



Nat Damon:

Welcome to another episode of Reach. Teach. Talk. Today we have as our guest, Dr. Judy Chu, who is a lecturer in the program of human biology in human biology at Stanford University, where she currently teaches a course on boys psychosocial development. You can learn from that title that we are going to focus today on boys and particularly on boys and relationships. Boys relational beings, boys always as relational beings. How boys relationships with themselves impact or influence the way that they relate to others. What are the influences on boys as they develop themselves as relational beings? And one of the more fascinating elements of her research in my opinion is how she's able to connect early child boyhood with adolescence. And in fact, the title of Judy's book from 2014 *When Boys Become Boys*, just really, really speaks to that point because there's boys like toddlers, they're joy filled, they're exuberant, the ones you see on the playground pretending to be so superheroes or back in my day, Luke Skywalker or Han Solo.

Nat Damon:

And then you have boys like the all caps boys, like the boys as defined boys. And you can tell by my tone, that there's a heaviness as well as a solidity, a gravitas to being a boy. And Judy and I are going to speak today. We're going to have amazingly delightful and thought provoking conversation about boyhood today, 2022, right now it is literally we're an early March, 2022, God willing knock on wood moving into the endemic phase of what has been so impactful on development. All of our development, particularly youth and young adults, and with the incorporation of isolation and remote teaching and learning and the stress and parental stress, anxiety all around, how have boy is come out of this? Or what are they currently weathering?

Nat Damon:

And how can we as a society and as the adults in society, whether we're teachers, parents, or just people who work with, or are in the company of boys, how can we really draw from what Judy is going to share with us today to relate to boys better in hopes that they can in turn relate to this very interesting society in which we are currently living. So without much further ado, Judy, I'm thrilled to welcome you. And by the way, it's a beautiful day in Los Angeles. I'm speaking to Judy, she's up in San Francisco. So it's kind of nice to have an early, early spring day here as backdrop to what will be a very spring like conversation. So welcome Judy to our program.

Judy Chu:

Thank you so much. I'm really glad to be here.

Nat Damon:

I would love to just start with your interest in focusing on boys and particularly the idea of boys relationships. And where did this come from? Did you grow up with brothers? Did you have an influence as a child yourself? Let's start where you began.

Judy Chu:

Okay. Yeah. Well, I do have a brother as well as a sister. My brother's nine years younger. And I often tell this story of how I came to study boys and their relationships. And it was very much that I was led to it by boys themselves when my brother was about 13 years old and I had just finished my first year as a doctoral student at Harvard, I came home that summer and was driving him and a bunch of his friends around. And they were wondering what I had learned at Harvard. And I said, "Well, I met this woman named Carol Gilligan, and she's done this amazing work with girls and supporting girls and the importance of that." And one of the boys said to me, "That's great. I know that everyone's really concerned about girls and it's important for people to be doing that, but there's stuff going on for boys too. And nobody's talking to us, nobody's looking at boys."

Judy Chu:

And so he's like, "You should study boys and you can start with me." And it had not occurred to me, being influenced by stereotypes of adolescent boys, it had not occurred to me that an adolescent boy would want to talk to me about his life and about his relationships. But that's exactly what came up in the first interview that I had with him was he smoked for two hours. And it was everything from his friendships to his crushes to his family relationships and all these things that were so central to his development. And I thought... And this is very consistent with what Carol Gilligan's work was about. Was how central relationships are to all people's lives, not just girls and women, even though the stereotypes tend to say, "Oh, relationships, those are realm of girls and women. Emotions, those are about girls and women."

Judy Chu:

But of course all genders have emotions and need relationships in order to thrive. Anyway, so it was very much boys telling me, "Hey, this has been overlooked and possibly by you too and why don't you come and take a look?" And they were so appealing in that way. I was definitely drawn in immediately and interested to hear what they had to say. And so that's how I started looking at boys relationships, boys development, how they experience the messages about what it means to be a boy and things like that.

Nat Damon:

I love, I love that story because it prompts me to think or to ask actually, what was it that he was hoping to gain in a sense from recommending that you study boys? Was there a specific answer to his question that he was looking for or was he just looking to be listened to?

Judy Chu:

That is a great question. I think, one, definitely, he wanted to be listened to. And two, there were definitely issues that were coming up for him that he thought, not that I had the answers to them, but that maybe talking through it with somebody would help. So having a sounding board and say like, "Is this reasonable for me to be wondering about this? Do I just need to suck it up and figure it out?" And definitely, in my listening to him talk about it, he would almost debate both sides, right. Like here's something, at the time, one of the things that came up was he goes, "I really love Anne Rice novels and

it's about these vampires, but what I love about it is these relationships and these men have these friendships." And it's really intriguing to him because, but then he immediately backpedals and says, "Oh, but why would a man want that? Why would a boy want that?"

Judy Chu:

So this very much this ebb and flow of here's something that intrigues me, I'm drawn to it, but I also already know that society or other people might not always be very accepting of it. So to speak to what you were saying, I think this might have been before we started recording, but this idea of the way boys are said to be versus the way they experience themselves to be and what they recognize to be the reality of their lives. And they're working very much to reconcile all those. Is there a way that those two things come together? And sometimes this particular kid would say, he was tentatively concluding, but still a little resistant to concluding that maybe that's just a part of growing up is coming to accept that there's always going to be a gap or a discrepancy between the way people say boys are, or the way people see you as and the way you know yourself to be or wish to be seen.

Judy Chu:

And so actually, when you were talking about the title of my book, that second, all caps boys originally had quotes around it. So it's like when boys, human boy, human beings become quote unquote boys, the way boys are said to be or expected to be or presumed to be, all these more stereotypical boys, the boys that we come to recognize as, oh, boys will be boys. But it's actually rather inconsistent with what their capacities and desires that they're born with to express themselves fully, to be known in these relationships that turn out to be protective and essential to their health and wellbeing. So it's really interesting to look at how their developmental trajectory maybe leads them away from some of the things that are actually not feminine weaknesses, but human strengths that they'll need in their personal lives as well as their professional lives.

Nat Damon:

That's excellent. When I think about those strengths, I'm thinking about all those unheralded strength that might not be defined as masculine strengths, am I right to think about going to Brené Brown, particularly thinking about vulnerability and humility or strength in listening versus speaking, are those the types of strengths that you're referring to?

Judy Chu:

Absolutely, absolutely. Brené Brown's work on vulnerability is so important because like boys' relational strengths, boys' vulnerability often gets overlooked or discounted or undervalued. And as you know, from her work, it's so important. I mean, if we're going to learn, learning is a vulnerable process because it starts with admitting we don't know something and it involves possibly revealing to other people that you don't know it and having them witness you struggling as you try to get better at that or to acquire certain knowledge and skills. And so learning vulnerability is essential to love and in a complimentary way, the relational strengths, like this ability to respond to people and to read the world and be attuned and sensitive, not only to their own feelings, but also to other peoples. These are all things that are essential to cultivating the connections both to themselves, like in terms of maintaining their sense of integrity and knowing who they are and what they want, which is not easy, easier said than done, and also relating to other people.

Judy Chu:

I mean, being able to tune into themselves, respond to other people. These are all things, qualities that are human qualities that are very, very much important to their thriving and not merely surviving this path through life, right. And in the inevitable obstacles that we will all face, so challenges and all these things, if you're told that life is going to throw these things at you and those challenges and struggles are real, but a certain group or certain groups of people are not allowed to reach out and ask for help when they need it, that's really, it's horrible actually. And then especially to wrap it around shame, and to say, "Oh, and if you admit that you actually don't know something..." Which everybody doesn't, there are things that we all don't know. There are things that in the learning process, we all have to admit to not being already experts at and prevents them from being able to circumvent any gaps or weaknesses, not weaknesses, but circumvent things that they're not already good at in order to develop the things that they're interested in becoming better at and then also their strengths.

Nat Damon:

Yep. It's interesting because hearing you speak about vulnerability, Reach. Teach. Talk this podcast is about relationships in the classroom and the classroom of life, right? So it's taking what's outside and integrating it to the inside the classroom walls and vice versa. And I find a lot of times I talk with teachers about the power of vulnerability and how you can use that as a connective way to relate to your students, not in a way of like I wasn't prepared I don't know, and that's why I don't know, but instead I actually don't know the answer to that question, isn't that curious? And then you can go from there, why don't you do some research and come back to me tomorrow, or I'll do some research and we can compare notes tomorrow. And that brings us together.

Nat Damon:

And it's interesting because I hadn't thought about it necessarily in that lens of... Because I grew up, I am a man, I'm a self-identified male, and I grew up in a culture where absolutely you need to know the answers, the person who knows the answers is the person who's in charge. And that being in charge is very charged with a masculine kind of connotation. So it's nice, it's really nice to hear you speak of that area of vulnerability, of humility as being one that is really important to explore in healthy boys development.

Judy Chu:

I think, I mean, I really applaud Brene Brown for just kind of normalizing vulnerability because when we can't acknowledge and admit to vulnerability, it just, like I said, it just becomes a huge obstacle that unnecessarily gets in the way of connecting with people and doing the things that we need to do. It also creates this enormous kind of anxiety around revealing that you're not always in control, especially as you're saying, during the pandemic nobody's in control. I mean, it's so uncertain, so tumultuous, so unpredictable. And so to have to always act like you know what's going to happen when it's impossible to do so, creates this tension and unnecessary stress. Whereas if people acknowledge, yeah, this is really hard, then everybody kind of breathes a collective sigh of relief because they realize they're not the only one struggling.

Judy Chu:

And I think that's the other thing, is that a lot of times individuals are made to feel like, oh, everyone else is fine, everyone's got to figure it out, their lives are perfect. And social media certainly exacerbates that kind of dynamic. But individuals, kids especially, but adults too, I mean, the minute we find out somebody else is just like us, trying our best but really there are things that are hard, we don't know

everything and they don't. I think when, as teachers, I know that I always worry like, oh, if I admit that, then they're going to be like, why am I even in this class? Why is she teaching the class? Okay. She doesn't know all the answers. But what I find is exactly the opposite, is then all of a sudden and they're like, "Oh, okay. So if she, if she admits that she doesn't know, then we can figure it out together and I can admit, I don't know."

Judy Chu:

And then it just opens up a whole new realm. And plus they teach each other, and I learn from them. It just creates a much more cooperative, much more, just safe brave environments and all those kinds of things. And I think parents have the same thing, they're afraid that as the authority they have to have all the answers, but what their kids really crave is seeing that, oh, you know what they don't, and this is how they handle it. Because then when I don't have the answers, I know that I don't have to fall apart or hide in shame, I know that there are paths forward to kind of admit that we don't know it and then get some help, I think so.

Nat Damon:

I love that. It's taking the rugged individual and actually putting more of the spotlight on the teaming approach, let's do this together. Oh that individual doesn't know the answer and is inviting me to join him or her on discovering what it might be.

Judy Chu:

Exactly.

Nat Damon:

It gets me thinking about what we touched on earlier, but I'd love to explore a little more deeply Judy, which is this idea of boyhood lowercase boy, the vulnerable boy, the more vulnerable boy, the more sensitive young boy, the more joy filled and perhaps, and definitely a more expressive boy. And what happens, what is your research kind of, if not concluded, where does it lead us to in terms of what happens to boys from three to say 10?

Judy Chu:

I love that. Thank you. You totally set me up to just talk about the things that I love most about learning with these younger boys. I mean, I should say that I started out studying the adolescent boys because they told me, asked me to, but when I found out that they were already talking about it, this is maybe just part of growing up, we just have to accept it. Accepting that discrepancy between how people say they are versus how they experience themselves to be. I spoke to Carol Gilligan who was guiding and supervising my work at the time, and she believed that I needed to look earlier when they're still actively struggling, when those kinds of messages and pressures around masculinity and being a real boy were first coming in and they're saying, wait, this is totally contrary and they were in a place where they were still actively challenging it instead of kind of privately challenging it.

Judy Chu:

And so she felt like, oh, I needed to look at boys in kind of early childhood. I looked at all of the boys in a pre kindergarten class. And some of the things that really surprised me in most wonderful ways was just, like you're saying, how out there they were and how open they were, how they wore their hearts on their sleeves, they would and could tell you exactly what they were thinking and feeling. And that

exuberance made them so appealing, not only to the adults, but to each other. I mean, there's just this, we're just here, we're having a good time, there's no agenda. Nobody is trying to one up the other person, they're just together in the most kind of wholesome, and friendly, and wonderful ways and how much they enjoyed that, and how much that can kind of come alive in those situations.

Judy Chu:

And then in tracking them over that year, is kind of their first, well for most of them, the first years that they been kind of in a school setting, and so kind of learning new rules that maybe were not always the same as what they were hearing at home from their parents. For instance, when boys parents would say, "If it doesn't feel right for you, don't do it. They were very much supportive of him being who he is and doing what he felt was right, and they really wanted to kind of nurture his moral compass and also his right to kind of preserve his integrity and say what he really thought, even if they disagreed. And it didn't mean he'd always be right, but he could always contribute what he honestly thought, right? And coming into a space where they were quickly learning that, oh, there's a way that the boys are expected to be. And if I want to be accepted and I want to fit in, then I kind of have to do these.

Judy Chu:

And it wasn't this coming down of a very strict regime or anything, but there were definite kind of implicit rules of engagement. Like, oh, if you want to fit in with the boys, then you run around at recess, or you play guns, or you see guns everywhere, even they use their hands, they use bananas, they use Legos to make guns, whereas if you want to make sure that you don't get mistaken to be one of the girls, then you issue doll play, you make sure you don't play with the girls. So there was this kind of, they called it the mean team, and it was this club that the boys created in order to distinguish themselves as boys and as being separate and different from the girls. But so, I mean, but that mean team was kind of like a microcosm of what boys in general I think are experiencing around that age, which is, oh, there are these expectations, there are these things that people value or notice, or particularly encourage in boys, and there are things that don't get encouraged in boys.

Judy Chu:

And because they're driven, and this is really important, because they're primarily motivated, not simply by this command, you must prove that you're a boy, that they're driven and motivated because they want to identify and relate to other people, especially their peers. And so they want to be one of the boys, and with the boys, and they want that sense of belonging and acceptance. So it's a very relational motive that drives them to then willingly say, okay, maybe I need to hide this behavior or emphasize that quality more in this context. But ironically, those rules of engagement that we as a society prescribe for boys actually makes it harder for them to establish the very connections that they're in it for, that motivate them in the first place. They're thinking I want to connect, I want to have these emotionally intimate relationships, I want to feel like people know who I am, but society tells me these are the things I need to do to earn that. And then doing those things actually makes it harder for them to feel close, and to feel known, and to feel truly accepted.

Judy Chu:

So this is all going on, kind of at this early childhood stage, but it doesn't stop when they turn six, that's kind of maybe we once described it as... [inaudible 00:20:10] just talking, she goes, "You basically observe the first in a series of disconnections along the pathway of boys developmental trajectory." And I was like, "That's so interesting." Because since she observes it, of course, with her work with

adolescent boys and their friendships, and what happens to that as they, again, at adolescence kind of get their version at that age of how society views boy, boy friendships and how they have to kind of make sure nobody thinks that there are kind of homosexual undertones to that friendship and how that can become an obstacle to maintaining those friendships and to admitting how much they value and love their best friends.

Judy Chu:

So there's a lot of kind of prescriptions for boys that get in the way of what infant studies show is an inherent capacity and desire for connection. And again, that is so important. And the work that I do with the Movember Foundation shows that it's so important, not only during childhood and adolescence, but into their adult lives because loneliness it's real, and it has not only consequences for our mental health, but also for physical health. And so there's a lot of ways in which these prescriptions, however well intended or whatever purposes they may have served at some point, are turning out not to be very helpful. And so we need to at least reconsider them and question whether if it was meant to be helpful, is it actually helpful or is it hurting boys?

Nat Damon:

Wow. I mean, it's really heartbreaking what you're sharing about, because it's coming from a desire to connect as you said, it's coming from a four year old whose heart wants to connect with another four year old's heart and wants to be a friend. And because that four year old, by the time they're four, they know what a friend, or at least they had a solid definition in their head about what friendship is. And they certainly see the value of friendships and they want to be connected. Our brains are wired for connectivity. And yet the heartbreaking aspect of it is, in order to connect, I might need to be ashamed frankly of parts of myself, shame being defined by something about who you are, that is not right. I like to play with dolls or I'm really into fashion, or I love just more of the feminine stereotypical behaviors that four years old that would connect if you could truly be who you are. And...

Judy Chu:

Or even like I'm afraid, or I'm sad. I mean, we've even gendered emotions that...

Nat Damon:

Emotions.

Judy Chu:

... That again are normal for all people to have. And we tell boys, "Oh actually, you can't talk about that. You can't talk about pain. You can't say that scary or you're scared are worried."

Nat Damon:

Right.

Judy Chu:

And that really cuts them off from the kind of full range that they need to access in order to really make sense of what they're feeling and to really engage with other people in authentic ways. But you're absolutely right. I mean, it's like they crave that connection and they crave authenticity in those connections. So it's not like they just want to count, like I have 12 friends or whatever, they seek this

truth, which includes a vulnerability, right? And they know, they recognize immediately, instinctually, when that authenticity is lacking.

Nat Damon:

Yes.

Judy Chu:

And so what's happening as some of the boys are socially adapting to these norms of masculinity, this is what will gain status, or popularity, or acceptance, or that at least what they're told, that moves them away from being able to be fully present and bring themselves in ways that again, at the end of the day, will they feel that someone really knows them or will they feel like they've gained friends, but that those friends don't know them at all? And so we've really put them on this path to kind of feel like who they are is not enough, that they have to become something else or something more in order for people to like them. And so even when they do gain and they do become popular or they do have these friendships, they can still feel lonely and that's kind of the problem, is that we lead them in those wrong directions.

Nat Damon:

That seduction of society's acceptance, right?

Judy Chu:

Right.

Nat Damon:

It's so strong and it does generate on a significant level, majorly significant level, it generates some reward. Yet on the deep level, on the fundamental soulful level of course, so your relationship with yourself is compromised. And it's interesting you talk about Movember, and by the way, you're on the board, the medical board, right, of this incredible nonprofit, is that right?

Judy Chu:

For Movember, I'm on the Global Men's Health Advisory Committee.

Nat Damon:

Amazing.

Judy Chu:

So that's just the wording. But I am on the board of Promundo, of Promundo US.

Nat Damon:

Right.

Judy Chu:

And [inaudible 00:24:54] and so anyway.

Nat Damon:

And I'm thinking about with Movember it's health, it's mental health and physical health, right? And they are absolutely addressing issues that are physical and mental that are impacting the lifespan of men and they speak about how men live five years younger than women generally in the Western world, and how can we really shine a light on and heal these mental health issues that come, that are brought about by elements of masculinity and also prostate cancer, testicular cancer, medical ailments primarily that impact men. And so the work, right, both of those Promundo as well, which I'd love for you to speak about actually, because I know less about Promundo than I do about Movember, but both of these nonprofits they focus, to me, they focus on adult men. And I'm wondering about what we can do as educators, as parents, what has your research led you to conclude about creating as optimally healthy a world for boys, what would go into that?

Judy Chu:

Well, both of the organizations, actually, in addition to having programs for men, they also have expanded and have programs for boys. For instance, Movember has a head of the game, which looks at adolescent boys and goes through kind of their involvement in sports and how they can, for instance, if they notice a friend is having a hard time, conversation starters, how to check in so that boys can support each other and feel to lower those kind of barriers that prevent boys from reaching out when they notice something's [inaudible 00:26:39] to go with their instincts when they're like, "Hey, this is my best friend and something is bothering," but again, the rules of masculinity saying, "Oh, we're not supposed to notice. I don't want him to feel embarrassed by it, so I'm not going to say anything," and they're trying to kind of say, actually it would really help.

Judy Chu:

And it really is important for you know as one of the people who will notice that the differences to do something. And then Promundo has launched their global boyhood initiative, which includes, for instance, they have a deck of cards for teachers and parents, conversation starters, for them to have with the boys in their lives. Because I think again, in general, we tend to feel more entitled to ask girls and women what's going on with you if we notice something's wrong, kind of to intrude on their lives with good intentions. And we tend to be more hands off. And sometimes it's in the name of being respectful, allowing a guy to figure it out, but that's proving to be not what they need. They need the same, again, it's a human quality to need other people, nobody in this world succeeds alone, we all need help at some point.

Judy Chu:

And it's not, I mean, I really love how Ross Zebo talks about this in terms of mental health. He's like, "It's not like there's those people who need help with their mental issues and those people who don't, it's that sometimes life presents really challenging circumstances and anyone, even the most healthy person that we can imagine, given that circumstance is going to struggle and need help. And so it's really not about somehow a defect, or a flaw, or a pathology in the person, if they are struggling, if they might be facing something that's truly challenging and we all need support in those instances.

Judy Chu:

And so again, just normalizing that vulnerability, making it okay so that boys and men in particular, but all people feel like there's no shame in admitting gosh, things feel really overwhelming, I don't know what to do right now and I could really use someone even to just listen, not necessarily someone who

can solve the situation, because sometimes there is no easy solution or any solution at all, but as one of the adolescent boys that I interviewed said, he says just that sense of knowing that somebody understands, is that just comforts, it provides a level of comfort. So it's not like they're saying come and fix my problem, it's to help them build a resilience, a healthy resilience when they inevitably face life's challenges and struggles.

Nat Damon:

That approach, the idea of I'm seeking somebody to listen to me, reminds me of that young man at the beginning, that kind of started your, catalyzed your area of focus and your career. What about us boys? I'd be curious if... Why don't you take a look at what it is to be a boy in society? I am reminded also in what you were just sharing about these organizations that are focused on men's mental health. I was living in London during the time of Brexit and for five years, it was exactly during that period of time where Brexit was voted in. And that whole, just the focus on Brexit was huge. Yet arguably a very, very close second of an area of focus in the UK during the time that I was there was on exactly what you're talking about, Prince William and prince Harry, very vocal and key sports figures as well, and very, very vocal support for a new way of looking at that stiff upper lip in Britain, right? And a real understanding that we need to start opening up here.

Nat Damon:

Our society is so tight about the challenges of growing up as a man in the UK. And I'm reminded of just the incredible work that's been going on across the pond, as you've been speaking about the incredible work going on here in the states and both of these organizations actually being globally focused. So it's encouraging, right, to know that we are able to today really focus on these topics, where 20 years ago, 30 years ago, there were not areas as much focus.

Nat Damon:

And bringing us to where we are today, I would love to explore a little bit with you about what your assessment is about what boys need and young men might need today, these past couple years in particular, with their isolation, and with the anxiety, and with this real decoupling from people and just normal school rituals, again, hopefully we're coming out of this and we're seeing signs of it. Yet what are ways that would be helpful for us as parents, as teachers to work with the young men and the boys in our worlds and help them in ways that they may not express in this period of time?

Judy Chu:

No, that's a great question. And I think that, definitely the last couple years have been, if anything exacerbated the conditions that were there when we started out, right? I mean, kind of people who didn't have social supports or social connections were lonely became even lonelier. And so, I mean, everything just kind of got exaggerated. And I think very much in some ways the solution is similar to what we were promoting or recommending earlier too, which is, or at least what I've been saying has not changed that much, which is to start with listening, and to check in, and to be patient. I mean, I think everybody's been, especially with the pandemic, everyone's like, I'm done with these masks. I'm done with, not knowing I want it to be returned to kind of elastic back, right to where I was.

Judy Chu:

But I think we need to realize that it was kind of two years in the making, kind of everything that we're feeling and especially around issues of resilience. I mean, we know that humans are resilient and that's

definitely something we can build on, but I think that even for adults, it's very, very hard to feel, okay, I'm just going to bounce back. And we've also had that many more years of experience to build our resilience, whereas younger people, they are absolutely resilient, but they haven't had as many years of kind of trial and error, or learning from mistakes, or realizing that, oh, things can be bad and then you can bounce back.

Judy Chu:

And in fact, for the pandemic to be one of their first kind of major things that they've had to deal with, I mean, this is not, I mean, some others have experienced other traumas, or really difficulties, I'm not saying that we went through life with all rose and rainbows and then suddenly the pandemic hit, but I'm just saying that the pandemic has really been unique in that it was so wide it impacted everyone, and it was such a big thing that everyone had to deal with. And for the adults, the adults in their lives who are very well intentioned and want to be there for boys to remember that, remember adults are finding it hard to bounce back, and so to be extra patient and to be... But the one good thing that it has revealed about the social isolation is it has revealed that absolutely humans, all humans, all genders thrive on connection, we need it, we crave it, and so hopefully in the wake of, as we pull out of it, we'll be able to recognize that and kind of make that explicit.

Judy Chu:

I know that a lot of construction from gender have tended to say that boys and men don't need it, but the pandemic has shown that everybody suffers when they're lonely, everybody needs to have that regular interaction and that's normal. So hopefully it has helped us as a society to understand what the basic human needs are, and that will help to legitimize boys when they do seek help and when they do want to talk about people, or when they do say, hey, I would love to have a close friendship. That there's no shame in that, that our situation these past two years has really made it clear that is something as essential as food, water, shelter, we need to connect to other people. And so I think that teachers, and educators, and anyone who's trying, parents, anyone who's trying to support boys can kind of put lead with that.

Nat Damon:

Right. A focus on connection, a focus on listening, a focus on embracing the extremely broad definition of what it is to be a man, to change that quote from be a man to be a man, is in similar to how we began this conversation when boys become boys. I'm thinking, I guess, my final question for you, and then I've got a quote I want to share with you that comes from your book that just is so powerful to me, but my final question would be actually, is there anything else that you think we haven't discussed that would be really important for educators in particular who may be working with boys or trying to create a classroom or school environment that really caters to boys' needs, we've got listening, we've got an understanding that they want to connect, to team, to collaborate, to appreciate their individuality, are we leaving anything out from your research?

Judy Chu:

I think, well, one of the kind of hopeful things is the boy's healthy resistance that throughout the lifespan, they continue to seek connections and resist disconnections. So even though my book kind of documented, here are their relational strengths, here's how they start to cover up those strengths as they kind of accommodate to societal expectations, but what was kind of the hopeful piece of it is they continue throughout to challenge it where they can, to carve out relationships where they do feel they

can speak their minds and tell people what they're thinking and feeling and helping them to identify what those protective relationships are, and to develop them, and to value them, and take care of those things. And so they do have this healthy resistance that there's evidence of, like I said, at early childhood through adolescence, into adulthood, a lot of the things that we observe men even struggling with really has to do with coming back to, are they just trying to connect with somebody, but they're doing it in the ways that society deems permissible for men to do?

Judy Chu:

And sometimes those are not always healthy or positive means of securing connections to other people. So can we return them to being able to draw from the whole breath and depth of their relational resources, the things that they're, again, these qualities and skills they're born with that they know how to do and just to kind of give them permission to say, okay, I can know this in the relationship, I can know this about other people, I can show this thing about myself to other people and it's going to be okay. And I think that for parents and teachers can come in, I mean, in terms of like what you were talking about, the whole be a man, you're probably familiar with Paul [inaudible 00:37:45], be a man that box exercise. And one of the things that when people do that exercise is yes, they do know this be a man which tends to be a more hegemonic or traditional kind of thing of you have to be tough, you have to be stoic, you have to project self sufficiency, and most people know that boys, men, all genders, we're all familiar with that image.

Judy Chu:

But if you also put up a second box and say, well, what does it mean to be a good man? If someone says, "Oh yeah, he's a good man." They know that too. And where we've moved from, if we can count kind of this is progress over at least the last few decades, is that we're moving from a singular definition of masculinity to the recognition that there are multiple masculinities. And in fact, some would argue there is many masculinities as there are people who identify as male, right? So there's a group in Canada that says their slogan is my masculinity is mine to define, right? And so kind of moving to this place where people can say, I'm a boy and I'm a boy who likes this and that, and feels these things. And I'm still a boy. You can't deny them that, whereas in the past, it used to be, oh, well, if you're not this, this and this, then you're not a real boy or man.

Judy Chu:

I think that we are moving away from that, and that's where kind of the adults and kids lives can step in and really give them some... Show them that there's leeway, show them that there's a space for them to be who they are. Because I think that's one of the hardest things is kind of kids want to know is there a place for me? How can I be with other people in this world, and can I be with them in a way that feels like I'm actually in the relationship as opposed to an outsider watching or constantly having to pretend to be something else so that people will like me, because if they find out who I really am, they're going to leave. I mean, that can lead to this kind of desperation that we wouldn't want anyone to have to feel.

Judy Chu:

And so kind of, again, I always bring up Mr. Rogers because I feel his fundamental message was so on target, which is if we could get to a place where every individual actually felt like they were seen and valued just the way you are, I mean, so many of the problems that we are seeing would... And it wouldn't disappear, but they would be mitigated. Because all of a sudden people would feel like, yes, this is hard, but I'm not alone, and I can get some help, and I can go on, and there's a place for me.

Nat Damon:

Yes.

Judy Chu:

I think that's probably my biggest critique of the way this whole socialization process has... The toll of this socialization process is making people feel like they're not good enough. And that can pervade every single aspect of our lives. When we feel like we're falling short, all of a sudden it keeps us from being able to develop, and learn, and to be our best selves, and all these things that you've heard a million times, I'm sure. But it's a simple message, but it's hard to do. So if we could get there, I think it would help a lot.

Nat Damon:

You've you've inspired me beyond a podcast with what you were just sharing about being a good man and creating an environment for thriving, not just surviving, and one where you can truly be... What was that Canadian expression again, my masculinity is mine...

Judy Chu:

Is mine to define.

Nat Damon:

Is mine to define. I mean, that is... So in Los Angeles we run a three week program for young men, grade seven through 10 called Reach Academy for Young Men. And it is you defined the mission of this new organization so beautiful because for it to succeed, the young men in this environment will know that they have, they feel free to be who they are, the agency given to them as boys, as young men in this environment will result in flourishing and self-discovery in a broadening of self definition. And I wanted to read a quote back to you, one of the amazing elements about When Boys Become Boys, your book is just how you capture the voices of not just the boys, but of the parents as well.

Nat Damon:

And we don't have time now to talk about fathers, but there is a part where you interview Mike's dad and Mike is a boy, young man, boy, and his dad watches his son, Mike get up on the stage and pick up a microphone and about to sing Elvis Presley, Hound Dog, and being very, very open and very buoyant. And the father views this so supportively and is so embracing his son. And as you write, as Mike's dad described, "Mike's spunk on that stage included his ability to express himself openly and wholeheartedly and seemed to reflect his comfort with himself and his trust in other people. Although Mike's dad viewed Mike's spunk as a positive thing, his dad also knew that this openness could get boys into trouble because it tends not to be socially valued, especially in boys and is therefore at risk as boys learn to behave and to be good. Mike's dad wished to preserve Mike's ability to be out there in this way. But he also worried that Mike's spunk if allowed to persist, could make Mike vulnerable to criticism and ultimately perhaps rejection."

Nat Damon:

And that vignette that you captured right there, it has transcended this whole conversation back to close to the beginning when we were talking about the, I want to connect with others, I'm four years old on the playground, and yet in order to connect, I'm going to be somebody who's hiding parts of himself

at such a young age, right? And also to have that furthered by the notion that this is the first in a whole series of steps of male developed masculine identity development. And yet in this conversation, we're wrapping it with such a message of hope that you shared about where we are today, what research is confirming, your research is confirming in how to help young men truly thrive in this world, it's okay to be collaborative, it's okay to be vulnerable, it's okay to say I don't know, it's okay to be outside of that box that certainly I grew up in and also having gone to an all boys school in the '80s.

Nat Damon:

So I want to leave you with that. I'm going to leave you with that, with gratitude for your wisdom today, Judy, and I'd love to give you the last word, anything we haven't covered or anything you want to respond to that we haven't had the chance to, please take us home.

Judy Chu:

Oh goodness. Okay. Well I think, I mean, in hearing you remind me of that, I love that example actually, because I remember seeing where it happened. And he said he was going to talk about it, he was nervous, Mike was nervous and he was going to sing this song. And he actually got on stage and then said, "I was going to sing this song, but then I'm feeling a little bit nervous," and then he went ahead and did it. And when his dad was talking about his spunk, it's kind of that, again, that spunkiness, that exuberance, that just kind of like here I am. And it's so vulnerable, but it's also so endearing. And I think, as you were kind of listening, all these things that we want boys to be able to do, I think the fear in the society that values so much being in control, which is kind of unsustainable, if not unachievable [inaudible 00:45:24], nobody can be in control all the time.

Judy Chu:

I think we worry that if we open this can of worms, that it's going to create this mess. But I think, I try to remind myself to think of, well, what's the alternative? Is the alternatives like you tell them you they can't do it, it doesn't make it go away, it just means that it's like a bottle of soda that gets shaken up and shaken up and it just feels all inside and then it's all inside the person. Whereas, when you let that go, first of all, that pressure doesn't have to build up, they don't have to feel like they have to come it all by themselves. And you'll find that sometimes if you're really careful and you open it gradually, it doesn't explode and everything's fine, and everything kind of equalizes out and kind of everyone feels better, feels relief.

Judy Chu:

I feel like right now, especially as, to return to your topic of how do we come out of the pandemic, we've been so pent up right from the past two years there for very good reason. There have been a lot of hard things that people have dealt with and, again, to kind of let our reentry be a gradual release, allowing us to be patient with ourselves, to be gentle with ourselves. That also touches on the topic self care, which often for boys and men gets kind of discounted like, oh, what do you mean self-care? You're just supposed to be the Energizer bunny, you're just supposed to keep on going and always be okay. I am always really surprised at how boys and men are kind of talked about and treated as though they were robots or expected to be robots. Like, "Oh, you broke your arm? Just walk it off, shake it off." And I'm like, what?

Judy Chu:

And so to kind of be able to, I'm not saying we should all be lying around weeping all the time, but that's not going to happen. I think that's the people's kind of irrational fear is that, oh, if we open the floodgates, the flood is going to come in. But that's really not what I've seen happen in practice, is that it kind of just, it's more of a gradual release and then people feel like they don't have to be all pent up and unhappy all the time basically. [inaudible 00:47:27]. And it doesn't mean that they have to be happy, but it just also means it's okay to feel whatever you're feeling and that this too will pass.

Judy Chu:

And the more that we are eager or that we are effortful in trying to suppress those feelings, the bigger they become and the more unmanageable they feel. So again, that comes back to Mr. Rogers, right? Like when we can talk about it, then we make them manageable, right? So maybe end with one story and you can always edit, hopefully. But I had a student who had suffered, a few years ago, who had suffered a huge loss, was very close to his grandfather and his grandfather had passed. And he was really having a hard time with it and so he emailed me, "I don't think I can come to class. I just don't feel okay." And three days later, he was still feeling he couldn't handle it, he hadn't talked to anyone. He didn't want anyone to know he was trying to be okay for all of friends, because this is a really great kid, right? And he just didn't want to burden anyone with what he was struggling with.

Judy Chu:

And I encouraged him to come to my class that day because we were having a guest speaker, Ashanti Branch, who was in *The Mask You Live In*, I don't know if you saw that film, but Ashanti comes to my class every year and my students just love him. And what he did was just kind of simple everyday things. He checked in, "Everybody go around the room and on a scale of one to 10," no personal outpouring, "But on a scale of one to 10, just be honest, how you're feeling." And the boy who had been struggling after that session with Ashanti said, "I feel so much better." He had been just kind of feeling crushed having to carry around this huge...

Judy Chu:

And it didn't mean that he was going to be skipping through the campus or anything, I mean, he still was feeling very deeply sad about the loss of his grandfather, but all of a sudden, being able to acknowledge it, if only to himself, but Ashanti helped him to have them partner up, so he was able to talk about it a little bit with one another person saying, "Oh, here's what's going on for me." And again, it was only like a five minute exercise, so it wasn't an hour long therapy session. It was a five minute acknowledgement, but it just lifted things. And so just to know that little things can help so that sometimes we feel, oh, we don't want to open that bottle because we're worried we're not equipped to deal with it, but sometimes it just takes listening. You don't have to be a professional, you don't have to have all the right advice to give, and you can make a huge difference anyway.

Nat Damon:

I'm so glad that you reminded us of that point, again, it gets back, you don't have to have the answers, it's listening, is absolutely front and center, and it's not about let's have lunch together and have a therapy session, it is...

Judy Chu:

Right.

Nat Damon:

... Actually not that at all. Because that's the quickest way to shut the door in so many boys and girls...

Judy Chu:

Exactly. Exactly.

Nat Damon:

... Just younger people or people in general. But it is just that showing that you see, you are seen, and you are supported. Wow, we could go on and on Judy. This has been absolutely wonderful. Dr. Judy Chu. By the way, weren't you in that movie too or am I wrong about that?

Judy Chu:

I was in that as well.

Nat Damon:

Yes.

Judy Chu:

In The Mask You Live In.

Nat Damon:

The Mask You Live In, it was 2015, I think. I think it came out right after your book maybe. Yeah. And if you haven't seen it, definitely I recommend it. It's really, I mean, not only obviously because Judy's in it and featured and offers more for wisdom in it, but it's also just, it was a fantastic documentary about the state of masculinity today, and today being six to seven impressionable years ago. And it's nice to see kind of where that film, where your book and other resources have taken us and will continue you to take us into a more hope-filled future. So thank you, Dr. Judy Chu for being with us today on Reach. Teach. Talk.

Speaker 1:

You've been listening to Reach. Teach. Talk with Nat Damon. If you'd like to recommend a guest for a future episode, you can send your suggestion or questions to nat@reachacademics.com.