

Boys and Big Emotions: Common Parenting Mistakes and What to Do Instead [Transcript]

Debbie Reber: 0:01

Hey Janet, welcome to the podcast.

Janet: 0:03

Hi, Debbie. So good to be here.

Debbie Reber: 0:06

It's fun to have you on my show. I've been on your show. Maybe take a few minutes and tell us about your work in the world and your podcast?

Janet: 0:14

Absolutely. Well, our show is On Boys and I co host that with Jennifer Fink of Building Boys. I am Boys Alive, and have been for about 20 years, started when I was a teacher. And I had 10 boys and two girls and my first first grade, and did not have a clue because I raised daughters. And so here were all these boys that were very active, very creative, I put that in air quotes, very busy. And I was scrambling to understand what they needed. Because nowhere in my training in my university degree, nobody talked about how different boys would be in the classroom than girls, this was the mid 90s. And all the focus at that time was on girls, and equity and sports and all of those things, and our boys were getting lost and left behind. And so I got really curious and did a lot of looking into who's talking about boys at that time, there were not very many people talking about boys. Curious about brain differences, curious about communication styles, learning styles, and all of that kind of just funneled me into boys alive. And I'm a family coach and an author and a podcaster. Like you. And you know, it's interesting how how the events in our lives pushed us in certain directions. We've had the conversation about Asher and, and you taking up this work. And I have just been thrilled, especially with the podcast to be able to interview experts and authors and thought leaders and bring the awareness that our boys are different in the way so often, many of my family coaching clients are moms who were raised with sisters who were raised with a single mom. And now all of a sudden here are these boys that are presenting them with lots of puzzles to solve.

Debbie Reber: 2:20

Yeah, absolutely. I love that story. Brought up so many things to me. First of all, you may know this, but I used to be a teen girl expert. So before I had a child, I spent 15 years writing nonfiction, self confidence, self esteem books, 14 girls, I volunteered with teen girls like that I spoke at girls conferences, I was all about girl empowerment. And when I discovered I was having a son I remember being first of all shocked is that, can you check that again? One of the first things I said to my husband was I'm gonna have to do a lot of work around my own baggage surrounding boys and what I know about boys, because being so pro girl, and in

that space, it's like I got some work to do. And then I also kind of got excited about Wait a minute, this is an opportunity to really lean into raising a respectful man. And we need men who grow up as a feminist and you know, and and who lived fully, you know, emotional lives. And so that I love the work that you're doing. And I love how you came to it. It's fascinating.

Janet: 3:30

Well, and I was thinking about the work, you're doing differently wired. And I think you know, when we can back up from that, and I feel like this is this understanding is bedrock. And when we understand, oh, we have, of course we look at the world through a female lens, as moms as women, when we can recognize that, that we do that, and step away from the expectation that our boys are going to want to talk to us like our girls do. And they're going to want to have those deep, meaningful conversations. And when we recognize, oh, you know, they're just as sensitive, they're just as desirous of connection. But it comes in a little different package. And when we can understand what that package is, which is very active, which is I don't want to sit and look you in the eye and have a long, deep meaningful conversation with you. But if we're out tossing a ball or we're on a walk, I am going to communicate with you. But if we can step away from that, that our female perception and I know you've got dads listening to so part of this too, is understanding how you relate to the men in your life. Because it's all it's all the same. And is it every boy is that every man No, absolutely not. You know, it's it's tendencies and so it just adds to our repertoire of Being able to connect with another human being.

Debbie Reber: 5:03

So I have just this focus group sample of one in my home, you know, I've got a teenage son. So I would love to hear from you. what is really going on with the emotional lives of boys, because in my world, the boys that I know or that are friends with my son are super in touch with, you know, they have really high emotional IQ. And I also know that their parents are working really hard to support that. But if we zoom out and look at gender generally, what is going on with the emotional lives of boys right now?

Janet: 5:37

Yeah, I think it is changing a cultural perception that because boys don't talk, they don't feel. And they do. And they do. And they may just not be able to express it in the way that we would. Again, as females imagine, they express it. So we have to be super, you know, get our radar antenna up, and be really aware. And for boys, there's a lot around shame and embarrassment. And putting boys on the spot. There's a lot around. I just always go back to this mom who told me that her first grader, her seven year old boy, came home from school one day and said, Mom, all the girls are perfect. And I'm the bad one. And so here's a little boy, that from probably preschool, kindergarten, first grade, for sure, has had female teachers. And you know, our boys are really perceptive, they're watching. And they're seeing that, oh, girls don't get in trouble for things that I do. Girls can be talking, but I get in trouble for it. And I mean, I've heard story after story of this happening. The all the girls, the girls are chosen for the star students and boys aren't and that they're, they're being subtly given this message from an early age that you're too You're too much you're too noisy, you're too active, you know, just sit still listen and learn is what we often wish for. And hey, I was there as a teacher, like, Can you just, I've got this brilliant lesson, just sit still. Just listen. And it

doesn't. That is not how boys typically operate in the world. And so it's a willingness to observe and to listen. And part of it is are you ready to listen when they're ready to talk, and especially with teens, you know, their, their biology is their biological clock is shifting. They're up later at night and way more active. I was working with a family recently who, the 14 year old boy and the dad wanted him to converse and do it in the morning because that's when the dad was ready to talk. And then the mom was there going Yeah, but you know, he really lights up at around nine o'clock at night. And then that's when he opens up. That's when he's ready to talk. So it's not on our timeframe as parents we have to be aware of Oh, this is okay. Yeah, gonna have stamp little later mom and dad so you can access that time when your boy is ready to open up and is ready to share.

Debbie Reber: 8:33

Yeah, that happens at about a quarter of Midnight in my house. Yeah, yeah, most times I'm okay with that. And other times I'm just like, you know, we're gonna put a pin in this but so I have all these like questions and I don't want to go off in a whole other direction. But also I find it so interesting that you know, you're describing classroom and a culture around our kids in school that really isn't designed to to embrace perhaps what is a more natural way of being for boys and girls and and just as a caveat, we are talking about gender identity, which is also there's a lot of fluidity there. So I just want to say that for listeners who are like my child doesn't fit in either bucket and I do want to touch upon that as well. But we've got these kids growing up, these boys who are, their needs are not being met necessarily in schools. They get in trouble more. They're perceived as being more disruptive. And yet, yeah, culturally, they especially as a white man, but men have a lot more doors open to them, at least historically.

Janet: 9:47

They do and it's the doors that are the outward doors. And so they're the achievers and and boys will typically overestimate their ability to achieve. They'll overestimate What grade they're going to get on the test? Why? I don't have an answer for that, but they do. And I think historically, you know, it's been the role of women and the role of men. And so there's that piece. But I, I look at the men, and especially, you know, the me to movement, and we have a lot of angry adult men. And I trace it back to this place where their full selves are not being met. They're being prodded and directed to go, you know, to achieve, go to law school, do the thing. And then we have Angry Men who, because their sensitive side, their emotional side hasn't been nurtured, hasn't grown, we have this imbalance as adults. And that doesn't go well for anyone. And often, it's the men who are achieving outwardly, that are suffering inwardly, or their families are suffering, their spouse is suffering, because Oh, he won't talk to me. We are not connected. We're going through the motions. And so it's, it's a big question. Without easy answers.

Debbie Reber: 11:16

It also underscores the importance of doing this work. And I know that you are considered a boys and anger expert like that is a real focus of your work. So can you talk a little bit more about that? Why anger seems to be the go to emotion for boys? Again, not all boys.

Janet: 11:34

I know exactly. Always, not all, for many boys, for many. And we'll say anger and big emotions, let's you know, there might be the attitude of a 14 year old, the slamming doors, the withdrawals, silent treatment, all of that. So it's not just anger, rage, although it is that too, but it's tantrums. And part of it is, again, this cultural message of boys don't cry, boys don't feel. And then you overlay that with just simply understanding a boy's nature, which is to be physical first, what do we do as parents? Use your words, use your words, well, he can't get to his words until he's moved his body. So a boy's brain is in motion, when his body is in motion, those are together. And if his body isn't moving, his brain cannot move. His brain cannot find the words that you're standing over him telling him to find. And so getting comfortable with large expressions of anger, of emotion, you know, flat out pounding fists on the floor, fist through the wall, not that we're encouraging that, but we need to recognize that our boys especially because they are so physical need an outlet, they need to be able to, you know, punch a punching bag to pound that pillow to run around the block and get that out of their bodies. Before we try to sit down and have the conversation about well, why did you hit your brother and it's not not Okay, with that, we have to let them get those feelings out of their bodies first, and then address the emotional piece that the feelings and the how to do it differently the next time. But until we can be comfortable as parents because it's not comfortable. It's scary, especially when your boy gets bigger than you. It's really scary. So getting comfortable with that sitting with them in their anger is an important first step that we often try to like, stop it, make it stop, which just as we know, just pushes it down. Further. not healthy. Right?

Debbie Reber: 14:03

Yeah. And you know, I've said this in other conversations on the show, but for me personally, I grew up in an A family culture where anger was not an okay emotion to feel and so that his work I have had to do internally is is learn as you said, sitting in that anger getting comfortable with it. And because my, you know, kind of knee jerk reaction to anger is always been to immediately just want to shut it down because it just feels out of control. It makes me feel threatened. You know, it just kind of triggers me in so many ways. And so...

Janet: 14:39

I'm a bad parent, what's wrong with me? What's wrong with my kid? All of those things come up with anger. And yet if you can level it with all the other emotions, because it's just another it's just more energy just happens to be loaded with as you said, How is anger handled? Your family, my family? We did not have anger, you do not. Yeah, total silence. Right? Yeah.

Debbie Reber: 15:09

So what about differently wired boys specifically? So, you know, the way you're describing the fact that boys genuinely need to move their bodies? First, that physical expression, you know, that makes me think of, you know, kids who have ADHD and who are more physical and movement is part of how they regulate or kind of process. But what have you seen in your work in terms of maybe just broadly, the emotional lives in our lives of boys? And are there more challenges for differently wired boys? Or are there some things that are actually more accessible, because a boy is differently wired?

Janet: 15:51

Well, I think this is where you and I put our brains together and our expertise together, because I feel like, you know, my area of knowledge is boys in general males, male tendencies. And again, you know, not everybody. And when, again, this is when we understand boys at a fundamental level of the need to move their bodies when we have realistic expectations for our boys. I mean, science tells us that they don't typically have as many words as early as girls, if we know how to connect with them in a boy friendly way, which is not expecting as much eye contact, using fewer words, because our words overwhelm them and their brains shut down, or they get get squirrely. And this is too much. When we understand these fundamental concepts about how to relate to boys, then we get to add, it's like, we've got bedrock, we've got that bottom layer of the cake now. And now we can put on the, you know, the flavor in the middle, which is the differently wired, and oh, okay, my boy has this ,are my boys that. And how does that also relate to how he experiences the world and connects with the world. And that, and that's the beauty of the work that you do of bringing in that informational piece as well. But fundamentally, he has tendencies that are typical boy tendencies. So starting there, and understanding. And the other piece too, and I'm sure you talk about this as is, as moms as parents is not taking things personally. And it can be so easy to go there. And yet when you recognize, oh, he actually and this goes for men, too. He actually doesn't want to look at me, when he's talking. I've had I've done podcast interviews on zoom, and had men let one dad in particular, stay at home dad didn't look at me for the entire interview. He looked out the window, he looked at his desk. And if I hadn't known what I know about boys and men, I would have been feeling really uncomfortable. And like, this is really awkward. He hasn't looked at me. But when I know that, then it's like, oh, actually, he's able to find his words more easily, because he's looking out the window. And he's not feeling forced that he has to look at me. And so when we know those little things, it's like, oh, wow, that just made that interaction go more easily.

Debbie Reber: 18:39

Yeah. I often just think that these kids these differently wired kids who many of whom have been in therapy, they've worked with occupational therapists, they've worked on coping regulation, coping skills they can emotionally regulate. I really believe that these kids actually will have a leg up on their neurotypical peers. So as grownups in terms of their emotional IQ and their just self knowledge about how they how they work. And so I'm kind of curious to know, when you work with families, how do you support families with boys who especially if anger is the predominant emotional expression in their family? How do you help them learn how to kind of manage their that angry energy and also tap into what is really going on with that child?

Janet: 19:30

Yeah. And it is always about, you know, the anger, that behavior is just the messenger. It's not the thing. And so then it's peeling back the layers of what is really going on as a family system. Maybe they're, you know, stressed because dad lost his job or they're in chaos because now they're trying to do online school and work from home and all the things so we always look at The bigger picture and try to sift it down because it's not actually the child. It's the parents that are the, the ones that can make the changes that need to happen in the environment. And also in a lot of it is the perspective of the parent, the expectation of the

parents. And when those begin to shift and change, I had a dad just recently who he was adamant that his boy take a shower every single morning, because that is how he was raised being clean with a family value, and you take a shower every morning, and the sun was rebelling, he did not want to take a shower every morning. He liked to showers in the evening. So then it's like, okay, instead of butting heads about this, let's collaborate and let's get curious about, you know, will when when is it okay to take a shower and his dad, you know, can dad kind of loosen up on how he was raised in that perspective a little bit. And so that change has to come from the parent. And so much of it is about listening, being curious, asking questions, including a boy's perspective and having him feel like he has a voice in the family. And I hear often that kids don't feel like they have a voice. And especially tweens and teens who are, you know, really taking a new interest in the world and they want to share their opinion, and they want to know that their voice is heard. And so I really believe in collaborative parenting, we'd have to collaborate with our kids. They want to have a say, and it's not that they get their way all the time, but they certainly get to have input into the family.

Debbie Reber: 21:55

Yeah, it's the shower example that conversations around personal hygiene come up all the time in my community, and also around deodorant. I'm like, at a certain point, they may decide they don't want to smell but that's on them. Like I'm really hands off with that. But I I love this team rebelling by saying I'm gonna shower at night that morning. I mean, yeah, yeah, our teens have to rebel. So that's pretty safe rebellion, right there. Yeah, totally safe when dad can back off, but they were really butting heads. And there was a lot of anger and impatience around that. And of course, that's going to ripple into other things. And, and to your point about the hygiene, you know, one of the detriments of this pandemic, and online learning is our kids are not getting the peer feedback that they would typically get of, Oh, you know, your breath smells, or Oh, you, you haven't showered in five days, and who, and you know, coming from parents, that's a little different message than when it comes from your peers. And maybe that girl or that guy that you're kind of alright. And also, to be fair, many of us listening as parents saying, yep, our shared habits are slipping a little bit too. .

Janet: 23:12

Yeah. My girls call it marinating. Yeah, I'm just marinating this weekend. And that's totally fine.

Debbie Reber: 23:19

I'm curious to know, is thinking about some of the common challenges that I hear about in my community and just kind of in general, with their kids, and particularly more, or possibly more with their sons. So in addition to anger, just you know, having kind of a short fuse, and then lying comes up a lot, too, as something that parents really struggle with. A lot of kids with A HD, lying is a big issue. And can you say more about that? And then also, how do you support families in dealing with those issues?

Janet: 24:02

So, you know, kids will lie. And it can be a little humorous and quite because it can be so blatant. And you're like, what I mean, I'll tell Tybalt, a story. When I was in third grade, I was

learning my times tables, right. And I was not very good at it. And so we had flashcards, and my mom put the flashcards on the wall, like where the ceiling meets the wall. So around my room. We're flashcards and every night we go through the times tables. Well, I thought I would just like if I just wrote the answers on a piece of paper and held them in my hand, as my mom is sitting right across from me on the bed. She will never know that I am looking down at the answers well, because I thought I was so brilliant, right? Wrong. That lasted like 30 seconds, but it's like our kids don't have the cognitive ability to parse through that, that like this is going to be really obvious. And so there's that. And part of it, I think, for boys is to be careful not to shame them. And that lack of safety. And so part depending on, you know, the age and the magnitude of the lie. And of course, it's going to start young, but if you can treat it as, Oh, what did you mean? That Oh, and kind of be light about it, rather than punching down because lying, lying triggers us, we think, Oh, my gosh, my kids, you know, gonna be whatever, and I'm a terrible parent, because my child is lying, lying is a normal stage of development, you have to have a certain stage of cognitive awareness to be able to lie. So it's kind of like if you can step back and go, Oh, well, my kid is growing up, he's lying now, and know that this too, will pass. And of course, as a family value, we value honesty and truth. And, and that's just part of the learning. And so being a little less dramatically reactive, when they do lie, and be a little more light about it is a good approach. And recognizing that boys, boys are really aware and attuned to being shamed. And so again, that's this place of, Oh, whoops, did you forget about that other part of this? And rather than, Oh, my gosh, you're, that's terrible. You're lying. So to lighten up a little bit, recognize it's a developmental stage, and move through it?

Debbie Reber: 26:52

Yeah. And, and also, you know, as you're talking about shame, you mentioned it earlier, too. We know that shame is different from feeling guilty, right? Because shame is more internalized that there's something wrong with me, like, I am bad. So that is something we want to be really mindful of with our kids. And me, you know, I'm thinking so I wrote down the phrase, I don't know, I will say that that was the response to anything that I wasn't supposed to do. And my dad asked me, Why did you do that? I would just say, I don't know. I don't know. I don't know. I imagine that comes up in your world, too. But if we have kids who that is their default response, or there may be just not, you know, we're talking about the emotional lives of boys and how to help them access their inner empathy, and you know, just kind of really have a full emotional life. How do we support boys who aren't communicative? Who don't naturally go there? Who say, I don't know, for anything? How do we kind of get them to go a little deeper?

Janet: 27:55

I'm so glad you brought that up. Because it's I don't know, or I don't care, which Oh, really gets your hackles up, right. And or just simply No, no, I don't want to know, I'm not going to all those initial reactions. And I always think of those as that's the first step to yes, no, is the first step to Yes. And what happens for our boys because they tend to, again, a tendency, process language a little more slowly than girls. So they've been asked a question, and you can check this out with the adult men in your life, you can ask a question. And boys know that, like, I'm supposed to have an answer right now. But they're still thinking. And then, you know, I got to have a response. So it's, I don't know, I don't care, no initial response. So

when we know that our boys actually need a little processing time, our men prefer to have a little processing time. We can build that in. And of course, there's times when, of course, you need an answer right away. But if it's something that, you know, you can give him a heads up, hey, I want to talk with you about the homework assignments that didn't get turned in or whatever. Let's check in about that after dinner. And so you give him some time to think, give him a point in time that I'm going to check in with you about it then. And then absolutely do that. But giving them some space for a teacher in a classroom. It might be Hey, you know, she asked a question, Sam, I'm going to. I want you to think about that. I'm going to come back to you after I talked to Tyler over here. So it takes the pressure off, gives them some time to process and find the words and find the response.

Debbie Reber: 29:53

I love that because I don't remember who I had on the show. I think it was Brendan Mahan. We were talking about Yeah, so Brendan Mahan is an ADHD coach, I can have the link in the show notes page. And we were talking about, you know, again, with kids with ADHD, their processing may look like not paying attention not having words, you know, just and and so we as parents tend to get impatient like, what are you doing? I asked you to do this or why aren't you? You know, and that was such a good reminder as this is as well to just give them time. Like, we're so impatient with wanting answers or to move forward on something. So that's a good reminder.

Janet: 30:35

Yeah. And along with that, I will say, you know, as parents, we tend to be in the Hurry up, hurry up, hurry up. And if we can reframe that for ourselves, to the benefit of our kids of, oh, you have all the time you need right now to tie your shoes you have all the time you need right now to gather your things. And even just saying that out loud, like Hurry up and tire Hurry up and get your shoes on. Versus you have all the time you need to get your shoes on. Right now. totally different experience. Yeah, it feels different. Just saying it. So I encourage your listeners, like give it a try. So it's different. And then so then it resonates, it lands with your kids differently to

Debbie Reber: 31:23

Okay, so I do want to ask, because we know, especially within the differently wired community, there is a higher prevalence of kids who are trans or who have a non binary gender identity. And I'm just wondering, like, we've been talking about this from a very male female lens, and I'm wondering if, in your work, like, how does this generation of kids who there's a lot more fluidity and gender nonconformity? What does that look like in the work that you do?

Janet: 31:55

Well, you know, I think that you can kind of lift it all out of this conversation of boys over here and girls over here and just look at it as qualities as characteristics as tendencies, you might have a child who was very talkative and very engaged and very verbal, okay, that's their tendency, that's their quality, great, you might have a child who's really an observer and withdrawn and you know, wants to check things out first, okay. That's great. So that might be

the child that you, you know, need to wait until quarter till midnight to have the conversation with or it might be the child that opens up when you're on a walk more readily. So it's, it's like, oh, we just opened Pandora's box of all these different ways to be human in the world. That isn't my personal operating system. I mean, I love eye contact and conversation. So that's me. Oh, now I have this whole other understanding of there's people that don't prefer eye contact, that prefer to answer with one or two words and not have the deeper sensory details emotionally laden conversations. And so it just becomes like, oh, here's another way of being in the world, regardless of their, where they fall in the gender spectrum, okay. And I mean, I just think boys, boys, girls are shorthand. I think of it as you know, okay. And probably the largest percentage, of course, falls into that category. Yeah. But it's its qualities, its characteristics, and ways to connect.

Debbie Reber: 33:44

Thank you. Yeah. All right. And so my last question, if you could beam yourself into the home of every parent raising boys, what advice or wisdom would you want them to know? What's your most important thing for to be on their mind so they can really support the boy they're raising, to grow up into this emotionally intelligent, aware in-tune man?

Janet: 34:11

The word that comes to mind is listen, listen with an open mind. Listen with an open heart. And just listen, be curious about what he's thinking and feeling.

Debbie Reber: 34:29

Great. And that's where you started the conversation about how you got into this, because you got really curious about these kids in your class. So I love that. Yeah. Yeah. Well, so tell listeners, you talked about your podcast at the beginning. Maybe just let listeners know where they can engage with you and learn more about your work.

Janet: 34:48

Yeah, come to boys. live.com. I have a really active Facebook group. So just Google Boys Alive and we'd love to have you join the conversation there at my website, boysalive.com, you can opt in for a free report called Your Boy and His Big E motions, common parenting mistakes and what to do instead. So that'll give you some tips on dealing with those big emotions. Yeah, and of course, the p dcast.

Debbie Reber: 35:17

And listeners, I will have links to all of that in the show notes page. So you can go check those out. And again, I'll put a link to the conversation I had with Brendan as well as the link to the conversation that I had on the on boys podcast.

Janet: 35:30

That's right. Yeah. Well, thank you so much. It's been really lovely to connect with you and have this conversation and I really just appreciate you sharing all this with us today. You are so welcome. My pleasure.