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## A guide to raising good men, by my mom

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## Story highlights

If we raised young boys to be sensitive, empathic and self-disciplined, we'd have fewer stories of men behaving badly

I tie my behavior with women directly to being raised by a strong, supportive single mother

**Editor's Note:** *Go Ask Your Dad* is parenting advice with a philosophical bent as one dad explores what we want out of life, for ourselves and our children, through useful paradigms and best practices. Share your insight at the [CNN Parenting Facebook page](#).

**(CNN)** — I can safely declare that I'm not going to end up on any list of media dirtbags. Like most men I know, I have managed to have a professional career and personal relationships free of assault, harassment or even run-of-the-mill jerkiness.

I feel confident in saying that because all the recent news coverage of indefensible -- and in many cases criminal -- male behavior has caused many men like myself to do some personal, sober mental accounting. A lot of guys I've talked to have been auditing their past actions, which is great, although it's largely for others to judge our behavior as we may have blind spots in the rear-view mirror.

I tie my self-awareness on this front directly to being raised by my strong and supportive single mother.

For nearly 16 years growing up, it was just the two of us. She raised an only son, with no money for vacations and brand-name sneakers, much less paid childcare. In fact, when I was a kid, she worked



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primarily as a nanny, so she'd be home for me after school when I was young, and that meant she helped raise other kids as well.

I recently asked her whether she consciously thought about raising a good male and whether she had any guiding philosophies or values that informed how she brought me up.

"Yes," she told me. "I wanted you to be the kind of person other people would like and admire, because I wouldn't always be around, and you'd need other people to help you. So it was for your safety and also for the world."

And so, here is my mom's guide to raising good men.

## Promote kindness and empathy

Throughout my childhood, she imparted what it meant to be a gentleman: being attuned to others' needs and meeting them without being asked. I still think about those discussions. Her guiding virtues included being sensitive, compassionate, empathetic and self-disciplined. And she also wanted to pass on "the best qualities of a spiritual life, if not any particular religion: kindness, being charitable."

To that end, she prioritized a parochial school education so these values would be reinforced by teachers, as well. It didn't stop me from getting into trouble, but she was vigilant. I still remember the time she pulled me out of the Christmas choir because she caught me disrupting rehearsal along with other boys, with jokes and general goofing around. Embarrassing to be called out, but lesson learned.



## Let them know words matter

My mom also had a zero tolerance policy for derogatory language. I will never forget the day I called her the b-word in a fit of 'tween rage. I write "b-word" because to this day I have a "Clockwork Orange"-like aversion to the word, due to my mother's swift, angry and righteous response. "Don't you ever use that word to describe any woman, ever," she growled just inches from my face. I never have since.

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## Build up self-worth

"I also wanted you to feel secure and have a high sense of self-worth," my mom told me. She often encouraged me to engage with the wider world, even

strangers, rather than retreat from it to build up that self-confidence.

She said she sees how I now help cultivate this same sense with my daughters. My wife and I reckon their strong-willed and forthright personalities are strengths that will serve them well their entire lives (especially if they come up against men to whom these kinds of lessons were not imparted).



## Emphasize family ties

My mom also felt that part of forming a strong self-identity comes from how we internalize our own family, even one as fractured as mine. She aimed to impart a familial identity handed down from my great-grandmother to her children and grandchildren. Our first-generation Irish matriarch defined her brood as intelligent, solidly built, healthy, handsome, polite, well-mannered, politically engaged and Catholic. She passed these descriptions down in terms of "who we are," what we represent and how we act.

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## Give the right feedback for the right age

A common criticism of parenting today is that kids are growing up thinking everything they do is worthy of praise. And while I do remember my mother being endlessly supportive of my creative efforts and ideas when I was little, she made a conscious shift as I got older and prepared to strike out on my own, to assessments that were more constructively critical.

When I was young, no artistic or writing effort was met with anything but praise. But I recall an essay I wrote for a high school contest that she tore down for poor word choice. And later, some life decisions I made about where to move were met with skepticism rather than blind support. My kids are young enough to be in the effort=praise stage, but I may follow her lead as I feel the stakes are raised.



## Foster independence

In some ways, being raised by a single mother required that I develop independence. I was a latchkey kid who got myself to and from school at long distances. I had no allowance, so if I wanted money, I found a way to make it, like buying a snow shovel and going door-to-door after a big snow. I had my first (not-so-legal) summer job at age 12 (my idea, not hers).

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## Stay busy

One of my mother's most inspiring parenting decisions was finding a youth boxing league for me to join when I was 10. I was getting in trouble for fighting at school, too often using fists instead of words. Boxing taught me some discipline. "You can't be getting into fights at school now," [my coach, Mr. Hunter](#), explained,

"because now you know how to really hurt someone." It wasn't true, but I believed it.

Kids get into trouble when they have too much idle time, my mom told me. This "Music Man" theory of behavior goes beyond just staying out of the pool halls. After-school activities, sports, artistic and literary pursuits and (in my case) paid jobs "help you understand the rules of engagement" in the world, is how she put it.

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These virtues and parenting lessons I learned from my mom are not just about raising sons. They apply to daughters, of course. But it seems clear to me that if we raise young boys to be sensitive, empathic, self-disciplined, kind and industrious and to have a high sense of self-worth, we'd have fewer stories of men behaving badly and fewer victims of that bad behavior. That work begins with the boys.

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