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A mother reflects on how boys and girls are shaped differently in the same home, and how those differences later collide in adulthood.

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Consent Conditioning...

... and the Different Worlds Boys and Girls Inherit

As a mother, I have been reflecting on how boys and girls are shaped differently in the same home, and how those differences I am learning the world does not treat them the same once they leave it.

I am raising a son and a daughter in the same South African home, under the same roof and love. I see it in what I find myself teaching my daughter without always meaning to:

- watch your drink.
- Trust your instincts.
- Don't ignore discomfort.
- Leave when something feels wrong.

These are not formal lessons. They surface in passing: in the way I read a room before she does, in the stories I choose to tell, and in the ones I cannot fully bring myself to say out loud.

And I see it in my son too, but in a different language:

- be confident.
- Be strong.
- Don't shrink yourself.
- Go after what you want.

These are also important lessons, given with love. But I begin to notice what the world adds to them once he steps outside the home. His persistence is often read as confidence. Pressure is softened into charm. Permission is assumed, even when it is not clearly agreed.

In social science, this is often called differential socialization. It is the way boys and girls are shaped into different emotional and behavioural systems, not by design, but through repetition, culture, and what is rewarded around them.

My daughter learns to read atmosphere. Before explanation, there is safety. Before permission, there is caution. Safety before politeness. Over time, this becomes instinct. Before touch, she learns not only what to feel, but whether she is allowed to move away without creating tension.

She learns to consider not only what she feels, but how that feeling will be received.

- How to say no without escalation?
- How to move away without creating tension.
- How to weigh her comfort against the social consequences of expressing it.

She learns to consider not only what she feels, but how that feeling will be received. How to say no without escalation? How to move away without creating tension. How to weigh her comfort against the social consequences of expressing it.

When she does speak, she is not always met with clarity. Sometimes she is questioned. Sometimes she is told she misunderstood. Sometimes she is encouraged to soften what she already knows she felt clearly. So she learns a quieter skill: how to protect herself while also managing other people's reactions to her discomfort.

My son learns something different. He learns to trust intention. To assume clarity unless something is directly refused. To measure himself more by what he meant than what another person experienced. Not because he is careless, but because this is what his environment reinforces as normal movement through the world.

And this is where the gap begins.



When these two systems meet later in life, they do not always translate. One person is communicating through silence, hesitation, and withdrawal.

The other is responding through persistence and forward motion. One is trying to prevent escalation.

The other is often trying to maintain momentum. And in that mismatch, a line can be crossed without both people experiencing the moment in the same way.

This is how many moments are later described differently. Not always because of intention, but because impact and interpretation were never speaking the same language.

And then there is something harder to sit with the longer I watch this pattern. When a woman says something felt wrong, the first response is often not curiosity. It is correction. Or defence. Or doubt.

Sometimes it is not only men who respond this way. Sometimes other women hesitate to fully sit with what is being said. Not because they do not care, but because accepting her experience would disrupt something else they are holding onto. A relationship. A reputation. A familiar version of someone they thought they knew. So the focus shifts away from her experience and toward explanation, character, or interpretation.

And slowly, what she felt in her own body becomes the least stable truth in the room. Because beneath all the argument and interpretation, there is still something simpler trying to be heard.

That she is saying: this is how it felt for me. And if even that requires negotiation before it is believed, then what is being protected is not truth. It is comfort. And comfort has never been a reliable measure of safety.



So I find myself returning to my children. To my son and my brother, I do not ask for perfection. I ask for something harder. That they become willing to sit with discomfort long enough to notice what they were not taught to see. That they resist the easy comfort of assuming that good intention is enough to close the gap. That they understand that there will be moments where nothing looks like harm from their side, but something has still shifted in the other person.

And that maturity begins at the point where they are willing to care more about what someone else is communicating than about explaining themselves. This is where many men are never asked to go further.

They are not required to stay long enough in someone else's experience to feel what it is like to live there. I am a mother raising a son and a daughter.



And to my daughter and my sister, I do not ask you to shrink yourselves for understanding. I ask them to trust what they know, even when it is inconvenient for others to accept. Even when it is explained away. Even when it is softened into something more comfortable for the people around them. Because what she feels is not a debate. It is information.

And perhaps the most difficult truth in all of this is that understanding does not only require empathy. It requires interruption. The willingness, especially from men, to pause the defence of themselves long enough to ask what is happening for the other person right now, not only what is happening in their own intention.

That is where accountability begins. Not in explanation. In restraint. In attention. In the uncomfortable act of not moving forward just because nothing has said "stop" loudly enough yet.