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A Boy's Sense of Self

Guest: Mark Hancock
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Bob: In our culture / in our world, Mark Hancock says there are systems in place that just aren't built for most boys for how they think and how they act and how they behave or don't behave.

Mark: We sit them in a school room / in a classroom and tell them to sit still, be quiet, and pay attention. Well, I have two boys. You might as well just hit them with a stick because it just isn't going to happen. It's a difficult environment. So, they start at a very young age feeling like—"I don't fit in here. This isn't quite my environment." They are fidgeting in their chair because they know intuitively they've got to move to learn; but then they are being disciplined because they are moving too much.

Bob: This is *FamilyLife Today*. Our hosts are Dave and Ann Wilson, and I'm Bob Lepine. So, how can we as parents learn to recognize what it is our boys need and then let them be boys. We're going to talk with Mark Hancock about that today. Stay with us.

And welcome to *FamilyLife Today*. Thanks for joining us. So, you're a mom of three sons; right?

Ann: Yes.

Bob: Did you ever have a point where it was like—"I really wanted a girl—just one girl"?

Ann: Well, it's interesting. My parents—they had four children; and of the four of us, we all had sons. So, there are 12 grandsons and no granddaughters.

Bob: Really?!

Ann: I had the last one. So, I felt so much pressure, like—all the hopes and dreams are on me to have a daughter. It did not happen.

Bob: There are a lot of moms who are intimidated by having sons. There are a lot of moms who decide that their job is to turn those boys into gentler creatures than they are.

Ann: Let's civilize these boys.

Bob: Did you have those impulses?

Ann: I was somewhat of a tomboy growing up.

Dave: I'll answer. No, she did not. [Laughter] I was the one saying, "Honey, lighten up a little bit." I remember she used to take them, when they were in middle school, over to the high school and run the stairs. She would run the stairs.

Bob: In middle school?

Dave: "We've got to get ready for football. It's July. Football starts in August." I'd watch her—I mean this is their mom—"Get up here. What are you doing?" I mean just pushing them hard. "Now, we're going to go down to the track now, and we're running sprints"—the whole deal.

Bob: But when they got aggressive and are throwing things and are breaking things and all, didn't you want them to settle down and domesticate a little bit?

Ann: Yes; I was also very scared because they were strong; and I was afraid, even with Dave, when he would play with them, he'd be so rough and aggressive; and I thought, "Oh, is this even—is this right? Should he be this aggressive?" Honestly, I realized, "I wanted to always step in and say, 'Don't do that,' 'Stop that,' and 'Dave, you shouldn't be that rough with them.'" He said, "You need to let me be a man with these boys." I realized I had to leave the room because he'd be doing these things; and I thought, "He's"—

Bob: He's going to kill.

Ann: —"risking their lives."

Bob: He's going to kill our sons.

Ann: Exactly.

Bob: Yes.

Dave: I never did, and—

Ann: By God's grace, because I was praying in the other room the whole time.

Dave: It probably was her prayers. I think we went to the emergency room once.

Ann: Yes; it wasn't very often.

Dave: It wasn't my fault. It was probably her fault.

Bob: Well, here is why we are talking about all of this because we want to talk about the uniqueness of raising boys in this culture where there is confusion about masculinity and femininity / where there is confusion about what it is supposed to look like. We've got a friend joining us again on *FamilyLife Today* who is passionate about this subject. Mark Hancock is back with us. Mark, welcome to *FamilyLife Today*.

Mark: Thank you. It's great to be here.

Bob: Mark gives leadership to Trail Life USA. Explain to our listeners who aren't familiar with Trail Life what it is all about.

Mark: Trail Life USA is a Christ-centered, boy-focused alternative to Boy Scouts of America. That's the shortest description. We're unapologetically Christian. We focus on character, leadership, and outdoor adventure for boys.

Bob: So, it's camping and canoeing and merit badges and all of that?

Mark: Exactly; a robust award program and troops in over 800 churches across the country are going out and are doing camping and hiking and repelling and all the boy stuff.

Bob: You've been doing Trail Life—is it for a decade now?

Mark: No; just five years.

Bob: Wow. It's growing year by year by year. I mean, every year, you're seeing more and more boys get engaged with this.

Mark: It is. We've got over 20,000 boys, and over 8,000 volunteers across the country who are active in the program right now.

Bob: In fact, you've got an event coming up here in a little bit. Tell listeners about that event. Tell them who the special speaker is going to be.

Mark: I would love to. It's our National Summer Adventure and Family Convention. It's being held in North Georgia. One of our special speakers is Dennis Rainey.

Bob: Yes; how about that; huh?

Ann: That's awesome.

Dave: I think he knows a little bit about raising boys.

Bob: I think he does. So, who is—this is for people who are involved in Trail Life? Or just for anybody?

Mark: Well, it's a unique event for us because every summer we have what we call summer adventures. That's where the boys go with their troops and go out, and they'll be in the outdoors. They'll use the skills that they've been honing over the year; and they'll go out; and they'll practice those skills in the outdoors.

So, we have what we call a summer adventure element of it; but we also have going on at the same site about a 20-minute hike away in a convention center a family convention. So, the moms and dads go, and the dads can camp with the boys; or the dads can stay in the hotel with mom. We get together a couple times during the week and some of the evenings we get together; and everybody is gathered together to do things.

Bob: Well, if folks want to know more about that event and how they could be a part of it, they can go to our website FamilyLifeToday.com. We've got a link there that gives them all the information.

This subject of boys developing a healthy sense of what it means to be men—this is a part of why you left what you were doing to get engaged with Trail Life; right?

Mark: Yes; it really is. You know, when you look at our culture today, it says boyhood is some sort of social disease that needs to be eradicated. It's got to be so confusing for boys—all the mixed messages that they are getting / the confusion around gender and the difficulties in just leading boys into saying, "Hey, this is what a masculine man looks like." We've had years of the fathers on television being shown as men of not great intelligence—

Bob: Right.

Mark: —or really not good role models.

I think about—remember in the olden days when they would have the coal mines, and they would put a canary in the mine. The purpose was to show if there was something going on in that mine that was dangerous—gases or something.

I like to think of boys as canaries in the coal mine of our culture right now. They are faltering. We are seeing terrible things happen to boys from suicide rates; they are twice as likely to be declared special education; three times more likely to be diagnosed ADHD. They are falling behind. They are behind girls in every single academic measurement. They are feeling the effects of a culture that's unsure of who it is that men should be, and that's affecting the next generation.

Ann: I think it is a confusing time. I love that women are being heard, and I think that's great; but I also think that men don't know what to do in that in some cases. I see boys becoming more passive. I see boys playing video games more and more. I see them being lost in a culture of not knowing—"Who am I?" and "What is my role in this place?" Why do you think that is today?

Mark: Well, here is what we know about boys—is boys are inspired by risking competition. I mean you have boys, you know that. Anybody who has ever sent two five or six-year-old boys to go get a drink of water—you know you've just fired a starting pistol. I mean it's a race. So, boys are—they are inspired by risking competition. That's what fires everything in them.

So, when we've done things like we're doing in schools by taking recess out and tag—we've declared that tag is bad for boys' self-esteem or kids' self-esteem. So, we don't let them play those kinds of games. We're taking the risk and competition out. So, where do they go?

Well, the video game world was built for boys. They can compete there. They can get points. They can win. They can lose. They can take risks. There's a clear scoreboard of how good they are. Boys love that environment. That's where we're sort of driving them there because we're taking that risk and competition out of their real world. Then, when they get into that video game world, we criticize them for playing too many video games. So, they can't even win for winning. So, it's a challenging thing to be in an environment where you don't quite know how to fit in.

We sit them in a schoolroom / in a classroom and tell them to sit still, be quiet, and pay attention. Well, I have two boys. You might as well just hit them with a stick because it just isn't going to happen. It's a difficult environment. So, they start at a very young age feeling like, "I don't fit in here. This isn't quite my environment." They are fidgeting in their chair because they know intuitively they got to move to learn; but they are being disciplined because they are moving too much.

So, this is set up—this whole thing where boys don't quite know where to go, but it seems like they have found their place in video games; and we're criticizing them for it.

Bob: You know, Mark, as you are saying these things, there are some listeners who are going, "Now, wait. Girls are inspired by risks and competition too." In fact, any statements that are made in our culture today that tend to differentiate—boys are like this, and girls are like this. All of the sudden, we see a yellow flag waving. We're not supposed to say things like that. We're not supposed to make distinctions about differences in temperament or personality between boys and girls. Is that really true? How much of that is a social construct versus the way God made us?

In order to understand / in order to grow boys to be boys, we've got to face the fact that God made two different kinds of people when He made men and women. He made us as different creatures; right?

Mark: Well, it's absolutely true in our culture that it's politically incorrect to say that boys and girls are different; but it also happens to be true. They just are. You can't argue with the biology or the psychology behind it. You know boys have more rods than cones in their eyes which means that they see things at a distance greater; and they are more sensitive to motion. That's why you get—"Oh, squirrel." I mean they see something.

What it looks like to us is ADHD when it's just that boy being a boy. So, there are psychological, biological—many differences—that are behind this fact that boys and girls are different.

Ann: Is school different now compared to when we were all kids for boys? You guys, you sat at a desk, and you wrote and did all that. What's different in the classrooms? Well, they recognized at the time that kids needed time outside. They needed that recess time, and they allowed for that. A lot of that is missing from our schools.

You know, in the 90's, there was a great emphasis on girls because they had fallen behind in science and technology. What they didn't look at, at the time, was that boys were falling behind in language skills and social skills. So, the system was kind of moved to help these girls get through the science and technology, but we forgot the fact that the boys still needed some help.

So, the new classroom that we see that's so strict and strict curriculum and the following the guidelines and preparing for the tests has really taken the flex out of there. It's taken the energy away from those teachers who really knew best who were in front of the classroom and knew—"I've got to get this class outside for a little bit." They can't do that anymore. So, it's putting the boys in a very, very strict environment that really puts them at a disadvantage. They know from the beginning—"I don't fit here."

Bob: I'll tell you what's different. You want to know what's different because I've got it pulled up right here. This is what used to be a part of elementary school for boys and for girls. This is from elementary school. [Music plays]

Ann: "Ten times."

Bob: "Ten times." This is calisthenics.

Ann: "And don't be chicken again."

Bob: Do you remember this from elementary school?

Ann: Yes.

“Ten times.”

Bob: “Push up.”

Ann: You could never play that today.

Bob: Exactly. You couldn’t talk about the flabby guys, and you couldn’t talk about chicken fat when you’re talking about—Dave is sitting there with his mouth wide open. You’ve never heard this before.

Dave: I never. I must be young. I’ve never heard this before.

Ann: There was actually an exercise guru that used to play this—

Bob: Oh, yes.

Ann: —I think I was probably five; and my mom used to work out to this with him.

Bob: So, the reason I bring it up. There’s not calisthenics. There are not jumping jacks like we used to do when we were in elementary school. Some of the stuff that would burn off the excess testosterone in little boys and help them, then, go back to the classroom with some of that energy diffused. You’re saying that’s missing from our kids’ schooling today.

Mark: That’s one of the things that is missing—that physical activity that engages the brain. We have in all fields of biology tells us—“Hey, you’ve got to get some blood moving to get the brain functioning.” We don’t. We sit them in chairs all day, and—for—particularly for boys, that’s a very difficult thing.

Dave: Why has it gone away? What’s the reasoning?

Mark: Well, part of it is preparing for tests and squeezing in that school work day down and taking out all this extra stuff and trying to focus on things like science and technology—which is important stuff—but if you don’t put a boy in an environment where he’s subject to great learning, he’s not going to do great learning.

Ann: So, when boys are fidgeting sitting in their seats and the teacher is saying, “I think your son has ADHD,” do you think those diagnoses are possibly not true?

Mark: There is a lot of research on what’s going on with those types of drugs. I’m not an expert on it, and I can’t really speak to it; but I can tell you that things that—when you look at bulleted lists of ADHD symptoms, it’s things like running and climbing when you shouldn’t be or not waiting to talk until it’s your turn. Well, that’s me.

So, it's amazing how quickly we'll go to that because, of course, the teacher wants a controlled environment. So, we go very quickly to those diagnoses. We don't realize, "That's just a boy being a boy." How early we start our education now—if kids are developmentally ready to learn, we put them in an environment where we're expecting—we're just expecting too much from them; and they are already behind. If they learn that they are behind in the beginning, they just accept, "This is the way that I am. I'm going to be behind."

Bob: My mom loved telling the story about when I was—I think I was three or four, and we lived next door to my best friend D who was a year behind me. D and I used to play together all the time. One day, my mom is looking out the back window, and she sees me just push D to the ground—just shove him down to the ground. She's horrified. She comes running out, and she's like—"Bobbie, why did you do that?!" I said, "Because I shot him. He's dead, and he won't fall down." [Laughter] She loved that moment.

I don't know that three and four-year-old girls, playing with each other in the backyard, are pushing each other down or even shooting each other; but there was something going on inside of me / some of that testosterone buildup even at age four.

We just have to face the fact that aggression, biological aggression, is a part of the makeup of masculinity. If it's improperly used, then that can be disastrous. If it's channeled in the right directions, that's productive and good for all of us; but I think we live in a culture that says, "We've got to eliminate aggression of all kinds. We've got to drain it out of boys and get them to be non-aggressive."

Mark: In our effort to protect ourselves from mentally unstable men, we're going after boys; and we're declaring them of somehow being deficient, and we've got to fix that behavior before they get older and do something. Boys just know that.

Bob: The whole term toxic masculinity is what we're talking about here. It's not masculinity that's toxic. It's that some men use their aggression and make it toxic; but the problems not the masculinity. It's the sin the men who are misusing their masculinity.

Mark: And boys are paying a price.

Bob: So, Ann, talk to a mom who has got boys at home; and she doesn't get it, and she is scared, and she feels like this is just wrong—"My kids are going to be juvenile delinquents when they grow up, and all of this aggression is a problem. I can't take them out in public because of how they act, and I don't know what to do with my boys." You would say, "Embrace what you're seeing."

Ann: I've had those exact discussions where I have—especially moms of young boys are petrified because their boys are loud, and they feel like they are aggressive, and they're afraid of what this will lead to.

I usually say, as a mom with young boys, it is exhausting—physically. They are demanding. They are always on the go. They don't sit down. I'm not saying every boy is like this; but for our three boys, they were really active. We spent a majority of our time outside playing. Dave was great because I was fortunate to have a dad that is very involved, and not all moms have that. He would have all the neighborhood boys—

Dave: It was awesome. The boys would come to our—the neighborhood boys would come to the front door.

Ann: Yes.

Dave: It was this: “Can Mr. Wilson come out and play?”

Ann: They would ask for Mr. Wilson to play. So, he would have all these boys—and I would go outside too. I'd bring snacks. I would also play with them. There was a camaraderie that these boys didn't experience because many of their dads weren't home or in the home. It became this safe haven of adventure.

Dave: Yes.

Ann: What I realized, as a mom, I need my boys to experience adventure and to embrace who they are. If there is not a dad in the home, find a healthy male model or friend or someone that could come and interact and be with our boys.

Bob: Mark, you've written a great 12-page booklet called *Let Boys Be Boys: Three Winning Strategies for Leaders of Boys*. Here are the three strategies. Number one, embrace the fact that there are differences between boys and girls; number two, risk and competition—we've talked about that—number three, physical movement. If a mom and a dad would say, “Our boys are different than our girls. They need risk and competition, and they need to be allowed to move.” That's going to make a huge difference in how those boys embrace the fact that they are boys; right?

Mark: It really does. In that situation, as you talked about, that you had at your household—boys, are asking the question: “Who's in charge? Who's with me? What is our mission?” If we don't answer those three things for them, they'll answer it in some way that looks like aggression or apathy or rebellion. So, in that situation at your household, they knew Mr. Wilson was in charge. Get him out here so we can play. They knew what the rules were. They knew what was going on. We need to provide those kinds of settings for boys where we answer that question clearly.

Bob: You're helping parents know how to answer those questions. You've put together a booklet called *Let Boys Be Boys*, which listeners can go to our website FamilyLifeToday.com and download it for free. Again, on the website, FamilyLifeToday.com, you can download Mark Hancock's booklet, *Let Boys Be Boys*

and just talk together as a couple about how you can encourage your sons to embrace what it means to be a young man.

I think this is something that is important for teachers and for youth leaders and for all of us who are involved in the lives of young boys. So, again, go to FamilyLifeToday.com to get Mark's booklet, *Let Boys Be Boys*.

You know the organization we've talked about today, Trail Life USA, is really a discipleship organization. We think of scouting or Trail Life as being about the outdoors and about canoeing and merit badges and all the rest; but this really about character formation and understanding who you are and who God is and what life is supposed to be all about.

David Robbins is here with us. Discipleship is what we're all here for.

David: That's right. And years of pursuing / discipling men well in a number of different ministry contexts—a standard curriculum is fine. I think a lot of times we want that one thing that unlocks—and I just—we all love using, “It's the perfect curriculum”; but really it has to be tailored to the unique giftings and temperaments and who that person is—whether that is our sons, like we've talked about today, or other kids in our neighborhoods or grandkids that we have.

I just love the idea that was talked about today that we disciple people toward Jesus. Doing it at an early age is an awesome thing to be able to do. We do it in a way that is tailored specifically to who they are. A lot of times, I feel like we've missed that. Some of the creativity we get to be a part of in participating—“How do we do disciple people toward Jesus in creative ways?”

Bob: Not a cookie cutter kind of thing, but it's something that we take into account: Who we are? Who they are? It's life on life; right?

David: Yes; let's study our kids. Let's study our grandkids. How can we transfer to them our understanding of faith and who Jesus is?

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