



THE GROWING BRAIN

EPISODE 14: Understanding Boys

Guest: Dr. Matthew Leahy

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Certainly all children are different, but there are many commonalities among boys. Diving into all things boys is guest Dr. Matthew Leahy who shares his learning from the past decade of working with boys.

Welcome to The Growing Brain, a social emotional health podcast. I am Maureen Fernandez with Momentous Institute, a nonprofit in Dallas, Texas, dedicated to all things, social emotional health. Welcome to Season Two, where we're diving deeper into some of the most challenging aspects of parenting - dating, sleep, ADHD, anxiety, and so much more on this season of The Growing Brain. Thank you for joining us.

Maureen *Welcome back to The Growing Brain podcast. Our guest today is Dr. Matthew Leahy. Matt is a clinical psychologist on our therapeutic services team at Momentous Institute, and he's been doing this work for almost a decade. And he works almost exclusively with boys and men. At Momentous, he's mostly working with boys ages 4 to 16, so across a wide range of ages and he is here today to talk to us about all of the lessons learned in working with boys.*

So today we're going to talk about parenting boys, and of course, every child is unique, and every boy is unique. And so today we'll be talking some in generalities about boys, and you may hear things that don't apply to your boys, and we'll talk about exceptions to the rule, of course, but in general, there are some things that apply to most boys. And so today we'll talk a little bit about, about some of those topics. Thank you so much for being here today, Matt.

Matt It's great to be here. Thanks for having me.

Maureen *So I know you have a lot of experience with boys. And so, um, I'm curious from you, what are some of the big things that you found in common among boys across your career?*

Matt First off, I'm glad you led with the, with the caveat that we're talking in generalities here, because I do think there's, um, a lot of boys that don't fit the, the different things we're going to be talking about today. In fact, you can, you can probably picture any boy in your head and kind of the different, the different, um, topics we cover today, one of those topics won't fit for that specific boy. So we definitely that's our goal today is to talk about the generalities that, that, that parents can look at and take and see what fits and advice we might have for those things. Um, so I do think there are a few things that we, that we can lead with and talk about.

Um, when I think of the boys that I work with, I think of these kids that walk into my office and they're, they're balls of high energy. They're messy, they're impulsive, they're, um, little wrecking balls all over the place, you know, they'll come in and there's four different types of something on their school uniforms from the day, you know, and it just speaks to how boys are, you know, they're high energy, they're all over the place. I think evolutionary that's how males have evolved. They can have... are, are going out and doing things and staying active. And I think it's important that we know that because we have them come to school where they do have to sit down and they do have to focus and there needs to be that time for them to get that energy out. You know, that that kind of being all over the place... it can be hard for a lot of boys to be able to sit there and focus and stay in one place. So, um, I always lead with that, that they're kind of these whirling dervishes by and large, that are coming in, um, in every setting that they're in. And they're very curious about the world and trying to find their place in it and, and what makes sense. So I always lead with that.

Maureen *Um, so that one checks out in my house, for sure.*

Matt Related to that, the, the point I was making there about that, their curiosity, I think boys are really trying to, to, to make scheme this for life, you know, and they kind of do that by, by searching for role models. Um, so I think it's important to talk about relationships.

So when we think of, um, who boys are gonna look at for role models, I think ideally perfect situation, it would be their dad, right? Their dad that's present, that's kind of leading by example for them. Now we know that a lot of boys don't have that. And we can talk about a little bit more about what that means, but boys are going to search for a role model. And if it's not dad, if it's not kind of a healthy male figure in their life, they're going to turn to TV, they're going to turn to social media. They're going to, they're going to search it out in some way, shape or form. Um, and there can be some not so great role models out there that kids starts to follow. So it's really important I think for boys to have, um, these stable kind of healthy male role models in their lives, whether it's in their family or, or some other avenue.

Maureen *How have you seen parents do that in families where they don't have dad present?*

Matt Yeah, it's a good point. I want to highlight that, that it doesn't mean if a dad isn't present in a family that that's bad or that that's, that's going to lead to negative outcomes. That's not it at all. I think families can... families look in so many different ways. And the key to really remember is that point let's find a healthy male caregiver, family member, friend, pastor, coach, whomever that can really kind of be that example. And kids will latch onto that. Like I said, these boys are looking for these role models. So if a family can get it there in front of them, that's who they're going to cling to. So it doesn't have to be dad.

It certainly doesn't have to be biological dad by any means. Um, so families can be creative with what that looks like.

Maureen *Sounds like you're saying that an important male role model is really important.*

Matt Yeah. And I think my next point was going to be the flip side of that too. You know, we have a positive male role model and, and boys are really, just by nature, they're, they're drawn to their moms. They love their moms. I mean, there's 200 years of psychological research on that, you know? So, um, boys need that nurturing side, even though they may, they may wipe your kiss off, especially as they get older, you know, like they get embarrassed by these things. Um, but they're clinging to that emotional side of it as well. It's filling a different role than kind of the male role model in their life might be. I always encourage moms to never stop showering their kid with love and with affection, even if it seems like they, they don't want it or they're embarrassed by it, they do want it. They just might be embarrassed by who might be seeing it. Um, or as they get older, it starts to, it's there... they may change emotionally, but that doesn't mean they don't need it or want it. And I encourage moms to stick with it. Um, and I'm using the term moms, but again, it may be a family that, that there isn't, um, a strong female presence or a trustworthy female presence in it. And you can, you can search that out too. Um, families look in many different ways, as I said earlier.

Maureen *I know when I was pregnant with my first kid, everyone said, if it's a boy, boys love their moms. That's just like a common thing people say to women who are pregnant with babies so it sounds like that's true.*

Matt Mm hm, and by and large, it's true, you know, and we have, we have decades of research on attachment theory as well in boys, really, and girls as well, really attaching to their mom and how crucial and important that first relationship is.

Maureen *So some of those things you just described are probably true for girls as well. I know my girls have a lot of energy and they love their dad and their mom. Um, but what are some of the big differences that you see between boys and girls?*

Matt Yeah, I think let's go back to this term, human, you know, like man is part of human and sometimes we forget the H-U, the h-u part of it, and we can get to that later, but we're all people, you know, so there, there are definitely more things between boys and girls that, that make them alike then do then are different. But, but there are some subtle differences that I think are important to talk about. You know, if we think in terms of puberty, puberty for boys can be a very wide range, a much, much larger range than for girls. And I think that's important to point out because it can be from, this is a rough estimate, but say ages 8 to 14, where boys can really be starting that process. So developmentally like a, an 8 year old that starts that is very different from an 8 year old that isn't, or the whole opposite side of it, like a 14 year old that's just starting at that point. So I say that to say that there... that makes boys, there's a broad range of what boys can look like during those ages. With girls, it's a little

bit more predictable, kind of the steps in the path they're going to go through. But with boys, that's all over the place, which means hormones are all over the place, which means kind of developments all over the place, both physical and emotional. So I think with boys, you get a lot more surprises along the developmental path, um, for lack of a better term.

Um, boys by and large are drawn more to kind of the, the, the stereotypical aggressive type games and toys and whatnot that we think of. They're drawn more to guns. They're drawn more to kind of, um, the more violent side of video games, which we can maybe get into a little bit later, um, the, the stereotypical masculine stuff or what boys are going to be drawn to. They're going to be like, ooh, I don't want to play with, with dolls and things like that. But, uh, there are some that will, you know, again, we're talking in terms of generalities here. Um, but by and large boys are going to be the active, rough and tumble, needing to get that energy out of them at a, a level that's higher than girls generally.

Maureen *So that's a really interesting point. You talked there about violence in video games. What are some of your thoughts on that?*

Matt This can be a tough one for parents, you know, but I think we're really starting to, to get some data on it now. And video games have been around for a few decades now. So I think 10, 15 years ago, I think it was harder for families to navigate what's appropriate for video games. Like we have all these shooter games out there. We have the, the Fortnite craze that's around and there's a broad spectrum of, of violence in video games, you know, from kind of cartoony-type games that yes, guns and yes, kind of a violent pieces involved, to like you literally feel like you're in a war zone. It's almost like virtual reality type thing. So I think that spectrum is important, you know, and I think this varies family to family and, um, kid to kid, again, going back to that developmental like level, like where is the kid developmentally? Um, to know which of these games are appropriate because I'm not, I don't, I don't advise parents to kind of make that hard and fast rule of no, no violent video games at all.

You know, I think you gotta be careful with that because, um, it can lead kids to, to find it out behind your back. You know, like we're gone are the days where you can just kind of assume that a child's not going to have access to any of those things, whether it's at school or at a friend's house or somewhere, you know, so I think it again, varies child by child, but, uh, but it's important for families to have these discussions with their kids and see what makes sense to them, you know? Um, and know... what's unhealthy about violence or what we worry about when it comes to violence and making sure it doesn't transfer over to their lives. You know, I go back to my point before that we now have a few decades of data on this that shows us that just because a child is exposed to certain video games doesn't mean that 20 years later, they're going to, um, go out and commit horrible crimes and whatnot. But it's a discussion that should be had in a case by case basis.

Maureen *And I assume that your advice would be, parents should understand what games their kids are playing and know about what's in them and have a conversation with their kid about what they're playing. Is that also...?*

Matt Video games, yeah. And electronics in general, you know, like parents really have to become detectives and it's an ever-changing situation, um, to really stay on top of it. Um, cause, cause right now we're at a point where boys and kids are almost the experts, you know, so parents have to work really hard to almost flip that and at least be at the same level of understanding as their child. So that families can make informed decisions about what's appropriate for, for that child.

Maureen *What you said or about the range in which boys go through puberty is so interesting and thought provoking and thinking about what one child at 8 might be able to do and one child at 14 might be able to do. And even with two boys in the same family, there may be differences, not just in maturity, which of course we know, but just in developmentally where they are in that puberty process, I just hadn't thought about that range before. It's really interesting.*

Matt Yeah and it's important to keep that range in mind when we're, where I think parents are naturally drawn to compare their children to each other, um, especially when we're talking like boys and girls, if we went back to that point, you know, like, that broad range means that your, your nine nine-year-old girl may look extremely different from your nine-year-old boy at a different time, you know, because again, they may be at different developmental levels by many years at that point because of puberty and whatnot.

And in regards to two boys at that level, you think about all the things that go into puberty. Like some may be starting to have interest in dating or romantic type relationships where another kid of the same age that might not even be close to on his radar, he might still be wanting to go outside and run through the mud when it's raining outside. Um, another point related to that is those... those boys that develop very late, we often find that that sometimes they're more prone to more of the depressive type disorders that are out there because when all of your classmates are kind of, you're 14 years old and all of your classmates have kind of moved on to this next level of development and you both physically and emotionally just aren't there yet. Um, it can be really hard to navigate that for kids. So it's important that parents keep that in mind as well. You really want to know where your child is at in this kind of developmental process.

Maureen *That's interesting. I want to come back to what you talked about, just sort of that depression in boys. Cause I think there's a lot there that, uh, goes undetected. I want to come back to that, but you said something there about comparing boys and girls or comparing boys with other boys. I think that's an easy, uh, accident that a lot of us make as parents, like look at your sister. She cleans her room like*

I asked her to her. She does, you know, she does this thing and you're not doing it. You know, it's, it's easy for us to say, why isn't my son doing this when my daughter can do it.

Matt One of the big things, one of the big buzzwords for me, when I'm, when I'm in therapy with someone, is the word *should* that I think comes out a lot. We do it to ourselves. And I think we can do it to our kids, that your sister was able to do this. Why can't you, you should be able to do this right now. Um, so I always encourage parents to, to catch these certain words that you can say. Um, because again, you can, you can set yourself up for you're expecting your child to be able to do something that just, they're just not able to do at that time. Or they're not the pro that their sibling might be at that moment because there's such a wide range of development, especially among boys.

Maureen *Wow, I love that. Catching the word should. I'm going to have to do self reflection on that one, I think. Um, let's talk a little bit about the boys who fall outside the mold here. So I know that already parents of boys are listening and thinking, yeah, some of that doesn't apply to my son. What are some thoughts about boys who just aren't what you described just now?*

Matt Yeah, we live in a society that's very, um, we have very strict gender roles. Um, and I think, I think we're seeing that, that some of those are loosening a little bit, um, kind of as time passes, but we live in a very masculine and feminine society right now. And you are expected to kind of check certain boxes and fit into certain molds and as we led with at the beginning of our time together that there's a, there's a group of boys and girls that aren't going to fit that typical masculine or feminine, um, kind of personality profile that we put out there. It can be things like if you think in terms of activities. so for these kinds of high energy boys, we're thinking sports, maybe we're thinking boxing, we're thinking martial arts, there's a group of boys that would do much better with drama or with music or that that's their jive, that's their thing.

Um, the important thing to remember for parents is acceptance is key to all of this. The kids that, that start to feel rejected and head down a path of potentially dangerous behaviors or again, the depressive type thoughts and even disorders, um, are the kids that don't feel like they're accepted and feel shame for the way they think the way they're feeling or the way they're acting.

So above all the changes that we might be seeing, acceptance is by far, um, the key for parents and I tell parents total acceptance is the key to long-term health for everybody. Um, but especially boys that may feel like they don't fit into these masculine gender roles that that society has created.

Maureen *Okay. Quick break. And we'll be right back.*

Commercial

Thank you so much for listening to our podcast, The Growing Brain. I wanted to take a quick minute to let you know about a really fun video series we're working on called The Science Of series. So far, we've released videos about the science of the brain, the science of gratitude, the science of empathy, the science of trauma, and these videos are light and fun and very informational. They're fun to watch for you. They're even more fun to show with your kids and to discuss together. I think you'll really enjoy them. You can find them on our YouTube channel, [youtube.com/momentousinstitute](https://www.youtube.com/momentousinstitute). Check them out.

Maureen *And we're back. You've touched on a few ways that we unintentionally don't accept our children. And one is the use of that word should. Uh, one is, you know, putting them in school sports instead of, you know, instead of paying attention to what they're really interested in. What are some other ways that you see parents not accepting their, who their children are?*

Matt A lot of us get caught in, in thinking that when boys show big emotions, that, that that's a bad thing or that we need to stop that. I mean, I think even the most accepting people can catch themselves doing it. Sometimes they're saying, why are you crying? You know, like, boys shouldn't be crying like that.

Or "be a man" is one that a lot of people throw up or "man up." Um, and some people come in at some parents come at it from very good intentions and saying those things. But at the same time, you have to look at what messages those are saying to these kids and these boys, they're telling them that this, me crying is a bad thing and I need to stop this or me feeling this way, I should feel guilty about this. What does this mean? Does this mean I'm gay, then I'm crying so much. Um, what does this mean for me? And I see this in my private practice, I'll have these 30, 40 year old, very successful men come in and they'll tell me that things are going great. But then I was at the gym and all of a sudden I just started crying and I had no idea why I was like brought to my knees by it.

And I've seen this happen over and over again. And the first few times I was like, what the heck am I seeing here? But, but as we started peeling back some of the layers and talking about it, it was, it was, they're human. As I said before, we forget that man has that H-U at the beginning, beginning of it. And at some point life will, life will show you that you're, you're a human too, and that you feel emotions for a reason and you can bottle something up for so long and eventually that cork is going to go popping off and flying into the air. So that's what I was seeing decades and decades later, you know, so I think letting, letting boys and letting men kind of express their emotions in whatever way feels right to them is very important.

Maureen *So after, you know, decades of raising boys in this certain way, I imagine, uh, you know, the dad at the gym might have a hard time teaching his son to show his emotions if that was not a value he was raised with. And, um, you know, in*

the same vein there's culturally and society, there's just sort of different values around allowing boys to show their emotions. So this is not an easy thing to do.

Matt That's such a good point. And I think it's, it's a discussion. All of these things are discussions, you know, like the, that example of the, the men that are coming into my office, I think they, they feel some shame about that or feel like they're being judged because of how they grew up in a certain way. And it's not that at all, you know, it's kind of every family, I think, navigates these things differently. And the important thing again is talking about them and seeing what makes sense. You know, we kind of know that emotions are important, so, so how do you show them, and their families, cultures, society, countries show them in different ways.

Maureen *So let's talk a little bit about how you help boys learn how to handle their emotions. I know my son is very sensitive and he talks about his feelings a lot. And sometimes I know I can tell he's holding it in and it takes a little bit of digging on my part to sort of understand what he's feeling. And I think, oh, I don't want him to hold those in exactly for the reasons we're talking about, you know, so we've done some work at our house to just say, you can tell me what you're feeling and here's how you talk about it. But what advice do you have to help parents kind of navigate that?*

Matt Yeah, I think catching it when it's coming out and reframing it can be really helpful for parents. You know, like I think boys are really good at expressing their anger sometimes, there's like my friend, he was such a jerk today or this or that, you know, and really kind of taking that and then helping them see that, that at the heart of that, it's their anger. Right? Like helping them see, wow, you were really angry when he was that way. You know, it kind of shows them that they're expressing it outward, but they're the ones feeling it, you know, or they can say, oh, my stomach was really hurting today, but then as soon as the test was over, it felt better. Wow. You must've been really nervous before that, you know, you start labeling the emotion and kind of helping them be able to label it too, as well.

Maureen *Let's talk about depression. Earlier, you talked about these boys who have some of these depressive symptoms and I've heard you and others say before that sometimes it's harder to spot depression in boys. What is, what is the story there?*

Matt Yeah, a big part of my practice is depression and boys, and it can be very hard to see, um, cause it comes out, it manifests in different ways. I'd say from, from ages, I don't know, seven to 12, 13, um, depression or kind of sadness and boys can often come out in anger. It can come out in risk-taking, it just manifests in different ways than just a boy coming up and saying, I'm sad right now. Um, or even being able to cry or understand and crying, it can come out in such different ways and it can be hard for parents to see.

Um, the key to look for really is changes. That's when that's when it may be time to kind of have an evaluation or get extra help, like, um, if your child, if your son, if you're, if a boy in your life is doing okay, and then suddenly behavior issues are happening at school or grades just completely tank, um, it's a sign that something's going on and that, um, we need to look at it closer to see if, if there is something depressive that might be going on, but it can be hard to see.

Maureen *And sometimes those things that you described - anger, or, you know, outbursts, those things, we don't, we don't often think depression. We might treat that really differently. We might talk about an entirely different sort of, you know, as a parent, you may talk to your child about managing their anger when really what's underneath it is depression or sadness.*

Matt Yeah. And if you think about it, one way we often manage behavior is by kind of consequences and rewards. But if, if you're depressed and somebody says, okay, if things don't shape up, you're losing your video games for a week. Um, if you're in a depressive state, one of the hallmarks of depression is you lose interest in things you enjoy. So it may be like, okay, take them away, I don't, I'm not enjoying it right now anyways, you know. So I have parents that will come into my office and be like, we've tried everything. We tried to give him additional screen time. We've taken everything in the world away, he just doesn't care. He literally will just sit in his bed and stare at the wall. Um, but if we think in terms of an adult with depression, that again is what we see, you know? So, um, it's important to really dig a little deeper and see what's going on.

Maureen *So speaking of screen time, and earlier you mentioned puberty and we know these things collide at times and, uh, boys start to, you know, explore and think back to the classic, you know, dirty magazines. And now that's evolved and boys are finding access to some, you know, explicit information or images on, on phones and on devices. Um, this is a tricky one for parents, I know. So what thoughts do you have about boys discovering those things?*

Matt Right. Think about having a cell phone and knowing you literally have the entire internet at your fingertips in a moment, and being a boy that's kind of started puberty and thinking about attraction, sexual attraction, typically to girls, women, and I hand you this phone and carte blanche, pull up whatever you want, search, whatever you want. And then the whole world is going to be there. Um, it's a lot easier than it was two, three decades ago when boys had to like search out for a magazine or whatnot, you know, and at the same time, we can't keep kids from all devices until they're 18 or 19 year old years old. So there needs to be a balance there. Um, the point I always tell parents to keep in mind is who do you want teaching your child, teaching your boy, teaching your son about sex. Do you want it to be you at home, kind of dealing with the awkwardness together, or do you want it to be the internet? Do you want it to be pornography? Um, and I think most parents will side for let's have these awkward discussions, um, and helping kids understand and see what the

difference between kind of healthy sexual development is and some of the graphic kind of really destructive, um, websites and, and inappropriate things that are out there. So there a balance, you know, I mean, boys just naturally are going to be drawn to these things and can we prevent it completely? No, but can you educate them and help them learn and navigate what's a healthy relationship, how to treat women and girls, um, very different than just letting them find whatever they want on the phone and, and learning that way.

Maureen *And never talking about it.*

Matt Exactly.

Maureen *We have another episode this season on healthy relationships, so, um... and dating relationships. So that's another one to listen to if your kids are in that age range.*

So you've given me a lot to think about here, definitely, and a ton that I know I have to look forward to as my son gets older. Um, as we close out, I was wondering if you would give us, what is your biggest piece of advice for parents of boys who are listening?

Matt As I said, as we said throughout kind of, we're talking in broad generalities here and every boy, every child, every human is different. And the key really is total acceptance of, of all of us for how we are. That's the key to long-term health. Um, and this means accepting boys for who they are and what they enjoy rather than focusing on, on activities or lifestyles that aren't a fit for them.

You know, I think you can't fail by just accepting them and going on this trip and journey with them.

Maureen *Nice. Thank you so much for being here today. I think you've given us a lot to think about, really appreciate it.*

Matt Thanks for having me.

Thank you for listening to The Growing Brain, a social emotional health podcast. We hope you have enjoyed this conversation. Don't miss an episode, be sure to subscribe so that you're notified when new episodes are released. And for more content, including articles, videos, and much more, please visit us online at momentousinstitute.org.