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[00:00:05] **Todd:** Here we go. My name's Todd. This is Cathy. Welcome back to another episode of Zen Parenting Radio. This is podcast number 746. Why listen to Zen Parenting Radio because you'll feel outstanding and always remember our motto, which is the best predictor of a child's wellbeing, is a parent's self-understanding.

[00:00:29] **Todd:** On today's show, we have the wonderful friend of ours, Dr. John Duffy. The one and only. The one and

[00:00:37] **John:** only. Hi guys!

[00:00:39] **Todd:** Good to have you back. I don't know how many times this has been. I was texting with John yesterday from my couch and we were talking about this upcoming conference that he's a big part of this weekend.

[00:00:51] **Todd:** And we were supposed to have an interview with John in December and he had some things pop up on his schedule. So did not allow us to have that. I'm like, Hey, how about recording? How about getting one more podcast in before the conference as a vehicle promotion, but also to promote your book, which is what, why we're here today.

[00:01:08] **Todd:** So it's so good to see you. Thank you so much, John, for showing up.

[00:01:13] **John:** It's good to see your faces. I miss you guys.

[00:01:15] **Cathy:** We miss you too. You know how SNL has the people who come on five times and then they get a coat. Yes. John needs to have a coat. We gotta

[00:01:22] **Todd:** get, I can get some in the closet. How about some ZPR socks?

[00:01:25] **Todd:** Yeah, we'll give him a pair of socks. Yeah,

[00:01:26] **John:** that's fine. I dig that. I'll wear them.

[00:01:28] **Todd:** Warm fuzzy socks. So we're gonna be all over the place. John wrote this amazing book called Rescuing Our Sons and the subtitle is Eight

Solutions to Our Crisis of Disaffected teen boys. It's a topic that's near and dear to my heart as I lead Men Living, which is an organization that I co founded way back when.

[00:01:47] **Todd:** This is the third of John's books, is that right? Third? Okay. First one was The Available Parent. Yeah. One was, what was the second one called again?

[00:01:57] **John:** Parenting the New Teen Age of Anxiety. [00:02:00] Yes.

[00:02:00] **Todd:** And now you have directed your attention to boys and at the risk of being a really kind and a canned question, why?

[00:02:07] **Todd:** Why did you direct your attention to the boys instead of the girls?

[00:02:11] **John:** I I can understand I, in writing the book, I anticipated this question. I actually was afraid it was going to be a a challenge Hey, this is a time for girls, right? This is a me too movement time.

[00:02:26] **John:** This is a breaking glass ceilings time. Why is it some middle aged white guy writing about boys? Like I've been worried about this question, to be honest, Todd But, the truth of the matter is I noticed in the past few years that the boys I'm working with have flattened out. They their affect is flattened out.

[00:02:47] **John:** They are disengaged, disconnected, unhappy. And the thing that worries me most is they don't seem to be hopeful. The boys and the girls I'm working with are all going through all the things, but the boys don't have light in their eyes. The girls do. They see this path and the boys don't seem to see a path.

[00:03:09] **John:** And so they are opting out of important elements of their lives and sometimes all of the important elements of their

[00:03:16] **Todd:** lives. Yeah. And I read this book over my Thanksgiving break and what I liked about it, John, first of all, it's a wonderful book and everybody should go get it. Is I also read Richard Reeve's books of boys and men and he's really research based and what I, and Kathy and I basically tell experiences and anecdotes, anecdotes from our own lives of being parents and everything else.

[00:03:37] **Todd:** And I feel like you like bridge that gap in between research and day to day parenting experiences because day to day therapeutic. Therapeutic because you have been in a therapeutic office with mostly young men and young women for how long you've been doing this for? 25 years. So you get 25 years of experience so you have a historical understanding of what was going on [00:04:00] in 19, whatever, 95, versus 2023.

[00:04:04] **Todd:** And you've made some shifts. I just love the that it's not Oh, these are all the stats. This is this is what I'm seeing. And I don't know if you can call this research based, but this is experiential based for you. This is what you are seeing. So I just thought it was a wonderful framework.

[00:04:20] **Todd:** And I want to give Kathy an opportunity to ask whatever she wants. But I also want to just frame out how you structured the book, because I think that's pretty important. You want me to do that first, sweetie? Yeah,

[00:04:28] **Cathy:** go ahead. Actually, that was gonna be my question, is before Todd does that John as a writer myself, when I'm looking at somebody else's book, I'm always like, I wonder why or how they got to this, because I know you're like me with, there's so many ideas, you want to throw it all on the wall, like, how do I say all this in a cohesive way?

[00:04:44] **Cathy:** So how did you was this you and your editor with Eight things. Did you condense it from 84 things? Or were you like, really these all fall under similar categories? I just have to, like, how did you come up with

[00:04:56] **John:** it? So initially I was just writing you guys might remember for a while I was writing some pieces for CNN.

[00:05:02] **John:** Yes. I and I pitched this piece. I said, I'm seeing that boys are not like thriving effectively. And they're like, okay, write a piece. And I wrote it. And my wife, Julie and I were looking at it and we're, and she very clearly is you have a lot more to say than this. Like this doesn't cover anything.

[00:05:18] **John:** This is so perfunctory and basic and the stories you're telling me go way deeper. I just started like recording ideas on my phone. And I wrote my publisher and I said, this is just about three or four months ago. And I said, Hey, I got this idea for a book about boys. And that they're struggling.

[00:05:38] **John:** And and they wrote me back and said, Hey, there's a bunch of books about this coming up. This is a crisis. Like how fast can you get this to us? And so I just started. Recording, like recording into my phone, typing when

I could, writing on planes, Kathy, and most of this I wrote in a week and it wasn't very organized.

[00:05:58] **John:** It was just a bunch of ideas [00:06:00] thrown together, and then I had to just organize them, and then my awesome publisher was able to edit in real time so we could get it out onto the market fast.

[00:06:09] **Cathy:** Got it. Okay, good. Yeah. And what better way, right? I love the, that medium of being able to say things out loud and then figure out how to write it, but it's just, you did, and again, it's just a big compliment that I wanted to give you because sometimes I really struggle bringing things together.

[00:06:26] **Cathy:** And I told Todd this, when your book came out, I'm like, He like, because your book is not simplistic, but it's simple. It's like not, I'm very, I get very dense in my writing where, like where it's so it's like layers and you're like, no, here's the things, here's what I saw. And I just always, you're a good role model for me.

[00:06:45] **Cathy:** So I

[00:06:45] **Todd:** want to jump in. So there's five parts to it. And I feel like the first three set up the last two. And I was like, if I'm looking through a table of contents okay, what, which section would I have most wanted? If I only could only read one part of the book, it would probably be going to parts four and five, but the first three set everything up.

[00:07:01] **Todd:** So part one is an emerging realization. Part two is the boy problem described, which is great. Part three, which is probably the most foundational piece, which is gaps. And he talks about the emotional intelligence gap. The loneliness gap, the hopelessness gap, opting out, joylessness, and then even post pandemic, which is, says how current it is.

[00:07:24] **Todd:** And then part four, the problems. And I feel like we could do a 20 week podcast series on the problems. And instead we're going to condense in this one small part of this conversation, but porn, body image. Yes, boys have body image issues. Yeah, for sure. Weed, mass shooter, video games. Sexual assault, bullying, and even sports betting, which I'm like, wow, that's interesting and it totally makes sense.

[00:07:48] **Todd:** Oh, for sure. And then finally, part five is the solutions. So that's how it's framed out. And what I did to prepare for this interview, even though I didn't really need to, I know that we can just go as soon [00:08:00] as

we want to go and we can go for an hour and not think about it. But I basically just highlighted some pieces that I'm like, oh, wow, this is super.

[00:08:08] **Todd:** powerful to me. And I don't even know what section this is in. And so I'm Sweetie, do you want to start with what you wanted to start with?

[00:08:16] **Cathy:** Let me just say this, like in, under the problems, Duffy, like I'm, all of the problems to me they culminate in a need to feel alive. And don't get me wrong that I think being a mass shooter is like, there's nothing positive about these things, but there's this, like you said, there's such a flat affect and all of these things, porn, focusing on weightlifting and bodybuilding and gambling and video games and sexual, conquest.

[00:08:44] **Cathy:** These, this is a feeling of, I want to feel something. It's like, why, in a much smaller version, why people go on a rollercoaster or watch a horror movie? They're like, I want to feel so is this, is that. Can boys articulate that, or are you helping them do that, or am I on the right track here?

[00:09:00] **Cathy:** I guess I should ask. You're

[00:09:01] **John:** 100 percent on the right track. Boys, the image I had when I was writing about the problems was A boy just screaming out in despair, like wanting to be heard and wanting to know who am I? Who am I supposed to be? And how do I fit into this world now? I don't want what I see that men have out there, like I so I want something and I'm desperate for it.

[00:09:27] **John:** And and so it's going to come out, this anxiety, this angst is going to come out somehow, because I can't contain myself, right? This energy is just building up while I'm laying in this bed or on this couch and I'm playing this video game or I'm watching this porn. I want those connections in my life.

[00:09:45] **John:** I just don't know how to get it, so all I have are these tools and these are failing me miserably.

[00:09:52] **Todd:** Yes. So I want to jump in, you start the book out with this, actually we were having dinner with Kathy and I and you and Julie, your wife, [00:10:00] and you told us about your Tuesdays. Yeah. And you opened the book with it.

[00:10:04] **Todd:** And I think it's just a really sweet way to encapsulate maybe what motivated you to spend as much time and energy on this book. So why, what happened on your Tuesdays

[00:10:12] **John:** of work? Every day before work, I get a Venti iced coffee from Starbucks. So I see a lot of clients same number of clients every day.

[00:10:21] **John:** And that, that is my little insurance policy that I'm going to make it through the day and be as present and available and alert for my last client as I was for my first. Tuesdays, I noticed. I'm draining that thing. Like I am drinking that whole thing and sometimes I'm sneaking to the Keurig machine in the lobby and I'm making another little cup of coffee to make it through the day.

[00:10:44] **John:** And what I realized, you guys, is my Wednesdays were completely different. I would hardly drink any coffee all day on Wednesdays. And I'm like, okay, what the fuck? I'm sorry. What's the difference here? And. So I dug out my calendar. This honestly happened one Sunday when I'm doing my little bit of paperwork for the month and I noticed, oh, I see boys and only boys on Tuesdays, not by any deliberation or anything.

[00:11:11] **John:** It just happens to be true. And I see girls and young women on Wednesday. That was the only difference and then I was thinking, why is it so draining to work with boys? Why do I come home dispirited and exhausted and sometimes a little hopeless myself after a day of working with boys? And so that was the impetus to write the article in the first place and then finally write the book is that there are these Disparities.

[00:11:38] **John:** And the biggest one is just emotional language. The girls have this rich, deep well of emotional language. So we can go through this entire arc of a story in an hour. And it's not like pulling teeth. Like girls will tell me like when the hour's up, okay, we got to go. I'll talk to you next week. Like they handle the whole thing.

[00:11:58] **John:** They know [00:12:00] they're comfortable in an emotional space. And my boys. are not comfortable in an emotional space. And it's heartbreaking because they're all such sweet kids who I can tell they're feeling the things and they can't quite get there. They can't quite articulate it. So we spend most of our time just marrying up the language that we're using.

[00:12:21] **John:** And that is draining. That is exhausting for them and dispiriting for them. And I think it is for me as well. So Tuesdays are hard.

[00:12:30] **Todd:** Yeah maybe I want to put a pin on that because I think what you're talking about is emotional intelligence and maybe it starts with emotional literacy and then it goes to emotional intelligence and in my judgment, our

daughters are much better equipped to be emotionally intelligent, conditioned and equipped culturally,

[00:12:45] **Cathy:** societally, and also just practice.

[00:12:47] **Cathy:** Yeah.

[00:12:47] **Todd:** So where I want to start is what? And I'll, what I want to do is just read your words back to you. And it's like a sentence or a few sentences and then tell me in what context or to expand on it. And I think this one, it's just a sentence that I'm going to read, but it's about what boys are hearing from society about their value.

[00:13:07] **Todd:** Okay. That's my setup to your quote. And your quote is, do these boys remain on the sidelines? Do they march in support? Should they just shut up? Boys come into my office feeling as if they themselves are the problem. I'm wondering if you can expound on that. Yeah.

[00:13:23] **John:** Todd, you mentioned a minute ago, you were talking about the difference between a guy who writes from a point of view of research and somebody who writes and what I.

[00:13:33] **John:** My point of view is what I am hearing from these young people, right? And what I'm hearing from these boys is that set of questions that, ultimately from an identity, like, where do I belong in this world kind of thing? Boys are I'm not sure what masculinity is. I'm not sure what role I'm supposed to play culturally right now.

[00:13:53] **John:** I'm not sure I'm not toxic. I'm not sure I'm not supposed to just shut the hell up and step out of the picture [00:14:00] altogether. And a lot of parents are like, I don't think my guy feels that way, but most of these guys do articulate that when we finally get down to what they really feel and why they're opting out.

[00:14:11] **John:** It's because they're not sure what their place is at all. They're not sure what role they're supposed to play in a family, in their friend group, in society and going forward into the future. They can't. They can't envision what their role is supposed to be. And if you think about how disorienting that is, like really, truly okay, I don't know.

[00:14:34] **John:** I can't think of what the Glennon Doyle talks about that, the next right thing to do. And if you're a 16 year old boy right now, and you're a

thoughtful person, which most of them are, you're not sure what the next right thing to do is. And so it might be. I'm just going to sit here and watch porn until something comes to me, something like that feels like a right thing comes to me because I'm not really getting many cues about what it's supposed to be.

[00:15:00] **Cathy:** Yeah. I remember John, like we continue to do this, but like about a year ago, we played a game with our virtual community teams and talked about, we said, who are the best male role models right now? And. People can come up with people, but they say people that are old. That no boy cares about Lin Manuel Miranda right now.

[00:15:19] **Cathy:** I shouldn't say no boy, of course there are boys and men who care, but it's a little outdated. Even The Rock is a little outdated. Like these people who are, thoughtful and articulate, emotional intelligence and all the And it's funny because this was before Travis Kelsey became famous for all the reasons is a few people said Jason and Travis Kelsey.

[00:15:36] **Cathy:** And I somewhat agree with that. I think that they have been good role models, but other than them, who do these boys have to look up to? Who in the world do you, who do they, and I know some of the people that look up to are very toxic, but what do you hear from

[00:15:52] **John:** them? Part of the problem is that what draws boys in are a lot of [00:16:00] podcasts and a lot of YouTube videos and a and the podcast the Rogan podcast.

[00:16:06] **John:** The Rogan. Yeah. The, the Bar Stool Sports guys, yep. Dave Portnoy. These guys are. Fun and funny and interesting and curious and it's they're a big draw for most boys. So a lot of boys for hours a day, these guys sit around and talk forever. And these are the voices that are leading.

[00:16:27] **John:** Most of our boys, and to most of our boys, they're by and large positive role models. And 99.7 percent of the time, it feels that way, but you can also feel this undercurrent. Like it's so subtle and it shows up just on occasion. It's Ooh, wait a minute. Was that like misogynistic?

[00:16:46] **John:** Was that really toxic? Was that like vitriolic? I. I don't know. And then these things kind of sneak in and bubble up a little bit more and more. And then there's a guest Alex Jones shows up on Rogan's podcast. You're like, what is, what's going on? And our 14 year olds are listening to this and we're giving some air to these negative messages.

[00:17:05] **John:** A lot of the boys I'm working with are. Looking for those voices that are positive male role models. They're not, they're really struggling, honestly, to find them. They're turning to really alpha male y, old school, toxic masculinity, vitriolic role models, unfortunately, and they feel the dissonance.

[00:17:31] **John:** They feel like that's not who we are. And yet these are the people who are talking at us. These are, this is the thing that everybody's listening to. If I want to be able to hang out with my boys. I got to know something about what these guys are talking about. So that's part of the problem is they're, they have a little bit of a cultural vacuum.

[00:17:50] **John:** It's not open enough.

[00:17:52] **Todd:** I'm scanning through. So Cathy and I had this thing called Team Zen and I posted who are the positive role models out there? And I'm just scanned through them. And [00:18:00] these are some. Of the people that our team said might be in that bucket. Peter Atia. I don't, I think most kids don't know who Peter Atia is.

[00:18:07] **Todd:** Again, it's too old. It's too old. Let's see. Dekeanu Reeves. Too old. Too

[00:18:14] **John:** old. I'm sorry. He's not in there. He's not in their orbit.

[00:18:18] **Todd:** Steph Curry. Okay. It's not bad. Steve. No, not bad. Steve

[00:18:22] **Cathy:** Kerr. But still our generation. Like he's a good dad kind of role model. Ted Lasso.

[00:18:30] **Todd:** Ted Lasso. It's pretty good. Ted Lasso's pretty good.

[00:18:33] **Todd:** I'm trying to see if there's any. And that's it. And it's such a sad, like it's so much easier for me to come up with the examples of Donald Trump, Jordan Peterson it's easier to remember the ones who I do have more of a harmful impact than the positive ones.

[00:18:48] **Cathy:** Yeah. And here's the thing, John, like from the, from a understanding human behavior perspective, I get it.

[00:18:53] **Cathy:** If boys are feeling that there's a lot of like commentary about how they're doing it wrong or patriarchy is a problem or toxic masculinity. And then you have people you listen to who say, Hey, listen, you're good. And you

need to hold onto that masculinity and you need to. Speak up for yourself. Human behavior wise, it makes total sense why boys would be drawn to that, which is something that we talk to our, to our clients, to our team about all the time is, this is less about saying, how could you listen to those guys, and more about being curious.

[00:19:22] **Cathy:** You do an excellent job at this, John. You've always, your clients are always interested in things you may not be interested in, but you stay curious, correct? Like, how do you manage that? Yeah.

[00:19:31] **John:** That's why I, like I listen to all these podcasts. Like I when a boy tells me he's interested in something, when a kid tells me they're interested in something, I go and chase that down.

[00:19:40] **John:** Like I, and this is what I want parents to do because I want parents voices in the mix all the time. So the idea that like, I can't stand he's playing those video games. So I'm not going to have anything to do with it is such a misguided. Yeah. Notion, right? Because it's oh, your parents weren't into whatever music you were listening to, [00:20:00] and how did that work out?

[00:20:01] **John:** So get into what they're into, and usually you will find a thread or a vein that helps you understand and it gives you a set of questions, it gives, it opens a discussion of all right. Walk me through this. What draws you into this particular guy or this game?

[00:20:17] **John:** What is, what do you love about this particular game? And that curiosity will lead you to someplace good, because these kids are amazing. I, again I've said this before. I haven't worked with a kid I haven't fallen in love with ever, like not one time, and but you have to get into their world to understand oh, this is why you present such an ass, like I get it now.

[00:20:41] **John:** That is, that armor is necessary in your world because of X and Y. I get it. I understand. But if you don't go for that depth of understanding then you'll just judge. And that is just a connector, right? And what the connection is, what our boys need more than anything, man.

[00:21:03] **John:** They're so disconnected. Everything is a screen. Everything is one dimensional still for them. We hear like they're not even, they're not having sex. They're not dating. I had a girl say to me, I don't know, maybe two weeks ago, she's 16 years old. Beautiful girl. And she's like, Where are the boys?

[00:21:19] **John:** Like, why are they not calling us? And we're awesome and we're fabulous and we're hot. And where are they? They're not, they're not looking toward us at all. What's going on, and she was right, like the boys are so anxious about connecting in a genuine way and so unsure about how to do it that they opt out and they don't.

[00:21:42] **John:** And you have to understand why, so you don't just judge it and say, just do it, just do the thing, it's not that

[00:21:48] **Cathy:** easy. It isn't. And it's so funny cause I have three daughters. So as and you know them well, is that I, it's funny to hear from their side because it, now that I have two that are adults, 18, 19, 20, they, the boys come [00:22:00] along.

[00:22:00] **Cathy:** But so much later than they did in other generations. Like by the time they're 17, 18, it's okay, now we'll go to prom. Like they make it to the last event, but it's they're so behind. And I don't mean because we failed as parents or because these kids are, it's just, they're just a little, they're just more behind than they used to be.

[00:22:20] **Cathy:** Thus your book. This is why we're having this conversation. And one of the things that I want to say about these role models is like the thing about listening like you do to the podcast or watching what these kids are watching is you can pull out the gold like what I know about, Barstool because I watch enough is that Dave Portnoy has Taylor Swift's back.

[00:22:40] **Cathy:** Okay, he adores her. He thinks she's amazing and he thinks she's amazing not because she's hot. But because she's talented and she's done this and this. So you pull, you, you hear him being able to, he says misogynistic things sometimes, I don't love all their content, but to be able to talk to your kid about the difference, like Dave is not perfect and neither are a lot of these guys.

[00:23:01] **Cathy:** And can you hear, because like you said, the boys are smart enough to hear that they feel that dissonance. Like I follow this part, but when they say this, that's how our kids learn how to have critical thinking.

[00:23:13] **John:** Yes, Kathy that if I could just if I could just like piggyback on that. Yes. A lot of boys, and one boy in particular who is very articulate.

[00:23:22] **John:** He said we, we don't need to learn the way you guys learn like we, we have the internet we can figure things out we can we so so you know like a lot of what happens in school is superfluous and unnecessary and drives

us crazy and that's why Bye. We're all taking medication for ADHD because we're not that interested in what you're teaching us.

[00:23:43] **John:** But we're not very good at discernment. And that's what we need to be able to do. We need to be able to listen to Dave Portnoy and discern what do we agree with? What don't we agree with? And that can all be part of our lives, that we can and we can seek out other.

[00:23:59] **John:** Positive [00:24:00] male role models and see what we agree with and what we disagree with and discernment is the missing piece of what, especially boys, but I think all our kids need to learn, right? It's okay, how do I pick out and decide it? What resonates with me. And part of that is what you were talking about, Todd, that emotional intelligence, being able to read yourself is huge and understand besides just sad, mad, glad, some with some depth.

[00:24:28] **John:** This is how I feel about this thing. And ooh, What he just said there, that hits me differently. I don't love that. You know what I mean? That little that didn't feel very good. That, that gut feeling, it needs to be taught to our kids. And then they'll get it. They're so close, you guys.

[00:24:44] **John:** They're right there and hungry for it, right? They, to your point, Cathy they want to live their lives. They want to engage, but they need a few tools before they're ready to.

[00:24:56] **Todd:** So there's a few things. One is one thing you taught me, John, I don't know how many years ago it was, but I would be talking to a mom or a dad and I just, my son, my 15 year old son is just so shut down and there's nothing available.

[00:25:09] **Todd:** I just cannot even start connecting with them. And one thing that you taught me was you just got to find a thread and you just got to Find that thread and pull on it, whatever that is. And if it's Kanye or if it's gaming or if it's sports and that's what you're talking about. So I just want to say thank you for that.

[00:25:25] **Todd:** Cause I, I repeat that a lot. Like just find one thing. Cause you can always find that one thing. And the fact that you're listening to these podcasts and I'm guessing some of the parents are not listening to these podcasts is a shame because they want you to fix them because their kid goes there every two weeks when in fact they have a much more.

[00:25:42] **Todd:** Opportunity for influence, and you do and then the other thing is I can't skip a chance to ask you about the term toxic masculinity because it's not a phrase that I'm against using when I'm speaking to groups of people. However, there are people that I respect dearly, like Jackson Katz, and he says that phrase [00:26:00] does more damage than it does good, and I just wonder, do you even have a position on whether or not you use that phrase, toxic masculinity, and why you hold the position that you do?

[00:26:09] **John:** I don't love the phrase because of what it suggests, but it is a phrase that boys and young men use a lot, like they think about and so I can't ignore that phrase, because it's, unfortunately, it encapsulates for them, it pulls together a bunch of pieces of things and suggests You might be this.

[00:26:31] **John:** This might all those little things that make you feel a little insecure about yourself, it might all be part of this core thing that you're not willing to recognize about yourself, that you are inherently not good. And that's what a lot of boys are worried about. Is they're either not good or, I think more to the point, Not helpful and not necessary.

[00:26:59] **John:** That's the idea I get from a lot of kids is a lot of the kids I work with, the boys in particular, have what I call passive suicidal ideation, which is, I'm not going to do anything, but if I walk out of here and a bus hits me. That's fine. You know what I mean? It's like that, not this deep value for their lives and that they have something to add to the culture and they have value, but I don't think I'm important in general, and I think it's, we have to show them that they are, that's what the, I, every conference, I think I've talked about lighting up for your kids. You gotta light up for your kids and let them know that they matter and that they're important. And I say it with a degree of like Desperation, because they don't know

[00:27:43] **Cathy:** it.

[00:27:44] [00:28:00]