

[00:00:00] <music>

Annie: Hi friends! Welcome to another episode of That Sounds Fun. I am your host Annie F. Downs. I'm really happy to be here with you today. I hope all of you dads and father figures out there had an awesome Father's Day. We've got a great show in store for you today.

Sponsor: But before we dive into today's conversation, I want to take a moment and share about one of our incredible partners, [Epic Will](#). Okay, today's guest, David Thomas is one of these people. And I feel like this is true of so many of our guests. They are so generous about how they pour their lives into the lives of other people and how they're building their legacy. They are the actual best, right? It inspires me to be intentional about my legacy too. It's why partnering with Epic Will matters so much to me.

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Intro: Today on the show, I get to talk with my friend, one of my favorite humans, David Thomas. You may remember him from [Episode 363](#) when he was here along with Sissy Goff. They co-host the wildly successful podcast Raising Boys and Girls.

And if you haven't heard it, that would be an awesome episode to go back and listen to.

But David Thomas is the Director of Family Counseling at Daystar Counseling here in Nashville, Tennessee, and the co-author of 10 books, you guys, 10 books, including the bestselling *Wild Things: The Art of Nurturing Boys*, and *Are My Kids on Track?*.

His new book is called *Raising Emotionally Strong Boys: Tools Your Son Can Build On for Life*. And y'all it is such an important message. I read this book and it is changing how I am in relationship with my MiniBFFs. I mean, it is amazing. I cannot wait for all of you who have any type of influence on the next generation to hear his wisdom about the boys in our lives.

So I will give you a little warning for our MiniBFFs. If any of them are out there listening with us, this conversation does have some real grown-up topics like suicide and rape. So if those are sensitive subjects in your story, please just take a little extra care here and a little extra care of the little ears in our lives. It's really important to talk about, but I also want you to care for yourself and your people.

So here is my conversation with David Thomas.

[00:03:34] <music>

David: Well, can I tell you what happened?

Annie: Yes.

David: So they announced at the top of the episode that I was only guest who've been on for four times.

Annie: Yeah.

David: And somewhere in the conversation, Dave named me the mayor of Dadville. I got very attached to that name. And at the end of the episode I said, "I would like to have some apparel with them on there. Like a robe, a blazer, or a shirt, something. It hasn't shown up in the mail yet-

Annie: I'm writing it down.

David: ...but I'm hanging on to it. I got really attached to that.

Annie: Mayor of Dadville.

David: Yeah.

Annie: So sweet.

David: I said, "Dave, you may regret that you threw that out there, but I'm very attached to it."

Annie: That's right. We will get you a mayor of Dadville. Sure. What a perfect person to be the mayor of Dadville! Because really, David, I mean, in our town and online and I'll say across the world easily, you are one of the experts in helping boys become men. Why did that become a thing for you?

David: You are kind to say that.

Annie: Oh, I mean it.

David: Well, I would say, Annie, any guy have probably... When I look back on the chapters of my own story, I think I probably have always known that I was going to do this work. I pushed against it for a while but I think I've always known.

I have vivid memories of conversations with friends from elementary school all the way through college where, you know, I think what would have felt overwhelming to other people, other guys in particular in those conversations didn't to me. And I just was moving toward people more than away from then worked as a camp counselor when I was in college and just always got called in for the kids who are a little bit homesick and teary at bedtime.

So I think I just have always probably been moving toward this work. And I will say, too, I have a rare story in that I have a really amazing dad, who I still have today. I lost my mom a few years ago. I don't take for granted that it's a gift to have a dad who has stills invested in me at this point in my life as ever, and I know how rare that is. So I feel like because I had the opportunity to sit front row to a man who had feelings, and we'll talk about his-

Annie: In the 80s?

David: Absolutely.

Annie: Wild.

David: That was unique. And so it was familiar to me. I laugh at my dad now too. My parents were so ahead of their time in so many different ways. I can vividly

remember being in an elementary school, and my dad loading the dishwasher, vacuuming the floor, all those things, and my mom saying clearly out loud, like, "In this family, men do all the things. They don't just mow the yard. They wash the dishes, they do the laundry, they do all these things."

So they had this beautiful partnership that I just don't think a lot of kids get to watch their parents have and serving and giving. So, just a lot of opportunities that I thought, "I just want to pour into kids and boys in particular."

Annie: So yesterday was Father's Day when people are hearing this. So will you talk for just a minute. I'm thinking about our groups of friends who did not enjoy yesterday. Either they just lost their dad, or they're raising kids without a father figure, or their dad was not a healthy dad, so Father's Day ends up being a different kind of painful than Mother's Day. What do we do the day after a hard day like that?

David: I think we acknowledge that it is hard. We don't try to pretend that it is. I love that you would even draw attention to that. So we could just camp out in that space and just acknowledge that's a hard day every year for a lot of people. I have sure sat with a lot of boys over the course of my work, and that's their story.

So I think it just starts with that acknowledgment and creating some space to talk about what that's like. And also to talk some about all the men—I talked about that in this book—who have fathered me in addition to my dad. And there have been many and still are. So thinking about those men, reaching out to those men.

I would also want to say is you and I talk around this. That, you know, I've been doing this work long enough that I've had the opportunity to see kids that I counseled when they were kids or teenagers who are now parents themselves who come back in for parent consultations, many of whom did not have any kind of relationship with their dad, or had a really harmful relationship with him who have turned out to be some of the most amazing dads I know.

It is beautiful to watch that journey and to think I know so much about your story and to watch you live this redemptive story now in the lives of your own children. It's extraordinary. So some of the greatest men I know were raised by single moms. I want any single mom listening to hear that.

Annie: It is possible to-

David: Absolutely.

Annie: ...raise a healthy child when there is not a traditional mother and father in the home. It is possible.

David: Absolutely, it is.

Annie: All things are possible with God, right?

David: Absolutely.

Annie: I'm getting to watch a version of that with my Vanderbilt baseball guys that I've known for a decade. They're becoming husbands and fathers. And I wasn't their counselor but I was an up close voice in a lot of their lives. And watching them be good husbands when they were baseball players a decade ago, they were just college dudes who packed up, moved and trash bags. Now, watching them be... My first one is having a baby this summer. It's one of the gifts of being older in it.

David: It is. It is. That we get to see all of that. Sit front row to that. It's a gift.

Annie: To all of our friends that are 20, start investing because in a decade or two decades, you get to watch the people you poured into being human, like grown-up humans, and they're good at it. It's amazing. I love in the book *Raising Emotionally Strong Boys*—I read it today. I love it. But you know how I feel about young men. I just adore them—adults can be preventionists. So will you talk about that? Because I felt so welcomed as I was reading your book because you talk so much about the adults that aren't the mom and dad.

David: Yes, absolutely. You know, I open the book with that Frederick Douglass quote that I love so much. That it's easier to build strong kids than to repair broken men. And I think about the role that we all get to play in the lives of building strong kids. It's one of the many reasons I love sitting with you because you are so passionate about building strong kids with me. And to think about all the different ways that we are doing that, in my experience in really intentional ways with the girls in our lives, but maybe not as much in some of the same ways with boys. So I'm excited to push that conversation further.

I think it starts with talking about the unique ways that we even engage boys. Our dear friend, Sissy Goff, opens the book with a foreword and says, "Boys are bewildering creatures." That is the right way to start any conversation. So the way we talk with them, the way we encourage them, coach them, engage them, you know, it's just different.

So I camp out in that space where part of this book just talking about their unique hardwiring. And then how to have conversations, how to have relationship with them in ways that we have an opportunity, I think, to change the current stats that are sadly really scary and daunting when it comes to boys.

Annie: Will you talk about that for a second, especially the suicide rate of men? I had no idea until I read the book.

David: It was difficult for me to read that, it was difficult for me to write that. Like I remember just staring at that sentence. I'll start by saying that there are all kinds of stats where things we know men have more difficulty reaching out for help when they need it. Men have more difficulty articulating significant life events, you know, attending to our physical and emotional health.

I read a fascinating stat about the number of women who go every year for their well visit versus the number of men who don't. So if we think about all these different areas where men just are not in the practice, the habits of attending to their health, their spiritual health, their emotional, their physical health-

Annie: It's a little rub, a little dirt in it, and move on, right?

David: Absolutely. That leads to the scary stats where men lead the stats for infidelity, internet pornography, substance abuse, suicide. The stat that you and I are discussing is that one man globally commit suicide every minute of every day.

Annie: That is literally hair raising on your arm.

David: It is. Yes, it is.

Annie: It's unbelievable.

David: Absolutely.

Annie: And a lot of them are 50, 60, they are grandfathers. These are not just... though it is children and young men, but it is older men too. That does not make any sense to me, David.

David: No. I've lost count with a number of kids I've worked with who lost their father to suicide. Like it happens so much, so commonly in our city. And that stat reflects what's happening all over the world in ways that... You know, it's multiple layers of grief. It's not just loss. There's so many extra layers that accompany it. There's guilt and what did I not do and all these different things that can accompany losing someone in that way that it is just a devastating loss.

Again, I just want to do everything I know to do to get in front of those statistics and look at what we could be doing differently with boys on the front side of development as they grow into those 50-year-old men we're talking about.

Annie: One of my favorite things you write in the book is you really dial in why dudes love Dude Perfect. Please talk because part one, me too.

David: Me three.

Annie: I think those guys are geniuses.

David: Aren't they?

Annie: They're just having the best time. What is it about Dude Perfect that every...? I mean, every kid I know that's a boy can talk about Dude Perfect.

David: Totally-

Annie: It's wild.

David: I know. I'm so thankful for those guys and what they're doing in this world. I love that they have uniquely captured the attention as you were saying of so many boys-

Annie: And non-faith kids and families-

David: Absolutely.

Annie: ...which is the coolest. I love that.

David: And I talked about in the book how few role models there are for boys. There just are not a ton of men in this world who have a really big platform that I feel super excited about having our boys attend. And I do with them. So I'm so supportive of what they're doing.

I love talking with boys about, you know, they are all about trick shots and all these awesome things like what would it look like to build some trick shots for yourself? So much of what I do in the book and the workbook is just how can we take these ideas and build on them—the things that boys are already loving?

I talk a lot about how I grew up with... My grandfather was a builder, I worked for him one summer. And I talk about how every man who worked on the job always had a toolbox with him. You'd never show up to work as a builder without tools. You need those things. My other grandfather was a fisherman. He would never go out on the water without a tackle box.

So how could we be building these toolboxes, these tackle boxes to have these skills, these trick shots so that we've got these things at our disposal for when we come up against the complicated moments in life, which every boy will?

Annie: Yes! Yes! How young do we start building that toolbox for our boys?

David: Right out of the gate, in my opinion.

Annie: Really?

David: Absolutely. I talk about using a feelings chart with boys who can't even talk yet. And that we can be pointing to the picture, the expression, and referencing that. That we're building this emotional vocabulary with boys from the earliest moments. What I would say to that is, you know, what pediatricians would tell us is that at well visits with kids at 12, 18, 24 months, they're always asking parents, like, How many words is he or she saying? What we know is true is that girls are saying twice as many words as boys on the front side.

Annie: Believe it.

David: So you think if their general vocabulary is smaller, of course, their emotional vocabulary would likely be too. So we're gonna have to work harder with him to build us an expansive emotional vocabulary. So it's gonna start on the front side, and then I think building from there.

I just want boys to get to sit front row, again, in the way I think we're super intentional with girls and doing this, to talk about feelings. I talk about how I think emotions over time have become gendered. And I think we commonly ask girls questions about "how do you feel?" And we ask boys questions about, "what do you think?" And we need to be asking more girls, "what do you think?" and more boys, "what do you feel?"

Annie: As an Enneagram seven, "what do you feel?" do nothing for me. Because I can't tell you. But if you asked me what I think, we can be here for an hour. My counselor does it to me all the time. She'll be like, "I want you to look at the feelings chart and tell me what you think." I'm like, "You sneaky woman. You know exactly."

David: I love that.

Annie: So yeah, you're right. I mean, for a long time, as a female, I was unable to do my work because I wasn't asking myself the right question. And so asking boys "what do you feel and what do you think?" it opens it all up? Will you talk about... This is a dating tip I've been given 10 times. If you want to have a serious conversation

with a guy, get in a car and drive, or go on a walk, both be facing forward and you're gonna have more... And that's true when we're raising boys too, right?

David: 100%.

Annie: Why is that? What is the deal?

David: Thank you for saying that. Eye to eye for us as males feels more threatening. So what science would tell us is that shame registers in the brain differently for us as males, and that you and I could just be having an intimate conversation and I could start to experience shame just because the eye to eye could feel scary and threatening for me. So shoulder to shoulder feel safer. I talk a lot about just talking around a task with boys. So yes, riding in the car, walking the dog.

Annie: Meeting, you said?

David: Oh, yes. There is so much wisdom to that. Straight to a man's stomach is here we start always, always. And if we're thinking about all the things we would be doing naturally with boys and having conversations and like building Legos, shooting hoops, jumping on a trampoline, like we're gonna get access to more with him in those moments where we're in motion and side by side than if we're sitting down.

In fact, I think boys even hearing parents or adults say things like, "I need you to look me in the eyes," automatically can set them up to experience some fear in ways that they could shut down.

Annie: You talk a lot about tug of war between parents and kids and hostage situations, where the boy is like... That one story where the kid was standing outside his mom's room saying, "What kind of mother doesn't listen to her son?"

David: Yes.

Annie: I was like, "Man, kids are the worst." I was too. I was too. I could be an emotional hostage too. So if we're gonna be side by side with them and we're gonna not let shame step into our parenting, and I'm gonna use parenting even for what I do with my MiniBFFs because I'm not their parent, but I'm a parenting voice-

David: Yes, you are.

Annie: So when we're parenting side by side with them, it does feel natural for me, David, to go, "Hey, Sam, look at me. I want you to look at me when I'm telling you this," because I'm scared... Oh, it's because I'm scared. I'm scared they're not listening and

I'm scared they're gonna miss something. So I want them to look at me because of me not because of them. Oh, oh.

David: It is important to know that boys are listening and absorbing and moments when we just don't think they are. And certainly hear me say, There are plenty of boys who are zoned out. But it fascinates me all the things that boys have reported to me or parents have reported that boys absorbed in moments where it looked like they were paying no attention.

Annie: Wow.

David: You know, I have the story in my own journey of parenting. I think my son was 5 years old at the time. And I was standing in the doorway of our kitchen, my wife was cooking and our kids were sitting at the table, and my wife and I were having this conversation, and it got a little lively.

Like we weren't fighting but our voice were elevated. And I was like, "Honey!" And my sons were just eating. And as we continued to talk, one of my sons got up from the table, walked over to my wife and gave her this big hug, like squeezed her real tight, and then came back over and sat down at the table. And we both just stop, just froze like where we were. It was like, "Oh my goodness, he was taking all of that in." I would have thought, "You're not even paying attention to what we're saying or doing." But they're emotional creatures. That's the other mistake I think we make with boys. We assume girls are emotional creatures and they're not. There is zero science to support that boys have fewer emotion.

Annie: Wow.

David: Zero. It's just they tend to have a smaller emotional vocabulary and less skills in terms of how to navigate the emotion but they feel it all. They just don't always know what to do with it.

Annie: I'm thinking about your book title, *Raising Emotionally Strong Boys*, we're raising emotional boys. We get to decide whether they're strong or weak-

David: Absolutely.

Annie: ...based on how we raise them.

David: Absolutely. And part of, you know, the story you mentioned, and I realized that language is a little strong when I refer to boys as terrorist in creating hostage crisis. But I think it's an example of if we don't equip them to be emotionally strong, they'll fall back on these emotionally lazy responses. And that story is just a boy

using his power for harm, not for good. It's like I don't know what to do with all these emotions, so I'm gonna hold you hostage because I can't work with the storm going on inside of me.

[00:20:49] <music>

Sponsor: Hey friends! Just interrupting this conversation real quick to share about one of our amazing partners. [Awana's Talk About](#) resource. Okay, what did the MiniBFFs in your life have on their TSF best summer ever list? Heading to the pool, camp, grandma, and grandpa's house?

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And remember that the links to all of our sponsors are in the show notes below, but we'll also email them to you on Friday if you've signed up for the AFD Week in Review email. That link is in the show notes too.

And now back to our conversation with David Thomas.

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Annie: So I'm thinking about our friends listening who have a 12-year-old and they're like, "Yeah, I wish I had known about this when he was four, but he's 12." How do we start an emotionally strong journey with our son who is not a baby, who's a kid, or a preteen or teenager?

David: Well, I want you to hear me first say it is never too late. It is never too late. I want any parent listening, any person who is a teacher, a coach, and an aunt, an uncle, a grandparent that it's not. In fact, I laughed with a mom who I asked to review the workbook. I had all these little boys who endorsed the workbook, which I absolutely love.

Annie: That's so sweet.

David: And this mom is like, "David, we're practicing so many of the things in the workbook." She goes, "And I'm using it on my husband all the time."

Annie: There's this other man in my house.

David: Absolutely. I said, "Good for you." The workbook on the front says 6 to 12 years old, but if it works for 42-year-olds, I'm great with that.

Annie: Listen, if you think I'm not taking some of the things I've learned in this into my dating life, David Thomas. I learned some things when I read your book.

David: Absolutely. So if you've got a 12-year-old, that's a great starting point if you're feeling like I haven't done some of these things, and building from that point forward. But hear me say clearly, it's never too late.

And the other thing I would want to say is, you know, I think it's so helpful when boys hear us as grown-up saying things like "I'm learning that too. I'm figuring that out, too. That's hard for me, too." I have so many dads I'm working with right now who are saying that on the regular with their sons, and I think, What a gift that boys get to grow up hearing adult men say it like, "I'm still struggling with that. I'm still working on that. You're outpacing me on that right there, buddy. I'm trying to figure out what to do with my anger a little better, too." So I want boys to hear that from all the grownups around them.

Annie: One of my favorite quotes from the book is, "Boys need to see that emotions reside in the life of a man."

David: Yes!

Annie: So why does that matter when we're looking at our coaches, or our teachers, or our dads, that the boys see that emotions are...? Because they see it probably... I'm thinking of the Barnes' kids. There's two sons and a daughter in that family. They see me emotional. I mean, I was emotional this week at their house. So those boys are used to a grown female being emotional in front of them or expressing emotion in front of them. Why does it matter that they see men do the same? And it doesn't have to look like crying, does it?

David: No, it doesn't. But it has to look like talking about it. Like naming my experience. And I think that is so often all boys see is the women around them feeling feelings, naming feelings, navigating feelings, and they start to think two things. One, I think they think, "What's wrong with me that I have these big feelings inside of me and I don't see that on the adult men around me?" And then secondly, I have absolutely

no idea what to do because I don't hear enough grown men around me talking about what it looks like.

So, you know, I would challenge any man listening that I think it's a gift for boys not only to hear us talk about our experience, and what we're finding works for us. But I challenge dads all the time. If you're in counseling, talk about that openly with your son. I don't think they can hear enough adult men talking about reaching out for help.

Talk about the friends you spend time with that challenge you and encourage you. Talk about the pastor you learn from. Talk about all these different individuals who are helping you become more of who God designed you to be as a man. That's not something that stops at your 18th birthday or your 25th birthday. Like, I'm still learning. I'm still talking about that with my kids who are in college right now. Like, "Hey, I went on a walk with our pastor, and I want to tell you something he taught me this week or he said to me that really made me wrestle on things."

Annie: When you're talking about that, and you write about this beautifully in the book, but for single moms or grandparents who are raising children alone, how do we find men to speak and to walk alongside us? I mean, we share friends who... people who've adopted and are married and are raising alone? How do we find men to help us? And is that necessary?

David: I think it is necessary because I want boys to get to see that full experience of like, "Here's what it looks like on men and women." And I would say two things. One, I think you pray it into your son's life and believe that God will provide that because it is needed. And I think you get really creative.

In fact, some stories that I share in the book that I absolutely love were of a group of moms, single moms who did not have involved dads in their son's lives. And they reached out to a campus minister at one of our colleges in town and said, "Could you just tell us some really great college guys that we could interview and have conversation with because our guess would be they need to make some money and we need some influence?"

And they hired a college kid who led a Bible study with their sons for a period of time. And everybody won in that equation. Like, this kid got to be with amazing kids and feel a sense of purpose and made a little extra cash which college kids need, and their sons got to be with this cool older college guy who they could sit front row and watch. "Okay, here's what it looks like. Here's what it looks like to have feelings. Here's what it looks like to pursue Christ when you're a 21 year old guy." Like all these things that I just want boys to get to see.

And I've heard so many unbelievable stories of amazing intentional moms who have provided or ushered in that kind of experience, who've found a neat high school kid who did book club with their sons or who became a tutor. That's the thing I love too. I think boys who are struggling with school, when they find a cool high school guy who needs to make a little extra cash, it becomes more than just "I'm helping you out with your academics but I'm mentoring you and talking about life."

I have a 16-year-old kid right now who has a guitar teacher and his mom said to me, "You know, David, I will walk by the room when they're in the middle of the lesson at times, and I've noticed that it's becoming about 15 to 20 minutes of music and about 40 minutes of life."

Annie: Wow.

David: And she said, "And I'm here for it."

Annie: I will write that check.

David: Absolutely. She said, "For as long as he is offering this, I'm in." And I'm like, "That's incredible." So all these different males that I think could be a part of boys' lives in different ways, teachers, coaches.

When my sons were in high school, I used to drive around town with an envelope in my glove compartment of Chipotle gift cards. And I would regularly hand them out to these amazing teachers and coaches and youth pastors and the group leaders who are in my son's lives, you know, and just say at times, like, "Thank you. Thank you because your voice is so loud in their ear right now, and I couldn't be more grateful for your investment and who they are. Go have a burrito on me."

I just would literally go to Chipotle periodically and "Can I have \$100 worth of \$10 Chipotle cards?" And I just keep passing out because I'm so grateful for these different voices.

Annie: So this is a hard question. I'm sorry to do it to you.

David: Ask it.

Annie: So what happens when a coach or a dad... And you said at the beginning that men have a higher rate of infidelity, of suicide. What happens when a coach or a dad or a pastor has a public disgrace? Or maybe it ain't even public. It's public in your town. It may not be public on the internet, but it can be public in your town. What do we do when the men investing in our children go off the rails?

David: It's an important question. I'm glad you asked. It's going to happen. And I think there is a way that we can talk about those circumstances without making that man the villain in the story. But using that as opportunity to talk about the very thing we're discussing. Like, this is what it looks like when men don't ask for help. This is what it looks like when men don't talk about their experience in life and hold those feelings, fears, all those things hostage. And it grows in us, it becomes cancerous inside of us, and it can lead to destruction emotionally, relationally, spiritually on so many levels.

So I think we do use it as opportunity. We use the stories in media that are in front of our boys as opportunity too. Again, I don't need to turn that into I'm going to bash this person or I'm going to turn them into the villain in the story. But I'm going to use that as opportunity. This is what it could look like for any one of us when we don't reach out for help.

Annie: I call it learning from the cheap seats. I'm like, "Let me learn..." Sometimes I'm getting to learn on the field and it hurts and I'm in the game and I'm not interested. And other times, I'm like, "I could learn from the cheap seats. I'll just sit up here and watch and pull a news story or even a fictionalized book and say, 'Man, that could happen here. If that happened here, what would we do?'"

David: Absolutely. We use it as opportunity to develop critical thinking. I mean, there's just a lot of opportunity that could come from those kinds of conversations with boys. But again, let's have side by side, not eye to eye.

Annie: I love that in the book you list out movies that are great conversation starters.

David: Because boys love movies. Like I talked so much about that in the book. Like, let's use the stuff that they already love. Let's use the stories that are out there in front of us at this point. So I just would challenge any parent, think about how you could have a little bit of conversation after sitting and watching a movie.

There's this great resource called Common Sense Media that we recommend parents all the time. They rate everything technology-wise for kids. So it's like video games, movies, all the stuff. And in the movie section, they have a section of like, "Here's things you could talk about."

And I'll confess. This is my cheating that I would do with my own kids. I would take them to a movie and then right before we leave, I'd be like, "Hey, guys, I need to run the restroom real quick before we drive home." And I would pull up Common Sense Media app and I would look at the three questions and drive home. I'm sure my kids were like, "Dad always had the most thoughtful questions when

we drove home from the movie." I'm just confessing it was all Common Sense Media. But just ways that we can use that content to build those skills in our kids.

Annie: Video games. A lot of what we're hearing about mass shootings, they trace them back to, especially when it's young man, they say they were very into certain video games. Are video games all bad? Are they all good? How do we figure out how to regulate them in our homes? It seems to be something that more of my girlfriends are interested in than my girlfriends. So will you talk a bit about that?

David: I will. I'm never surprised to sit with parents and people who love kids who are talking about how fearful they feel about boys in particular being so drawn to that. And I think it is, you know, we as males are visual creatures. So images on a screen are going to capture our attention way quicker than words on a page.

And it's not that boys don't love to read but it is to say I think it's easy to just sit with that. And we have a lot of spatial skills that make us strong in those places. I don't think they're all bad. I do think we want to have healthy limits in place at all times. So no question about it.

What the research keeps telling us over and over is that, you know, it's these long stretches of boys being engaged with video games when they get into this scary space, as opposed to if they're playing for short windows of time and then going outside and running, riding their bikes.

Annie: You talk a lot about being outside.

David: Yes, so much about that. I think that's important to note. But I do want parents to really look at and use a tool like Common Sense Media whose they've got a team of experts who's really evaluating video games to understand which ones are okay, which ones aren't. So there's some great sports video games that boys love, and I have great conversations with them about and then there's some that are dangerous.

I remember when my boys were growing up, I said to them, "I'm open to talking about any video game that you hear about or interested in. But there's one I'm never gonna say yes to. It's Grand Theft Auto." It involves shooting policemen and raping women. So the answer's no. Like no. There's nothing good that's kind of come from that experience. So I think there's some that we want to be off-limits, but let's have conversation around the others.

Annie: I'm terrible at video games but I sit there when the Barnes Kids are playing and I pretend like I'm someone in the stands when they show... It's a soccer. They always play soccer. And someone was, "Oh, there I am. There I am." And they get the giggles about it. And it's the only thing I can do to connect with them while they're

playing video is find myself in the stands as a computer-generated person. That's all I've got to offer.

Some of our friends we send the email on Fridays, the AFD Week in Review, and we got some questions back. Sometimes we have one or two, sometimes we have two pages like we do for you. So let's bust through some of these if you don't mind.

David: I'd love to.

Annie: Riley has a great question. Is seeking therapy a selfish endeavor on this side of heaven?

David: I don't think it's a selfish endeavor. I think it's a healthy endeavor. I really do. And I don't think it's the only healthy endeavor. In fact, Sissy and I have laughed about the workbook I created to go with this book for boys and the workbook she created for elementary-aged girls.

You know, we talked about, we're really given away three months of free counseling. You don't have to go but that could be a starting place. That is more than anything just about building awareness and building tools. If I were gonna give the CliffsNotes version. So I don't think it's selfish. I think it's healthy. But there are other paths to doing that as well.

I think podcasts... This is one of the ways I learned so much. Podcasts are a great tool for learning and building awareness and skills as well.

Annie: Oh, man, so many of our friends are listening to Raising Boys and Girls, y'all's podcast, because it is just such a deep resource for parents. When it's counseling right for the boys in our lives?

David: I think that's obviously going to be different for every boy.

Annie: Sure.

David: But I would say, you know, if you're listening right now, and thinking, "Ooh, I'm hearing Annie and David talk about some things and that feels concerning for me," I think the workbook could be a good place to start. To say, Okay, let's start with some skill-building there, build some emotional muscles.

If it doesn't feel like enough, then it could be great next to do a consultation with your pediatrician. Or we do parent consultations with parents all over the globe, by phone or through zoom where we will just sit with parents and hear them talk about some unique concerns with their kids, and then we'll create a to-do list and say,

"Okay, try these things," or "I'm hearing you say enough, that makes me think it's time. Let's go ahead and move forward with counseling at this point and find a great resource for your son at that point." So it could just be putting another set of professional eyes on the situation to assess your needs.

Annie: We had multiple questions about grieving. You and I talked about this before, and I got permission from my sister to tell this story. But my nephew... As people are listening to this, right now our family is grieving of a loss of a family member. So I'm not on socials, I'm not anywhere when people are hearing this because we're in the middle of a great loss. How do we talk... Like my little nephews two, how do we talk to him about a person he knew that is not there anymore?

David: I'm so thankful that we could have this conversation because I think when we are navigating loss ourselves, it can feel overwhelming to think about carrying that with the kids that we love.

Annie: Or thinking, "They'll be fine. They're too little."

David: Exactly. I know. Even back to that story I shared about my son picking up on all that and I didn't think he was listening. So I would want to encourage any adult listening, let's err on the side of too much support instead of too little. And kids will cue us because I think kids have this internal barometer that goes off inside of them that tells them when they have reached capacity on getting as much information as they can work with, which is different than it is for us as adults. Like we can stay in grief for longer, we can stay in hard conversations for longer, but kids can't.

I tend to say it's a little bit like swimming, in that we as adults can stand or water for longer and kids can't. They need to come up for air. So if you're talking with a child you love about something that's hard... And sometimes boys especially will just say things... I've countered thousands of boys who would just be like, "Can we be done talking now?" or "I don't want to talk anymore," or put their hands over their ears, which is their way of saying that little barometer went off inside of me and I can't work with more. So let's take a break and I need to play and when we come back-

Annie: What do you do? Y'all go play?

David: Absolutely, you go play.

Annie: Wow.

David: So I think it's good in conversations to remember that kids grieve in doses and they need to go up for air more often than we do. And they move in and out of grief

from play to the hard conversations actually in ways that we could learn from as adults.

Annie: You know what I was going to say? Everything you're describing is a little bit about as good as I can be with grief too, unfortunately.

David: And it's a healthy way. It's like we don't necessarily always need to stay underwater for that long. We start to struggle after a while. I would lastly say, when we talk with kids about death, we want to be very concrete, which doesn't feel instinctive for us.

But kids pre-12 are in what we call concrete thinking in terms of their cognitive development. So the world is very black and white. So we want to avoid abstract terms. Like we say things like "he passed away." And that's an abstract phrase that doesn't make sense to kids. I say to parents, if divorce is a part of your story, don't say "we grew apart." Say "we're getting a divorce. We're going to stop being married." Do you hear how that language feels more abrasive, but it's more concrete?

Annie: Yes, it's concrete.

David: It is.

Annie: It feels like concrete.

David: So with children we say, you know, things like, "Their heart stopped beating and they stopped breathing at that point." As people of faith, we can then move straight into, "At that moment when their heart stopped beating, they were in the presence of Jesus. Can you believe that they could be here right now and then as soon as their heart stopped beating Jesus was holding them?" But painting those really concrete experiences for them of what happened next. So hold on to all of that when you talk with kids.

There's also a great book that we recommend a lot at Daystar called *When Dinosaurs Die*. It's about a little series of dinosaurs and explains in concrete language how death happens. Now, it's not a faith-based resource. So I always encourage parents, you know, you can fold in what you want to be the next part of that, but it does a beautiful job. It's even written like a cartoon almost with little pictures and we get to talk about different scenarios. So you could use different parts of that with kids when you have those hard conversations.

[00:42:56] <music>

Sponsor: Hey friends! Just interrupting this one more time to tell you about another amazing partner, [Athletic Greens](#). So if you haven't heard me share about Athletic Greens before, it's one thing we can do to be good friends to our health and to our bodies.

Mixed in really cold water, one scoop of Athletic Greens will deliver 75 high quality vitamins, minerals, whole food source superfoods, probiotics, and adaptogens in forms that your body can absorb. Their special blend of ingredients supports your energy level, gut health, nervous system, immune system and ability to focus. All the things.

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Policygenius doesn't add on extra fees. I like that. Policygenius doesn't sell your info to third parties. I love that. And Policygenius has thousands of five star reviews across Google and Trustpilot. Policygenius has options that offer coverage and as little as a week and avoid unnecessary medical exams. Please and thank you.

So head to Policygenius.com to get your free life insurance quote and see how much you could save.

And now back to finish up our conversation with David Thomas.

[00:45:38] <music>

Annie: Let me ask you this. This is from Kristen. What do you feel is the least talked about, but still important characteristic of most boys that needs a parent's attention?

David: You know, I would say and really the main reason that I wrote this book is that I think, you know, boys having heart, you know, boys having heart. There's a story in the book about an adult man who lost his dad to suicide when he was a teenager. And I was listening to an interview with him when he said, you know, "My dad was physically strong, but he wasn't mentally strong."

Annie: Wow.

David: And that stayed with me. And I think that's some of what it looks like to have heart. That I'm strong in different ways and my heart is strong in a way that I am aware of what I feel, which allows me to be aware of what others feel, which allows me to be different in the world. So that progression is a characteristic that I think we just don't attend to enough with boys.

We tend to be wisely so, so focused on their academic life, their athletic life, their spiritual life, these different aspects, but it's one of the more neglected threads of his development, which is why I wanted so badly to write this book.

Annie: I am glad we intentionally released the show when the book is available, so that no one's having to wait. They can get it right now, because it is out this month, or actually last week. Do we pray differently for boys than we do for girls?

David: It's a great question. We laugh about this. The only thing I might say is that we might pray for a little shorter with boys. You know, their attention span is shorter. We need to acknowledge that. Like there are all these different parts of how God designed him that we do want to be thinking about all the different ways that we interact with him, including that.

I have parents in my office sometimes who will say to me, like, "I don't like it when he's holding a fidget object in his hands while we're talking. It makes me think he's not paying attention." Or I've had parents say that when they're kids pray, and I challenged him to say, "You know what? Be open to the possibility that that might actually help settle him a little."

Annie: Wow.

David: "That might actually help bring his focus to the equation." I'm sitting with a former educator who knows this. One of the strategies we use in a classroom setting with boys with attention hurdles is to let them squeeze a stress ball on their non-dominant hand, which is drawing his attention to the place where he wants it as opposed to his attention and starting all around.

So I would challenge you to think about timing, and that he may need something that may be a part of. He needs to hold a stuffed animal. He needs to squeeze a stress ball and to have something with him that allows him to engage the experience differently.

Annie: Something you and I have talked about before, I did part of my master's degree on boys and education and teaching boys. And it has just helped me so much in all my relationships with young men to remember that the systems we operate in, even how we get in line at the grocery store, how school is built was not meant for men. It was meant for women. It was industrial revolution, get on the factory line, don't be individual, don't be creative. And it is easier for women than it is for men.

David: Absolutely.

Annie: And so letting little boys be outside the lines a little bit has them inside the lines for them.

David: Absolutely. I know adult men who would say their richest moments of connecting with God and conversation and prayer happen walking outdoors. You know, that that's where it has, not sitting still in a chair. And that's not to say it can't happen in that way. But is to say, let's just be open to all those things.

Annie: When we think about the future, I mean, you are spending your life thinking about the future because you're trying to make healthy boys into healthy men. What is your hope about who this generation of young men could become? What do you see when you look in 10 years or 20 years?

David: I would say I feel really hopeful in a lot of ways. There's certainly things that make me feel fearful. Now, let's start there, and I'll move toward hope. It does concern me that I've seen more boys in the past decade who are less interested in getting their driver's license and asking a girl to a dance and getting a part-time job. Whereas when I was growing up, I didn't know a single boy who wasn't chomping at the bit to drive a car and excited... nervous but excited about asking a girl and wanting to make money.

And I worry that there are more boys who don't feel a sense of purpose and don't have opportunities for healthy risk in ways that they're not moving into those spaces. Then I think if we were to add to the conversation we just had about video games. It's like easier to kind of stay in the basement playing games and out doing those things. And certainly the pandemic lessened the opportunities that were there in those spaces, which furthered some of that. So I want us to pay attention to that and moving those boys out there.

I have a whole section of the book called *The Strength of Purpose*. And I think it's part of how we're hardwired as males that we crave and hunger for that. I will say I don't know another time in history that we've been talking about mental health as much as we have and that counseling is as normal as it is. And that excites me that I think we are raising up a generation of kids who that's more familiar.

We're more focused on social emotional learning skills in schools than we've ever been at any time in history. So there are a lot of things happening in ways where I think I'm super excited about that, to see this generation sitting with parents 25 years ago, versus sitting with parents now. And how many parents I sit down and they're like, "We're in counseling individually. We've been in marital counseling. We believe in counseling, we want to be here for him to have the experience." I'm like, "That's awesome." Like boys growing up, that's just always something I always did.

Annie: That's right.

David: My parents parked me in that chair when I was eight years old. And so it's just what you do.

Annie: That's right.

David: And back to its what the males in my family do, you know, that we see that. So when you and I were talking a little bit earlier about these different amazing voices, I get so excited about how many grandparents I feel like are learning skills at this point that are offering boys something different too.

I have conversations with boys all the time and they'll say, "My grandfather said when he was growing up thing ever talked about feelings. But he had to learn to do that because my grandmother said, 'There's no way you're gonna live with me and not do it.'" And so I love that even there they're getting to have these neat conversations with different men.

- Annie:** What did we not say about the book that you want to make sure we say? The workbook is available as well.
- David:** The workbook is available as well. So targeted elementary-aged boys 6 to 12. But as we've discussed, it might work for an 18-year-old or a 42-year-old. Use it for whatever made it's useful with.
- Annie:** That's right. Where can we get all those?
- David:** Wherever you buy books, it is available. So thankful for that and just super grateful you would let me come on and have this conversation with you.
- Annie:** I know you're already the mayor of Dadville, so I won't try to get you elected here. But I am thankful for you and your work and Sissy's work and the way y'all are... I mean, I told y'all this last time you're on the show like, You can't throw a rock in this town and miss the kid who is seeing you. I mean, it's just every kid sees y'all. It is just incredible. And some of the best teenagers I know came through y'all's offices. And it's just amazing.
- David:** It's been a gift to work in that space. I'm so thankful for that place. And friend, I'm so thankful for you. I do not ever want to miss an opportunity to be in your company to just remind you you are spreading so much joy and goodness in this world. I'm so glad to know you.
- Annie:** That's very kind.
- David:** Really grateful for you.
- Annie:** Well, the last question we always ask. I don't know I've done it through tears many times, but here we go. The last question we always ask is because the show was called That Sounds Fun, tell me what sounds fun to you.
- David:** You know what I just did that was fun and about to do again? So I have college-aged kids, which just means I'm an empty nester and they're all over the place. I don't get to see them as much, and we have all of us share a great love of music and live music. And just took one of my kids to see our dear friends Drew & Ellie.
- Annie:** Yes, did you go to the Ryman show?
- David:** Yes.
- Annie:** Friday or Saturday?

David: I went on Friday.

Annie: Me too.

David: You did? I wish I'd seen you there.

Annie: I know. Where were y'all? We were in Section 12.

David: We were down on the floor this time, section seven.

Annie: What a show.

David: Can you even believe we live in this town and we get to experience things like that?

Annie: It was unreal. It was unreal. People can watch it. If you can still buy tickets online, I think, and watch the live stream, do it.

David: Do.

Annie: I bought Saturday show because I didn't get to go back.

David: I'm gonna do the same thing. I'm gonna do the exact same thing. It was so amazing.

Annie: What was your favorite part of the show?

David: You know, I loved being the round in the beginning.

Annie: I was like, "Only Drew Holcomb opens for his own show."

David: Seriously. Seriously.

Annie: It was awesome.

David: You know what else I loved? I loved when he asked that question, like, "How many of you are from out of town?" And I looked around the room, 80% of the people were. I thought, "Love that all these people traveled from all over to be in this beautiful space and have this experience."

Annie: Tell me about the moment when Drew... From your counseling point of view, and your like raising emotionally strong boys point of view, Drew is about to sing a song and he sees a little boy in the audience and he says, "Tell me your name." And the kid says his name. I don't remember. "How old are you?" "I'm eight." And he

says, "Where are you from?" And he says, "Denver." And Drew says, "After I finish this song, if you'll meet me right here, I'll give you this guitar." And my gosh, he did. He said, "If you'll learn to play it, I'll give you this guitar."

David: Were you in tears like I was?

Annie: Yes. Tell me what happened right there for that little boy?

David: I know. I was thinking, "Drew Holcomb. I love Drew and Ellie Holcomb so much. And I think you're changing that little guy's life. There won't be a day that he does not remember: when I got to walk up to the stage..."

Annie: At the Ryman.

David: Absolutely.

Annie: Yes.

David: "...and this man that I admire believed in me and saw that I could do this neat thing." I know. I was weeping.

Annie: I'm like, "Can I buy stock in that kid right now?" Because you don't go off the rails for your whole life if you start like that at eight years old. Drew Holcomb sees you when you're eight? I just was just blown away.

David: It was beautiful.

Annie: It was a great show.

David: It was stunning.

Annie: What y'all's next one?

David: So I'm gonna take all three of my kids to see our dear friends Dave Barnes and Lady A-

Annie: Yes!

David: ...in a couple of weeks.

Annie: Here in Nashville?

David: Yes.

Annie: I'll be there too. I can't wait. I don't hardly miss it. If it is anyone I care at all about in the Ryman, done.

David: I know.

Annie: It's hard to miss.

David: And if you're listening and you don't live in the city, just find somebody you love and come to this great place, eat ladybird tacos in the morning, go to the Ryman at night. There's so much good stuff coming in our city.

Annie: Oh, you just can't beat it. Drew played a couple of his songs because it was his 40th birthday. A couple of the songs. They did a long instrumental interlude and a kind of... I mean, we got there at eight and we left at 11:30 probably. It was the longest concert I've ever been to. One board for a minute because I thought, man, I can listen to Drew Holcomb in the Ryman for hours.

David: Days.

Annie: It was unbelievable. So Dave and Lady A are next for you?

David: Yes. It's so fun. It's just so fun to have those experiences with my kids as young adults now-

Annie: Yes, it's the best.

David: ...that we share that love of great music.

Annie: That show is gonna be great. That tour... A lot of our friends can see that anywhere. So if you can go find Lady A and Dave Barnes somewhere close to you, do it because that is going to be incredible. And it's theaters. What a dream! These megastars playing rooms that you can see them in. Okay, I'll see you there then.

David: I'll look for you there.

Annie: I know. I'll look for you, too. David Thomas, thank you, my friend. I'm grateful for you. Can't wait for people to read *Raising Emotionally Strong Boys*.

David: Thank you, friend.

[00:57:09] <music>

Outro: Oh, you guys, how much do you love him? Could we please like another hour, two hours, three hours? That's why there is *The Raising Boys and Girls* podcast. So there is that option for you. But man, I love David Thomas. I could not love him much more. And he brought us delicious cookies, which was very kind. And not necessary, but it made us happy here at the office.

You guys, get your copy of *Raising Emotionally Strong Boys*. Be sure you're following David on social media, so you can tell him thank you for being on the show. And we'd love for you to pass this on to your friends who are part of young men's lives, whether they are parents, coaches, teachers or they have MiniBFFs in their life like me. I'm telling you, I learned so much. Share this show so that lots of our friends can hear and we can be a part of raising the next generation of men. I am here for that.

If you need anything else from me, you know I'm embarrassingly easy to find. Annie F. Downs on Instagram, Twitter, Facebook. All the places you may need me, that's how you can find me. And I think that's it for me today, friends. Go out or stay home, do something that sounds fun to you. I will do the same.

Today what sounds fun to me is hanging out with some of those MiniBFFs. I would like to be playing some soccer with some of my MiniBFFs. That sounds really fun to me today. Y'all have a great week. We'll see you back here on Thursday with one of my absolute heroes, a brilliant man, Andy Crouch. See y'all then.