

Nelson woman Anne Harvey's new book has an important message for the mothers of teenage boys. **Tracy Neal** reports.

# Lessons for mums and sons

To understand their teenage sons, mothers must first understand themselves, says Nelson's newest author, Anne Harvey.

Her book is for mothers who might be surrounded by the things that once swirled around her, and about which she rarely spoke, due to a fear of stigma.

*Sons To Men – A Mother's Guide*, being launched in Nelson next week, has evolved from the courses Anne Harvey teaches to mothers raising boys.

The 49-year-old Nelson business mentor, with qualifications in adult learning, life coaching and early childhood education, emphasises that it is not simply another parenting book, but one that focuses on "strengthening the woman within the mother".

It contains the message that it is OK to say, "Things suck – this is hard".

"One mother once said in a workshop she wanted to go to the dairy for milk and never go back home. To say that to other women and have it heard – have it acknowledged – is helpful for others."

The 366-page book came to light with a bit of prompting from researcher and social justice advocate Celia Lashlie, who wrote the foreword and describes the book's purpose as "helping mothers to laugh with their gorgeous boys".

Ms Harvey speaks from the experience of raising four sons, the

youngest of whom is now 14, and time spent listening to other women. Her knowledge has been shaped by the challenges of raising children on a remote Marlborough Sounds farm, a shift to Blenheim and an ensuing marriage split, and being a single parent while running a business.

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**Anne Harvey**  
Nelson author

It was the sense of loss within herself that spurred her to take action – first by running the courses, and then by writing the book, in which she has placed herself on the line with some highly personal accounts of herself as a parent: the crippling grief she felt at letting a young son go when he was struggling for independence in ways that could be challenging.

"I didn't reach out to other mothers then, partly because I was running two preschools in Blenheim and I had a view that I was meant to be this upstanding person in society – people were sending their children to me to look after, and I couldn't admit that I was having trouble with my teenagers."

Writing in private was a useful outlet, which gave rise to her interest in writing poems, although she says they were more like "thoems".

"I call them 'thoems', because they're more thoughts. Then a friend said I should go and do a writing course."

Ms Harvey ventured into creative writing at the Nelson Marlborough Institute of Technology, which was the kickstart she needed. Strong support and belief from her friends helped the book from conception to delivery, and the small miracle not often bestowed on first-time writers: keen interest from a publisher, in this case HarperCollins. Divine intervention came in the form of Ms Lashlie.

Reality struck when Ms Harvey was given a deadline most experienced writers would choke on.

She is keen to impart the message that a mother's self-value is a lifesaver when things are pulling her under, but it can be eroded from pregnancy. "Being able to get pregnant is an incredible privilege. It's an incredible thing to do,

and I don't think we value that absolutely enough ourselves."

Ms Harvey cherished raising babies because of her early childhood training, but recognises how difficult it can be for other women to keep their sense of self.

"Part of losing ourselves is our desire to give to our children and for them to have a good, solid start and good sense of themselves."

"I think the important thing I want to tell mothers is, 'Yes, it's difficult through the teenage years, and, yes, it's challenging in the sense that these teens are still figuring out who they are, but it's not just about them'. We can get so focused on trying to support them, but, sod it, we've got to live our life."

Ms Harvey believes women can be good role models for young men. She says a woman might be happily married and have a supportive husband who is a good father, but there are times when she is standing "toe to toe with this 15-year-old towering over her", and in that moment, she is by herself.

"Some mothers then throw their hands in the air and go, 'It's not a job for me. It's a guy's job. I'm a woman – therefore, I can't do it.'"

Ms Harvey says mothers are vital role models for anyone who lives in the house with them.

"In the courses I teach, I talk about supporting mothers in their

own emotional reaction to things, because they [children] watch you far more than you think they do.

"You think he's slumped on the couch watching television, but he's listening and watching and noticing if you're rude to someone on the phone or abrupt to someone who comes to the door, or angry because you spilled the milk."

Ms Harvey says it's something that emerges in her workshops, when mothers turn up thinking they're going to be told how to fix their boy.

"The spotlight is on the son, who is described as 'disrespectful', or he's 'this' and he's 'that'.

"I really lovingly turn that spotlight around and say, 'Well, let's have a look at what's going on for you'. Quite often, these women are stressed out. They're overworked, they're exhausted and they're financially challenged. They need love and support to be the woman their son needs them to be."

Ms Harvey says it comes back to mothers valuing and believing in their own worth. That's when they can approach teenagers' challenges with compassion, empathy and non-judgment.

"Otherwise, we come to them from guilt, regret and judgment. If we can get ourselves clear, it's a better outcome."

■ Anne Harvey will launch *Sons To Men* at Page & Blackmore booksellers in Nelson next Thursday, July 8, at 5.30pm.



**Home front:** Anne Harvey with Keelan, 14, the youngest of her four sons. Photo: COLIN SMITH