



Episode #246

**What it Takes to Grow Up Safely in Today's World, with
Jonathan Cristall**

March 16, 2021

Debbie: Hey, Jonathan, welcome to the podcast.

Jonathan: Hey, Debbie. Thanks for having me.

Debbie: Of course, I was super intrigued when I got your email telling me about your book and the work that you do. And I have had a couple of conversations, you know, that have talked about safety in a general sense. But I was really intrigued by your book. And I just thought this would be an interesting topic to bring to my listeners. So as a way of introduction, tell us a little bit about yourself, kind of who you are in the world and your personal why for this work that you're doing?

Jonathan: Absolutely. So again, thanks for having me. I'm excited to be here. Again, Jonathan Christall is my name. I live here in Los Angeles. And for the last 20 years or so, I've been a prosecutor for the LA city attorney's office, it was pretty unlikely I'd ever become a lawyer, let alone a prosecutor enforcing the laws because I used to break a few laws. As a teenager, I was a troubled teen, I was a good kid, I got pivoted off path, at some point had a difficult family situation. And I started doing things I shouldn't have been doing. I shouldn't have lived through my teen years. But you know, here I am. Thankfully, I'm also trained and certified to teach on sexual violence prevention with a very large nonprofit here in LA. But I suppose the most important thing to know about me is I'm a father to three sons, my wife, Lisa, and I have three boys, all teenagers. And I don't know about maybe like six or so years ago, Lisa, my wife says to me, almost as an aside, hey, you know, it's time we got to start teaching the older boys about sexual consent. And of course, it was that time. And it started me thinking about, you know, all the other things that we should be teaching them as parents or caregivers. And I actually made a list of core sexual consent, you know, their rights with the police, I added, you know what to do, and not to do when they get stopped by the police when driving their digital footprints, cyberbullying, sextortion, street smarts, dating violence, and I was like, well, there has to be a resource out there. There has to be a book that we as parents and caregivers can, you know, just look at and help our children learn the information and there wasn't. And so with the encouragement of my wife, who urged me to write the book I was looking for, I wrote what they don't teach teams, and it came out this past October, October 2020. And thus far, it's been, you know, very well received.

Debbie: Yeah, again, it was just a different topic than I then I've seen, and you really do talk about such important issues, but issues that as a parent can feel overwhelming, or super uncomfortable. You know, I've done a couple of episodes on pornography, and the importance of talking about pornography. And so we've had a couple of conversations about these issues. But you know, talking about these things, and reading your book, it can feel really heavy, right? It can feel scary to read. And just to imagine our teens being in these situations, you know, so I could see there might be resistance. And I'm curious to know, around parents who don't want to know, or don't want to go there, because it feels too heavy, yet we want our kids to be prepared. So I'm just curious how, how do you help parents kind of open up to hearing your message?

Jonathan: Well, you know, I'm so glad you've asked me that. Because, obviously, I've been doing, you know, a fair amount of publicity around the book, and events, but I don't think anyone's asked me that yet. And it's a really interesting question, we could probably spend all of our time trying to just digest that. But it's, you know, there's really two schools of thought, there's what, you know, the parents who are really plugged in and totally understand why the issues in the book or you know, not maybe not all of them, maybe they all all the topics don't resonate with every parent, but some of them do, you know, for this last segment of parents, and they do you understand, like, why their son or daughter has to understand what sexual consent is and what it is not. And the other topics, and then there's others who don't appreciate it, and that's okay. And generally, they think that those things happen to, you know, to other people's kids, and maybe they're right, who can say, but, you know, from my perspective, hope is not a strategy. And it's not always comfortable to think about these things, but I certainly am not saying these things are gonna happen to any of our children. But, you know, maybe it's a friend, maybe it's a loved one. And you just never know, you know, what's going to happen or what the future holds. And the other point I like to bring up: The information is just interesting, you know, it's good information to have. And as important as math, history, science, those traditional school subjects are, I mean, I'd like to argue that this is more pertinent, and in many ways more important, because these are life skills that are going to apply in one way or another outside of school. And the last thing I'd say on it, is that, you know, one thing I've been hearing continually from readers, whether they're teenagers, parents, caregivers, teachers is that it's bringing and this was my intention is bringing them a sense of calm. Because when you have the information, and you know the realities of these issues, and where you know where the risks are, and where the myths are, it brings you a sense of calm, because you know how to handle the unexpected. should it happen?

Debbie: Yeah, absolutely. And the subtitle, just say, for listeners is, so the book is what they don't teach teens, the subtitle is life safety skills for teens and the adults who care for them. And so, you know, we spend a lot of time talking about life's skills in general and independence skills, and what we need to do to get our kids ready for launching. But we don't often talk about the safety skills. And I think you're absolutely right, you know, that knowledge and you do go into such great detail, like the information on your rights in police interactions, was fascinating to me. It's so detailed, and it is empowering to have a better sense of what are your rights as a person? What can they ask you? What should you do? What are the ramifications of doing X, Y, and Z.? could see how that would give someone a sense of at least preparedness right?

Jonathan: For sure. And you know, the the book is really 11 books in one because, you know, there's three sections, as you saw on sexual violence and misconduct, four chapters there, street safety, and your rights with the police, three chapters there, and then four chapters on digital safety. And so you know, you pick and choose, maybe you want to read it cover to cover, but I'm finding that most people don't they pick and choose the chapters that are resonating, right, then for the young person they're caring for, and you know, you keep it on hand, with respect to your rights. The hardest part, or not just the rights, every chapter, the hardest part, for me writing this book was, you know, keeping it concise, you know, it's harder to write short than it is long. So how do I take you know, a topic, like your rights,

and instead of writing a whole book about it, write an effective chapter and make it accessible to anyone who might pick it up, regardless of age. And I appreciate your kind words about that chapter. And I think the others are similar, because there's a lot to cover in a short amount of time, or space. And I want to give the readers the essentials, the information, they just have to have, you got to know this stuff. And if you want to learn more, go ahead. But here are the essentials. And then, you know, again, tying back to your comment about the chapter on your rights, you know, obviously, in light of what's happening, you know, in this country, with racial injustice in the criminal justice system and violence that's inflicted on the citizens by or the residents of our country, by the police, particularly people of color, I'm glad to see that coming into, you know, the social consciousness, because, you know, I wrote this book over a period of five years and and I wrote that chapter years ago, and I very clearly sit state in there, that we need criminal justice reform, I respect police and the difficult jobs they're doing. But we have entire communities in our country who are afraid of the police. And, and that really has to change. And, you know, I tried to write the book in a way that was inclusive to everyone, for anyone who might pick it up.

Debbie: Yeah, no, I really appreciated that. And the dimensions that you had in the book about people of color, and specifically what's been going on for a long time, but what we're becoming more aware of as a society. Yep. So you know, the book was written, you said for teens, and the adults who care for them. So I'm curious, how has this been received among teens? Are you finding that teens are curious about this stuff? Are they picking it up and reading it and how are they responding?

Jonathan: Well, you know, it's interesting, because that was like one of my greatest challenges. You know, one obviously, just finding the time between my family life and my professional life, to write a book on complicated nuanced subjects was, you know, no small undertaking, but then who am I writing for? Because I want this to be you know, accessible to as many people as possible. So, what I decided to do is to write the book, as if a young person is the reader. So essentially any tween teen young adult can pick up this book. And I'm using language that they understand. I'm breaking down sometimes complex topics in very simple terms. And the benefit for the adult reader is that they'll understand it too. And it's an easier read on them. Because the reality is, you know, it's difficult to get young people to read books much of the time, you know, everyone's kids are different. And most of the time, it's going to be the parent or caregiver buying the book. And you know, what I say in the book, if anyone has the book, it's an appendix six, or a really convey a number of ways to get this information to the young person you care about. Because again, the parents are probably the ones buying the books. And there are a whole bunch of ideas I give there. And one of them is, you know, depending on your kid, you can give them the book, to read a chapter to read a portion of a chapter to read, or even a page to read, whatever you think is the most important part in a given chapter. And I know for my three sons, they learn very different ways. So one of my sons will not read anything. So I find other ways, again, all the techniques I use are in appendix six, another one of my sons will read an entire chapter. And then my third son will read portions. And so you know, the feedback I've been getting from, from the young people who are getting it directly from the parent, or caregiver, or from reading it themselves has been very, very positive. They're finding the information, you know, interesting, because it's things they just didn't know, but were curious about. And I think

they're getting a sense of comfort knowing that if things happen, the unexpected happens, they'll know how to handle it. But, I'll say that many of them are saying, you know, I don't think this is going to happen to me, but it may happen to someone I love. And so I'm glad to have that information.

Debbie: Yeah, I think it comes across as very empowering. And it isn't talking down. It's presented in a very, I think, teen friendly way, but in a way that engages them, you know, through the design and illustrations, and yeah, it's just broken down in a very digestible way. Okay, so I actually, we talked about police interaction, I just wanted to go back to that for a second. And just wondering, this is something that a lot of parents have differently wired kids are concerned about, I know that police forces are getting more training about how to recognize people who may be autistic or have other differences that mean that they are going to respond in ways that may be unpredictable. And I'm just wondering, if you have any thoughts on how parents have differently wired kids can best prepare our kids for interacting with the police?

Jonathan: Yeah, again, I'm really glad you asked me that. There's two police chapters, one on what's your rights on fourth and fifth Amendment's? You know, do you have to consent to searches? Do you have to answer questions, and there's another police chapter on safer police interactions, what to do, and not to do when you get stopped on foot, or when driving by the police. And in that latter chapter, I have an entire section, probably four or five pages, that's dedicated to interactions with the police, and those who have disabilities. And it's, you know, it's a really important part of that chapter. Because we see, you know, so much about police violence, and perhaps the violation of the rights of people of color and the poor. But there's not enough discussion, or I think awareness about the many, many challenges that the police and the people that are policing who have disabilities face during those interactions. And when you talk about violence that is inflicted by the police on the people, they're policing, so much of it, a disproportionate amount involves people who have disabilities. So it's a huge issue. And one of the things you know, that's starting to change in some cities and jurisdictions better than others is that the police are getting more training, they, you know, the police were asked to do a whole heck of a lot. And despite, you know, some of the things I say I make very clear in the book, at least, I think I made it very clear that I am supportive of the police. I have many police officers who I'm close with, and I admire what they're doing. But that doesn't mean things don't need to change. That doesn't mean things don't need to be improved upon. And when it comes to interacting with folks who are differently wired, there is a lot that needs to be changed. And one of those again, is that there is more training that's being provided. And you know, one of the things I mentioned in the book and you know, there's too much for me to cover just in this moment, but one of the things Got parents of children with certain disabilities are doing as they're bringing their children to the police station, they're introducing them to the police. And you know, it's probably a good idea to call in advance. And they're having their children interface with police officers, and perhaps more importantly, having the police officers interface with their children, to have an understanding that different people need to be policed differently. And the fact that someone isn't responding to their commands in that moment, may not mean they're being disobedient or disrespectful of their authority. And so I think it's a two way street that teaches both groups so that they can have a mutual understanding of, you

know, what they're going through, and what's expected of them and the challenges that they may be facing.

Debbie: Another chapter that I found particularly interesting was the chapter on street safety, which is, you know, really about street smarts, especially because, again, a lot of differently wired kids, they can have challenges when it comes to reading certain situations and kind of understanding what's really going on or, you know, they're just not maybe spacing out. So not as plugged in. Can you talk a little bit about that chapter? And maybe what some of the biggest considerations are?

Jonathan: For sure. And you know, just, you bringing that up, made me think of a previous question you asked about, you know, what's the response from teams about the book and the chapters and, and what's interesting is that, you know, the teams, by and large, they understand why they have to have sexual consent, they may not understand the details and nuances, but they get the new, they've had a friend, who's been an abusive relationship, and so on, and so forth. But the one topic that I just think there's a disconnect with them is on street safety, they just, you know, and I'm going back, I'm 49. I remember, obviously, as a teen and, and many of my friends, when we didn't think anything bad was gonna happen to us, we didn't think we could get physically hurt, that stuff wouldn't happen to us. And we all know, that's not the case. And I think, you know, many young people just think they're always going to be physically safe. And I have to remind my own sons, you know, you're fortunate enough to live in a relatively safe neighborhood. But you know, anything can happen anywhere. And I don't know where your life travels are going to take you. And obviously, you know, when you're talking about kids who are young people who are differently wired, that that adds a whole nother dimension to it. So the most important thing in the street safety chapter is situational awareness. There's no more important aspect of personal safety than understanding that and situational awareness is simply to know what's going on about you, as you go about your daily life. And you rely on your eyes and your ears and your intuition. And practically, what that means is, you know, when you're going about your daily life, you periodically get your head out of your phone, or just, you know, if you're having a conversation with someone, instead of looking at them, you just look around for for a second, literally just a second and see if everything's normal around you. And maybe it's just you're buried in your thoughts, and you just look around you... does everything appear normal. And what I always emphasize is that, you know, when people sometimes say that, you know, you're being paranoid, it is not about paranoia at all, you don't expect anything bad to happen, because it's very unlikely that anything bad will be happening, or anything will be out of sorts around you, but you simply realize that it is a possibility. And the beauty of situational awareness is that it gives you in the event of a manmade disaster or a natural disaster, it gives you a one or two second Head Start. And in a situation in which you know, there's a risk of bodily harm, one or two seconds is a very meaningful or can be a very meaningful period of time. So being situationally aware is huge. And it's really not hard to do. And it's an important life skill.

Debbie: Yeah, for all of us, right?

Jonathan: Absolutely.

Debbie: Yeah, I'm just thinking of times when we're walking around and, you know, we live in a big city and walking around and sometimes coming across some characters that don't particularly feel safe. And so usually when I'm walking with my team, he's assuming that I'm the one doing all that looking out, right, and I'm the one kind of scary, right and so I tried to even just say, like, you know, once we're past that situation, like, did you notice that person like, how did that make you feel? I felt a little um, you know, certain to me. That's why we cross the street or whatever..

Jonathan: You know, I'm so glad you said that because I feel my sons are doing the exact same thing. We go riding our bikes a lot, particularly, you know, during the coronavirus pandemic. And I see like when we're riding, you know, across the street at a green light, you I'm always looking left, right, left, even when it's green, but they're not. And I say to them guys, don't rely on me. Don't rely on me to be looking, you guys got to look for yourself. And you talk about, you know, how did that person make your son feel? And that's such an important question, because another part of the street safety chapter is about your intuition, and the power of your intuition. And your gut instinct, when it comes to your personal safety is almost never wrong. And to trust your intuition is so important. And the problem that we face when it comes to relying on our intuition is that, even though it's almost always right, when it comes to trying to keep us safe, it's a whisper. It's not always going to be a loud alarm bell. But if we can tune in to listen to that whisper about why that person just doesn't make us feel right. And we may not have a rational explanation, we may not be able to explain it. But we feel it. And we know it in our gut. And when we can listen to that little whisper, it can keep us so much safer.

Debbie: Yeah, so good. So you talk about cyberbullying and digital safety. Can you talk a little bit about the digital footprint? I just think that this is such a critical topic right now, especially as our kids and teens are spending so much more time online, what would you say are the biggest takeaways, or maybe the most important lesson when it comes to our kids digital footprint?

Jonathan: Absolutely. What's interesting is that the book came out this past October, October 2020. But it took me five years to write the book, again, I was juggling a lot. But I've been speaking, you know, via zoom or at schools or in private events, you know, for about five years, as people heard about what I was doing. And it's very interesting, because the last couple years leading up to the pandemic. You know, I spoke about sexual violence, misconduct, consent, police interactions, and so on. But in the last year or so, I'd say 80% of my speaking events are on digital safety. Because you're absolutely right, with these people spending more time online than they probably ever have being on lockdown. And they were spending a fair amount of time before, it's so much easier to find yourself, you know, doing something that, you know, maybe you shouldn't have done or being a victim to someone out there who's looking to cause harm to them. So when it comes to specifically your digital footprint, that's essentially your digital reputation. What you do online, from the first time you clicked what you've liked, what you shared, and not just on social media, it could be in a text or in an email, you know, that is, again, your digital reputation. And once you click Send or share, there's no getting it back. And it's going to exist somewhere out there longer than we will. And, you know, we have to be incredibly mindful, you know, as adults to

that, you know, we share things that are the best reflection of who we are. And, you know, so much of the time when I see, you know, a young person sharing things that were ill advised and come back to bite them. It can be because you know, someone made a mistake, they shared something, you know, they didn't mean to, you know, they reshare something that they didn't need to, but I've got to tell you more times than not, it's because they trusted somebody with information or an image. And that person turned out to be someone, unfortunately, that they couldn't trust, you know, that they didn't know at the time. And so it's incredibly important for young people to preserve the integrity of their digital footprint to just, you know, first and foremost, don't ever put anything digitally in writing or an image that you wouldn't want you know, your worst enemy to see that you wouldn't want you know, your mom or grandma to see. Just don't put it out there. And then once you've taken care of that, that's a huge part of preserving the integrity of our digital footprint to just not push out anything that could make you look bad. But let's be proactive, let's populate your digital footprint with which things are that are the best reflection of you. And I'm not talking about phony stuff. I'm talking about things that are true to who you are, you know, put things out into your digital footprint that you know, are positive, you know, an award, you receive the recognition, volunteer service, doing something that you love that you're passionate about, because it's very likely that sooner or later, either as a college administrator, or a potential employer will be digging into your digital footprint. And yeah, you don't want anything bad in there. But use this as an opportunity to shine and use it as an opportunity to show them what you've got. And why you are a great person for that employer or the college.

Debbie: Yeah, and I'll just say, as I was just flipping through the book, this section as you were talking, and, you know, you have a whole chapter on sextortion, which I, I had never heard that term before. You know, I'm sure that I've seen TV shows where this happened, you know, fictional characters have, have had someone, you know, tried to extort them or blackmail them because of a compromising photo they have. But again, like, reading that, as a parent is super uncomfortable. And it just to me, underscores the importance of making sure that we don't miss the opportunity to talk to our kids about this stuff, because the ramifications could be so huge for something like this happening.

Jonathan: Oh, for sure. And it's interesting, you bring that up about sextortion. Because out of the 11 chapters, titles, the sextortion chapter is easily the one that the fewest people know of, I get that all the time, Debbie, like I didn't know anything about sextortion. I didn't even know this was a thing. And that that's scary to me, because you know, sextortion, which is online sexual blackmail, according to the Department of Justice is the fastest growing crime online against young people. And the average age of a sextortion victim is 15 years of age. So you're talking about a crime of not only unspeakable brutality, but you're talking about a crime that specifically or most of the time is targeting, and the victims are young people. And, you know, there's a lot to know about sextortion. But but in a simple way, for your listeners, the way sextortion happens is commonly when a perpetrator and I use that term very broadly, right now gets a nude image of a young person, and it could be a new video, or a compromising image that they just don't want, the young person won't want widely disseminated. And the perpetrators are, you know, people online looking to sex stored, young people.

And you know, that could be from catfishing, which is essentially having a fake online persona, where they trick a young person into some sort of online relationship. And then when the young person trusts them, online, they set they share a nude, and then that nude is used against them, if you don't meet me for sex, or send more images, or send money, I'm gonna release that new to the world and tag all your friends. But the more common way that a perpetrator at least, you know, sextortion is just starting to get studied by academics. So there's still a lot we need to know. But the early research indicates that the more common way people young people are extorted is through in person relationships.

So the way that would look or sound is they're in an in person relationship, things are going well. And they decide to share a nude with the partner they trust, they go to break up and the partner says, If you break up with me, I'm gonna release that nude and tag everyone you know, or another variation. If you don't come back to our relationship, I'm going to release your nude and tag everyone we know. And again, it's a crime of unspeakable brutality. And it's something that you know, you can, there are specific things I listed in the book, there are ways to help protect ourselves from being targets or victims of sextortion and, you know, getting in front of it. And first of course, knowing it exists is you know, is the first thing you know, we should be doing.

Debbie: Such good information and, and you know, I hope listeners are not panicking, but just kind of realizing Okay, there are some things here that should be on my radar in order to protect our kids. Let me ask you just as a way to wrap up, what is your biggest hope for this book, you know, your intention for writing it and your y came through but um, you know, did you write it with the big goal in mind or your ultimate hope for how this would support Families.

Jonathan: Yeah, you know, um, I wrote it because, you know, as a dad, and with my experience and training background, I was frustrated, you know, I love the schools, my, my sons go to our great schools. And the teachers are wonderful, you know, by and large, they, they're wonderful. But there's not enough of them, there's not enough money for the teachers to have the resources they need. There's too many standardized tests. And even if they wanted to, they can't get to the, you know, the non traditional, generally speaking, the non traditional school subjects like math, history, science, so I wrote the, the resource I was longing for, and I want, you know, I'm not the only parent, obviously, who wants the best for their children. I'm obviously not the only parent who has concerns about Okay, well, I got a new driver, are they gonna know what to do and not to do when they get pulled over, because sooner or later, they're getting pulled over? So um, so I wrote it, because I wanted to, you know, help families. And it's a passion project, you know, I can tell you that there were many times when I was writing it, and it was, you know, it was my first book and writing a book, as you know, is really, really hard. And there were so many times I was like, Oh, why am I doing this, this is so much work I got, I got so many other things to do. And I just, it was a passion project, I wanted to put something out that didn't exist that I knew parents would want, I knew caregivers would want. And really, I want to help young people coming of age today is no joke. Coming of age today faces different challenges, and in my opinion, more significant challenges than when I was coming of age. And I wanted to just help ease that transition as best I could.

Debbie: Well, congratulations. Yes, writing a book is a huge accomplishment and pain in the butt depending on where you are in the process. And so congratulations on this book. And can you let listeners know where they can learn more about you or connect with you if you're on social media?

Jonathan: Thank you. Um, well, my website is what they don't teach teens.com. My email is Jonathan at what they don't teach teens calm. And the book What They Don't Teach Teens is available on amazon.com, Barnes and noble.com or anywhere, they might buy books. I love getting questions on my site. And I love hearing from readers about how the information has helped them and how it's impacted them. And like I mentioned earlier, I teach the stuff remotely anything in the book, I teach at various schools anywhere. And I'm always happy to get those requests. Awesome.

Debbie: Well, thank you. Thank you so much for doing this important work and for taking time to share it with us today.

Jonathan: Thank you, Debbie. It's been my pleasure. I really appreciate you having me.

RESOURCES MENTIONED:

- [What They Don't Teach Teens website](#)
- [*What They Don't Teach Teens: Life Safety Skills for Teens and the Adults Who Care for Them* by Jonathan Cristall](#)
- [Jonathan on Instagram](#)
- [Jonathan on Facebook](#)