



Let's celebrate vulnerability

THE other day I was travelling on the LRT in Kuala Lumpur when I saw a teenage boy sitting beside an older (but still young) woman, his mother I presume. The boy was visibly crying. It was not a very crowded train and I was seated not too far away from them.

It is not often that you see a teenage boy crying in public – most of them at that age may consider it “weak” or “unmanly”. Being a teacher myself who has spent many years teaching teenagers, I know this very well. It is a social construct to which most of us probably never give a second thought.

But there she was, sitting patiently beside him, uttering soft words and giving soft pats to the boy's back. As a mother myself, this is nothing unusual – I know I would comfort my girls in a heartbeat the moment they are hurt. But what caught my attention was that the woman was thoroughly breaking convention by allowing the boy to have his moment of vulnerability in public.

I can easily imagine a parallel situation where the boy is asked to shut up and stop creating a scene in public. And that was when I realised how far some of us have come from traditional toxic ways of parenting.

I know many would say “Well, not all parents”. But that is the point. Some parents, like that young woman on the train, are breaking out of their strict and authoritarian roles to be more sensitive and kinder to their children. I personally have seen many young boys forced to hide away sorrows and angst, and young girls called attention-seekers for showing the same emotions. I used to feel extremely disturbed thinking about the kind of adults they would grow up to be, without proper guidance from their loved ones on how to handle their feelings. The alarming statistics on depression and other mental disorders among young people in the country is just a Google search away. Help yourself to it.

This is precisely why I feel that the younger generation of this era needs a lot of empathy from us. I would love to encourage more parents to allow their children to express vulnerability so that they learn how to manage their feelings from a young age.

Children should be taught that being gentle, vulnerable and kinder to themselves is the cheat sheet to living a strong, confident and independent life. Softness is not gender exclusive; boys and girls alike should be made to understand that they need to cry when they need to cry. There is no way around it.

And the best way to teach them this is by showing vulnerability ourselves. New parents need to destroy the social construct that repressing feelings is a sign of strength.

And since no one could have said better than this, I would like to quote American poet Brittin Oakman: “Your vulnerability can be a gift to others. How bad**s is that?”