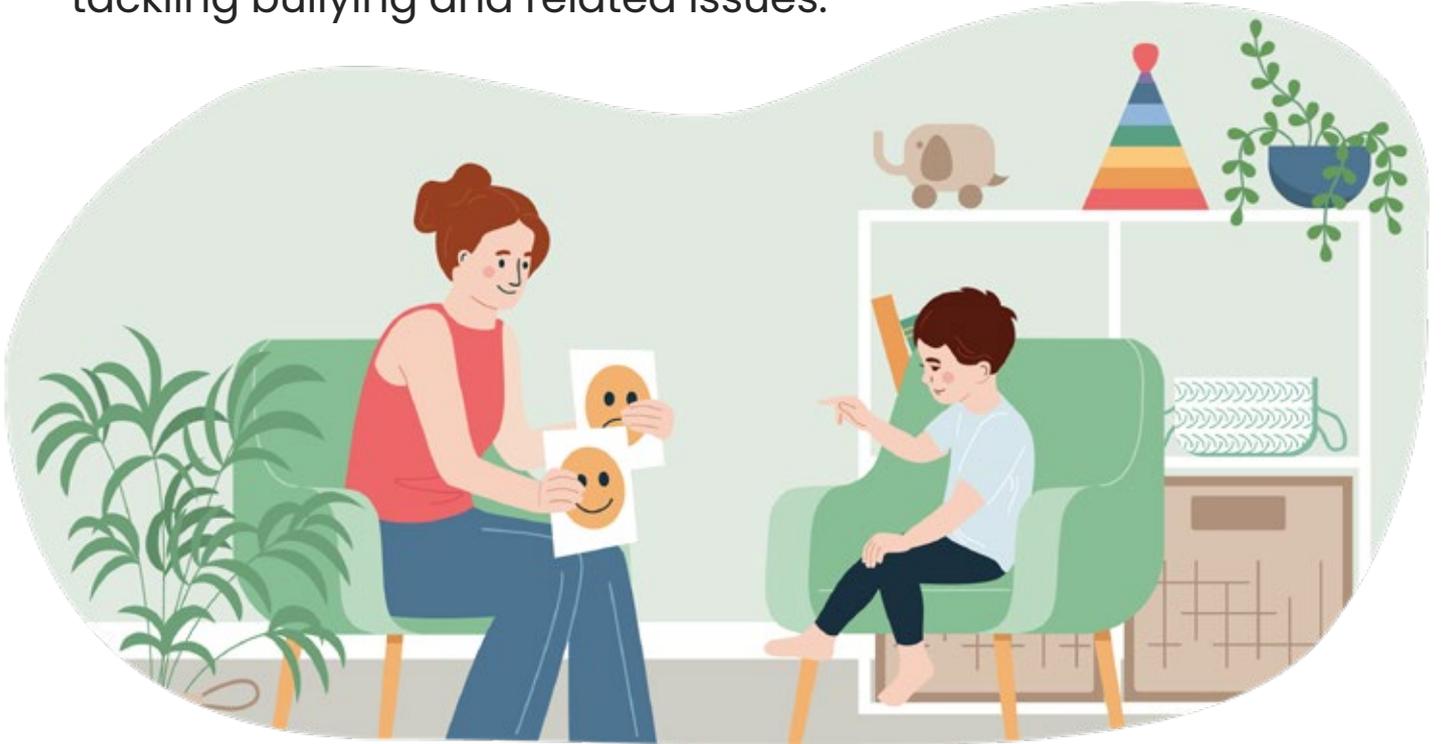
Bullying and eve-teasing often stem from deep-rooted issues, and Lubaina Faizullabhai, a counsellor at Fountainhead School, Surat, strongly believes in addressing these causes through conversation and counselling. As part of the school's well-being team, she outlines the process that follows when such a complaint is received.

**"Every student involved is counselled individually,"** she explains.

## Creating safe zones

One of the key initiatives the school employs to combat bullying is its Life Sessions. These are safe spaces where students can openly share their concerns without fear of judgment. Designed by the counsellors and implemented by the teachers, these sessions provide vital support to students.

From kindergarten to Class 12, every student is required to attend these sessions, ensuring a school-wide approach to tackling bullying and related issues.



## What Needs Your Attention:

### Teaching boys to respect everyone: understanding our social fabric and gender bias

Anuja Amin, founder of Circles of Safety Education Pvt Ltd — a social enterprise working towards integrating body literacy into school curriculums — believes gender stereotypes are deeply ingrained in our subconscious.

“Think back to your school’s annual functions,” she nudges. “When assigning roles to the students, guys are usually put in charge of the music systems and the technical logistics. Sometimes, girls aren’t even considered for these roles.”

Anuja points out the implicit nature of gender bias — the phrase ‘...like a girl’ has derogatory connotations, while its counterpart phrase ‘...like a boy’ implies someone is doing a task well.

# Vocabulary Checklist for Raising Respectful Boys: Language Matters

## Avoid harmful phrases

~~“Boys will be boys”~~ → “Everyone is responsible for their actions.”

~~“Man up”~~ → “It’s okay to show your feelings.”

~~“Stop crying like a girl”~~ → “Crying is a healthy way to express emotions.”

~~“Don’t throw like a girl”~~ → “Let’s focus on improving your skills.”

~~“Be a man”~~ → “Be responsible and respectful.”

## Replace stereotypical praise

~~“Strong like a boy”~~ → “You’re strong and brave.” (Gender-neutral)

~~“Pretty like a girl”~~ → “You look nice.” or “You’re creative.”

## Use emotionally inclusive language

~~“Toughen up”~~ → “It’s okay to feel hurt.”

~~“Don’t be a sissy”~~ → “Being sensitive is a strength.”

~~“Girls are too emotional”~~ → “Everyone has emotions, and that’s okay.”

## Promote equality in play and activities

~~“Boys don’t play with dolls”~~ → “You can play with any toy that you enjoy.”

~~“Girls are better at cleaning/cooking”~~ → “Everyone can help with chores.”

## Who are our children idolising?

If you were to ask your son today, “Whom do you idolise or look up to?” what would his most likely answer be?

Gender bias has roots, but it also has wide-spread wings, Anuja recently deduced when she posed the question “Who is your role model?” to a group of students. The answers revealed that boys rarely have female role models.

“Their icons are usually football players, Batman, and other male superheroes. While girls idolise female characters, they are even open to considering a male character as a role model. But if a boy even gives the slightest inclination that he looks up to Moana or Elsa (popular fictional Disney female characters), he’s had it.”

### ***So, how can we encourage our boys to overcome this sense of shame or ridicule about looking up to a woman?***

The first step in triggering any change in your home or school is to assess which behaviours are modelled, encouraged or praised.

It helps to initiate open conversations about the value of women’s contributions in various fields – be it science, arts, sports, or leadership. Sharing stories of inspiring women and discussing their achievements can help normalise the idea of looking up to female role models.

Encouraging boys to express admiration for women openly and without hesitation fosters a supportive environment. This can be done by celebrating instances where they show respect and acknowledgement toward women in their lives, whether it’s teachers, family members, or public figures.

## Questions To Consider

*How do boys react when they see a girl showing strength or toughness? Do they respect her actions or feel they challenge their ideas about gender?*

*Are boys encouraged to express their emotions openly, or are they often told that certain feelings or expressions are “not for boys”? How can we create an environment that encourages emotional expression in boys?*

## Expert-Approved Strategies to Help You:

**What are some practical ways to teach 5–9-year-olds about gender bias in society and how to be respectful regardless of gender?**

### Move beyond the gender binary

**Example:** Encourage boys to express interests in a variety of activities, like painting, cooking, or sports, without framing them as ‘for boys’ or ‘for girls’. For instance, say, “You can be an artist or an athlete, no matter who you are.”

### Promote open dialogue

**Example:** Create a safe space for boys to share their feelings or experiences about gender expectations. Ask open-ended questions like, “What do you think it means to be a good friend?” or “How do you feel when someone tells you what boys or girls should do?”

## Avoid labelling toys or activities

**Example:** Instead of saying, “This toy is for boys,” encourage exploration by stating, “This toy can be fun for everyone!” Allow children to choose toys based on interest rather than societal labels.

## Use gender-neutral terms

**Example:** Instead of referring to a group of children as ‘boys and girls’, use terms like ‘kids’ or ‘friends’. For example, say, “All kids can be strong and brave!” to foster inclusivity.

## Discuss advertisements and movies that highlight gender bias

**Example:** Watch age-appropriate cartoons or movies together and pause to discuss characters’ behaviours or roles. Ask questions like, “Do you think it’s fair that the girl always has to be saved? How would the story change if everyone helped each other?”



## Role-playing to tackle bias

While observing the world around them, children are quick to grasp the subtleties. And an interesting way to gauge their observations is through gendered play. This goes a long way in helping children articulate how they perceive different genders. [\[20\]](#)

For instance, asking a child to play the role of an Indian mother or father would immediately alert them to the stereotypes that the child associates with this role. Not only this, teachers and parents can also get a sense of the societal complexities linked to this role, as perceived by the child.

This pedagogical approach has a dual vantage – not only can teachers gain insights, but they can also introduce new possibilities that challenge convention.

# Ages 10–14

## Understanding Boundaries and Equality

From the age of ten, you start to see the stark difference in your child's thoughts, interests, behaviours and emotions from when they were toddlers. During pre- and early teen years, you might find your child eagerly discussing topics like climate change or debating the merits of their favourite superheroes.

While it's wonderful to see them engage passionately with such subjects, keeping up with their whirlwind of thoughts can also be a bit overwhelming.

At this age, children are experiencing significant growth—not just physically but also in their emotional and cognitive abilities. They're ready to tackle new challenges, whether it's engaging in a new sport or exploring creative hobbies like painting or music.

They are better able to understand their own emotions and empathise with others, which is a crucial stage in their emotional development.

***Peer relationships become increasingly important during this time.***

Your child may feel the pressure to conform to their friends' interests, yet they'll still seek the comfort of familiar support



when they need reassurance. Your role as a guiding influence remains vital as they experience these new social changes, helping them build confidence and self-awareness.

This chapter will focus on helping parents play an instrumental role as children navigate complex topics, such as relationships, boundaries, and equality.

It will also emphasise the importance of open discussions about respect and empathy, thus guiding children to become advocates for positive change in their homes, schools, and communities.

## **What Needs Your Attention:**

### **Teaching young boys about respectful communication**

#### ***“How did that make you feel?”***

When you see your child struggling with difficult emotions after an unpleasant incident, ask them this question. It's a simple gesture with the power to teach your child about self-awareness, empathy, and respect.

As humans, we are wired to want social validation, and a big part of that is being 'liked' and feeling valued. Since empathy is still a growing skill for young boys, it helps to set the foundation for their interactions with respect and kindness.

But before they can begin to recognise someone else's feelings, they need to be able to identify their own emotions and how they are connected to external events.

So, if your son is being teased or feeling left out in a playgroup, explore the feelings that result from this experience, as it will help you have more open conversations about how their behaviours affect others.



It's common for boys this age to want to play with other boys and sometimes this might translate into teasing or picking on girls. They don't do this with the intention of being hurtful – it's a natural byproduct of their need to feel validated by others who are 'similar' to them.

But, nonetheless, it's important that we help them understand how their actions could be hurtful to the other gender. Course correction is a major part of childhood parenting. Patiently teaching young kids to speak with kindness, think before acting and take accountability for their actions is key here.

As a parent or teacher, modelling this behaviour is as important as trying to talk to your child about it.

If we don't make efforts to change this behaviour early on, it continues into the pre-teen and late teen years, and at that stage, it's no longer 'harmless' teasing, it can have long-term effects on both girls and boys and how they interact and respond to the world around them.

Every child loves being called creative, talented and smart. So imagine the frustration when one ticks all these boxes but is

still relentlessly teased for something as trivial as body hair.

This is the fate of Cassandra Fernandes's (name changed on request) 15-year-old daughter who is shadowed by jeers of 'Amazon Rainforest'. Her classmate, meanwhile, is called out for being 'flat-chested'.

Naturally, the girls' self-esteem has taken a hit; doubt occupies centre stage in their minds. Meanwhile, their male peers perceive these as harmless jokes.

On most days, Cassandra finds herself coaxing her daughter not to take the comments to heart. "At 15, one's body has not even had a chance to fully develop," she shares.

But to society, she poses the question: "Why are 15-year-old boys even looking at girls' chests? How is it normal to expect these young girls to be fully groomed?"

## On Teaching Children About Respectful Communication



**Don't say:**

*"Stop being so sensitive."*

**Instead, say:**

*"How do you think they feel? It's important to understand their perspective."*



**Don't say:**

*"You shouldn't feel that way."*

**Instead, say:**

*"It's okay to share your feelings; just make sure to express them respectfully."*



**Don't say:**

*"Just say what's on your mind, no filter!"*

**Instead, say:**

*"Before you reply, think about how your words might affect the other person."*



**Don't say:**

*"I don't want to hear about it."*

**Instead, say:**

*"How did that conversation go? Was everyone respectful? Let's talk about it."*

## Cyberbullying: a grim reality

According to Cassandra, the problem is compounded by anonymous confession groups, where it is impossible to tackle the mean-spirited commenters who lurk behind an incognito mode. Complaining to the teacher is a band-aid on the issue. It needs to be nipped in the bud.

In Cassandra's opinion, "It all boils down to poor sex education. Most boys' parents do not have 'the talk' with their sons.

*Teenage boys need to be educated, not just about their own bodily changes, but also about what their female friends go through during puberty."*

### Questions To Consider

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Are boys aware of how their words or actions can make a girl feel uncomfortable or included?

## Expert-Approved Strategies to Help You:

- Teach children the importance of age-appropriate language
- Simplify concepts of sexism
- Derogatory comments must have repercussions
- Analyse movies and cartoons to call out sexist behaviours and language
- Teach children to make inclusivity a norm
- Practise respectful responses with children
- Teach assertiveness

# Checklist: Vocabulary Changes to Raise Respectful and Kind Boys

## Reject gender-based roles

~~“That’s women’s work”~~ → *“Everyone should contribute equally.”*

~~“Girls should be quiet and polite”~~ → *“Respecting others is important for everyone.”*

~~“Boys are natural leaders”~~ → *“Anyone can be a good leader with the right skills.”*

## Address negative stereotypes early

~~“All boys/men are aggressive”~~ → *“People can be calm and respectful.”*

~~“Girls are weak”~~ → *“Strength comes in many forms.”*

## Encourage positive descriptions

~~“Tomboy”~~ → *“She likes outdoor/adventurous activities.”*

~~“Girly”~~ → *“He enjoys creative/playful activities.”*

## How masculine norms and peer pressure shape boys

“Did you want to do that, or did you feel like your friends would make fun of you if you didn’t?”

Boys across the globe are significantly impacted by masculine norms and peer pressure, often leading them to conform to stereotypical expectations of what it means to be a boy or man.

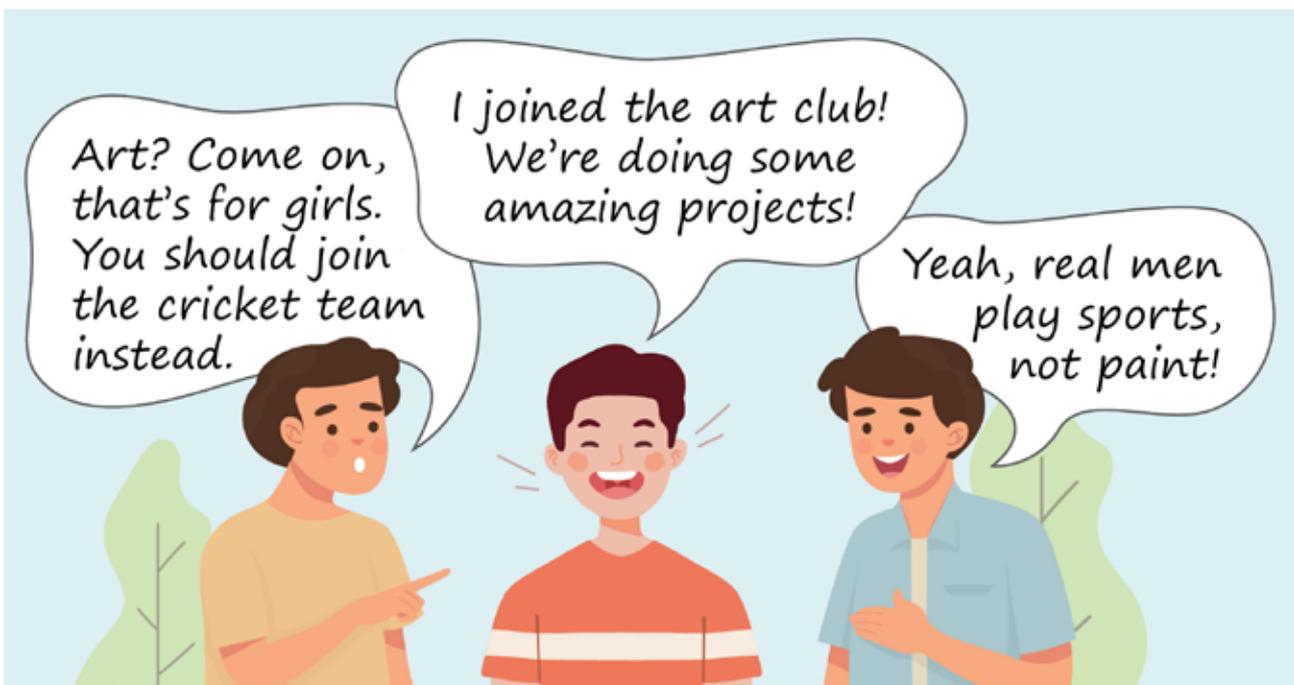
As we’ve already discussed, from an early age, boys may be taught to suppress their emotions or equate aggression with strength and dominance as a natural male social skill.

Aggression is influenced by various factors within family and school environments during adolescence. Research highlights that peer contexts play a crucial role in shaping aggressive behaviours among adolescents.

Key contributors include the need for perceived popularity, exposure to domestic violence, aggressive parenting styles, academic challenges, and aggressive behaviours within peer groups. [\[24\]](#)

These influences often lead to social and behavioural adjustment problems, especially in boys, who may feel pressured to conform to aggressive norms to fit in or gain acceptance. Addressing these peer and family dynamics reduces aggression and fosters healthier adolescent development.

An illustrative example of this dynamic can be seen in a conversation among a group of friends.



This exchange reflects how peer pressure can discourage boys from pursuing interests that don't align with traditional masculine norms. This toxic mindset can lead to harmful behaviours toward women, as boys, who internalise these norms, may view aggression as a form of power.

## Navigating conversations around sexist attitudes

There is a mindset behind sexist comments. Anjana Goswami of Equal Community Foundation (ECF), which is on a mission to ensure that every boy in India is gender equitable, helps decode it.

She cites Shivraj's example. From a truant who would while away his time whistling and passing comments at girls in his basti to one of ECF's most valued alumni who now educates young boys on the implications of their actions, his life has come full circle.

And the secret ingredient has been introspection.

Underscoring how the idea of street sexual abuse is often not apparent to boys like Shivraj, Anjana takes us back to one particular session where the question 'What, according to you, is sexual violence?' was posed to the teenager.

His response — "If a boy touches or grabs a girl, that is sexual violence."

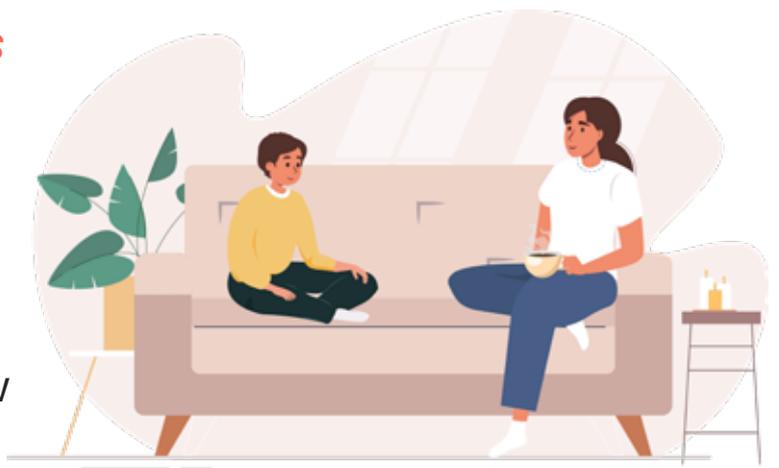
### ***"What if the boy passes comments at the girl?"***

"That's okay since the boy is not touching her," Shivraj was quick to respond.

"When you tease a girl, how does she react?"

"She walks with her head bent low." After some thought, Shivraj rectified his answer, "Actually, I rarely see her again."

His own response alerted him to the ripple effect of his jeers. Shivraj realised that he had violated the girl's right to mobility.



Posing probing questions to boys can help change their attitudes, instead of resorting to a 'holier than thou' approach. Fostering a proscriptive mindset will only create rebels. Instead, ECF believes in guiding the boys to the solution and leaving room for introspection.

## What Needs Your Attention:

### The finer nuances of consent

Consent is defined as 'explicitly agreeing to something without coercion'.

'No' means 'no'; this is an established fact. But there is little consensus on how to interpret a 'maybe' or an indirect 'no'. In many cases, the problem arises when the absence of a 'no' is taken to be a 'yes' in disguise.

Anuja (of Circles of Safety) breaks down these concepts to her young audience by asking them, "How often do we check in with our partners when sharing intimate moments?"

In these sessions, Anuja underpins what she calls 'shades of consent'. She proceeds to explain to her young audience, "Consent at the beginning does not imply every action following that 'yes' is okay. If a person stops responding at some point, are you checking in? Are you finding out if they have changed their mind?"

## Questions To Consider

*Do boys respect girls' boundaries in friendships and group settings?*

*Are they learning that 'no' applies in all contexts?*

## Expert-Approved Strategies to Help You:

- Teach children that consent can be revoked by either of the parties at any time
- Illustrate situations to deduce their opinions about consent
- Explain that consent isn't just verbal
- Teach children how to prioritise boundaries
- Explain the legal age of consent
- Challenge adolescents to think critically about relationships
- Normalise discussions around 'consent' and 'sex' instead of making these taboo

### Consent = A Cup of Tea



*If someone refuses tea, you don't push it on them. It's the same with sex.*

Studies suggest the reason young people may experience problems articulating and interpreting consent is not because of malintent, but rather sociocultural power dynamics that constrain the communication.

Breaking down the ambiguity around consent, Anjana (of ECF) says, it doesn't need to be complicated — consent is as simple as a cup of tea.

Imagine that you drink tea regularly. You like tea. Someone asked you if you'd like a cup of tea yesterday and you said yes. They made you one.

"Does that mean it's okay for them to assume you'd want one today at the same time with the exact amount of sugar that you took yesterday?" Anjana asks the young boys she trains.

"Just because you said okay to something yesterday or a month back, doesn't mean those feelings hold true every time."

Through these simple examples that borrow from reality, Anjana and her team at ECF dismantle the complexities that surround 'consent. "Unless said directly, a 'yes' is never a 'yes'," she remarks.

## What Needs Your Attention:

### The dark side of the internet

Young, fit, masculine, rich, owner of luxurious cars and mansions. This is what some young boys aspire to look like when they grow into a man. So imagine when a boy of impressionable age logs into social media and sees an icon who exemplifies these qualities. [7]

The boy has now found a role model in this figure.

Over time, he follows the icon closely, believing that if he emulates him well enough, he will someday taste the same success.

So, when this said icon begins advocating against women, calling them 'bad drivers', 'properties of men', and glorifying male supremacy, how does this dent the young boy's beliefs? [7]

## ***Will he question these ideologies or will he blindly follow what his icon says?***

With every boy who chooses the latter, a generation of men is born who believe women are subservient to men.

British personality Andrew Tate is one such example. Teachers, experts, and parents perceive his beliefs on female inferiority, including the subjugation of women, as a questionable influence. He is touted as one among the many chauvinists who make up the 'manosphere' of the internet ecosystem. [\[11\]](#)

And his views, experts say, have given rise to contemporary media's dangerous 'incel' (a slang for involuntary celibate) subculture. [\[7\]](#)

Anuja (of Circles of Safety) explains that a school version of this is the 'Sigma Club'. "It is formed on a warped idea of toxic masculinity. Boys, who are part of this so-called club are not supposed to associate with girls."

## **When misogyny drives cinematic narrative**

Every culture is shaped and defined by the 'art' it creates. As one of the world's largest film industries, Bollywood wields the power to influence ideologies and mindsets, especially for young boys and girls who idolise its characters.

Movies like 'Kabir Singh' (2019), where the protagonist is shown emotionally and physically abusing his partner, set a harmful precedent.

By putting this 'hero' on a pedestal, the film implicitly condones his behaviour, encouraging young men to see women as not only subservient but somehow deserving of mistreatment.

The movie 'Animal' (2023) similarly mishandles its female characters, presenting them without depth and relegating

them to secondary roles, used merely as devices within the larger narrative.

Beyond overt misogyny, Bollywood often portrays romance exclusively from a man's perspective. In classics like 'Raanjhanaa' (2013) and 'Tere Naam' (2003), stalking and harassing a woman is normalised as long as it's framed as romantic intent.

While Bollywood films of the 90s, particularly, were known to bracket women in either of two roles – the archetypal selfless mother or the damsel in distress bride, the landscape is seeing a sure shift. [\[8\]](#)

The narrative's scope is widening to include women who assert agency over their own lives. The trope of the male liberator who once dominated the screen is being revised in a way that deconstructs patriarchal norms. It is a paradigm shift for the better.

Films like 'Lipstick Under My Burkha' (2016), 'Laapataa Ladies' (2023) and 'Parched' (2015) offer a refreshing perspective. These movies invite viewers into the intricacies of the female experience, sensitising them to the complex, multifaceted lives women lead.



Borrowing from Canadian American psychologist Albert Bandura's renowned 'Social Learning Theory' (1977), the study spotlighted how the representation of women in films can

significantly reinforce stereotypes and cultural attitudes, which can impact women's well-being and opportunities.

"Normalising misogynistic attitudes linked to women's existence can hamper the minds of young adults," the study noted. [8]

## Misogyny in gaming

Not just in cinema, women are represented unfairly in gaming too. A study discovered that "in comparison to male characters, females were significantly more likely to be shown partially nude, featured with an unrealistic body image, and depicted wearing sexually revealing clothing and inappropriate attire." [9]

However, experts argue that it isn't just women who are sexualised in video games but also men.

Watching muscular 'hunks' with chiselled abs and broad shoulders on screen often misleads young boys into believing that these features are what account for masculinity.

Similarly, young girls may often get the impression that unless they grow up to have a perfectly sculpted figure, they are not 'feminine enough'.

*How do social media platforms and influencers shape boys' views on masculinity?*

## Questions To Consider

*What characteristics are often highlighted as 'masculine' in movies, advertisements, and TV shows (e.g., toughness, emotional stoicism, dominance)?*

## Expert-Approved Strategies to Help You:

- Guide adolescents to identify how misogyny manifests online
- Encourage scepticism among adolescents while analysing online content
- Address cyberbullying and harassment
- Recognise positive influences online
- Teach adolescents to report misogynistic content
- Encourage healthy breaks from social media
- Educate adolescents about online communities, resources, and channels that promote gender-correct behaviours

### Don't skim over uncomfortable topics; address them

While no one can deny the abundance of questionable influences on the internet, teachers and parents mustn't shy away from bringing them up in conversations with children, experts say.

As Canadian educator Will James points out, "Teachers must acknowledge that many young boys and men are impressionable and drawn in by influencers like Andrew Tate, which can result in them perpetuating toxic masculinity in their own lives." [\[10\]](#)

Young boys mirror what they see online. And so, James suggests that teachers channel these personalities into examples of how 'not to be'.

"Teachers can use Tate and others as examples of inappropriate conduct, thereby targeting harmful behaviours and toxic expressions of masculinity while promoting equity and empathy in their classrooms." [\[10\]](#)

## Use trending situations to reinforce correct attitudes

Cassandra Fernandes, the mother to the 15-year-old interjects here, urging parents to follow suit at home.

“When Amber Heard and Johnny Depp’s divorce was all over the news, everyone was in favour of Depp, including my daughter and her friends at school. They were sympathetic towards him and felt he must get justice. That’s when I used the example to teach her that the world is not black and white. Not knowing someone’s side of the story doesn’t mean we can assume it,” she shares.

## Gauging children’s thought patterns

James suggests an activity that teachers can model their lessons on. Call students up to the board and have them write examples of situations. Let them describe how they would express how they are feeling in those situations.

“This creates a visual mind map of human interactions that allows students to walk away from this exercise with a renewed sense of how they are connected to their community,” he says. [\[10\]](#)



# Ages 14–17

## Building Relationships with Respect & Taking Action

Adolescence represents a critical period of identity formation, where boys start grappling with societal expectations around masculinity, behaviour, and relationships.

According to a report by UNICEF, high levels of stress among adolescents often stem from academic pressures, family expectations, and societal standards, including gender roles and norms. [\[23\]](#)

This chapter will focus on the importance of teaching adolescents how to express their emotions in a healthy way, how to develop respectful communication and respect boundaries, and how to take responsibility for their actions and be aware of how those actions affect others.

Through the strategies suggested below, the aim is to create champions of equality and respect, both online and offline, as they identify harmful stereotypes and speak out against any form of discrimination or bullying.

***Our collective goal should be to nurture adolescent boys who are empowered to stand up for girls, even when their opinions may clash with those of their peers.***



# What Needs Your Attention:

## The good and bad of crushing

There are always tell-tale signs that are indicative of your adolescent having their first crush.

We're all too familiar with the exhilaration a first crush brings with it. Teenage romance has its fair share of thrills. But at the core of the heart-lifting highs and the stomach-dropping lows that teens sign up for when they 'fall in love' lies a craving for validation; the desire to be 'liked back'.

Most adults recall the ages of 11 to 16 as when they had their first romantic interest. Now well-versed in how dyadic these fleeting romances are, their tendency, is to reprimand the teen from falling for the bait. This isn't wise.

What you are discounting as a short-lived fantasy, is something very real to your child – a cornerstone of the social scaffolding of an adolescent's romantic experiences.<sup>[13]</sup>

***Some experts even go so far as to brand teenage love 'a marker for adulthood'.***

Does this go to say that teenage relationships should be affirmed? There's a disclaimer.

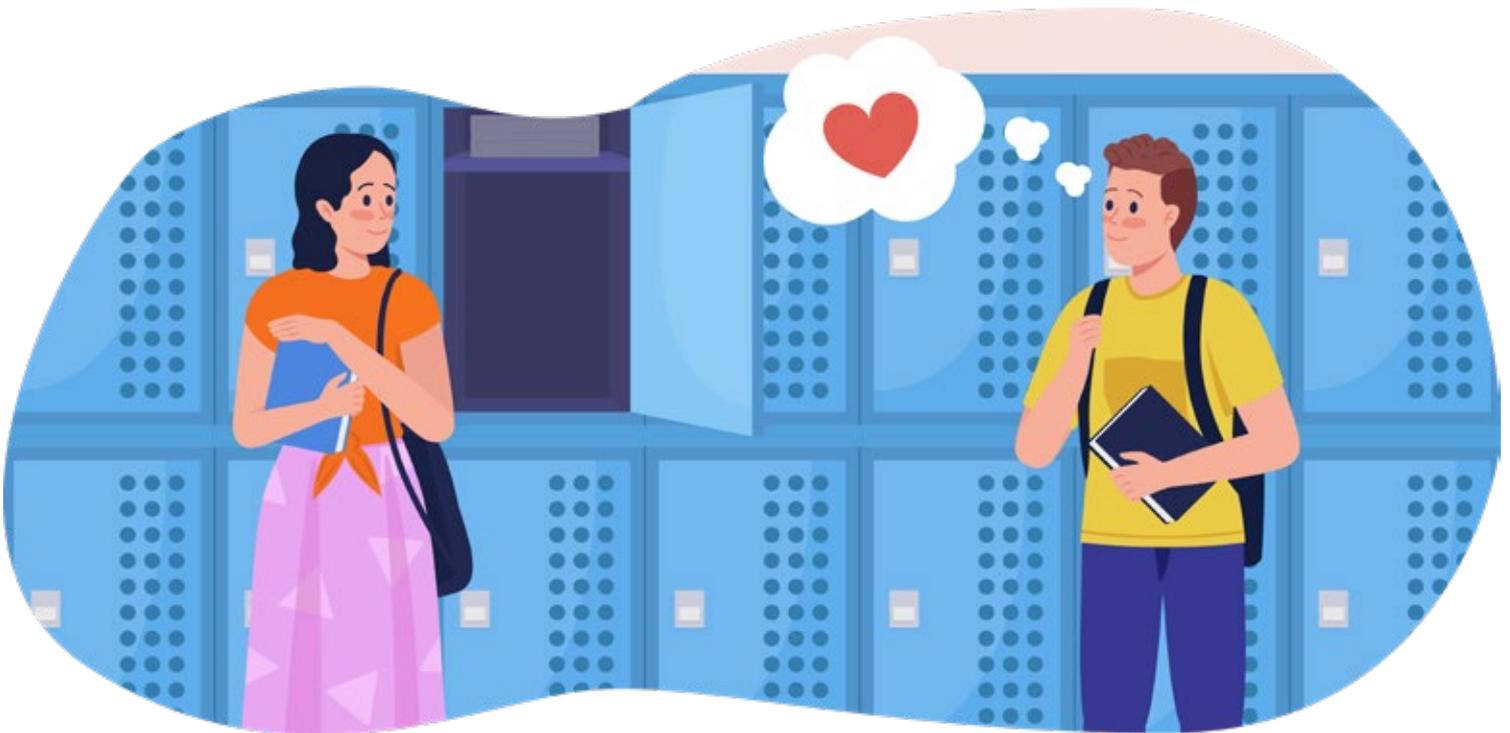


## The side-effects of teenage love

Teenagers' idealistic fascination towards love owes to an underdeveloped prefrontal cortex, experts have always maintained. This is the centre of the brain responsible for rational and higher-order thinking.

In layman's terms, your teens aren't the wisest decision-makers around adolescence. And one of the biggest corollaries of this is risky sexual behaviour.

"Young adults that frequently watch reality dating programmes are more likely to report that the male sex drive is uncontrollable, as well as to hold disempowered gender attitudes," a study noted. [\[14\]](#)



Meanwhile, data from the fourth National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4) revealed there were 11.8 million adolescent pregnancies in India. [\[15\]](#)

As you can see, teenage love is innocent; until it's not.

So how do you curtail their romantic freedoms without being accused of being the bad cop?

## Questions To Consider

*How can you help teenage boys navigate their first romantic experiences without trivialising their feelings?*

*How can you discuss the importance of mutual respect in relationships with your teen?*

*How can you have open conversations with your teen about the consequences of sexual behaviour without instilling fear or shame?*

### **Expert-Approved Strategies to Help You:**

- Encourage open dialogues about relationships and sexuality
- Offer them fact-based information about contraception and STDs
- Distinguish between infatuations and deeper connections, not bracketing either as 'good' or 'bad'
- Teach adolescents to recognise red flags and prioritise mutual respect
- Teach adolescents the importance of healthy boundaries
- Encourage questions. Don't make the topic one-sided
- Talk about sex without stigmatising it

# Checklist: Vocabulary Changes When Addressing Relationships With Adolescents

## Their crushes are important

~~"It's just a phase; you'll get over it"~~ → "What you are feeling is important."

~~"All boys are the same/  
All girls are the same"~~ → "I recognise you like this person for their qualities."

## Encouraging them to open up with you

~~"If you respected me, you would have told me about this relationship"~~ → "I respect your need for space. I will be here when you are ready to share."

~~"Don't come to me when it doesn't work out"~~ → "I will be here when you need advice."

## Illustrating healthy boundaries

~~"Don't trust the other person at all"~~ → "Use your discernment to gauge if you are safe with this person."

~~"You have to go out of your comfort zone if you want to make a relationship work"~~ → "Prioritise your safety and comfort over what the other person is asking of you."

## Talking about sex

~~"Sex is a sin"~~ → "Sex is sacred and you should only engage in it once you are sure about the other person involved."

~~"You'll regret it once you have sex"~~ → "Make a well-informed decision before you have sex."

~~"Having sex will lead you down a wrong path"~~ → "Here's information on protected sex, STDs and more. I am here to guide you."

## Understand your teen's love logic

Acknowledging that adolescence brings with it the need to conform, studies point out, "Young people without a girlfriend or boyfriend can feel stressed or 'different' and out of step with their peers."

ECF's strategies come to the rescue, offering parents and teachers a way of addressing the elephant in the room – an icebreaker on relationships, love, and sex.

From the outset, attraction and infatuation are normalised in these sessions, Anjana shares.

***"These are things that are bound to happen and it is perfectly okay," the boys and young men are reassured.***

As this narrative sinks in, the team touches upon the broader legalities of sex including POCSO (Protection of Children against Sexual Offences Act) (2012).

The Act provides for stringent punishment to those engaging in sexual crimes against children; death penalty in cases of aggravated sexual assault, besides levying fines and imprisonment, to curb child pornography.

In tune with the ECF mantra of 'Don't preach; leave food for thought', questions such as 'Are you ready to take on the responsibility that comes with love?', 'Are you emotionally and mentally ready for a serious relationship?' are floated around.

Marriage, love, and sex are not a bed of roses. And any ideas that confine to this rhetoric are dismantled.

Sometimes it takes days, says Anjana, other times weeks. But a tangible shift in mindset is inevitable.

So when after one particular session, a teen walked up to her and confided, “Maybe I need to first focus on my studies before I seriously think about a relationship,” Anjana knew the message had been driven home.

Incredible though this is, the same needs to be extrapolated to society at large.

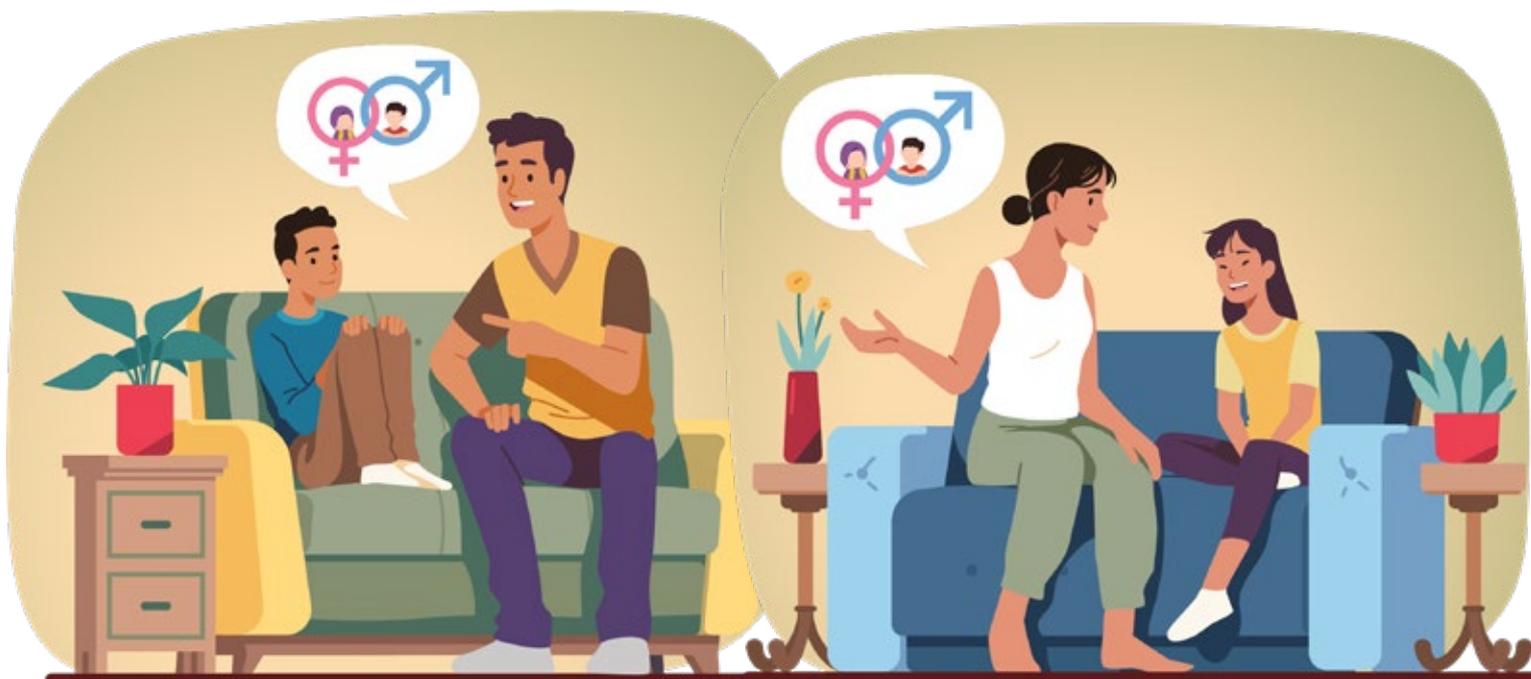
## Are you having ‘the talk’?

Are we broaching topics about love and sex in a manner that will provoke thought among adolescents?

Experts point out a paucity of these discussions. One study noted that the issue stems from the taboo surrounding conversations about reproductive health and pregnancy in schools.

In India, safe sex information for adolescents mainly comes from friends or media, with parents, health workers, and school teachers providing it to a lesser degree.

But, you can be the harbinger of this change.



# What Needs Your Attention:

## The bully behind the screen

A 28-country analysis found that Indian parents remained among the highest to express confidence that their children were cyberbullied at least sometimes. The study said that the number of Indian parents with this concern had grown from 32 percent in 2011 to 37 percent in 2018. [16]

Whether in the form of trolling, distasteful comments on pictures, threats, harassment, and more, cyberbullying is a trend that shows no signs of ebbing away any time soon.

Dr Pavan Duggal, a renowned cybersecurity expert, in a podcast with The Better India co-founder Dhimant Parekh, shared the story of a second-year college student who was a victim of online bullying. “While she was attending classes, she was receiving messages like ‘I can see you are sitting in xyz spot’, while the sender went on to prove his proximity by describing her outfit.

The girl complained about it to the principal asking for action to be taken.

***The principal refused help saying, ‘This is happening over the internet; it isn’t the institution’s problem’.***

Dr Duggal firmly believes in stricter action by institutions to tackle cyberbullies instead of “washing their hands off.” “Fortunately, cybercrime.gov.in is a cybercrime reporting portal of the Government of India, which allows you to report cyberbullying anonymously,” he says.

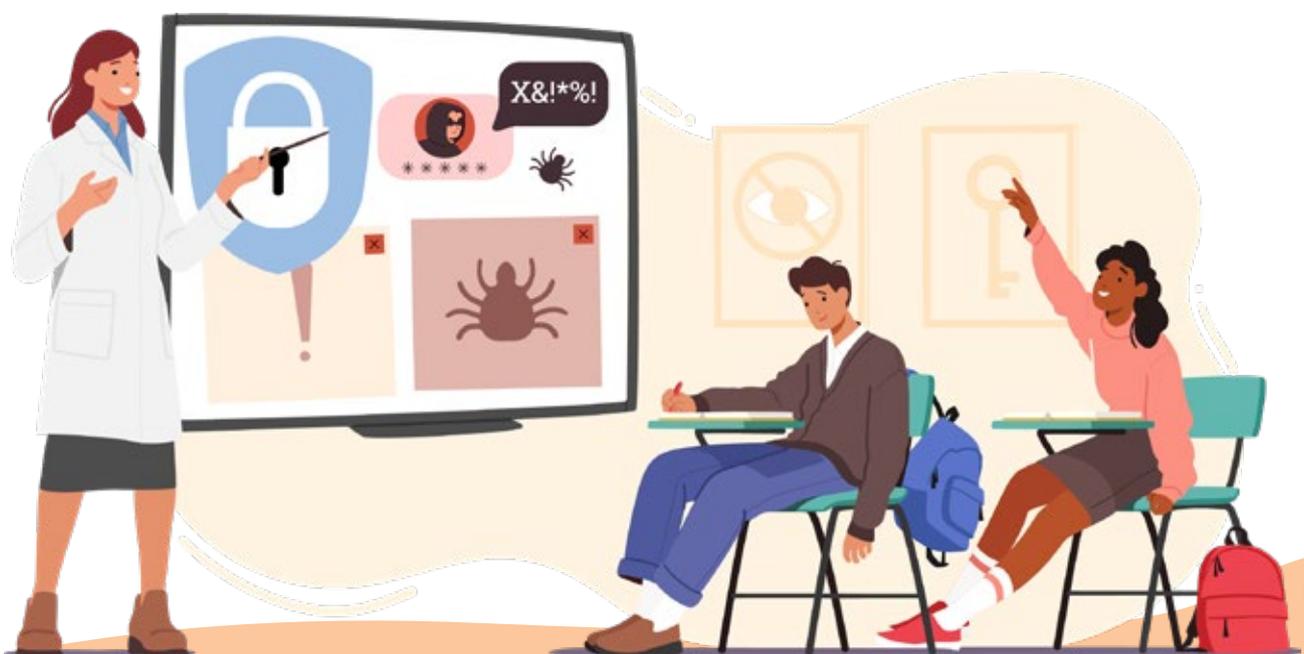


## Expert-Approved Strategies to Help You:

- Encourage adolescents to share their experiences with a trusted adult
- Document everything, and keep records of the bullying incidents
- Advise adolescents to not engage with the bully or retaliate
- Guide them to block or mute the individual who is harassing them on social media
- Guide them in adjusting their privacy settings on social media accounts
- Encourage them to report the bullying to the platform or app where it's occurring
- With their knowledge, you could monitor their online activity if they are comfortable with it

### Counter cyberbullying: An expert's tips

Dr Duggal firmly believes in stricter action by institutions to tackle cyberbullies instead of “washing their hands off.” “Fortunately, [cybercrime.gov.in](https://www.cybercrime.gov.in) is a cybercrime reporting portal of the Government of India, which allows you to report cyberbullying anonymously.



# What Needs Your Attention:

## Cracking the shell of patriarchy

“You can’t make an omelette without cracking an egg.”

A metaphor for an egalitarian society and patriarchy, respectively, the omelette and egg example is how author Michael Kaufman, co-author of ‘The Guy’s Guide to Feminism’, cautioned that the battle for gender equality will, no doubt, ruffle some feathers. [\[17\]](#)

It isn’t a simple change, Kaufman, who has spent decades innovating approaches to engage men and boys in promoting gender equality – emphasises.

## Don’t expect an easy road

The UN Development Forum gender index revealed that 90 percent of the population in 75 countries is biased against women, with men’s rights activists believing “the efforts to enhance the rights of women have become toxic efforts to undermine the rights of men”. [\[18\]](#)

The question begs to be asked, while on our quest to create allies and cut the cord of chauvinism, are we creating a generation of men who feel victimised?

As every parent, teacher, and expert interviewed for this guide has pointed out, we need to realise the dichotomy and find a way through it.



## Questions To Consider

*How can you guide boys to identify and challenge subtle sexist behaviours and beliefs in themselves and others?*

*What conversations can you initiate about gender biases, including how they may manifest in their peer groups, schools, or communities?*

*How can you help boys navigate discomfort or confusion as they witness or participate in the shift towards gender equality?*

*What tools can you give boys to help them become allies, especially when they see gender inequality happening around them, both in public and private settings?*

## **Expert-Approved Strategies to Help You:**

- Use relatable examples to talk about gender bias
- Talk about how most stereotypes are perpetuated in the home
- Emphasise that no matter the gender, correct behaviours should be a norm
- Encourage allyship towards female peers
- Demonstrate gender-correct behaviours by probing questions
- Trace the roots of gender bias to educate adolescents about its long-running genealogy
- Play 'gender bias bingo' to inculcate knowledge of stereotypes among adolescents

# Checklist: Vocabulary Changes When Motivating Young Men About Allyship

## Don't generalise

~~"You are a man, all men are the same"~~ → **"I'm sure you know better."**

~~"It is your fault that the world is unsafe for women"~~ → **"What can you do to make other men conscious about their actions?"**

~~"Men do not deal with struggles of gender equality"~~ → **"Men also go through their fair share of struggles and we recognise this. We need a safer world for all."**

## Encourage attitude shifts

~~"You'll never understand what women go through"~~ → **"Thank you for understanding my point of view."**

~~"You are privileged because you are a man"~~ → **"How can you use your privilege to ensure a safer world for women?"**

## Why stereotype respect?

For change to happen at a visceral level, ECF reiterates, boys cannot be preached to. The last thing you want, as a parent or teacher, is to get on their wrong side. Ditch the masculine manuscript. Use a gender-neutral approach, they advise. Illustrating this through an example, Anjana takes us through their 'behaviour' sessions.

***"Don't respect her because she is a girl; respect her because she is human."***

## Live and let live

At an ECF session, nothing is left to assumption. Ground rules are set. "We start by asking one of the boys the behaviours

that he considers deal-breakers. Let's say he responds, 'I don't like anyone using bad language with me'. We put this down on a chart," Anjana shares.

The volunteers then probe, "But do you use bad language when speaking to others? Is that okay?"

The response is more often than not a 'yes'. This makes for a fine teaching example of reciprocal behaviour.

"We check with each boy who amongst them does not like abusive language being directed at them. None of them does," Anjana explains.

"If you wouldn't like something being done to you, it means another person might have the same opinion. So, whatever you wouldn't accept, don't do it too."

## Dissecting the ancestry of gender bias

Raising a generation of allies starts at the root. At ECF, this is done by explaining to boys their gender-conferred privilege. Anjana puts this into perspective.

"When speaking to them about power and patriarchy, both in the context of history and their communities, we emphasise how women have been at the receiving end of the bias and then tie this with the need for adaptation. The message we want to drill is that irrespective of gender, respect is non-negotiable."

# What Needs Your Attention:

## Don't dictate; encourage observation

Only when male adolescents truly comprehend the misogyny in the status quo can it foster a change in mindset. Why are home duties relegated to women? Why is this lack of parity such an accepted norm? Why is a woman's efficacy determined by how she keeps a home, but a man's by how good he is at his job? What are the psychosocial risks of this gender epidemic?

To understand this, ECF conducted an activity.

### DAY 1



Anjana probed the young boys. The theme that day was addressing gender bias in the home.

The above exemplifies the claim I'm about to make — the roots of gender bias and stereotypes lie in the young generation. Mature enough to know the role their mothers play, these adolescents are oblivious to it. And it isn't their fault.

## Let adolescents draw conclusions

Gender blindness has come down through the generations; a well-wrapped package of stereotype. As side-effects of systemic inequities, these prejudices will take years of undoing and unlearning. But one has to make a start.

So, undeterred by what she hears, Anjana has an assignment ready for the boys. "Go home today and observe everything your mother and father do for a day. Tomorrow, talk to us about what you saw."

### Day 2:



The dawn of this realisation makes way for new thinking. The boys have begun to be cognisant of their mothers' role in bearing the brunt of the domestic load.

The team goes a step further, "What can you do to help?" The boys suggest they could take up some work. What starts with them offering to do the dishes snowballs into them coaxing their fathers and brothers to also pitch in.

As one mindset is transitioning into a new one, ECF steers clear of any flattery. The boys are not put on a pedestal. Instead the message, "It is your house too. It is as much your responsibility as it is your mother's," is reinforced.

## Gender bias bingo

Experts see the game as an engaging way to raise awareness about gender stereotypes and biases.

### Materials needed:

**Bingo cards:** Create cards with various scenarios, phrases, or stereotypes related to gender bias. You can use a 5x5 grid format.

**Markers:** Use coins, buttons, or any small items to mark the squares.



### Preparing the Bingo cards:

Identify common stereotypes. Let these be age-specific.

Create Bingo cards by randomly filling the squares of each Bingo card with different phrases.

### How to play:

**Distribute cards:** Give each player a Bingo card and markers.

**Call out the phrases:** Ask players to mark the corresponding squares on their cards.

**Bingo!** When a player marks five in a row (horizontally, vertically, or diagonally), they shout 'Bingo!'

**Discussion:** After someone wins, discuss the scenarios marked on their card. Encourage players to share thoughts or personal experiences related to the stereotypes.

## Questions To Consider

How can you encourage open discussions about gender roles and responsibilities within your family or classroom?

What steps can you take to promote more equitable gender dynamics at home and in your community?

In what ways can you support young people in questioning societal expectations around gender roles?

How can you create an environment where children feel comfortable expressing their thoughts on gender roles without fear of judgment?



# Expert-Approved Strategies to Help You:

## Checklist: Vocabulary Changes When Addressing Gender Bias in the Home

### Relegating home duties

- ~~“It is your duty to cook”~~ → *“Thank you for cooking the meals. How can I help?”*
- ~~“Taking care of the children and everyone in the home is a wife’s duty”~~ → *“Caregiving is a shared responsibility and everyone needs to take onus.”*
- ~~“Since I am working in the office and earning, I will make the decisions of the home”~~ → *“Let’s make decisions regarding the home together. We both play an equal role.”*
- ~~“Home chores are easy and do not count as a real job”~~ → *“Looking after the home is a stressful ordeal and counts as a job in itself.”*
- ~~“Women must clean the home and men can relax on a holiday”~~ → *“The responsibility of home chores needs to be shared among everyone in the family.”*
- ~~“Men don’t do any work in the house”~~ → *“I see that you are helping out in the home and appreciate it.”*

### Don’t provoke conflict

Now that we have ascertained the far-reaching effects of allyship, the question is how do we achieve it without turning the narrative into a blame game against men? Gendered programming begins at home, experts tell us.

“Meet men where they are at”, which essentially translates to addressing their behaviour in nonjudgmental ways. <sup>[19]</sup> Instead of spotlighting everything they are doing wrong,

applaud positive masculinity when you see it, and use it to guide your conversations.

The goal is to create gender champions. And home is where the seeds are sown.

## Home is where it starts

The women who were interviewed as part of the research for the book 'Good Guys: How Men Can Be Better Allies for Women in the Workplace', conceded that asymmetries in sharing domestic work often spill into inequality in the workplace.

It is no surprise that housework and caregiving roles have a symbolic gendered value.

How often have we addressed the topic of pregnancy and childbirth with a stereotypical emphasis on the change it will bring to a woman's career?

We're all guilty of it.

## Power play at work

To this end, experts tell us that only when gender bias is broken at home, will its ripples be felt at the workplace and in society. True allyship involves men taking equal responsibility for household chores and childcare and supporting their partner's career.

This, say experts, could well be the antidote to the plague of 'time poverty' – where home chores and caregiving derail a woman from pursuing her professional goals.

Experts go a step further and urge, "Assigning more value to care work can also bring men closer to their children and more positive forms of masculinity through parenting and elderly care. Generating mainstream media representations of men as caring and competent can motivate men to lean into positive masculinities that normalise care work as equal work." [\[19\]](#)

# How? Here's a roadmap:

## Become an ally at school:

- Treat classmates with kindness and empathy
- Avoid making jokes about topics that might hurt your female peers
- Stand up for your female friend when you think she is being bullied
- Encourage your female friends to contribute to discussions about STEM and sports
- Avoid comments which include phrases 'like a girl'

## Become an ally at home:

- Create a 'chore chart' to balance tasks
- Don't wait to be asked before you help out
- Don't subscribe certain chores to being 'women's duties'
- Check in with your partner to gauge their feelings on whether the division of chores is fair
- Encourage open dialogue about household dynamics

## Become an ally at work: <sup>[2]</sup>

- Don't downplay incidents of sexism
- Acknowledge their experiences and take on the role of educating other men
- Reflect on your own power and privilege as a man
- Credit your female co-workers' ideas fairly
- Speak up when you hear sexist language

Gender inequality might seem like a tough nut to crack. But as ECF puts it,

***"Not every boy is part of the problem. But every boy can be a part of the solution."***

# Raising Responsible Allies:

## For Parents and Caregivers/Mentors

According to a UN report, at the current rate of progress, it will take 286 years for the world to achieve gender equality. Per the World Economic Forum, it will take another 131 years. [\[22\]](#)

Morbid though these statistics are, the fact that you are reading this guidebook indicates you have said 'yes' to the revolution that lies before us.

As a parent or teacher, you don't just get to reimagine a more equal world but also to mentor the minds that are going to create it. The task at hand doesn't promise to be easy.

***Parents and teachers, we're handing the torch to you.***

As we come to the end of the guidebook, it is clear that while gender bias remains a challenge, there is a growing movement towards equality, and together, we have the power to create lasting change.



As our experts have nudged us through this book, the solutions are plentiful. The trick lies in which strategy you wield while dealing with your child or your class of students.

As ECF urges, never force your beliefs on children. “Always encourage children to ask ‘why’ questions. Then it does not become a directive but a mutual discussion where all the people involved can share their insights.”

Sreeja Iyer, CEO and founder of Sparkling Mindz Global School, Bengaluru agrees. Sharing how she has integrated a gender-sensitive curriculum in her school, she urges that these conversations need to be had with tact.

Often, when a child questions the need for fighting stereotypes while pointing out scenarios in their homes that follow traditional gendered norms, Sreeja’s team of teachers must tread carefully – reminding themselves that their words will create a dent in the child’s mind.

“Certain families have made decisions on going about home chores in a certain way. If in the future, your calling lies in staying at home and taking care of kids, that is completely fine. Don’t do it because the role is a presumption. Do it because it is your choice,” she says.

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## Guidebook credits

**Conceptualised by** Anuradha Parekh, Sanchari Pal, Manabi Katoch and Tanaya Singh

**Content designed and structured by** Leila Badyari Castelino

**Written by** Krystelle Dsouza

**Edited by** Pranita Bhat

**Designed by** Amrasha Bafna

**Creative inputs by** Sanchari Pal

## Individuals and organisations part of this endeavour:

- Anjana Goswami – Equal Community Foundation
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