

# Men and women who hold sexist views are less responsive as parents, research finds

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Do your attitudes about women and men influence how you parent your children?

Perhaps you think [women](#) are warmer and more supportive and so naturally better caregivers. Perhaps you see men as stronger, more independent, and better able to protect and provide for families.

But thinking women and men are different can do a lot of harm. Nowhere is this more obvious than in how some people view the roles of parents.

In this traditionalist world view, men should be physically strong, seek resources and status, and provide for their family. On the flip side, women should serve their partners and nurture their [children](#).

And people who break with these gendered norms can face criticism from those who hold these views—also known as "[hostile sexism](#)".

The term refers to overtly [negative or misogynistic attitudes](#) toward women. People inclined to hostile [sexism](#) more strongly agree with statements such as:

- most women fail to appreciate fully all that men do for them
- women seek to gain power by getting control over men
- women exaggerate problems they have at work
- once a woman gets a man to commit to her she usually tries to put him on a tight leash
- women are too easily offended.

But how do parents with these hostile attitudes fare in the job of parenting? Our [new research](#) has found that hostile sexism can harm parenting. And it's not just dads with more sexist attitudes. Mothers with sexist attitudes can cause problems as well.

## **How does hostile sexism affect parenting?**

There is evidence that sexist attitudes contribute to gender inequalities by generating [discrimination, harassment, and violence toward women](#).

Research also shows that men who hold more hostile sexist views

commit [increased levels of violence toward intimate partners](#).

But while there is a growing understanding of how hostile sexism might harm women, the way it might affect behavior toward children has been largely ignored. This is starting to change.

For example, during the first COVID-19 lockdown in New Zealand, men with higher levels of hostile sexism reported more [aggressive parenting](#) when they were isolated at home with their families.

But [self-reports](#) measure what parents think they do, which is only weakly associated with how they actually interact with their children.

"Gold standard" [behavior assessments](#) involve video recording parents interacting with their child. Trained observers then rate how warm, engaged and responsive parents are to their child.

In [two studies](#), we used these behavioral methods to examine how hostile sexism influenced parenting.

We recruited 376 families with heterosexual parents and a five-year-old child from the Auckland community. Each child's father and mother first completed scales assessing hostile sexism that included the statements listed above.

We then recorded parents undertaking family tasks, such as playing games or building a cardboard tower with their child. A team of trained coders independently rated how much fathers and [mothers](#) were warm, engaged and responsive to their child.

## **Both parents' hostile sexism is harmful**

Fathers who reported higher hostile sexism exhibited less responsive

parenting towards both daughters and sons. They expressed less warmth, were less engaged with their child, were less sensitive to their child's needs, and were more intrusive or controlling.

But mothers who held hostile sexist views also demonstrated less responsive parenting, showing less warmth, engagement, and sensitivity toward their children.

We propose two potential reasons for the unexpected effects of mother's hostile sexism.

Mothers with higher levels of hostile sexism believe they [should follow the father's authority](#). Following the father's lead during family interactions may detract from mothers attending to their children's needs.

Another possibility is that mothers higher in hostile sexism believe they should be the primary caregiver and so [limit fathers' involvement](#) in family interactions. Known as [maternal gatekeeping](#), this could involve mothers controlling or criticizing how the father is engaging with their child.

Enforcing their caregiving role may interfere with mothers being responsive to their children.

These findings have important consequences for children. Responsive parenting is pivotal to healthy child development. Less responsive parenting [predicts](#) greater behavioral problems, emotional difficulties, and lower health and well-being in children.

## **Improving gender equality and child well-being**

Our findings indicate that reducing beliefs about rigid gender roles, and

whether fathers or mothers should have power, could allow parents to be more responsive to their children.

Changing [gender roles](#) and beliefs is challenging. Interventions designed to reduce hostile sexism typically involve showing that [gender stereotypes](#) are untrue or that [gender inequality](#) is harmful. But these [intervention studies are ineffective](#).

However, parents generally do love and care about their children. So understanding what sexist attitudes mean for parenting and children's well-being may offer motivation for parents to rethink their [sexist attitudes](#).

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