



## Conscious Life presents

### Male Depression: Causes Consequences and Solutions

Guest - Ruth Whippman

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#### [00:00:09] Meagen Gibson

Welcome to this interview. I'm Meagen Gibson, your conference co-host. Today, I'm speaking with Ruth Whippman, an author, journalist, and essayist. Her most recent book is *BoyMom: Reimagining Boyhood in the Age of Impossible Masculinity*. Ruth, thank you so much for being with us today.

#### Ruth Whippman

Such a pleasure to be here. Thank you.

#### Meagen Gibson

Ruth, first of all, reading your book felt like reading my diary, and the diary of my neighbor across the street who has three boys. It turns out that a lot of us in the care, and keeping of young men are experiencing the same struggles and are concerned about the same things.

I'd love it if you could tell us why you wrote this book and what it outlines are the challenges facing young boys and young men in this moment.

#### Ruth Whippman

I've got three boys who are now 14, 11, and about to turn seven. My youngest was born in this really, really fraught cultural moment. So it was right as the #MeToo movement was just exploding online.

We had this global cultural reckoning around toxic masculinity and just all this evidence of men doing terrible things, just one after another after another. Here's another terrible man and another terrible man.

I'm a feminist. I was really happy that the #MeToo conversation was happening. It felt very validating as a woman, and that many of these feminist ideas were being talked about in a whole new systemic way.

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But at the same time, it was really tricky as a mother of boys to reconcile all of these very conflicted feelings. It felt like it was just this moment where any goodwill that anyone had ever had towards men and boys had just gone.

It was like we were all angry, men were the problem. They didn't have problems, they were the problem. That's something that Richard Reeves talked about. I wanted to reconcile my mother self with my feminist self.

How do we look at these systemic issues in the way that we're raising boys? What are the pressures bearing down on boys? How have we normalized this violence in society? Sexual assault?

But what are the ways that boys are also harmed by the system? They're not just causing harm to others. The system clearly isn't working very well for them. I wanted to bring some empathy and nurture to this conversation, as a mom.

I think a lot of my feminist peers, it was just like, "Let's write these awful jerks off completely. They don't deserve any of our empathy. They're so privileged. They have everything." And I think I wanted to look at this issue through an empathetic lens.

### **Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely. You make a good distinction that it's not like the majority of young men are thriving in this environment. They're not saying, "We've got no problems here." I think we're finding that there's a large rate of dissatisfaction on happiness, depression, higher suicide rates. There's plenty of evidence to suggest that men are also hurting, too, in this system.

### **Ruth Whippman**

Absolutely. I think that when it comes to loneliness, to friendship, to mental health, the male suicide rate at the moment, and especially for adolescent boys, is nearly four times the rate for female peers.

Boys are struggling in school compared to girls. They're not going to college at the same rates. I think about 60% of college admissions are now girls and 40% are boys.

Boys, in many ways, are really falling behind girls. This system, however much privilege they may have in many ways, and that's also real, there are many ways in which this system just is not working for them. I think that boys in our culture are being emotionally stunted, they're being socially stunted. Things are not going well for boys and men either.

### **Meagen Gibson**

Some of the most striking things that I read about in your book are some of the things that we know about boys' and girls' developments as babies. In social-emotional learning and nurturing and things that they need and their sensitivity. I'd love it if you could share some of that with us because I think it's probably the first time other people have heard this, too.

**[00:04:28] Ruth Whippman**

Yeah, this was really surprising. So I have this whole chapter where I dig into the gender... The real biological sex differences between males and females from infancy onwards. And this is such a controversial area because everybody's co-opted it for every kind of story.

But I think in general, when we talk about innate gender differences, we think of boys as these tough, sturdy, robust... Boys will be boys. They're destructive. They're maybe a little aggressive. Those are the things we think of as being the innate gender differences.

But actually, when you look at the research, pretty much by every measure, boys are more sensitive, they're more emotionally vulnerable, and they're more fragile than baby girls.

The reason for this is because at birth, the right part of the brain, which is... And it's very easy to oversimplify, but broadly speaking. The right hemisphere of the brain is the part that deals with emotions and emotional self-regulation, so the ability to calm down when you're upset, and attachment and relationships.

That part of the brain is about a month to six weeks behind in a male infant than a female infant. So it's more vulnerable. The brain is more immature, which means it's more vulnerable to disruption.

So anything that can go wrong for a baby, like all the bad things that can happen to a baby, like abuse or neglect or poverty or poor living conditions, you can see in the data that they tend to have a bigger impact on boys than on girls. There's lots and lots of data on this.

Boys are more physically vulnerable as well. You can see that pretty much every type of developmental disability, neuro-disability, death, illness, etc. is more common in baby boys than it is in baby girls.

A premature baby's... Premature girls do significantly better. They have much better outcomes than premature boys. And this is because of this same thing, this brain immaturity.

It means that a baby girl is born slightly more independent, slightly more resilient, and slightly more able to calm down when she's unhappy. Girls in general cry a little less, they sleep a little better, they calm down more easily.

A baby boy actually needs more support from his caregivers than a baby girl. On average, all of these things are group level differences, so any one individual might have a different trajectory. But in general, boys need more support from caregivers.

They need more care, more nurture in those early months. Really, actually, the boys' brains mature more slowly all the way through childhood. Actually, they need more support than girls.

But because of the way... Our cultural stories about gender, and our gender stereotypes and what we believe that boys and girls need, we actually end up giving boys slightly less care than baby girls.

**[00:07:23]**

We masculinize them. We think of them as being more robust. People handle baby boys and girls differently. They throw boys around and they're like, "Hey there, little man", and throw them up in the air. Whereas girls receive around twice as much caretaking touch from their parents.

We talk to boys less about their feelings. We're less likely to respond to their cries. These are small differences. They're not big differences. These are very subtle differences, but they're also real, and they show up in data.

Boys are more likely to get physically punished. They're more likely to get what research has called hostile or confrontational parenting. The list goes on. And they're less likely, as they grow up, we don't talk to them about their emotions as much. We don't touch them as much.

Teenage boys are one of the most touch-starved groups of all groups of children. I think the statistic is that a teenage boy is about twice as likely as a teenage girl to never be hugged or cuddled, which is tragic.

It becomes this double whammy. Boys need a little more care, and they get a little less care in our culture. Together, that means that the gap just grows and grows and grows in terms of...

Because obviously, we learn social skills, we learn empathy, we learn how to care for others by being cared for ourselves. The gap just widens and widens and widens as girls and boys grow up.

### **Meagen Gibson**

It's stark. It struck me so much. I have to actually give you credit, too, because I have a 15-year-old who's a freshman in high school. From reading your work, I realized that there would definitely be full days in which my son never got a hug or never got any...

Because of his schedule and temperament at 5:00AM. There's lots of factors involved. It's not neglect, but I was like, I'm going to need to make an effort. And if he ever sees this interview, he's going to laugh. But now every single day, I make sure at some point in the day I give him an uncomfortably long hug, where he's like, "Argh."

### **Ruth Whippman**

But I also think it becomes like a self-fulfilling prophecy, because I think boys are so unused to it in a way that they then like to stiffen up and, "Why are you touching me?"

I think it builds and builds and we have to normalize it. I think we have a hard time in our culture seeing boys as vulnerable. I think it will be really familiar to a lot of parents. I think that you're worried about your daughter going out late at night, but you're not worried about your son.

Even though boys are far more vulnerable to street violence than girls are. They're significantly more likely to be the victim of violence, for example. But most parents, or many parents are like, "Oh, protect your daughters, and your sons are tough and strong, and they're okay."

**[00:10:09]**

I think this inability to see boys as vulnerable means that it's really hard for them to see themselves as vulnerable, and to then respond to others in that way.

**Meagen Gibson**

Yeah. How could you name your own vulnerability if nobody's ever actually acknowledged it?

**Ruth Whippman**

Named it for you.

**Meagen Gibson**

If you don't see yourself as deserving of nurturing, then how can you ask for it or name it or any of those things?

**Ruth Whippman**

It's never been modeled to you. You just haven't received it. You don't know what you're missing. I think there's an added layer onto it, which is not just that they've never received it. It's also somehow seen as a little shameful.

Masculinity norms mean that vulnerability is shameful. Showing weakness is shameful. Needing care is shameful for boys. It's really hard for them to acknowledge that. I see that with my own sons all the time. No matter how much I try to correct for it, it's just coming from everywhere in the culture.

**Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely. I want to name... You made this distinction between neglect and under-nurturing. We're not talking about... Neglect is obviously overt abuse, whereas under-nurturing is more subtle and...

**Ruth Whippman**

It's very subtle. I think it's something that we all have subconscious biases about everything. About gender, about race, and we're all acting them out all the time.

So this obviously isn't like you're leaving your baby to cry for hours, or you're leaving them on a doorstep or you're not feeding them. Of course. And often, I think this shows up a lot with dads in particular, that often this under-nurture is not done from a place of neglect.

It's done from a place of love. It's from a place of like, this is what a boy needs to be successful in life. They need to toughen up, they need to be stronger, they need to man up. And so they... People, parents feel like they're giving boys what they need in order to thrive in our culture. Really, actually, it can be quite harmful for them.

**[00:12:08] Meagen Gibson**

We think we're giving them the tools that they need to deal with the circumstances that the world is going to hand them, when actually what they need to deal with all that hardness and judgment and all of that on the outside is deep nourishing.

**Ruth Whippman**

It's so true. I think once I started... And I think it becomes even more fraught in this particular moment, this particular moment in history, that we're talking about toxic masculinity, we're talking about boys being bad.

I think from my point of view, my response to all of that was to panic and think, "Oh, I need to be really harsh with my boys, and really discipline them and make sure that they don't do these terrible things and be really strict with them. And not to feel like I'm mollycoddling them or enabling them in some way."

And actually, once I started to think about this in terms of vulnerability rather than innate badness or aggression or destructiveness or whatever, it was much easier for me to reconcile all the different parts, I think. To just think this is what they need. More care, not less care.

**Meagen Gibson**

Yeah, absolutely. I keep thinking about this moment as I was reading your book. It was during COVID lockdowns and both my kids were home, schooling from home. We're lucky enough, we live in Florida and we have a pool.

And still to this day, my kids are in their teens. They cannot be in the pool alone, not because they can't swim beautifully. But because it always ends in someone trying to drown someone, right? It's infuriating.

And I remember I just burst into tears, and I looked at my husband and I was like, "I cannot be feminist enough to out-masculine... I can't do it. It's not possible for me to..."

And I've since changed in that, there's an acceptance of aggression. There's an acceptance of the physicality of what it means to be a boy or masculine or whatever. And also, when they're not doing that, my job is to nurture and care and connect and all those things.

**Ruth Whippman**

And even when they are doing that... This is the hard thing. And I have it so much. And I have this whole chapter in the book about how I go into parenting boys with all this hubris. I'm like, "Oh, I'm going to do better. I'm going to be this great feminist mom. I'm not going to be like, boys will be boys and let them get away with this."

**Meagen Gibson**

No Nerf guns... yeah.

**[00:14:30] Ruth Whippman**

My boys will be different. They won't be that. The only reason why boys behave like that is because people let them behave like that. I was blindsided by my three boys. They were all the things.

Not only did they love Nerf guns and every possible violent toy, violent show, and they were just wild. They were absolutely the most physical, wild... The play-fighting, which would just tip over...

**Meagen Gibson**

There's always an escalation.... It always escalates.

**Ruth Whippman**

It's like a bar fight. Do you know what I mean? It starts off and then it just escalates and escalates, and then suddenly someone's bleeding. Oh, God.

It's really hard because as a feminist and as a parent, I think we're encouraged in general in American parenting to believe we have all this control. It's your fault if you get it wrong.

So with *BoyMom*, I didn't want to write a parenting book which would just be like, "Do these three things and you'll get this outcome." Because I read so many of those and they just made me feel awful, because none of the things would work.

So I have some principles in there which are like, this is the way you can think about it. This is what the research says. This is what the culture is doing. This is what we can unpack from the way the culture is going. But I don't see it as this one for one that you have this complete control over how they're going to turn out in that way.

**Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely. Yeah, and you spoke to that.

**Ruth Whippman**

It's messy.

**Meagen Gibson**

I'm so glad that you spoke to it because I can really relate to that when I had one kid. I remember my narcissistic tendency, as you named it, to think that this child was a direct reflection of my parenting. And then I had the second, and I was like, oh, I have very little to do with any of this and have very little control over any of it.

### **[00:16:17] Ruth Whippman**

It's so true. And for good and for bad. It's like we have three kids. In some ways, they're very similar. In other ways, they're so different. Pretty much every trait that you can name as a well-brought-up trait.

At some times they've shown them, and at other times they haven't shown them. It doesn't mean that parenting doesn't matter. It's just this is really complicated, and they're human beings that are trying to assert themselves. Let's just be honest about the mess of all this.

### **Meagen Gibson**

You name at one point the centers of the brain that are responsible for organized thinking and impulse control and all of that. The same delay that exists in that right brain development in infants, exists in the prefrontal cortex part of the brain that's in control of all the self control and all of that.

And executive management and planning and things like that, all through the school years and major developmental... And it's like a two-year delay or something between boys and girls?

### **Ruth Whippman**

Two-year delay, yeah. It's between a one and two-year delay. So boys are just behind developmentally. I think that what the story has been, classically has just been...

Not classically, but recently there has been a gender essentialism, which is just like, well, they're immature. That's just what they're like, so let's give up. Let's just not bother. I think we'll just work around how limited they are.

But actually, I think it's just an opportunity to support them more, help them more, to do more. I think the boys will be boys is like, oh, let's just do less parenting and forget about it. I think it's more an invitation to do more and to see them in a slightly different way.

And I think sometimes there's this limiting language that we're using around boys at this moment. With girls, there's so much inspirational language. So you just wouldn't have... Even if there are gender differences that favor boys, you wouldn't be like, oh, well, girls can't throw, girls can't run, girls are physically behind.

You'd see it as... They talk about it in an inspirational way. It's like, girls can do anything. They just need to practice. The sky's the limit. The future is female.

Whereas with boys, it's like, boys can't sit still. Boys can't... They don't like reading. They don't like this. And I think there's got to be a way that we can be aware of some broad gender differences.

But I still believe that people can change, that we can be expansive, that we can offer opportunities, that we can talk about them in a way that's not incredibly limiting.



**[00:18:44] Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely. Yeah. In the example that you gave, I'm thinking about strength training in boys and girls. It's not that girls can't build muscles, it's that they might need different adaptation, different nutrition. We're going to support them more because that particular skill might be harder or more challenging for them physically.

It's the same thing with boys. Just because they might be a little bit behind or it might be developmentally more challenging, doesn't mean they don't still need the psychoeducation in this work.

**Ruth Whippman**

It's just like, oh, well, there's nothing we can do. Let's just give up. Same with interests. I think a lot of girls go through a princess phase, and nobody's saying, "Well, that's just what girls like. So let's just give them more princesses and nothing else ever."

Nobody's saying, "Well, it's biologically determined that that's what they're going to like, so let's just not even try anything else. And it would just be shameful to even introduce anything else to them."

It's like, let's try some different things. Let's offer something different... I think with boys, it's just like, well, that's what they like. That's all they like, and so therefore there's nothing we can do.

**Meagen Gibson**

You also describe the only way... And I found this to be true, that boys are socializing now is via video games, and that there's not... I think you said it's "no hellos, no goodbyes."

**Ruth Whippman**

Oh, yeah. No hi's, no byes, no hellos or something. Yeah, that was something that a boy said. Yeah, that has been a huge thing. I think there were lots of different things going on in there.

One, just on the face of it, just the data shows that screen time in the moment... We talk about it a lot, and in many ways, the conversation is focused on girls.

But actually this phenomenon of replacing in-person socializing with screen-based socializing is a much more significant problem for boys at the moment. Boys are spending around five hours more than girls on screens per week, and about, I think, a similar amount of time less hours socializing than girls. They're spending less time socializing in person with peers than girls of the same age are.

I think also it's partly because socializing in general, I think, is more fraught for boys than it is for girls. They haven't really been taught those skills of connection and intimacy and vulnerability and intimate friendships. It's not modeled to them.

I wrote a whole chapter on popular culture, and it's just in the stories they read and watch in the movies and the TV. Girls get modeled over and over again on how to have these intimate

friendships. All these stories about pairs of best friends and taking care of your friends, doing emotional labor, friendship dramas, nurturing...

**[00:21:26]**

And those stories are just so almost nonexistent for boys. You just don't see boys in those roles in books and movies and shows. So over and over again, it's not really modeled to boys and girls. I think it's pretty fraught in the real world now. It's just easier to slip into this screen-based social world at this moment.

**Meagen Gibson**

And spend a ton of time together, but not actually share anything real, right?

**Ruth Whippman**

Exactly. I was really surprised when I spoke to boys. I interviewed many boys, probably around 50 boys of teenagers and college-age kids. Different backgrounds, different geography, different whatever.

And I thought that they would just be like, oh, well, that's what we like. We don't want to have more in-person connections, or we don't want to share our vulnerable feelings.

And that is not what they were saying at all. Pretty much every single one of them was like, "I would love to have deeper, more supportive relationships with my friends, but I feel like my friends would laugh at me. I don't know how to go about it. I don't have the skills. I don't even know where I would start."

It's just culturally, socially, and just personally it was so difficult for them to get started with it, but they really craved it.

**Meagen Gibson**

Yeah. I'm so glad that you made that point because it's not like they enjoy the way that they relate to one another. They're craving depth and support and connection, but they just don't know how to do it.

**Ruth Whippman**

They don't know how to do it, and they would look to girls to provide it for them. I think we see that modeled. We see that, or many of us see that in adult relationships where so many of my female friends are like, "Oh, my God, I'm my male partner's entire social support system. I'm his only confidante. He doesn't talk about this stuff with his male friends."

This is something that starts in childhood. So many men are lonely now. They want more connection. It's a crisis, but they just don't know how to do it.

**[00:23:21] Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely. That leads to problems like depression, right? You were saying in the book that depression for men looks a lot different than it can look for women. What are some of the ways that it looks different?

**Ruth Whippman**

Well, so I think for men... Because they don't have this social permission to just be straightforwardly sad, and to express it as sadness and tell everyone that they're feeling depressed, that it can often come out in other ways.

More aggression, more irritability, substance use, alcoholism, violence, these kinds of things. Our outlets. We don't really give boys a very developed emotional repertoire to express these things, and we don't really give them the social permission. They feel they have to keep it inside.

You see this rage-filled, substance-abusing boy or man, and it doesn't look like, oh, sad, crying, whatever. But the problem is, and that often the statistics around depression can get really skewed. It looks like in the statistics that girls are more depressed than boys because they report it more often.

But a lot of that is just a feature of they're just not prepared to tell the person who calls up, that that's how they're feeling. Then it gets so late. Boys are much less likely to seek help for depression. They're much less likely to talk to someone, to talk to a teacher, to talk to a friend, to report it.

Then it's too late. So the male suicide rate is several times that of the female one. And it's a tragedy. It's a real tragedy.

**Meagen Gibson**

And so many of those behaviors that you were speaking of earlier... You said in the book that we address boys for behavior problems instead of giving them mental health support.

**Ruth Whippman**

It's so true. I mean, it's like we tend to view... I wrote in the book, boys as bad, not sad. And it's like right from the beginning, it becomes this compounding problem.

Even with little boys, it's like often they get funneled into these disciplinary systems in school or at home. We punish them and it looks behavioral when actually it's emotional.

So if we could treat these things as emotional problems and give them support and nurture, it's a better way to get them out of these things. But we tend to punish them and be harsher and harsher and harsher.

And then it makes them feel more alienated, more... Further and further from society, further and further from health-seeking, makes them feel ashamed and bad inside.

**[00:25:53] Meagen Gibson**

We're seeing a drawing of these folks to the political right. Why is that happening?

**Ruth Whippman**

Yeah, well, I think that the political left has not done a great job of articulating that patriarchy and these norms, masculinity norms, harm men. I think at this moment, we're more about...

And it's understandable why this has happened. But I think it's become this cultural divide where the left sees itself as broadly on the side of girls and women, and everything to do with boys and men is slightly right wing coded.

To empathize with men, it's almost seen as a betrayal of feminism or progressive values. They're the enemy, don't care about them, they're privileged, they have everything, time for them to shut up.

I think there's this narrative... They've got the old version of masculinity, which is be tough, be strong, suppress your emotions.

Now they've got these new voices from the left which are saying, "You're taking up too much space. Don't talk about your feelings. Your pain is not as valid as somebody else's pain. You're the privileged one. Everything's great for you. Be quiet."

So I think it's just different ways of shutting men down. Then along come these bad actors like the Andrew Tate, the masculinity influencers, the right who are saying... They have this very simple story.

They're like, "It's all women's fault. It's all feminism's fault. The reason why you're feeling terrible. I can restore you back to this place of manly whatever-ness." And it's really appealing. They feel lost, and somebody's not telling them they suck.

**Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely. You said something striking in the book, too, about how... There's a particular type of man who gets influenced into this incel behavior. If he's at the bottom of the hierarchy of men, the only person that he can be better than is women.

**Ruth Whippman**

Absolutely. I mean, it's this thing about hierarchical masculinity. There are successful men at the top. The alpha male, they call them, or the Chads. The incels call them Chads. These good-looking, strong, successful men who are really successful with women and girls.

Then there's what they call the beta males who are the slightly less successful men. The incels see themselves right at the bottom of the pile. In their eyes, they're short, they're unattractive, they can't get women, they can't get sex.

**[00:28:20]**

You're right, the only people beneath them on this scale are women, and it's just that they want to have somebody to oppress. Somebody to be better than. They feel so terrible about themselves.

But then the other thing that was really surprising to me was that, these incels online... I spent a lot of time interviewing incels and being on incel message boards, and their boards are a really weird mix of horrifying misogyny and racism and awful things. That's very real.

But they're also weirdly tender and loving and vulnerable with each other in a way that men generally aren't in real life. It was almost like they had just given up hope of achieving any status in traditional masculinity.

They were like, "We suck so much. We're so useless in the system that we're just going to give up."

Then they were like... It was almost freeing to them online. They were like, "Okay, well, considering we're never going to get anywhere, we might as well just be vulnerable with each other." In some ways, they were really tender and supportive with one another in a way that I was just not expecting at all.

### **Meagen Gibson**

It makes perfect sense. That's the only place where they don't have to over-explain themselves, where they're inherently understood and get empathy...

### **Ruth Whippman**

They've got nothing to prove. They don't have to prove how manly they are because they're like, "I've already..." There's this idea that masculinity is something that boys and men have to constantly prove and reprove. It's precarious. It's always going to slip away.

And these incels were just like, "Okay, we've lost out. We're never going to be that. We're never going to be masculine. We're never going to win in this system. So we might as well just give up and do the thing."

It was strange. I think it's this thing that if we don't give boys and men spaces to connect in real life, if we don't allow them that in better, more healthy places, then they will find it online.

### **Meagen Gibson**

How do we best help our boys and give them adequate role models and education in relationships and emotions?

### **Ruth Whippman**

It's a really tricky thing. When I think about this, I tend to split it up into three areas. So they're critical thinking, curiosity, and care and compassion.

**[00:30:38]**

So critical thinking, I think, is just like naming this problem and giving boys and us and everyone a vocabulary to talk about this and to understand the problem. Because I think we've done a great job with girls and women, in that that work is not done.

But in general, we know what's going on. We can name the problem. We know when something's sexist. We can call it out, we can name it. Even your average fifth-grade girl can usually tell when something's pretty sexist and sniff it out.

Whereas I think with boys, they just don't even really know the contours of the system. They don't know the way patriarchy harms them, and I think it's the same with adults.

I think a lot of people read this book... Me, myself, when I was researching this, so much of this was a surprise to me. I went into this thinking, "Oh, boys and men have everything. They're so privileged." And I just didn't realize how harmful this system was for them.

So I think the critical thinking, just to give a voice. A name. Pulling these problems out so it feels like something they can talk about, is one thing.

The curiosity piece, I think it's just approaching boys with the same curiosity about their experience that we would do with anyone else and not to shut them down. I think for feminist moms in particular, there's something about a boy saying, "Oh, things are terrible for boys these days."

That we're like, "No, it isn't." And then an hour long lecture about patriarchy and how things are terrible for women. I think boys feel very unheard at this moment. I think they feel a little bit gaslit. Is that a word? Gaslighted? Anyway, you know what I mean?

That people aren't really acknowledging that things are hard for them and telling them that they're so powerful and privileged, and they don't feel that way. It just does not chime with their experience.

So they stop trusting us. They're like... If we tell them everything is great for them and terrible for girls and women, it just doesn't chime with their actual lived experience. And so I think they just don't... They give up on us.

And so I think if we can really listen and be like, "What is life like for you?" And not try to reform them or judge them or try to make them better. We're not trying to use it with an agenda to try and make them into something else, but just like, "Who are you and what's your life like?"

And then the care and compassion piece. It's exactly what you were talking about, about just correcting. Boys are so starved of that emotional nurture by parents, by adults, by the culture, by everything they read and watch, by their friends.

They need it. They might be really brittle and seem like they don't want it. But we need to give it to them and to help them feel cared for as though... We're on their side, that we're advocating for them, that we're touching them, that we're giving them...

**[00:33:23]**

That we're talking to them about their feelings, we're listening to them, listening to their feelings, and giving them the same kind of nurture and connection that we would give a girl. Meeting them where they are and just trying to build the best relationship possible with them. The unique individual child that you have.

**Meagen Gibson**

It reminds me. My friend, Kristina Kuzmic wrote a book called *I Can Fix This* about her son's suicidal ideation, and he was in and out of therapies for substance abuse. She said toward the end of the book that she's just learned how to say, "Tell me what it's like to be you. Tell me what it feels like to be you."

**Ruth Whippman**

Absolutely. No agenda. Not trying to make him different, reform him. The boys I talked to felt so unheard from everywhere. There was the right wing tough guy saying, "Man up! Don't express your feelings."

There was the left wing progressive saying, "Shut up, your voice doesn't matter. You're taking up too much space. You're toxic, you're terrible."

Nobody was really interested. And there was all this under-nurture. They didn't have friends that they could talk to. They just needed people to listen to them in a really profound way.

**Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely. I always like to say when we're talking about child-raising and parenting and development that nobody requires you to be perfect.

**Ruth Whippman**

Absolutely. Oh, God. I mean, thank God, because none of us are, and I'm certainly not, and learning and growing all the time.

**Meagen Gibson**

Yeah, Absolutely. I know I get overwhelmed, and the... Burden is the wrong word. But the responsibility feels so huge that oftentimes I can find myself getting in a perfectionistic way of thinking.

**Ruth Whippman**

I think people... I do these talks and things and people are like, "What do I say to my son about this? What do I say to my son about porn? What do I say to my son about consent?"

**[00:35:22]**

And it's like, I don't know because I don't know your son and I don't know you. And it's like, your son will respond to you being your real authentic self, and showing up as the person that you are in connection with the person that he is. Not trying to follow a script or like... There's no script.

We're just humans. And I think teenagers can smell it a mile away if you're not being authentic. But just show up in relationship with that actual individual human in the best, most loving, most nurturing way you can.

**Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely. Ruth, how can people find out more about your book and your work?

**Ruth Whippman**

The book is called *BoyMom: Reimagining Boyhood in the Age of Impossible Masculinity*. You can buy it wherever you get books or get it from the library.

I have a Substack called [I Blame Society](#), which you can find on Substack under my name, Ruth Whippman. I'm on [Instagram](#) and on X, a little bit reluctantly. But yeah, find me online. My name is unusual. So if it looks like me, then it's me, usually.

**Meagen Gibson**

Two P's.. Ruth, thank you so much for being with us today.

**Ruth Whippman**

Thank you. It was such a pleasure.