

Speaker 1 ([00:00](#)):

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New Speaker ([00:13](#)):

Welcome to Let's Examine This podcast focused on engaging the young males in your life in their health. I'm Dennis Barbour, President of the Partnership for Male Youth. Each week we talk with two experts about physical and mental health problems that young males face and what you can do to address those problems.

Speaker 2 ([00:32](#)):

Today, we are joined by two guests who will discuss the subject of fostering boys relational health. We will answer a number of questions, including what relational health is, how important it is and what caregivers can do to promote it. Our first guest today is Dr. Niobe Way. She is professor of developmental psychology and the founder of the Project for the Advancement of our Common Humanity at New York University. She is also past President of the Society for Research on Adolescence and co-director of the Center for Research on Culture Development and Education at NYU. Her work focuses on the intersections of culture, context, and human development with a particular focus on social and emotional development and how cultural ideologies influence developmental trajectories Dr. Way has authored nearly a hundred journal articles and books, including *Deep Secrets, Boys, Friendships and Crisis of Connection*, and *Everyday Courage, the Lives and Stories of Urban Teenagers*.

Speaker 2 ([01:27](#)):

Her research has been funded by the National Institute of Mental Health and numerous foundations. She is a contributor to Huffington Post Psychology Today and her research is regularly featured in mainstream media outlets. Our second guest is Dr. Michael Reichert. He is a psychologist who has worked in a variety of clinical school community and research contexts over the course of his career. He serves as Executive Director of the Center for the Study of Boys and Girls Lives, a research collaborative at the University of Pennsylvania and a supervising psychologist at the Haverford School, outside Philadelphia and in clinical practice also outside Philadelphia. He has long specialized in work with boys, men and their families. He led research teams that have conducted studies of boys education, resilient presentations, publications, and professional development workshops for educators throughout the United States, Canada United Kingdom, Ireland, South Africa, New Zealand and Australia. He also founded an urban youth development program in the tri-state region around Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, which was recognized as a promising practice and violence prevention by the state's attorney general. His writing has been published in the Atlantic New York Times, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, Time, Fatherly, Good Men Project and others. His books include *Reaching Boys: Teaching Boys Lessons About What Works and Why I can Learn From You Boys as Relational Learners* and *How to Raise a Boy, the Power of Connection to Build Good Men*. Welcome Dr. Reichert.

New Speaker ([02:56](#)):

Good morning, Dennis. Thank you for having us.

Speaker 2 ([02:59](#)):

Let's start out with a question that I think might be of particular interest and that is what about your research has surprised you.

New Speaker ([03:08](#)):

There's a new rigor in how we're thinking about male development generally. And that really was the impetus behind my research on boys' education. You know, as you know, we have this gender achievement gap that's been true for a hundred years, but only in the last 20 years, have we really legitimately been permitted to dig into why is this gender achievement gap true? You know, why is it that girls have outperformed boys academically for so long? But the truth really is we don't really treat boys as if they are vulnerable and education is essentially all about being vulnerable. It's all about going to the edge of what you can do, what you can know and asking somebody to help you. When we began our study and asking boys essentially a thousand boys, 1,015 hundred of their teachers, grades six through 12 in countries around the world.

Speaker 3 ([04:08](#)):

When we asked the question what's working, it was the boys themselves, the young men who told us they were dependent on the quality of the connection with their teachers in order to engage in learning that they are essentially relational learners. So two things surprised us the first was that even though my partner and I, my research partner and I, we had 50 years of experience in the trenches with boys and boys education. At the point we did that study, neither of us were prepared, had anticipated that boys would so clearly identify themselves as dependent on a relationship, a connection with a teacher or a coach. And that's really the second thing that surprised us was that not only were we, the researchers surprised at how clear boys were about that, but in asking teachers the same quite, you know, what worked in engaging boys and learning, it was not the teachers, but the boys themselves that said that they were relational learners. Teachers talked in robust detail about the technology of their instruction. And didn't talk in nearly the same degree of clarity as the boys did about the importance of the connection. So the fog of stereotype and the clarity of the boys themselves, I think that was what was surprising to us in our research.

Speaker 2 ([05:33](#)):

Dr. Way?

Speaker 4 ([05:34](#)):

When I was a counselor in Austin in the late 1980s, I began to hear boys in my counseling sessions, talk a lot about their friendships, and I didn't expect it at all. I expected them to talk about school or parents, or maybe what was going on with their girlfriend if they had a girlfriend. And I realized in my counseling sessions that they were talking a lot about trying to find friends, trying to find good friends, having good friends, getting in a fight with their friend. And I was really shocked because I didn't understand we had had this stereotype that still exists quite frankly, which is that emotionally intimate, close friendship is kind of a girl thing that girls and young women want and women grown women want, but boys certainly teenage boys are more into dating girls and having sex than they are in emotionally intimate friendships.

Speaker 4 ([06:30](#)):

I was hearing a very different story from the teenagers themselves. And then I essentially dedicated my entire career to that surprise and started investigating friendships among boys and discovered that not only the boys in my counseling sessions, which were just a couple dozen, but in fact, thousands of boys I've been interviewing and doing research with over the past 30 years, talk about their desire for their needs. They're having close friendships, the sharing of deep secrets, the emotional sensitivity within their friendships, their desire to tell them everything, to tell them what's important. Many boys talk

about wanting these friendships. Some boys talk about having them, especially when they're in early adolescences, as they get older and the pressure to man up it's become harder and harder to hold onto those intimate friendships. And so while some boys do, and we can talk about why some boys actually are able to hold onto their close friendships, many boys struggle to find them or to hold onto them because the pressures to sort of turn toward a heterosexual relationship is intense.

Speaker 4 ([07:40](#)):

And also to man up in this culture and American culture means to do things on your own. And so you don't need anybody. You shouldn't need anybody if you're a man. So boys struggle with that. Young men struggle with that. And so by the time they're young adults, they talk oftentimes about their struggle with having to live a life in which you don't need anybody, which is not a human way to live a life because as humans, we all need each other. I was surprised not only at the existence of, and the desire for close friendships, but to be honest with you, I was also surprised by how rigid our culture is in terms of understanding boys and young men, but also giving a gender to a basic human desire of not only, you know, emotional intimacy, but just friendships that had been given a gender, which doesn't make any sense and is not reflective of the data, but we still hold onto the belief that somehow deep secret friendships are things that girls and women do, but not boys and men.

Speaker 4 ([08:39](#)):

And while that may be the case for some friendships for men and boys, not necessarily what they want in their friendships. And so to me, it was the surprise of the boys and also the surprise of what a completely incoherent and rigid culture we live in that perpetuates stereotypes that basically dehumanize boys and young men, as well as of course girls and young women, because they get the opposite side. So girls and women are feelers and boys and men are thinkers. And somehow if you're a thinker, you're not a feeler. And if you're a feeler, you're not a, to me, it's a surprise on both sides, the actual human experience, and then the culture, that's not reflective of humans, of human desire.

Speaker 3 ([09:23](#)):

What are the roots of the problem, the dehumanizing effect of that culture. It's a fundamental violation that is brutal in male development, who disassociate our hearts and our ability to communicate with other people, to connect with other people who we are and what we're feeling to disassociate that from the experience of males is a brutal violation of our fundamental human natures. And I think that that brutal violation, you know, produces terrible outcomes, developmental outcomes, across a wide range of important metrics. And yet we have normalized that for generations,

Speaker 4 ([10:11](#)):

The whole notion that emotions becomes gendered is a very 20th century phenomenon. And it's a very late 20th century. And it's also a very American phenomenon. I'm not saying only in the United States, but I'm saying you see it in the United States. And then you see it globalized in all sorts of ways around the world. It was not a culture that was somehow responding to humans. It was a humans being constrained increasingly by the straight jacket of masculinity. That started to be imposed on Americans in particular, in the late 20th century. But it is definitely a cultural phenomenon. It is not a biological phenomenon. It is a cultural phenomenon, but at some level, I also think it's gotten worse. You know, in some sense, because as one, the young person told me when everybody seems gay, meaning, especially when you live in a place like New York city, there's more of a sort of determination to make a sharp divide between gay and not gay.

Speaker 4 ([11:09](#)):

The meaning of masculinity, norms of masculinity are very tied into an anti girl, anti gay, anti feminine belief system. So anything soft, anything vulnerable, anything emotional is perceived as feminine girl and gay. And that's still the case. You have to talk about homophobia and you have to talk about misogyny. If you're gonna talk about what's hurting boys, because rather than allowing boys to be human saying, you can't be a girl or a gay kid, you have to be straight and you have to be a masculine kid, which means you can't be anything associated with femininity. What it means to be a man is the opposite in our notions of what it means to be a girl or a woman. So it shouldn't be the opposite, but it's premised on the opposite. So to be a boy is the opposite of being a girl. So you shouldn't cry cuz it's girls who cry that premise that boys and girls are opposites in order to be a boy, you shouldn't be a girl, especially in a patriarchal society. Now it's easier for a girl to be a boy behaviorally, cause it's more accepted than a boy to be a girl. That's the incoherent part because what we've stereotyped to be a boy and a girl is just a human. So when you think about intervention, I just wanna remind your audience. It's not about, about teaching boys and young men. Something is about nourishing. What they were born with.

Speaker 3 ([12:39](#)):

This might be a good point to actually define what we mean by relational health. And I wanna kinda head in that direction based on what you were saying in my educational research, you know, we asked the question, what's working. We tried to build a theory of boys education in an inductive way from the ground up from stories of what was working a thousand boys, 1500 teachers, where do they overlap? Where do they correspond and what the boys said so clearly is that when there is a connection between me and the teacher, when I can tell that the teacher knows me and cares about me, I'm able to engage with him in this vulnerable practice of learning something. I don't know. And what we realized was that the relational approach, the relationship itself had transformative power, that the young person that didn't know how to do math problems or didn't know how to run fast on a track or throw a lacrosse ball or catch a football that young man becomes in a practical way, transformed by what he's learned from that teacher he's transformed psycho logically his self concept has changed. Suddenly. I think of myself as someone that can run really fast or is capable of writing a poem or expressing my heart in a written essay, even bigger. I think the transformative power is existential. The young man recognizes that I'm not alone. And when I don't know how to do something, when I can, you know, when I need to learn something, I can find somebody who can help me. I don't have to do this life all by myself. I

Speaker 4 ([14:33](#)):

Use the word relational and relational health a lot, and I need to step back and define it. And I of course define it the same way you do. And it's fundamentally the human need to feel seen, heard and listened to. If you're talking about teachers and parents and how we can nourish boys and young men in their relational capacities. One of the things we discovered in our own project, the listening project is it's nourishing listening, which is actually, we define as the expression of interpersonal curiosity. So what's amazing to me is how much we listen to each other, but we don't ask each other follow up questions from what we just said. So oftentimes when we do that, we actually don't feel listened to, unless someone actually follows up with something, a question or a comment in Michael's case that shows that he was listening to me in terms of adding something or questioning.

Speaker 4 ([15:25](#)):

So encouraging interpersonal curiosity among your kids, among your students, asking questions of each other, asking, you know, replace judgment with curiosity. I mean all sorts of things you can do in the classroom and at home to engage in interpersonal curiosity and allow for building close relationships through the curiosity that's absolutely required in any closeness. And through the curiosity, it also allow for things that come out that feel vulnerable. You know, why are you feeling that way? Why did you feel bad yesterday? Why are you feeling happy now? What did that remind you of? I mean, all those questions actually pull for a kind of vulnerability. That's a human vulnerability. So we need to start nourishing that at home. It sounds a ridiculous Michael, from one teacher to another to say that, cause it's so obvious, but the reality is we just don't do it. So we need to be building the connection in our home and in our schools to be able to nurture boys natural, natural capacity, to be intimate and to share these beautiful and emotions, a whole range of emotions with their close friends and with their family and

Speaker 3 ([16:36](#)):

Not. And the question I think that we should talk a little bit about is, is that also true about their healthcare providers? We're talking about their emotionalized. We're talking about their friendships. We're talking about their relationship with their parents, with their teachers. But I think because of this threat of masculinity and being called out as somehow, you know, deficient in your masculinity, I think many guys live behind the mask and unless they experience some moment in which they're perceived accurately, their humanity is recognized. If we want to help boys regard their bodies in a different way than the culture is training them to think about their bodies. If we want them to actually talk to someone as if they can think together in a partnership about what do I need to do to take care of my health, what's troubling me. What's bothering me. What's worrying me. I think if we want that kind of doctor patient relationship between a young man and a provider, we have to emphasize the relational nature of that transaction and equip physicians and nurse practitioners and whatnot with the insight that in my work we're providing teachers and parents, which is, you know, boys are essentially relational. They're easily deterred from revealing that vulnerability. And all they need though is just the encouragement of being recognized for who they are.

Speaker 4 ([18:17](#)):

We have decades and decades of research, underscoring, the importance between quality relationships and physical health. So that thinking about what their patients relational health is, do they have friends that they can turn to. Do they have relationships in their lives that they can tune to figuring out resources and ways to get them involved or opportunities to offer them, to get them involved so that they build those relationships. We have incredible data that even says from the healthcare profession, they do these studies in which they give you a very minor cut on your thumb. And then they rate how quickly you heal. And those that are more connected to each other heal quicker than those who are more isolated. Your immune system responds to your emotional relational context. You see tasks as less difficult if you're standing next to a best friend than if you're standing next to a stranger, we literally have over 30 years of research in the medical field, <laugh> that doesn't get circulated much, but that we know.

Speaker 4 ([19:26](#)):

And as well as in the social science field, that shows that our relational, building close relationships helps us think better, makes us activate our immune system in ways that protects us from disease. We have longer lives when we're more connected to other people. There is such a thing as dying of loneliness. We now know that empirically that there does seem to be something that you can literally die of

loneliness I almost think Michael that doctors in some ways, nurse practitioners and people in the healthcare profession could really be leading the way with this conversation. More so even than parents and teachers, because if the medical profession was really emphasizing the relational nature of human beings and that we thrive in close relationships that changes everything. It changes how we raise our children. It changes how we school our children. And so I really think making the link between relationships and mental and physical health is critical in the movement.

Speaker 4 ([20:25](#)):

And I hope the healthcare professionals will know this. And then if you wanna know where the research is cited, there's a couple great books I'll just throw out there. One is a book called on loneliness written by John Kapo, who is a social neuroscience. He summarizes a lot of the medical research as it's linked to connection. So loneliness another book. And then the other one is Matthew Lieberman is another book. He wrote something about, I forget the title of the book, but it's Matthew Lieberman. He also summarizes the medical research as it's related to human connection. And those two books are for people wanting citations.

Speaker 3 ([21:03](#)):

No, I really love your challenge. You know, that healthcare could lead this opposition to the gendering, the negative effects of gendering male bodies, because essentially we say that gender is a body practice. We take a look at a body when a child's born and we gender that body in ways that have tremendous implications, not just for their learning, but for how they treat their bodies. You know, such banal issues as whether or not they apply sunscreen, turns out, hinges on whether or not they identify as male or female. The idea that there's an integrity to the human physical existence and doctors and medical practitioners could advocate for that integrity. That's really a powerful idea.

Speaker 4 ([21:54](#)):

You know, Malcolm Gladwell actually in his book, the outliers, I think it's an outliers refers to a town that they couldn't figure out for half a century, why that town had so many good health outcomes, very, very low heart disease, very low, all sorts of health, you know, almost no health problems in this small town. And then they finally discovered after many, many decades of trying to investigate why this town was so incredibly healthy physically. And they came down to the one thing that they could identify after decades, the way the town functioned is that people were all talking to their neighbors and checking in with their neighbors and very, very collectively in how the town worked. And they said essentially they started to do studies and they saw that those that were engaged in that sort of deep connection of checking in with each other and talking to other et cetera, were healthier along all dimensions.

Speaker 4 ([22:53](#)):

Again, it's like, that's an Malcolm Gladwell book, meaning it's out there in pop culture. And so it really is. I, I really do call to healthcare practitioners to really take what we know now in the medical research between the link between physical health and relational health and connection and deep connection, really feeling close to someone and really promoting that in their practice, in their conferences, in every form so that we start to reimagine the human as born in relationships. And if we don't nurture their relationships, as they go through life, they will suffer psychologically and physically. And that's particularly gonna happen for boys and men, which is Michael's point too, because we actually have a set of gender stereotypes that say that those needs are just female needs, not male needs. And so we need to see that as human needs not gendered needs,

Speaker 2 ([23:50](#)):

This has been a phenomenal conversation. Really thank you both in closing, I just want to mention to our listeners a couple of books in terms of resources, again, that Dr. Reichert's book, How to Raise a Boy, the Power of Connection to Build Good Men and Dr. Way's book, Deep Secrets, Boys' Friendships and the Crisis of Connection. Both of those are excellent resources for parents and other caregivers. And for our listeners who want more information about relational health and young males, please visit our website@www.partnershipformaleoyouth.org, where you'll find more information and resources about young males and relational health. Thank you both. This has really been terrific. Thank you. Thank you,

Speaker 5 ([24:35](#)):

Dennis. Hi everybody.

Speaker 1 ([24:39](#)):

Thank you so much for listening to this episode of let's examine this. If you'd like to learn more, visit us online at partnershipformaleoyouth.org, where we have lots of excellent resources. We are also on social media at [partnershipformaleoyouth](#) on both Facebook and Twitter. Thank you again so much for listening to this episode and we'll see you next time on Let's Examine This.

Speaker 5 ([25:06](#)):

I.