Raising Emotionally Healthy Boys- BoyMom: Reimagining Boyhood

Speaker 2: [00:00:00] Welcome to the Peaceful Parenting Podcast. I'm your host, Sarah Rosensweet, mom of three young people, Peaceful Parenting Coach, and your cheerleader and guide on all things parenting. Each week, we'll cover the tools, strategies, and support you need to end the yelling and power struggles, and encourage your kids to listen and cooperate so that you can enjoy your family time.

Speaker 2: I'm happy to say we have a great relationship with our three kids. The teen years have been easy and joyful. Not because we're special unicorns, but because my kids were raised with peaceful parenting. I've also helped so many parents just like you stop struggling and enjoy their kids again. I'm excited to be here with you today and bring you the insight and information you need to make your parenting journey a little more peaceful.

Speaker 2: Let's dive into this week's conversation.

Speaker 3: Hey, y'all. Welcome back to another episode of the Peaceful Parenting Podcast. Today's episode is an interview with Ruth Whitman. Ruth is a journalist and the author of the new book, Boy Mom, Reimagining Boyhood in the Age of Impossible Masculinity. You're going to want to give this a [00:01:00] listen, whether you're raising boys or girls.

Speaker 3: It was a super interesting look at sort of the state of boys. In our culture today at this really interesting time where we are raising up girls in a way that's totally beautiful and appropriate. But what happens to the boys when this is happening? Ruth really does a wonderful job of looking at this, looking at the reasons behind it, looking at the differences and how we raise boys and girls still, even if we still Think we're raising them you know, in a non-sexist way the way boys are treated in our culture and sort of the outcomes, the sort of scary outcomes that are happening for boys.

Speaker 3: And she did this in a way that I'm gonna use her words. She looks at how privileged and disadvantaged are intertwined for boys. This is a really great read and listen, or rather a great read, and I hope you find that it's a great listen. Let's meet Ruth.

Sarah: Hi, Ruth. Welcome to the podcast.

Ruth: It's really great to be here. Thank you.

Sarah: So I just told you before we started recording that I just finished your book this morning, like an [00:02:00] hour before we, an hour before we started the podcast taping and I really loved it. So when this podcast comes out, your book will have just come out.

Sarah: yesterday, if people are listening to this podcast on June 5th. I really encourage anyone to go out and, and get it, order a copy of it. It is really, really wonderful for, I think, moms and dads of girls as well as boys, but tell us the title of your book.

Ruth: So my book is called Boy Mom, and it is Boy Mom, Reimagining Boyhood in the Age of Impossible Masculinity.

Sarah: Tell us a little bit about who you are and what you do.

Ruth: So I'm a journalist and an author. I have a previous book called America the Anxious and I write for various places. I write quite often for the New York Times, the Guardian, Huffington Post et cetera.

Ruth: And I am also a mom of four. I have three sons, hence the title Boy Mom, which I have a complicated relationship with that, that identity, you know, the Boy Mom hashtag identity, but I have three boys who are 13, 10 [00:03:00] and six now, but they, the book starts when my youngest son was born which was just around the time of the Me Too movement.

Ruth: It was such a fraught and complicated time. You know, it was so many conflicted feelings going on and so many complicated feelings.

Sarah: Yeah.

Sarah: Well, and hopefully we're, we are raising a new generation of men. You talk about how privilege and disadvantage are intertwined for boys. And that seemed to be really like the, a big theme of your book.

Ruth: Yes. I

Sarah: just want to, like, center us in the idea that we're going to be talking a lot about how Hard life can be for, for boys today, but also don't want us to get lost in what you mentioned in the book and what some people call Himpathy, right? Just to call out that there still it does exist a lot of male privilege in the world,

but being locked into that this idea of masculinity also makes things so hard for boys.

Ruth: Yes, absolutely. So what I came to realize, you know, cause I think a lot of the conversation around boys and men and gender at the moment is one about sort [00:04:00] of power and oppression and those dynamics are very, very real. I mean, it is true that men have had privilege through history. They have greater access to power.

Ruth: They're still paid more. There's women's. You know, they still control women's bodies. There's still terrible things happening to women all over the world. But the same system, I think it's easy to see that and then feel as though we're on different sides, you know, that men have all the benefits of patriarchy and women have all the disadvantages.

Ruth: But actually what I came to realize when reporting this book and also from my own experience raising sons is that as I say, the privilege and disadvantage are really the same system that harms women also harms. Men and boys and the same rigid gender roles and expectations that come from patriarchy are really harmful for boys.

Ruth: You know, they, they have to subscribe to these very rigid masculinity norms, or I guess they don't have to, but there's extreme pressure on them to conform to these very sort of you know, to these ideals of like [00:05:00] being emotionally stoic, being physically tough, being mentally tough, being, you know, squashing your emotions and feelings and boys You know, and we, it's, we expect those things from boys and we kind of project these qualities onto boys.

Ruth: And so we give them, we tend to see them not as. fully emotional beings as caregivers and parents. And so I think there's this pattern that starts right from birth and there's a lot of research on it, which shows that right from when they're born, people tend to sort of masculinize baby boys and see them as You know, when they cry, they tend to see baby boys as angry rather than sad, or they treat them more roughly.

Ruth: They give them less, like, positive attention, less nurturing, less care than they give baby girls. And there's all kinds of data on this. And all, this goes on all the way through childhood. You know, we tend to see boys as you know, I say it in the book, you know, we tend to see boys as, bad, not sad. So if a boy is acting out, we tend to see it as a discipline problem rather than an emotional problem.

Ruth: And we sort of tend to code their [00:06:00] reactions as anger and bad behavior. So they get funneled into these disciplinary systems. And this just keeps compounding and compounding and compounding. And then that's, those are the tools they learn for how to show their emotions and for how to, and then, you know, it becomes a vicious circle.

Sarah: Yeah. You talk about the research that shows that boys and girls start out with relatively similar levels of emotional intelligence and expressing feelings. And by the time they hit, I think kindergarten, you said is there's already started marked drops in their ability to express emotions and, and, read other people's emotions.

Ruth: Yes, absolutely. And you know, there's, there's, so the Judy Chu and Niobe Wei are two researchers who've done a lot of work in this area. And it's like, yes, we're boys have the same innate sensitivity and empathy as girls. And if anything, they're actually more emotionally vulnerable and sensitive at birth than, than girls are.

Ruth: Can

Sarah: you talk about that a little bit? I was going to ask you about that research that shows that boys are actually [00:07:00] more fragile. in a lot of ways than girls are. I thought I found that really fascinating.

Ruth: Yeah, this was something that was a real surprise to me. Because when you talk about gender differences, you know, whether things are nature or nurture, and there's so much research on this, and a lot of it is quite contradictory.

Ruth: But you know, we tend to think of this kind of boys will be boys thing as like, as though boys are kind of innately hardwired to be destructive, or aggressive, or badly behaved. But actually, the main gender differences that come from, you know, that are innately. In us, you know, that come from nature as opposed to nurture are that boys are actually more emotionally sensitive and more emotionally vulnerable.

Ruth: Their brains are literally neurobiologically more fragile than girls brains. So they're born, a male brain is born around six weeks less mature than a female brain at birth. I'm not sure exactly why, but, and it's in the right brain, the emotional centers that it's less mature. So these are the sort of centers that help you form the attachment bond with the mother.

Ruth: They help [00:08:00] you self regulate Emotionally, they help you calm down if you're upset. And so baby boy, I mean, and you've had kids. So, you know, that the difference between a brand new newborn and a six week old baby is a lot. I mean, a lot of development happens in that time. And so this is the work of Alan Shaw, who's a neuroscientist and a psychoanalyst.

Ruth: And he looks at this, these sort of early differences between boys and girls, and he's written a lot about male vulnerability. And it's quite shocking because what happens is that it then becomes this double whammy. The baby boys are more vulnerable. They actually need more, more care than baby girls.

Ruth: They need more attachment from their mother. They're all caregiver. They need more nurturing, but they get less. And so it kind of becomes this, you know, compounding problem where, you know they need more, they get less. And so they, they don't develop the same empathy and social skills along the way as girls do.

Ruth: So there's this innate vulnerability, which we then compound with all this socialization. So these sort of differences, small differences at [00:09:00] birth become bigger and bigger and bigger. And this pattern keeps continuing through our childhood and through our adulthood as well that you know, so it is both nature and nurture.

Ruth: And I think this, for me, it was very helpful because You know, my boys were a lot and quite hard to handle when they were little and they they did have a lot of meltdowns. They did get aggressive. They were all the, all the things that are hard to deal with as a parent. They, they were all of them. And I think for me, it was really helpful to see this, especially when there was this wider conversation going on around toxic masculinity.

Ruth: And then your four year old boy is hitting his brother over the head with a, you know, Lego spaceship. And, you know, the other one's shooting the other one with a nerf gun. And I think once, you know, it was very easy to see this in terms of some like terrible thing about boys and men. And, you know, as part of this whole thing about toxic masculinity.

Ruth: But when I started seeing it as a mother, as vulnerability and sensitivity that needed care and attention and nurture as a response rather [00:10:00] than more discipline and harshness and you know, that sort of thing. I think it really helped me. It helped me to bond with them and to connect with them. It helped me to sort of, and it helped them as well.

Ruth: It definitely helped them to self regulate.

Sarah: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. One thing that was really interesting reading your book through the lens of being a parenting coach is you write a lot about in the first, you know, half of the book about how challenging you found being a mother and your kids were really challenging and you spend a lot of time comparing And Challenges you were having to the challenges.

Sarah: You didn't see other people having as a parenting coach. I'm reading it going, she's not having a typical experience. Like there's something going on with her kids. Like her kids are in the, in the, you know, 10 percent of the kids who are more challenging and then lo and behold, you end up getting the, getting an assessment for your kids and finding out that all three of them are neurodivergent.

Sarah: And my parenting coach self was like, aha.

Ruth: I think we were handed a really challenging situation, I think. And this was the [00:11:00] difficult thing because, you know, all the narratives about boys, you know, which we've all heard, you know, boys will be boys and boys, you know, Oh, that's just what boys are like. And they love breaking everything.

Ruth: And they love, you know, the, the, you know, all of these sort of boy. Boy stories, you know, and our boys were all of these things, but it's really hard to separate that out from, you know, what's pathologizing normal boyhood and what is neurodivergence, you know, so throughout the book, that's a sort of running theme.

Ruth: And then we do go and get them assessed.

Sarah: Let's just talk a little bit about you know, boys are more fragile.

Sarah: Environmental stressors affect them, more greatly than they do girls. Then they get less nurturing, more labeling as behavioral rather than having a hard time. And so where does that leave us today? You talk about the crisis that Boys are facing today.

Sarah: I know you talked about in schools and just in terms of their mental health statistics, you want, do you want to talk a little bit about that? Yeah.

Ruth: So I think boys are in real trouble at the moment. I mean, I think, [00:12:00] and also the statistics and sort of ways that we have for understanding adolescent mental health don't really map well to boys.

Ruth: Because if you think about it the way they gather these statistics, so they talk to, you know, they call up. teenagers or they, they, they survey teenagers and they say, are you depressed? Are you lonely? Are you anxious? Are you this? And I think asking that question of a teenage girl and a teenage boy is going to be a really different experience because the boys are socialized not to admit it, that to admit to depression and anxiety and loneliness is a weakness.

Ruth: And so they'll just say, no, no, no, I'm fine. And so I feel like, and there's a, there's a, a really well known phenomenon that those statistics are not. So accurate for boys that there's a real under reporting of depression and anxiety and mental health problems amongst boys. Big for, for exactly that reason.

Ruth: And it makes sense, you know, because I interviewed many boys for this book. And, you know, we'd start off and I'd be like, how's everything going? And they'd be like, fine, everything's great. And they would have this bluster. And it would only be after interviewing them for, you [00:13:00] know, one to two hours that they would start to sort of reveal these deeper, Things and so you can see how if a poster calls up with a checklist of questions and says, you know Are you depressed?

Ruth: Are you anxious? They're just going to say no, no, no. And that will get missed. So I think that's a big part of it. And yeah, boys at the moment are in adolescent boys are really kind of in crisis. They're very socially isolated compared to any previous generation. They're spending a vast amount of time on screens, much more than same age girls.

Ruth: And they're socializing in person, much less than teenage girls are. And I think part of that is the socialization that we give them that really is not a lesson in connection and intimacy. And, you know, for many reasons, we don't teach boys to be these kind of relational, emotional beings. And that makes it really hard to find friendships and connection in adulthood.

Ruth: And we're seeing that now.

Sarah: I think you mentioned too that, the way that the research, the polls [00:14:00] are conducted. It might not show up as much that boys are so depressed and lonely, but the suicide rates for boys are, what was the statistic?

Ruth: Yeah. So the suicide rates for adolescent boys are nearly four times the rate for adolescent girls. A lot of this is that there are male mental health problems, which are just getting missed in a really, really serious way. And it's part of this same phenomenon that we see these, you know, when we talk about the adolescent, you know, when we talk about the crisis with adolescence, we tend to talk about girls in terms of sadness and mental health problems and depression and anxiety.

Ruth: And when we talk about boys, The sort of wider debate in the media tends to be about you know, underachievement, bad behavior, antisocial behavior, substance abuse, these kinds of things. You know, we see boys as bad, not sad. And I think that we're missing those things all

Sarah: probably come out of depression and anxiety and feeling alone.

Ruth: And because we don't give boys the emotional vocabulary to express their sadness in more constructive [00:15:00] ways, then that is how it comes out in boys. You know, they are, those are the symptoms of depression in, in adolescent boys.

Sarah: Before I backtracked on myself, I started to talk about that boys aren't doing as well in school either.

Sarah: Not finishing school or going on to higher education in the same number as girls are.

Ruth: Yeah, the statistics on that are really shocking and the gap is widening every year and some of that is just that, you know, girls were held back for so long that, you know, not given the opportunities and now they are and they're soaring ahead, which is obviously wonderful, you know, we all want opportunities for girls, but they're You know, every year the gap gets bigger and boys are falling behind and behind and behind.

Ruth: And there are many reasons for this and some of them are to do with like late maturing brains and you know, that, that sort of innate reasons, hardwired reasons. Some of them are, you know, a huge amount of these are to do with socialization and the way that we socialize boys, the way that we talk to boys, the way that we teach them [00:16:00] the skills that they need to succeed in the classroom about emotional self regulation and the way that we engage them in learning and school. So there's this narrative in politics, you know, on one side of the. Which is just, you know, the reason why boys are doing so badly is because of this, like, they call it the feminization of the classroom.

Ruth: So it's this idea that, you know, we're being, we're, we're focusing too much on girls and, and schools are great environments for girls and boys are innately. wired to be kind of, they can't sit still, they, they need to run around, we should teach them, you know, we should let them sort of indulge their natural interests, which are things like weapons and war, and we shouldn't be talking to them about feelings and all this girly stuff.

Ruth: But actually, it's almost the opposite that, you know, Boys don't get enough engagement around emotions and relationships and social connection. And they don't, their relationships with teachers are damaged by the fact that they're seen as discipline problems. So actually, you know, I sort of flipped in the book, I ended up sort of flipping [00:17:00] on its head and saying, well, actually what we need is more feminization of the classroom.

Ruth: You know, I mean, it's, it's Know, it's, it's a,

Sarah: I know what you mean. It's still the binary. We like to avoid that. It's not

Ruth: things, they're not feminine. They're, they're human, but it's just, you know, we've coded them as feminine.

Sarah: That was a super interesting thing about that. That therapy house that you visited, I forget where it was again.

Sarah: Utah. In Utah. In Utah, yeah. And this place where the guy talks about how it's this place to relearn masculinity and be masculine, but when you went and visited all of these young men and visited with him. You found, well, tell us about what you found because it was super

Ruth: interesting. It was a really fascinating experience.

Ruth: So I came across this guy, his name is Cade Jones and he runs this center for, well, it's actually for, it started off as just for boys. They now accept girls as well. But at that time he was just accepting boys and it was all boys and young men. And it was, you know, for boys who were in trouble, they weren't you know, that they had substance abuse problems or [00:18:00] they had behavioral problems or emotional problems.

Ruth: And it was like a residential therapy center in Utah. And when I talked to Cade on the phone, I was saying, you know, what do you see as being the major problem with young men?

Ruth: And he was very much on the side of, Oh, you know, it's a crisis of masculinity. We need to get back to traditional masculine values. We need to toughen them up. They need to be more masculine. So, you know, and this is like a very common perception. So I, and you know, it's something that a lot of people in America think at the moment.

Ruth: So I went he said that I could come and stay there for a while and, you know, be part of their groups. He was very generous. I went and stayed for a while. For several days at this place. And what I found was what, you know, and this place was actually really helping these people, everyone, without exception, all the boys and young men that I spoke to, they were saying, this is great.

Ruth: You know, this is so good to be here. But what they were actually doing was kind of the opposite of what he'd advertised it as. You know, I expected it to be these like [00:19:00] 30 mile runs and like, you know, brutal kind of

Sarah: like a bootcamp or something.

Ruth: Yeah, exactly. I kind of bootcamp army sale, something like that.

Ruth: But what he was really offering all these support groups and chances to talk and community and connection and empathy and hearing their feelings. And the boys were really responding to this. They were, you know, they loved it. And, you know, a lot of these boys were very lonely. They were very troubled.

Ruth: They had no one to turn to. They were saying, you know, that they've been hiding that their so called weaknesses for so long that they were just It was so corrosive to them that they were pretending to be okay, pretending to be strong and tough and masculine. And then they could come to this place and go to group therapy and go to individual therapy and talk to the other guys.

Ruth: And it had this sort of almost like this sort of slumber party vibe to it. You know, they were all hanging out in the kitchen and talking about their feelings and it was lovely, but it wasn't. What I would traditionally associate with masculinity. That is

Sarah: so interesting. [00:20:00] And, and it, and it sounds like, I mean, correct me if I'm wrong, but it sounds like Cade wasn't aware that that's what he was doing.

Sarah: Exactly. Like he knew what he was doing, but he wasn't aware that it wasn't like the traditional masculinity thing.

Ruth: Yeah. I mean, it was funny because when I asked him like, well, what is your definition of masculinity? He'd say something like, well, it's about relationship building and empathy and forming connections.

Ruth: And I'd be like, well, That's not my thing. And I think what he was trying to do almost was to use the masculinity as a way to draw boys in, you know, to use the sort of heading of positive masculinity or healthy masculinity as a way to sort of make it okay for boys to embrace those things. I have to say, that's not, I've seen that a lot with various groups.

Ruth: You know, the. Positive masculinity discussion. And I think these groups are generally doing good work. And I know that Cade is it's not my favorite framing for that conversation. It reinforces the stereotypes. It's almost like [00:21:00] saying, if we just have to fold everything into the definition of masculinity, you're really sending this clear message to boys that masculinity itself is non negotiable.

Ruth: You know, it has to be masculine. The starting point and then everything else, you know,

Sarah: and I guess that's how they get people in. Even if, even if the organizer himself isn't really aware of what he's doing, it's really, I guess we need to start talking more about humanity, right? Instead of masculinity or femininity, but he probably wouldn't have gotten all those boys if he said, come and discover your humanity.

Ruth: Yes, it's so true. And he's in a very conservative community. Masculinity is something which is a value that's very important in that community. And so you're right, it is kind of a way to draw people in. And it's, you know, I, yes, I feel sort of churlish. Complaining about that because, you know, he's doing great work and it's not my own personal preferred framing for this conversation, but you know, you got to start somewhere as well.

Sarah: Yeah. Well, I mean, [00:22:00] it's sort of exemplary of the problem that boys are facing, right? Is that that there is this limited definition of masculinity and that it's hard to get outside of that. Even he's finding that.

Ruth: It's really hard. And it's sort of like, why does it have to be masculinity at all? I mean, in the book I talk about, you know, you can't imagine that

somebody running a program for girls calling it positive femininity or healthy femininity, you know, cause you realize that that word comes with a lot of oppressive baggage.

Ruth: It sounds sort of laughable almost to be like, you know, what's the future of femininity when you're talking about women's issues, you know, because obviously that's kind of setting the terms already in a quite limited way of, you know, the ways that women can be. And so, but I think we have this blind spot when it comes to masculinity.

Ruth: We kind of just can't conceive of a vision of boyhood or maleness. Outside of it.

Sarah: Yeah. Well, you, you talk about that as a mother that you were, you were very aware of sexist things in like books and [00:23:00] games and toys if they were sexist toward girls. But once you started seeing the sort of sexist toys towards boys stuff, you said that all flies under the radar when it's against boys.

Ruth: Yeah, that was so true. I mean, so I grew up with a feminist mom. My mom was a second wave feminist of the real like 70s and 80s, you know, no Barbies, no nail polish, no pink, you know, and she was, so she really like developed those like little senses in us, you know, we were those little mini feminist detectives, my sister and I, and so we'd be like, that's sexist and that's sexist.

Ruth: And, but I think now most girls have a sense of that, you know, they'll see a stereotype in a book and they'll be like, They'll call it out and they'll be like, well, that's sexist. And, and I think that's great that girls have these tools. And, you know, there's been a very, you know, wide ranging and very detailed conversation about that.

Ruth: But yeah, for boys, it's just invisible. And it was invisible to me until actually, until I have my third son. I think I just, I had two boys already and I just, [00:24:00] boy stuff was just kind of default. It wasn't even gendered. It was just.

Ruth: So it's like very obvious by its absence, you know, I started looking for examples of books which are about friendship and you know, not just that had friends in them incidentally, but that the narrative was driven by the relationship and the friendship. You know, figuring that side of things out and I just couldn't see anything like that.

Ruth: The boys at all, all my son's books, you know, if we don't consciously correct for it, everything they have is about adventure or fighting or battles or competition. And there's always a hero. There's always a villain. There's always a winner. There's always a loser. There's none of that like complex relational negotiation.

Ruth: And I tell this story in the book and it was such a turning point for me. I remember being in the bookstore with my sons and there was this magazine. on the shelf and it had this like sparkly pink cover and it's so clearly communicating this is a magazine for girls, you know. And it sort of had like a friendship bracelet giveaway [00:25:00] on the cover and then I opened it up and there was a story in the magazine and it was about this girl she'd been invited, you know, she was like nine or ten.

Ruth: She had been invited to two birthday parties that were supposed to be happening at the same time. And she didn't want to let down either of the friends or disappoint them. So she had this whole like plan that she was going to go to one party and do the games and then like secretly run off to the other girl's house and go to her party.

Ruth: And, you know, but the whole story. was driven by this idea that it was her responsibility to manage the feelings of these two friends. And that was the thing driving the narrative. And she didn't want to disappoint them. And so this is how she responded. And she kind of exhausted herself in the process.

Ruth: And she collapsed at the end, I think. And I think I just was like, my boys will never read a story like this. This. That there will never be a story where there are two, you know, there's a boy who's desperately worried that he's going to disappoint one of his friends and not go to their birthday party.

Ruth: And I was like, for me growing up as a girl, it was a [00:26:00] real bog standard story that, you know, that would come into my life. I would have probably read, you know, hundreds like it. And my sons, you know, just have no access to that kind of modeling.

Sarah: Or if it was I'm thinking about some children's literature and

Sarah: boy deep relationships were either with a girl, like Bridge to Terabethia,

Ruth: or,

Sarah: or with a dog.

Ruth: Yes, exactly. With an animal. I mean, yeah, Niobe Wei, who does great work in this area, said that she and she's specialized, she's an academic at NYU, and she specializes in boys friendships. And she said she went to the library once to look for a book about boys friendships, and every book that involved friendships was about being friends with an animal.

Ruth: There was just nothing that was about two boys having that kind of relationship with each other. And I think there are starting to be a few like that, but they're very few and far between. It's just not the model that boys see. And so, you know, and I think we've done such great work in kind of correcting for girl role models, you know, so now that you go to the bookstore It's hundreds of books about [00:27:00] teaching your girl to be strong and mighty and be a CEO and be the, you know a Supreme Court judge and being the, you know, the president or a superhero.

Ruth: But you don't see the correction the other way

Sarah: I think that's still because there's so much misogyny in our culture that it's okay for girls to be like boys, but it's not okay for Boys to be like girls, unless, unless you're gay. And I read that in one of your interviews, one of the kids said I wrote it down.

Sarah: One boy said it's okay to be gay, but not gay ish.

Ruth: Yeah. So there's been all this progress in terms of actual literal homophobia in the sense of most of the guys I spoke to said, yeah, it's okay to like, like guys, but you can't act like a girl. You can't think if you're straight. You still have to

Sarah: be masculine if you're actually gay.

Ruth: But even if you're gay, it wasn't just for straight boys, it was like, even if you're gay, you can't act gay. You can like guys, you can have sex with guys, that's fine, but don't act like a girl. So that makes me think that the, the, the sort of underlying problem is actually misogyny rather than [00:28:00] homophobia.

Sarah: Let's switch gears just a little bit. You talked about, screen time can you explain what displacement is?

Ruth: Yeah, so displacement so when researchers do Studies or research into the kind of harms of screen time. The one, there's like two areas that they look at.

Ruth: One of them is called content, which is basically like what you're literally seeing on when you go to your screen is harmful to you. So that would be like when you're scrolling Instagram and you see all your friends, like perfect lives, you feel terrible about your life. And, but the other major harm is this thing called displacement, which is that you.

Ruth: When you are on your screen, it means that you're not doing something else that is better or more healthy for you and you know, that could be sleeping or exercising, but the main one, the main thing that's being displaced by all this screen time is socializing in person. And the thing that is kind of been missing from this discussion is the displacement phenomenon has been much, much more significant.

Ruth: For boys than for girls. So [00:29:00] boys have more screen time. They have about seven hours more screen time than girls in general. Mostly playing video games and they're socializing much less than girls in person, teenage boys. So the average girl was socializing, I think around six hours a week. And the average boy, it was something like 42 minutes in person.

Ruth: In person. Yeah. And so I think that they always have these like parasocial relationships where they are on video games, you know, these big multiplayer video games and they're like on the headsets. And it's not that there's anything wrong with that, but when it takes the place of real life socializing, then some real problems emerge.

Ruth: And, you know, I spoke to, I spent some time at the teen therapy center down in LA, which is you know, and they run a guys group so it's like teenage boys go for therapy and the guy who runs it, Kent, who sent his Wonderful, says that every year he sees this sort of decline in boys social skills. They, they're so used to having screens as a crutch for you know, for when they get [00:30:00] together or for, you know, interacting through this medium of the computer or a video game or discord or something that the actual real life social skills are kind of declining.

Ruth: And because we're not teaching them the relations, you know, they're already starting off as at a disadvantage. Like boy socialization is. So good away from connection and intimacy and social skills that when you add in the screens, it just compounds the problem. And I see it with my own sons. It's a real battle.

Ruth: Like when their friends come over, they just want to be on screens and we have to really fight the tide to. So say, you know, you have to find something

to do in person and often they just really don't know what to do with themselves. They're just wandering around. And my kids are neurodivergent. Their friends are not and I'm saying this with, you know, with all their friends as well.

Sarah: Yeah, I hear that from a lot of parents that I, that I work with. And I do hear parents saying, well they, They say that they have to have the screen time because their friends are online. But what I'm reading in your book, where I read in your [00:31:00] book is all these boys who do have lots of social screen time, but they still talk about being really lonely and, and that, that makes so much sense to me also thinking of like in the context of COVID, like we all had like when we were all in lockdown and, you know, only had our bubbles, I think.

Sarah: Most people, most of us as adults would say, yeah, that was a really lonely time, even though we had unlimited access to talking to our friends on Zoom, right?

Ruth: So there's this sort of narrative that, you know, that that's just a different way to connect that that's just what they want. But when I started talking to these boys, they were like, no, I'm we're lonely.

Ruth: And now, you know, and a lot of them were like, I want to see my friends in person, but nobody's meeting up anymore. They're just like the whole culture of socializing. had changed, you know, there were no parties, there were no like meetups, there were no hangouts, you know, and I think when I was a teenager, there was just this culture of just kind of hanging out.

Ruth: And it wasn't like you had to like plan it or call, you know, a little bit, but you know, there would be places where people would just go and it was very easy to access. And now these [00:32:00] boys felt like it was so many steps to get to the point where they would be hanging out with somebody that it was just, You know, a barrier that they couldn't, couldn't cross.

Sarah: And I think that's happening with teenagers in general. There's less hanging out with teenagers today.

Ruth: And there's, There's a ton of data to support that. I mean, there's like so much research that kids are hanging out so much less than kids of any previous generation since they started tracking this stuff.

Ruth: So,

Sarah: I guess when we were teenagers, we, we didn't have as much of a choice of like, we had to connect in person more. So what can parents do? Do you have any ideas for how parents can help their kids or sons, especially get over this screen based socializing?

Ruth: I mean, it's really hard. I think where I landed and you know, look, I have had all this. I'm not approaching this from this high and mighty place and being like, Oh yes, I know the answer to this.

Ruth: But, and it's just something I've thought about a lot and I've seen enough data and done enough interviews to be worried about it. And I think the way that I ended up approaching it was rather than seeing it as [00:33:00] limiting screen time to see it as sort of increasing in person. Connection time so really trying and sort of talking to other parents as much as I can to sort of set limits between us and say look when they see each other, you know just really trying to make time for them to meet up in person and when they do to sort of limit access to screens.

Ruth: And it can involve some like incredibly uncomfortable and excruciating times. Like kids will come over for playdates and it'll be like, can we, can we be on the screen? Can we be on the screen? Can we be on the screen? And I'm just feeling so terrible and I want to help my kids. And I've been trying really hard to sort of overcome those uncomfortable feelings in myself.

Ruth: To push through to the other side, because eventually they do actually find ways to connect. And I've seen it happen over and over again, but you have to really get through it. And I feel like the feelings are as uncomfortable in me as they are in the kids. You know,

Sarah: I always try to tell parents, like find some other parents who will be on the same page as you, and it won't be, well, everyone else is [00:34:00] on whatever the games are that they're playing.

Ruth: Yeah. And I think it's fine for them to be on those games. It's not that they. I don't think that the games in themselves are so harmful. It's just like what they replace. So I think that, and I think, you know, with my sons, it's sort of. worked well to kind of honor their love of those games. You know, so not just be like, this is terrible and you should be doing, you know, it's like they love that.

Ruth: That's important to them. Great. You can have it, but also you also need to do this. Totally.

Sarah: Yeah. There's nothing wrong with games. It's just what they, when you spend too much time doing them, that what they prevent you from doing. And that's why I asked you about displacement. Cause I think that's a really interesting way.

Sarah: Yeah. Right. Exactly. I

Ruth: think that's, I think that's, that's the thing. So I try to sort of see it as that. And you know, the other thing that I would say about screens is just like, when my kids were really little. You know, there's this whole messaging around don't use screens as child care. Well, give me some child care then, you know, provide if you, if you, the APA don't want me to use screens as child care, [00:35:00] then please support universal child care, affordable child care.

Ruth: And in the meantime, this is the best use of screens screens. I feel like screens. Our childcare, and we should feel fine about using them as that because we have no social supports as parents. We have no federal childcare system. Childcare is so unaffordable, you know, that's exactly what I want to use them for.

Ruth: And I think that's

Sarah: so necessary sometimes and parents wouldn't have been able to work during the pandemic if it, if it hadn't been for screen time,

Ruth: absolutely. And you know, with, you know, I'm obviously raising three neurodivergent kids and they're They're very, very challenging and I need the break, you know, and I think that's okay.

Ruth: And I've, I've tried to stop beating myself up about it and to try to add things in rather than forbid things. I think it always works better

Sarah: for me. That's a great approach. Can we talk about the incel paradox? Yes. That was one of the most fascinating parts of your book. Yeah.

Ruth: So I spent some time in the whole [00:36:00] incel world I, I don't know how much your listeners know about the incel movement, but it's this, you know, incel stands for involuntary celibates.

Ruth: And it's often these like quite young men who are online. They're super lonely. They feel like they want to have sex with women or have relationships with women and they can't. And they sort of form these communities online,

which can be extremely misogynistic, extremely toxic, extremely violent. And at their worst, incel movement have committed various like horrific crimes, mass murders, school shootings, you know, this sort of stereotype of this like angry, lonely boy who goes and shoots a bunch of people out of resentment and hate, you know, often those guys are in some way involved in incel communities.

Ruth: And I was really kind of fascinated by this movement, because Like fascinated in a horrified and terrified way as the mother of three sons. [00:37:00] I was like, you know, these are boys who it felt like this was the sort of very extreme version of some, some sort of more mainstream trends. And I wanted to find out, you know, there's this whole idea amongst lots of journalists that we should never engage with these people because it's kind of this idea of empathy that if we.

Ruth: if we talk to them or humanize them in any way, then we're kind of somehow condoning this like violent misogyny or you know, mass murder. But I was really keen to sort of hear from these people directly, you know, to really talk to these guys because I was like, look, obviously we can all agree that this thing is wrong, you know, that, that like mass murder and terrible, terrible racism and misogyny and all the rest of it is wrong.

Ruth: But like, what is going on for these people? What are the trends that are driving this? So I spent a lot of time in on Intel message boards and I did in depth interviews with a few, a handful of incels, a couple of which I featured. In the book, and [00:38:00] what really struck me was that the things that they were saying, I sort of half expected them to be these kind of very extreme freaks, but actually a lot of the things they were saying were very uncomfortably close to what a lot of the sort of more regular things Quote unquote kids had been telling me as well, you know, these feelings of loneliness, these feelings of disconnection, these feelings of these impossible pressures to be masculine and tough and to meet this ideal of masculinity that they always felt they were falling short.

Ruth: You know, these ideas of being shut down by the wider conversation about you know, in the culture wars about men and boys and privilege. And these were guys who just really didn't feel privileged at all. They felt very powerless in their own lives. And I actually ended up having some really productive and deep conversations with these guys that I felt.

Ruth: you know, that they were very extreme, but they were kind of almost like the logical conclusion, like the most scary conclusion of a lot of sort of

mainstream threads [00:39:00] in in boy culture at the moment, which is frightening.

Sarah: Yeah. And you talked about how they ironically, the incel community had gotten the closest to getting rid of the toxic masculinity norms of any community that you talk to.

Sarah: Can you say a little bit more about

Ruth: that? So it was really interesting because in some ways it was sort of the opposite of that because on Intel message boards you see these like horrifying things. You can go on the front page and just see the most repulsive, misogynistic, angry, toxic, horrible, horrible postings.

Ruth: But what you also is this kind of real tender, brotherhood, you know, these guys. So what the insults, their sort of self conception is that they are like the losers in the system of masculinity, that there's, they see it as this hierarchy. They have these guys that they call chads, who are the like successful men, who are like tall and handsome and powerful.

Ruth: And they get all the [00:40:00] women and they, you know, so there are those guys. And then there's sort of the beta males. below them. And then the incels are like right at the bottom of this hierarchy of masculinity in their, in their worldview. They're, they're short, they're overweight. They know girls don't want them that they feel very emasculated.

Ruth: And it's almost like they've given up hope of ever being anything else, you know, ever succeeding in that system of masculinity. So they've just like thrown off the pressures altogether. And so then they feel able. And so Guys that I spoke to were saying, look, this is the only place I can really be myself.

Ruth: This is the only place I can be vulnerable. This, I get all this support from my incel brothers. I find this real connection with emotional, with each other. We're not trying to prove anything with, you know, they've basically taken themselves out of the system. And that was, Like, in a way, like, very touching, you know, in a very twisted and horrible way, it was very touching.

Ruth: But it was also very scary because, you know, [00:41:00] you can see that if boys don't find connection and emotional vulnerability and the chance to be themselves elsewhere, they will find it in the manosphere, in these awful toxic spaces. And, you know, that's something that we really have to be careful about.

Ruth: Aware of we really need to provide this for boys somewhere else if you don't want to be looking for that

Sarah: Yeah, it's so it was so wild to read about that that it's it's sort of like everything got broken down and what was left I mean when you not that you can put aside all of the horrible the violence and the misogyny But if you did put aside the violence and misogyny you would have like the humanity that is lacking in the traditional masculinity

Ruth: Absolutely.

Ruth: And I think what we're missing in the discussion of it is so there's this real push at the moment to label these guys as terrorists, you know, and there's this argument that, you know, we need to show consistency. And like, if sort of an Arab Muslim commits an act of mass murder, we label him a terrorist straight away.

Ruth: But if it's a white guy, we say he has mental health problems. And like the media [00:42:00] discourse will be about that. And I'm like, so, you know, we should, we should call these guys terrorists to be kind of consistent and for justice. And I'm like, well, actually I'd rather see it go in the other direction that we give the mental health support to the Arab Muslim guy as well and to the white guy, you know, not that all incels are white Though I was surprised that actually it was really a pretty diverse.

Ruth: Community in terms of race. But you know, I'd rather that we humanize everybody and give all these guys support rather than trying to go to the lowest common denominator and condemn everybody. Which is not to say that we should not condemn violence of all kinds. Of course, of course, of course, that goes without saying, but you know, these guys were often desperate for support.

Ruth: They desperately wanted therapy. They desperately wanted mental health help, but they felt they couldn't access it partly because if they went to a therapist and said, I'm an incel, she'd be like, well, you're a terrorist. Get out of my office. You know, that was their perception. And they felt that, you know, the conversation around male pain and male [00:43:00] Emotions, you know, that they were constantly being shut down from both sides, you know, from the guys on the right being like, man up, shut up, squash your emotions.

Ruth: And from the guys on the, or the people on the left being like, well, don't, you know, don't speak about your pain because it's taking male

Sarah: tears.

Ruth: Yeah. Male tears. Exactly. Like shut up, man. You know, you're privileged time for somebody else to have a chance and, you know, let women speak or let somebody else.

Sarah: Well, just to sort of wrap it up here. I love in the end of the book, you talk about sweetheart versus buddy.

Sarah: You want you, can you just talk about that a little bit? And I love how you said at the end that we should treat our boys like sweethearts.

Ruth: I mean, we were talking before about like how these things are so invisible in our culture, you know, the sort of sexist against boys thing, they just fly under the radar.

Ruth: And it was my son's first day at kindergarten. And there was this. Sky. I don't actually know if he was a teacher or a volunteer or something, but this man, it was at the gate and he was greeting other kids as they walked in. And like, there were a [00:44:00] couple of girls in front of my son and it was like, hi, sweetheart.

Ruth: Hi, sweetheart. And then Abe, my youngest, walked in and he's like, hi buddy. And like high fives him. He's in kindergarten. He's already tracked into this like buddy system and, you know, it's, it was sweet. It was so well meaning it was so harmless on the face of it is such, you know, it's not really a big deal, but like, he's already seeing the girls as these like, Creatures that are in need of nurture and protection and the boy is this almost like this sort of drinking peer, you know, this like buddy and like buddy It's like sort of a tick away from a fight, you know, it's like hi buddy is kind of a bit like hey buddy You know that it's just like this It's this sort of performance of masculinity and it's so subtle.

Ruth: You see it all the time. I mean, my middle son, you know, I remember the labor and delivery nurse calling him buddy, like literally as she's cleaning the, you know, the gunk off his body as soon as he's born. And. [00:45:00] It is just that we track boys and girls into these different systems and we can see where girls lose out in it.

Ruth: You know, I say in the book, buddy, you know, the buddies are in the locker room making all the important decisions and, you know, that sort of marginalizes girls. But also, boys are excluded from intimacy and connection

and nurture. And I feel like young boys, we need to start seeing them as vulnerable and yes, seeing them as sweethearts, not just the boys.

Ruth: You know, not just buddies

Sarah: I was thinking about this study that I heard about a couple months ago that talked about the political views of Gen Z.

Sarah: Oh, gen Z. Yeah. And it occurred to me that that men and boys could see me too.

Sarah: And the sort of the lifting up of women and girls as taking something away from them. Right. Taking away their power, taking away their privilege. And we're not, they're not getting anything back in return. Right. They're just like, quote, losing. And, you know, I think maybe this is like [00:46:00] super overly simplistic and I don't know how to, how we do this, but like, what they need to be given is that sweetheart, right?

Sarah: Like the humanity piece and the like love and nurturing and connection. So they don't feel like they're left with nothing. Yes,

Ruth: I think that the left has done a bad job of articulating this to boys because smashing these systems of patriarchy, you know, we see it as this, like, all the girls are chanting it and it's in the Barbie movie and smash the patriarchy and you can see why this message isn't connecting with boys because they're not visible in it, you know, patriarchy harms boys.

Ruth: Boys and men it makes them you know, it squashes their feelings. It squashes their emotions It squashes their access to intimacy and connection, but that's not visible to them And I feel like the feminist movement and the left has done a bad job of articulating that boys can also benefit from the ends of these rigid stereotypes and roles, you know, boys can benefit from that.

Ruth: But I think as long as we adopt this tone of like mockery or ridicule, or you're [00:47:00] so privileged, or you're so powerful, or shut up, or, you know, they will never connect with that message. You know, you've got to give people, you Something, you're right, something positive, something hopeful, something that feels like a benefit to them rather than just a loss.

Ruth: And I think the, the, you know, the feminist left has to, of which I consider myself a part, has to do a better job of communicating that to boys.

Well, you've done it. Not just the feminist left, everybody. You know, we've got to get rid of these stereotypes and systems that oppress boys. Yeah.

Sarah: And keep them

Ruth: locked in a box.

Sarah: You've done a really good job of getting us partway there with your book and also how you're raising your boys. Well thanks for coming on. I have a question that I ask all my guests, which is, if you could go back in time to your new parent self, what advice would you give yourself?

Ruth: Such a great question. Well, I think there's a lot of things. I think respond with more nurture rather than less.

Ruth: I think, you know, don't, [00:48:00] and don't be so hard on myself. I think, you know, I saw everything as my fault. And I think you know, I think that was harmful for me and it didn't help, didn't help the boys. I think maybe more nurture for them and more nurture for myself, probably.

Sarah: I love that. Thank you so much.

Sarah: Thank you. We'll link to your book in the, in the show notes and I encourage everybody to grab a copy of it. Thank you so much.

Speaker: Thanks for listening to this week's episode. I hope you found this conversation insightful and exactly what you needed in this moment. Be sure to subscribe to the show on your favorite podcast platform and leave us a rating and review on Apple Podcasts. Remember that I'm rooting for you. I see you out there showing up for your kids and doing the best you can.

Speaker: Sending hugs over the airwaves today. Hang in there. You've got this.