

Matt (host): Welcome back to the Nimble Youth Podcast. I'm your host, Matt Buttermann. And today we're talking about a topic that I think many parents, educators and mental health professionals are noticing, but may not fully understand. It's the increasingly complex challenges facing teen boys today. From emotional overwhelm to academic disengagement, boys are struggling in ways that are both familiar and surprising.

And today, we're gonna unpack that with someone who sees this work every day. Before we dive in, couple of facts to frame the conversation. In this book of boys and men, author Richard Reeves, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, makes the case that boys and men in America are falling behind in key areas of life, including education, work, and social connection. While girls and young women have made significant gains in academic achievement over recent decades, boys have not kept pace. It's a dynamic that teachers and counselors are observing in classrooms across the country.

So it's that boys are now less likely than girls to excel in traditional academic environments. And that this isn't just about grades, but about how boys engage with schooling, relationships, and purpose. These educational disparities have ripple effects to career paths, mental health outcomes, and social identity. We also know that boys and young men are disproportionately represented in school disciplinary actions. They're more likely to feel disengaged in structured learning environments, and they often struggle to find meaningful support for emotional and relational challenges.

So what's going on here? What are the real day to day struggles teen boys are facing? And how do we, as caregivers and community members and parents, respond in effective, compassionate ways? To help answer these questions, I'm thrilled to welcome Jarrod Hoffman, a licensed professional counselor based in Memphis, Tennessee. Jarrod works extensively with teens, young adults, schools, and families.

Jarrod, welcome to Nimble Youth. Thanks, Matthew. It's a pleasure to be here. So your work with teens and in school settings gives you a front row perspective on what boys are actually dealing with. To start us off, can you share a little bit about how you came to work with teens in general and then especially teen boys particularly?

Sure.

Jarrod Hoffman: Yes. I had my parents get divorced when I was 10 years old. I saw porn for the first time at 11, which is later than what boys and teens have experienced now. Wow. My age is much younger.

Yeah. And I didn't find counseling until I was 25 years old. And I'm really passionate about making that gap smaller. And that's how I got into counseling teens particularly, but counseling in general.

Matt (host): Right. And so teen boy comes in for counseling. What are some of the first things that you kind of notice or or or find out about them, the problems they're engaging with?

Jarrold Hoffman: Sure. I I have two parts to my work at the moment. And so one is on the private practice side in a group setting, and then another is on-site at a school. And so I'll try to make that distinct when it makes sense. But behavior is the word that's throwing thrown around a lot.

And it's funny that you already said the word purpose. I I don't think I have a whole lot of people who say that their child or the child that they're seeing is just struggling with a lack of purpose. They usually call out the behaviors that they're seeing. Yeah. Yeah.

Interestingly enough, I was

Matt (host): just reading it all up this weekend by David Brooks from the New York Times where he makes a claim that what's what's the problem with so much of America right now is that we've kind of lost our sense of of purpose, whether it's it's religion or just belief in in kind of ourselves in general, not seeing sort of a way forward. So I think purpose is really, really important to the mental health of the nation writ large, and certainly for boys and teenagers in general in that part of their lives. So Richard Reeves and others, they've they've talked about the male struggle in education and they highlight how boys are often behind academically compared to girls. That's a a statistic, but what does that look like in real life for a teen boy? How do you see them kind of dealing with those those maybe those academic struggles?

That is one of

Jarrold Hoffman: the bigger questions. Do you think it's, you

Matt (host): know, maybe a a an issue with the way schools are set up? Do you see maybe the traditional educational settings maybe favor girls in

Jarrold Hoffman: many ways and the way they learn? Yeah. I I think there's a a bunch of different things happening. I probably can speak a little bit more to the the smaller individual things that I see versus kinda education practices and yeah. So the one of the things that comes to mind is a very specific thing, and it's just this idea of of what we call teens.

And there's this line that says that teen teenagers didn't exist, you know, fifty, seventy five years ago. Right. We had to give them something to do. Yeah. I think some of it is what we call students or teenagers particularly.

I hear the word kiddo a lot. I hear there's a school close by who calls their students scholars. And there's a joke among my teacher friends at that school, scholars, they're not producing scholarly work, but we live into what people call us. And so I think particularly with teenage boys, they'll be called a kiddo for till 12, 13, maybe even 14 years old. And the reality is if we call

them something that we're aspiring for them to be, like a gentleman, I know that's so ancient, man even.

Of course, they don't have all the responsibilities of a man at the moment, but if we continue to call him kiddo, they're just gonna live into that language. So that's like a very practical thing that I see. Maybe teachers, admin, in an effort to kind of say where they're at, forget to say where they want them to be. Right. Right.

Yeah. I think it's a

Matt (host): very important point, you know, referring to them as young men because that's that's what they are. And if we have this idea of a sort of an endpoint of where they wanna be, that makes, you know, their arrival at that at that endpoint, you know, much more likely. Right? If if we keep calling them kids, then they'll be kids, you know, or as long as we keep calling them that. So, yeah, I think a really important point there.

A lot of listeners will wonder, is this because, you know, boys are bad at school or is it, you know, the system itself is kind of mismatched with how boys learn or how they express themselves? And I know, you know, certainly talking with other, educators and and therapists who work with teens, you know, there's a a real distinct difference between how how girls developed, you know, psychosocially and how boys developed. And so what do you what do you think the disconnect is there and are there ways that we can better approach how to, you know, how to meet boys where they're at?

Jarrold Hoffman: Yeah. I love what Jordan Peterson says about aggression. I think in that that behavior kind of referral that we talk about, how they show up because they've been referred for bad behavior or or aggressive behavior. Jordan Peterson says, we want boys to be aggressive. We just want them to be aggressive in a pro social way.

So what what fun would football be if the players stood around and just talked about what they were gonna do on the field, and I'll let you go right to the end zone and and just just score. That'd be fun. No. We we wanna see them hit each other and tackle each other, but we know that once the play is over, anything after that is unacceptable. Right.

We need to learn how to harness that as a man. Yeah. And I think maybe one of the tendencies in the education system that I've seen is is just the kind of, you know, we have to prepare them for the test. We have to we don't have as much freedom, and so we have to stamp out that behavior so that we can get the work done. And I think that can take maybe some of these positive feelings that we have, like aggression, anger in in the positive sense, which would be passion.

And we just say, hey, you can't even feel that, rather than let's direct that in a way. And that's just super challenging when you've got 30 kids in a classroom.

Matt (host): Yeah. Yep. So much of it is just, you know, a lack of the ability to sort of deal with people individually, which, you know, would solve so many of these problems, I suppose. But one size does not fit all for Mhmm. For all students, certainly.

Right? Yeah. Reminds me, this is before your time, I'm sure, but there was a a cartoon, you know, when I was growing up. It was, you know, a a Bugs Bunny cartoon with Wile E. Coyote and this sheepdog, and they would fight each other to the death.

But but before before the, you know, the the the fights occurred, they'd punch in at this workstation out in the out in the corner somewhere. And, hey, Ed. How's it going? How's it going, Charles? And then, you know, they they punch in, and then he could grab him by the neck.

And then afterwards, they punch out, You know, great day today. You know, see you next season tomorrow. It's the same sort of thing. You know, we have to be, we have to be aggressive, you know, sometimes in our professional and and even our academic lives, but we have to be gentlemen when we're not when we're not in that competitive arena, I suppose. Yeah.

So let's talk specifically about mental health issues. So we're seeing rising levels of anxiety, depression, and overwhelm in, in boys too, and, and not just girls.

Jarrold Hoffman: What are some of the emotional experiences you see most often with the boys that you work with? For sure, the anxiety and the depression is, is real and prevalent. I am trying not to just continue to go right to screens. I think that's maybe more of a symptom. We talk about behavior, right?

That's just a symptom of what's going on. Yeah. I think the if if you're seeing a behavior, I think about it in sort of like if your car isn't working. You hear the noise which alerts you to what's happening underneath. Right.

And there's two options here. You hear the noise, it's clanking, we gotta get that taken care of. And something that's often ignored is that there are things that can be going on in your engine where you don't know. Maybe you don't know you, you can't hear it for some reason. Or it's in a part of the car that's, you know, over a little far away.

And so I think we have boys who show up with behavior and also boys who show up with no behavior and they're excelling at school. But a lot of the root causes can be the same. I think you're right, shame, guilt, loneliness, isolation. Yeah. We're struggling as a culture to have deep community.

And for teens, it doesn't even have to be many. It'd be two to three good friends. I think some of the factors that make finding those deep friendships challenging, You know, you might have

three to four surface level friends. I mean, this is true for adults too. So often when they come in, they they are around people, but they don't have deep and meaningful connections.

Most of their interactions with their parents revolve around what they're doing, what they're doing wrong in school, what they need to be doing. And that's why I think the work of counseling is so powerful and almost so easy is because it's the one place that they come in and just be heard, understood, and connected with.

Matt (host): And not judged. And it's kind of a a way to start a relationship afresh, right, without any kind of frequency of notions. Yeah. I I think it's a really important point. What do you think contributes to boys having a when I say boys, I mean teenager teenagers, but in particular teenage boys having a harder time seeking support or or reaching out to for help?

Is that a you know, just something within the gender? Is it a characteristic of the male gender writ large or is there something in our society today that maybe is contributing to that? Do you think that it that is?

Jarrold Hoffman: Probably tons of reasons. One of the reasons that I'd love to connect is we talk about purpose. We talk about what we expect of boys. So much of that is wrapped up in a future that hasn't yet been realized. Gotta go to college is the best example.

I'm not saying college is good or bad, but you have to go. That kinda draws them into a purpose that they haven't necessarily chosen for themselves. When you have a teenager, they're in the midst of Ericsson's stage of finding out what their identity is that involve or also involves kind of interest, passion, direction, purpose. And so if I'd given a teenager a purpose, and then most of my conversation with them revolves around how they're not achieving that purpose, well, it might not be theirs to begin with. I know a lot of the teenagers come into the office and their parents have them there for one reason, and it's ten minutes into the conversation or less before we talk about what really has brought them there.

Yeah. Could you imagine what you would yeah. Maybe some of these boys, what they would be met with if they said, hey, I want to go to counselor and I wanna talk about my lack of purpose. And the parent says, Well, when are we gonna find time for that? You have to, you have to do this sport.

You have to do this extracurricular. Your grades are suffering and we've gotta get you into a good college. I think that's one facet I could see is this being wrapped up in what the future is versus being aware of what's presently important and necessary for their thriving.

Matt (host): I guess leaning on from from that. So you've worked you worked with schools in the past. And so are there sort of structural or cultural elements within schools that you see making a difference, whether it's, whether it's a positive difference or a negative difference for engagement, particularly with boys and their psychosocial well-being. There's certain things that work particularly well for them that I can see.

Jarrold Hoffman: Yeah. This once again, I've worked with a few schools. I wouldn't consider myself an expert on this school implementation of this. One of the things that's very exciting about the school that I'm at is that I'm contracted to get, provide individual and group counseling, and that has been fascinating because it's almost as close to in vivo as you can be. The behavior doesn't have to go through the tracks of, hey, we're seeing this at school, can you please take them to a counselor?

I think they need more help. And then months go by and then they finally get connected with the counselor. No, as soon as that form is signed, I can see them, I can pull them from a class. And, you know, one of the interesting things that we've seen in the data that we've collected is that the student actually may not talk about school or even the behaviors that they're there for, or they've been referred because of. And yet we see the grades improve.

We see their behavior improve. And so what's working in schools, I think schools can really benefit and students can really benefit in trying to make that referral to a counselor or whether that's a counselor, it's a church leader, it's a whoever in their community is, is going to be beneficial for them as soon as possible. Make that gap even smaller. Because one of the realities of my going to counseling for the first time at 25 is I ended up talking about the stuff that happened was happening when I was 15. Right.

13. Right. And so the closer we can make that resource, whether that is a counselor, a pastor, maybe it's not doing the sport, and it's doing something that actually interests them to give them a little bit more purpose. And so, obviously, schools have a lot on their plate, but making that as those partnerships as solid as they can is super helpful. Yeah.

Think one other thing, yeah.

Matt (host): I think that's a really important point. Just increasing access to these support structures for for mental and behavioral health is really important.

Jarrold Hoffman: Yes. And that's why you're doing what you're doing with this podcast. Absolutely. Maybe a practical, very practical thing I would call out as well, and this is on the school side, and this is also on the parent side, and it's something I've been very passionate about recently, is this idea, I think, in education and even in the parenting, we're stewarded with their education at a time. Let's be present for that time.

What happens, parents fall into this trap of saying, or parents or admin saying, hey, if you're struggling right now, just wait until, you know, what's next? What's the next line? Just wait until the real world. Exactly. The real world.

What about their experience in tenth grade

Matt (host): Yep.

Jarrold Hoffman: Is not the real world?

Matt (host): Right. Exactly.

Jarrold Hoffman: Yeah. Are there less responsibilities? Shortens their experience today. Right? 100%.

Matt (host): Yeah. Yeah. That's a really important, really important point, I think. So I wanna discuss a little bit about, something you brought up, earlier, in the discussion. So a lot of of digital pressures today, things like social media, gaming, isolation, and you mentioned porn, digital porn.

I like to call the, the the the trifecta of vices that boys are are kind of, exposed to and that's gaming, porn, and then now, you know, sports betting or gambling. Those are sort of traps that they can easily fall into. So for the parents listening, how can they help boys in particular? And, of course, it's a problem across genders here, but how can they help boys in particular from sort of falling into those rabbit holes, those funnels of vice, if you

Jarrold Hoffman: wanna call Yes. Wow. I'm glad you mentioned the sports gambling. Just saw that an article on that, just the statistics of of how many children 18 are are gambling through these platforms. Yes.

Man, first, read *Anxious Generation* if you haven't done it. Audible, whatever. Yes. Yeah. You gotta read it.

I think it challenges us as well as parents to to confront our own anxiety. I think the super important point is, have I, if the device is already there, which probably already there, having to move our mindset from protection to equipping. You can't, even if you've given them a phone at you've held off for some amazing miracle at till 13, the time of first porn exposure is I mean, they say it's what? Nine? But it's because how do you I mean, some of these kids don't even know the age that they first saw it.

And so if you're talking about trying to protect them at age 13 and they've had four years of porn exposure. We need to drastically change our our mindset on on what our role is. We have to bring it up. There's a research that I found that's just sort of silly in how simple it is, but it was that having a conversation about sex is significantly more impactful in their behaviors than not having it at all. So I think a lot of parents think, well, it's super awkward.

It's like, well, if it's not awkward, you're probably not doing it right. And if you what you want is maybe that behavior or or the hiding to disappear, having the conversation is a must. It's also not a one time thing. It's a constant thing. They should be maybe annoyed how much you're talking about the realities of sports gambling, pornography, video game addiction, cell phone addiction.

Hey, this is just gonna be something we bring to light, especially because parents are struggling with that too. Right. So I think opening up that conversation in a non judgmental way is crucial.

Matt (host): Yeah. I think that's one thing that's really hard for parents to navigate is, you know, you wanna develop, in your child, you wanna develop the ability to deal with these these sort of temptations that are that are omnipresent, right? They're all around us. You want to have sort of an organic ability to deal with these temptations because, know, at some point, if you restrict access to them at some point in their lives as they grow up, you know, that that your your limits on that, they're gonna it's it's gonna not gonna be in their lives anymore. Typically, it's when kids go to college, but sometimes it's if they, you know, move somewhere else, you know, traveling, whatever, they're exposed to these things.

And so I think you wanna try to develop, you know, or cultivate sort of the inner ability to, to deal with, with these, these things rather than, you know, this sort of external limit that the parents are placing on them. Any any thoughts you have on how that might be cultivated or best best dealt with?

Jarrold Hoffman: In terms of how to give them tools and equip them because you're gonna lose them in the sense of, like, you lose your ability to control the situation if they leave the house. Yeah. Just sort of

Matt (host): building it to probably regulate, I guess.

Jarrold Hoffman: Yes. I think prioritizing physical world experiences is so valuable and crucial. Mean, you can have, we're having this conversation virtually and I feel connected to you and it's very possible. But if we were in the same room, would just be something that we could like physically hold onto, if that makes sense. Right.

So it's, I should say a competing argument here is that there is research on therapy being virtual is as effective as in person therapy. And I think that speaks to the connection that you feel. But when I say physical, I think of driving, for example. We are much more willing to let our teenager play GTA and do whatever they want in a car and beyond, but we're so fearful to give them the keys to a car. Right.

Maybe that's even because of the cost. And whatever it might be, we're more interested in just allowing them to do what they need to on a device than giving them a physical experience of driving. So you think about the child who has maybe been driving at 16 and learning that responsibility that's gonna come with being in the real world. They're already in the real world, and now we're adding this layer of responsibility and trust versus, you know what? This is really hard.

You are really scared about this thing. I'm not gonna push you. I think that goes down to purpose. If I'm stuck in my room playing GTA and the physical world of driving and responsibility that comes with it, of course, it's gonna be scary. I don't have that option.

I'm not gonna feel very much purpose. A story for me is I think I had a bad attitude with my mom and she, we were lined up. We had the beat up car in the driveway. I don't know if it started. And we were ready to go.

And she decided, hey, you have a bad attitude. You're not taking the trash out. Something's gotta change if you wanna drive your car to school. And so I think it took me six months to kind of figure that out and have a better attitude. And once that was solved, I got the keys to the car.

And so, you know, there's a statistic particularly on driver's licenses.

Matt (host): And what are saying about

Jarrold Hoffman: Boys are waiting These are bonding. To get their driver's license. Promoting those That has

Matt (host): to do with cherishing those. Yeah. So before we wrap up, couple of questions I just wanted to to get your take on. What what do you think parents should hear, from from what we've been talking about today? What do you think is the most important thing, they should they should, value when supporting their sons?

What are the most important keys giving them support? So that's, sort of part one. Then part two would be what gives you we've talked so much about what's wrong with boys today. What what gives you hope of being able to cultivate our boys into, you know, young, good male role models for the future?

Jarrold Hoffman: Yeah. Two things I think I would share with parents. Number one, you are the most important human relationship on the planet. Yeah. I can do great work in the counseling relationship as they sit on my couch, but they are not going to be talking about their connection with their counselor over their connection with their parent in ten years.

Maybe it's a good instance of healing, whatnot, but they're gonna be navigating their relationship with you for the rest of their life.

Matt (host): Right.

Jarrold Hoffman: You are the most important human on the planet out of like 8,000,000,000 people. So fostering that relationship is a game changer. The second thing I would tell parents, and this is a practical tool and I'll keep it as short as I can here, There's this idea in motivational interviewing, which is a style, almost a theory of counseling that I use all the time. It's the idea that the person sitting across from us, whether that's the teen in our lives or the

person in the therapy room or the student that we're teaching is on the verge of trying to make a change. And change doesn't happen most of the time because of it gaining any knowledge.

Most of the people sitting across from us have all the knowledge they need, and the example is if a teen needs to make a change about their school, maybe I need to study more or what whatever the example is, their parents have told them everything they need to know. Their teacher has instructed them everything they need to know. They can write a list of one to 10, what I need to do to get the A. It's not hard. The hard part is deciding that I would rather get the A than be on my phone a little bit more and lose that social connection.

Or get the A and maybe even like practice the sport to get better than goof off and go play a video game. Whatever those examples are. And so the the tool I would give parents is, like, think about they don't need more knowledge. They need more space to discover the reason for making the change. And that won't come from you giving your opinion, giving what worked for you when you were a kid.

It won't be critiquing what they're doing. It won't be making a joke, sarcasm, trying to get them to change. It will be empathy to understand and help reflect that. So the tool is reflecting what they say. You're lost in a conversation, you naturally go to just trying to tell them.

I would challenge you to reflect back what you hear. So if they're struggling with a decision, just repeat back what you heard them say. So it might go something like this. Yeah, I just, I wanna go to the party and I don't wanna study. You're really having a hard time deciding whether to go to the party or study.

Often, they just fill in the rest, and they keep talking, especially if that relationship has been built. We wanna go give our opinion instead of try to understand. And the best part about reflecting back what you hear, word for word if it requires that. You are struggling to decide to go to the party or study. If you do that, they're gonna feel understood.

Or you're wrong. No. Actually, I'm disappointed for x y z. Oh, okay. You're not frustrated.

You're disappointed. Tell me more about that. So I would challenge a tool, reflect back what you hear, and just know they don't need more knowledge. They need more space to discover, and you can help them do that, 100%.

Matt (host): Yeah, important point. So what gives you hope about boys today? That's a loaded question, I know.

Jarrold Hoffman: Yeah, teen boys haven't lost the ability to change their lives. If you, a counselor, or a teacher, or a parent, even, you're gonna be burned out if you think that teens in this day and age just don't have the ability to make a change in their life. They 100% do. It's the reason I keep showing up. When teens come in, they decide to make a change, they do it, they see their progress, and then I don't see

Matt (host): them again, because Right. They got better. I'm encouraged. Validating to your work, certainly, so you don't wanna see them for for for too long. Right?

Jarrold Hoffman: Yes. Exactly. Yeah. And so I think, you know, a positive thing that has come from maybe some of the cultural things that we've experienced the last several years is is maybe I see teens more open to share about their feelings. They're willing to talk about that.

Maybe not quite as much to adults, but certainly with each other, the amount of times that they say things that I go, I had to go through a master's degree to learn that word. And they know it. Yeah. And they wanna talk about it. And I think that's just super encouraging.

I think we'll see, you know, if we can work through some of the other things that they have been exposed to, I think we'll see a generation of people who are willing to talk about hard things because they've just been in it and they're willing to talk about it. I think that's gonna be exciting. Say that again.

Matt (host): Yeah. More dialogue equals better collective, you know, behavioral and mental health for sure. That's why we're doing this today. Well, Jarrod, I wanna thank you for our conversation today. It's been really important, really, really thoughtful, and thank you for sharing your insights and anyone who wants to learn more about your work or connect with you, what's the best way to do that?

Jarrold Hoffman: Yeah. My website is Jared Hoffman. I'm on LinkedIn. If you're a LinkedIn person, you can email me. My email is jaredjaredhoffman dot com.

I'd love to hear about what's working for your teen, what's not. I offer therapy virtual and in person in Memphis, so the state of Tennessee. If someone you know or love is in need of therapy, they can reach out to me about that. In the state of Tennessee, otherwise, if you're in need of coaching services as a parent or yeah, honestly, if you just need resources and you wanna talk, please feel free to email me. I do run some parent kind of workshops or offer talks as well as some teen group type things.

And so, yeah, just stay in touch and and feel free to sign up for a newsletter if you need it. Do that about once a month, that's available on my my website.

Matt (host): Excellent. Well, thanks again, Jarrod, and, we'd love to have you on again. Please, come join us again. I know there's so many things that we can we can delve, more deeply into. And for our listeners, thank you for tuning in.

And if you found this episode helpful, please do subscribe, share it with a friend, and leave a rating wherever you get your podcasts. We'll see you next time on the Nimble Youth Podcast. Until then, please take care of yourselves and the young people in your lives. Bye for now.