

## E2 Kim Waddilove.mp4

I was standing in my kitchen taking washing out of the washing machine when I found a foreign lump in the pouch of one of my son's hoodies. Uh oh. What's this? What have I ruined now? He's not the most tolerant person of other people's mistakes. And before you tell me, he's a spoiled brat, and he should do his own washing, I know, I know. I've tried, but we can't afford the amount of cycles and products he uses, so I'm back to doing it for him.

With some trepidation, I put my hand in the soggy pouch and. Oh, wow, it's much worse than expected. My immediate response is to lose it. Wtf? What is this thing doing in this pocket? Why does he have it? What is he using it for? Should I tell his dad? No. He'll overreact and make things worse. What to do? Approach him. Should I march into his room and demand to know what's going on, or should I introduce the topic in casual conversation? I opt for the latter. A ploy, he can say see straight through. But as long as we are both pretending I'm not being obvious, it tends to work better than direct confrontation.

'By the way', I say after lengthy discussion on some questions I've prepared courtesy of [www.ManUnited.com](http://www.ManUnited.com) FAQs. 'I found this lighter in your pocket this morning. Is it yours? You're not an arsonist, are you? Ha ha. Do you smoke? I hope it's weed and not tobacco. Ha, ha. You're old enough to smoke, I know, but I'm just curious. I know how much you care about your health, right?'. Without hesitation, he says, 'No, Mom, it's not mine. It's [friend's name]-His best friend-, He left it in my car and I was planning to return it to him'. Totally calm. Conversation closed. He looks at me straight in the face with his huge brown puppy dog eyes, and I can't tell if he's lying or not.

My son was born fastidious. It's the nicest way I can think of describing a narcissist. He eats well. Gyms every day. Takes excellent care of his skin, teeth and hair. He always smells good. He only wears excessively priced top brands and talks in well modulated culture terms. His room and car are immaculate, and he's quite disapproving of those of us who aren't as polished. I'm no exception. Not that it bothers me. I'm just so proud of him that he's so together. My daughter once said he makes us look rich. I once asked him if he would ever consider getting a tattoo, and he said 'definitely not. It would be like putting a sticker on a Porsche'. And now he's smoking. And what exactly is he smoking,

for goodness sake? And why does it matter so much? He's an adult, graduated and in his first job and everything, totally capable of making his own decisions.

And then, wham, the epiphany strikes, it's not the smoking or possible lying that bothers me so much. It's the fact that I don't know everything there is to know about my own child. And that matters. It really matters. When my kids were born, I spent three work interrupted months of maternity leave with them, plus one hectic two week school holiday a year. But that was just until they were old enough to prefer holiday camps or friend's homes. The rest of my minimal time was split 5% between pursuing a career, taking care of household admin and other relationships, and 95% feeling guilty about not doing any of those things properly. And about 90% of that 95% was working Mom's guilt.

Even so, I tried to be a good mom. I tried to do everything right. I tried to be there for them and also give them freedom, but not so much of it that they would go off the rails. I just wanted them to grow into happy, healthy, well-balanced adults. I wasn't sure if I was succeeding or not, but I kept trying. Face it, we moms live in a world that isn't designed for us to succeed in everything, right? Yes, there's a lot of talk about gender equity by everyone at every level, just about everywhere in the world. But until that talk turns into effective, transformative action, we guilty moms will have to live with their guilt for years to come.

Then COVID happened and it was seriously horrible. But I very soon saw the opportunity it presented. My kids were supposed to be leaving the nest to attend university, but that was put on hold whilst lectures were postponed and then held online in their bedrooms across away from our home office. They couldn't go shopping or to movies or parties or on holiday with their friends. They were literally stuck at home. And so as I. This time was an unexpected gift, and I intended to make the most of it. Yes, we all still had our work to do, but suddenly there was so much more time to talk and listen and do things together.

I became super mum. We cooked together. I even baked once or twice. We ate together. We walked the dogs, We played games and watched movies. We chatted face to face. My husband's income was severely affected, so we were probably even more stuck at home than some folk. And I was there through all of it. I was there for the

assignments and exams. I was there when they graduated. I was there when their friends came over. I was literally there when my son split up with his girlfriend. I heard it all through his bedroom door, even though I tried my best not to listen.

I supported them as they embarked on their search for jobs in a country where jobs, especially for young people, are impossible to get. I think the stats are at the moment like 64% of youth are unemployed in South Africa. I help them with their CVs and where to look and witness their failures and successes. For the first time in our lives, I felt like a good mum, maybe even a great mum, that I hadn't done such a bad job and that everything was going to be okay. They were going to survive adulthood because I'd got to them just in time.

And then two or three hard working years later, the lump in the pocket. My son is old enough to smoke if he wants to, and old enough to deserve total privacy to do whatever he wants to do. But finding that lighter in his pocket meant that if I didn't know that one small thing about him after spending all that concentrated time in his company, what else didn't I know about him? And my daughter, for that matter. And just like that, I'm back to the same level of pre-COVID insecurities regarding my prowess as a mother. This is not the neat little happily ever after ending I expected. The pandemic and forced isolation and my considerable efforts to make up for lost time changed almost nothing. I wanted to prove my strength as a parent, despite being a **sound mum**.

But this one little incident meantime, pretty much back to square one as far as working mom guilt is concerned. Except at least now I've got three years and counting of being at home and up close to my kids, a unique and precious experience I wouldn't trade for anything. And please don't think by the telling of the story that I don't have an excellent relationship with my son, or that by discovering that he might actually have a vice, might have changed the way I feel for him in any way. We love each other with a vengeance. It's just that I thought I had the whole parent thing down **pat** when obviously that is not the case.

One thing that has changed quite dramatically, though, is my determination to raise awareness of the personal and career obstacles faced by mothers in STEM. I'm the communications lead for a network of African led research institutes based in eight African countries with a singular mission to empower African science and scientists in

the fight against HIV, AIDS, TB and associated morbidities and emerging diseases. As such, I am perfectly positioned to take up the fight by weaving gender equity awareness into everything we do and to search out funding and collaborative opportunities to take the matter even further. Viva **science Mommas**, Power to Mothers and Science. Watch the space.