

[Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / How To Dad in 2023: A Roundtable With Our Favorite Fathers

Hi guys, it's Barry with a really exciting announcement for you.

As listeners of the show will know, one of the reasons that this exists in the first place is to embody and promote honest, frank conversations and good faith debates, both of which feel increasingly rare in our polarized country.

That is why I'm so excited to announce that the Free Press, along with FIRE, the nation's leading defender of free speech rights, are hosting a live debate on a very sexy and contentious subject on Wednesday, September 13th at 7 p.m. at the historic Ace Theatre in downtown Los Angeles.

The proposition? The sexual revolution has failed.

Arguing for the proposition is co-host of the podcast Redscare, Anacachian, and author of the case against the sexual revolution, Louise Perry.

They're going to be facing off against musician and producer Grimes, and writer and co-host of the podcast A Special Place in Hell, Sarah Hader.

I'm going to be the moderator and I couldn't be more excited.

This is going to be an amazing night.

It's a chance to meet other people in the real world who also like thinking for themselves and who listen to this show.

You can get your tickets now by going to [thefp.com backslash debates](https://thefp.com/backslash/debates).

Again, that's [thefp.com slash debates](https://thefp.com/slash/debates).

I can't wait to meet some of you guys in person.

And now, here's the show.

I'm Eli Lake in for Barry Weiss, and this is honestly Happy Father's Day.

Before we get into today's episode, I wanted to share a few thoughts on my own recent experience of becoming a dad and losing my father.

Nearly two years ago, my queen gave birth to a curious, determined, beautiful, independent little baby, and we named her Nora.

It was a bittersweet summer.

As soon as I saw her, I knew I would do anything for this girl.

At the same time, I was filled with sadness.

My father, who was so eager to meet her, died suddenly, only five weeks before she was born.

He collapsed from a brain bleed on my birthday and died the next day in the hospital.

My father was a social genius.

He had a superpower to get strangers to like him and say just the right thing that they wanted to hear without coming off phony.

He could persuade waiters to offer us free dessert and car salesmen to offer an even lower price that the dealership was comfortable with.

In my high school and early college years, my relationship with my dad was really difficult.

As I imagine it is for many young men,

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I felt that he wanted to stifle me.
I felt constantly criticized.
My father would take out his own frustrations, at least it felt,
on me, and it all seemed unfair.
I imagine my adolescent self would want to remind me
to check my temper with my own child
so as not to repeat the mistakes of my father.
But if I could talk to that teenage version of myself,
I would ask him to have a little more empathy and sympathy.
My father was in a tough racket.
He sold expansive telephone systems
to big corporations, universities, newspapers,
and even a social genius like my father
couldn't overcome the recessions of the 1980s
when money was tight all around.
When my dad was looking for a job or wasn't doing well,
he wanted to blame someone,
even if there was no one really to blame.
And that's a very human instinct I can relate.
And I know that when he crossed a line,
he was sorry because he would tell me.
I never doubted that my father loved me,
even though there were times when I felt
that I was unfairly criticized by him.
Well, my daughter, Nora, is way too young
to have done anything in her life so far.
She's only a toddler to revoke anger from me.
Everything she does seems to delight me.
But I imagine in the coming years, at some point,
Nora will say or do something that will set me off.
It's inevitable.
All children, at some point,
anger or disappoint their parents.
So I anticipate that I might lose my temper with Nora,
and she might lose her temper with me.
So instead of remembering my father's yelling
and criticism as a kind of cautionary tale,
I choose to remember how he would say he was sorry,
and how he would tell me that he loved me unconditionally.
How even when our family struggled,
my father made all of us feel that eventually we would be all right.
I imagine I'm not the only dad who is sitting here today,
reflecting on their own experiences in fatherhood

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and wondering what kind of dad they will be going forward,
and what kind of father their dad was to them.

Well, for this episode, I invited three dads
who have thought a lot about fatherhood,

and being a dad in this modern world,

Richard Reeves, Ryan Holiday, and Ian Rowe.

Richard is a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution

and the author of the book of Boys and Men

about why boys and men are falling behind

in so many aspects of American life.

Ryan is a writer, a bookstore owner,

daily stoic podcast host,

as well as the Daily Dad podcast.

Ian is a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute

where he works on issues surrounding education

and upward mobility, family formation, and adoption.

He's also the chairman of the board

of the Spence Chapin Adoption Organization.

We talk about a lot of things today,

marriage, and if it matters anymore.

What's up with toxic masculinity?

Adoption, if the rules and traditions of gender

are hurting today's dads,

or if they offer wisdom we need to re-embrace?

And much, much more.

Stay with us.

We'll be right back.

Hi, honestly listeners.

I'm here to tell you about

an alternative investing platform called Masterworks.

I know investing in finance can be overwhelming,

especially given our economic climate.

But there's one thing that will never go in the red,

and that is a painting from Picasso's Blue Period.

Masterworks is an exclusive community

that invests in blue chip art.

They buy a piece of art,

and then they file that work with the SEC.

It's almost like filing for an IPO.

You buy a share representing an investment in the art.

Then Masterworks holds the piece for three to 10 years,

and then when they sell it,

you get a prorated portion of the profit's minus fees.

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Masterworks has sold \$45 million worth of art to date, from artists like Andy Warhol, Banksy, and Monet.

Over 700,000 investors are using Masterworks to get in on the art market.

So go to masterworks.com slash honestly for priority access.

That's masterworks.com slash honestly.

You can also find important Regulation A disclosures at masterworks.com slash CD.

Richard, Ryan, and Ian, welcome to Honestly.

Thank you.

Yeah, thank you.

Thank you.

Great to be here.

So to start, I just want to say happy Father's Day to everyone.

And before we get into it,

I would really love to hear from each of you and tell us a bit about your own families, how many kids you have, how old they are.

So let's start with you, Richard.

And then we'll go around the room.

Sure.

So pleasure to be here and happy Father's Day to you and everyone listening.

I have three sons.

They are aged now 27, 22, and 21.

You know, it changes all the time.

But and that's from two marriages.

I think it's important to put that on the table that my first son was from my first marriage and my second and third sons from my second marriage.

Ryan.

Yeah, I've got two boys.

The oldest is six going on seven and the youngest just turned four.

And I live out in rural Texas where we are doing what we do.

The last couple of years have been fun as any parent with young kids can tell you getting through the pandemic.

But we made it and here we are.

And Ian.

Hello, guys.

My name is Ian Rowe.

And I am a married father of two children,

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one 13-year-old girl and one 11-year-old boy.

You didn't share that I'm also running a new high school in the Bronx.

So I feel like I'm the parent of a couple of hundred of more kids that I obviously care deeply about.

My own family growing up, my parents were married for 48 years before my dad passed away and my mom recently passed away.

So I'm a big believer in married fatherhood.

And I should say that I have a beautiful toddler.

Her name is Nora and she turns two years old in August.

Okay.

So let's get into it.

Ryan, on your blog, the best parenting advice I've ever gotten you right, there's a difference between having a kid and being a parent.

So what is that difference?

And how and why is that difference uniquely important for dads?

Yeah.

I mean, obviously having kids is something biological or in other cases, it's a legal decision that one makes.

But I do think the decision to actually try at this thing, to do more than what one is required to do, to stay on the right side of child protective services, to make parenting be central to your life.

I think especially for men to go like, this is a thing that I am going to treat as seriously and make as central to my identity as the other things that I do that for in my life.

You know, your profession, your status, et cetera, is really, really important.

And I see this distinction even in people that I know that do a pretty good job of being parents.

The decision to say defaulting that the time that you have belongs to your family as opposed to the family getting the crumbs that are left over after you have checked off or fulfilled every other dream or interest or demand for your time is not just an essential decision if we want to have a good country and a good world. It's also, I think, an immensely fulfilling and meaningful decision to make as an individual.

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I haven't met anyone that makes that decision that goes, you know, I really blew it.
I spent too much time making my family my priority in life.
Okay, but what if you're in a fantasy football league?
Joking.
Okay, anyway, Ryan, that was a great answer.
I think it gets us into a bigger question here, which is, I want to know, maybe we'll start with Ian here.
What do you think the role of the modern dad in 2023 really is?
I mean, in some ways, we're way beyond father's no best and like the sort of traditional mid-20th century version of the dad, but we haven't had that moment where we sort of reimaged what fatherhood was.
It sort of strikes me that we might be in a kind of liminal phase, if you will, of fatherhood in America.
But I would love to hear what you think about that.
So let's start with Ian.
Well, the role of an effective dad today, I'm not sure if it really that much differs from what an effective dad has been for hundreds of years.
Your question to Ryan reminds me of a speech President Barack Obama gave years ago, you know, when he still had the courage to actually be talking about the importance of marriage and fatherhood, and he said...
We need families to raise our children.
We need fathers to recognize that responsibility doesn't just end at conception.
That doesn't just make you a father.
What makes you a man is not the ability to have a child.
Any fool can have a child.
That doesn't make you a father.
It's the courage to raise a child that makes you a father.
And he goes on to talk about the importance of marriage and what a father, both in deed and principle and behavior, does for his children and his wife when that is the situation that exists.
So in terms of what is the role of the modern day father, I think it is still to be a provider, which doesn't negate the need for a spouse to also provide.
It's the role to model behaviors, to pass on virtues of kindness and courage and love.
The role of the present day father is to express affection for your spouse in front of your children, to demonstrate that the most important thing that a father can do for their children is to first love their spouse in a way that demonstrates a long-term loving relationship is how you're modeling for your children what they should aspire to achieve in their own lives.
Richard, the last time that you were on the Honestly podcast, you said that men don't know what it looks like to be a successful father.

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And since it's no longer synonymous with just being the breadwinner,

I want to ask you, so what happened to fatherhood, Richard?

I'd love to hear you on that.

Yeah, I think a key point here is the simple role of what it meant, like father knows best, wait till your father gets home, and the father is breadwinner.

The simplicity of the role has certainly gone away.

It's a more complex role today, and that's the natural and inevitable result of the fundamental shift in economic relations between women and men.

I think it's central to this conversation to note that 40% of breadwinners are now women, in a third of married couples, the wife is the main breadwinner, and this just huge increase is on recent decades ago.

40% of women earn more than the typical man today, and that was only 13% in 1979.

And so that recasting of the economic relationship between men and women has necessarily brought about a reckoning in some ways.

So what does it mean to be a dad?

So my own dad did lots of things, but his core responsibility was as breadwinner.

He actually lost his job when I was in my teens, and he still put on a shirt every day to go and type out resumes and try and get another job.

And I asked him, why are you still shaving and putting a shirt on?

And he said, because I still have a job, it's to get another job to look after you.

And that speaks to Ian's point about that traditional role.

But the issue today is that men can no longer claim any kind of monopoly of that.

And so I think what that means is the relationship between fathers is no less important today than it was before, but it's more direct.

It used to be more of an indirect relationship between fathers and children, mediated through the mom.

So husband and father used to be almost synonymous.

And you know, there's org charts where you get dotted lines.

You know, you get straight lines and dotted lines.

There was almost a dotted line from dad to kid, right?

And what that meant was there was a kind of unit there where the relationship between the father and children was to some extent mediated through and dependent on his relationship with the mother.

Well, we live in a world today where that's just much less true and for largely good reasons.

And so we need more direct fatherhood.

We need fathers providing care, time, love, energy, which by the way, they are.

And the good news here is that most dads do feel the way that it sounds like we all do on this call.

I was looking at some data the other day and it finds that 24% of fathers say that being a father is the most important element of their identity.

And another 61% say it's one of the most important.

And those numbers are pretty close to those for mothers.

And so dads really care about being dads.

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And it turns out that dads do bring something that's complementary to overlapping with, but also distinct from the role of mothers.

So it's incredibly important, especially given that we're doing this for fathers day, to just make the point that dads matter period and that that doesn't in any way require them to be married or even a relationship with the mother, even if that's ideal.

And so I just think being a dad now is just less about checks and more about time.

All right.

Ryan, what do you think of that?

No, I agree.

I was going to bring up this sort of concept that I've heard thrown around quite a bit, this idea that I think it's much harder to get away with as a man in a sort of a co-equal sort of modern relationship these days, which is sort of idea of weaponized incompetence.

Richard was talking about sort of being intermediated by the mother.

The idea being, hey, if dad doesn't think about it, if dad isn't good at it, if dad feels self-conscious because of various gender rules, have no fear because mom will be there to catch that or to handle that or to take care of that.

And so I think if you look at both modern marriage and modern parenting, where two spouses are actually both having to be parents, it demands a lot more from the man in a good way.

You can't get away with just assuming that things will get taken care of if he doesn't do them, that the rules have to be split, that there's an expectation.

So the expectations have been raised, which is fantastic.

I think maybe what Les talked about is the gains that come along with that.

When you think of the old system, I think of my father's role around the house, but I think further back generations removed where the father was the dotted line, as opposed to the direct line had no sort of direct responsibilities as far as day-to-day caregiving.

Many of the things that I do in that regard with my kids, whether it's getting them up in the morning, getting them dressed, taking them for a walk, making sure they eat, putting one or both of them down to bed, these are some of the most rewarding and wonderful experiences I get on this earth period. And I do sometimes take a minute and think about how many men for how many generations were deprived of that, either because they didn't think they could do it, they were not expected to do it, or just somebody did it for them.

I think where this gets really interesting is when we unpack the idea of parenthood from fatherhood.

And I think that because of this strong division of labor that we've had historically, the idea of how do we parent has almost been synonymous with the idea of motherhood and parenthood have been very closely aligned, and fatherhood has been this slightly distant institution.

And the evidence that I see suggests that most of what moms and dads do is something that they can both do equally well.

So it's just good parenting.

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Ryan, the stuff you were just saying now, I don't get the sense you're claiming that you're doing that any better than your partner or wife is, right?

You're just like, someone has to...

Probably not.

Right.

No, but also it's very important what you said about this weaponized incompetency.

You're not doing any worse either, right?

It's just...

But then what's interesting, and I'm quoting here some work from David Eggebin,

a sociologist, is that about a fifth of the thing parents do,

moms and dads, looks to be kind of distinctly related to being a mom or a dad.

And that's much more interesting and controversial, of course.

It's very important that we accept that we just acknowledge that most of it's just about being a parent, right?

Parenthood is what matters here.

And dads are as important as good parents as moms and vice versa.

But it gets more interesting when you start to think about, well, what are the ways in which we might have something different to add?

There's a difference, like fatherhood is not exactly the same as motherhood.

And of course, there's a much more difficult question to unpack,

but I'm reasonably convinced by the evidence.

There are some ways in which dads and moms do bring something different to the party, and that shouldn't be a source of, in my view, crisis.

It should be a source of celebration as long as we don't then say that it's like 100% that, right?

So it's mostly overlapping, but it's kind of nice to feel as a dad, I think, right?

There are some things that I can do that are a little bit more distinct, maybe.

Ian, do you want to weigh in on this, Ian?

Yeah, yeah.

And I think those functions differ over the lifespan of the child.

So I have run pre-K elementary and middle schools and now running high schools.

And I can tell you there is a very distinct role.

Again, we're talking in generalities here, of course, there are always exceptions.

But the role that moms play in the very early years pre-K elementary that I have clearly observed is far more intense, engaged, nurturing than the role, and certainly relative to typically fathers.

But as the students age, especially in high school, especially for boys, oh my gosh, the role of fathers, absolutely crucial.

So I think we should just put it in the context of both are needed, potentially needed at different times for different reasons.

But it's still fundamentally a partnership, which is one of the reasons I push back on the idea of fatherhood being an institution independent of marriage.

I know we're going to talk about that.

But these dual roles that mothers and fathers typically play can't be denied over the course

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of the child's lifespan.

All right.

Well, I want to dive a little bit deeper into a debate about whether or not strengthening fatherhood is connected to or even dependent on renewing the institution of marriage in America. 40% of kids are born outside of marriage today.

Richard, you said that unmarried fathers are benched as a result.

Does benching our fathers affect their sense of purpose as fathers, as men or both?

I want to start with Richard, and then I want to move on to Ian.

Yes.

I think it's very important here to be clear about the descriptions, which you just put some of the data on the table.

Of course, it's much higher rates for certain groups.

So Black kids, for example, have higher rates.

But the share of kids born outside of marriage, as you say, is approaching half.

Actually, only a minority of kids will be with their biological parents or throughout their childhood.

So we're just in a new era.

We're in a new world now, partly because of the change in the economic relationships that we've already mentioned between women and men.

And so I think it's terribly important to say, number one, fathers matter distinct from mothers and complementary to mothers.

And that's not always a message that goes down well, if you like, more on the progressive left side.

But it's also, I think, essential to say that fathers matter whether or not they are in a relationship with the mother.

That is not the same thing as saying that it isn't easier, and I've done it both ways, to raise a child when you're co-resident with the mother.

But I'm really fearful that the conservative message, which is basically to dads who aren't married to the mother, you've already failed.

They're essentially getting a kind of failing grade right out of the gate.

We shouldn't then be surprised if they are, actually, are less attached to their kids, if they're not as in their lives.

And so I feel that we're stuck, honestly, between the old model, where it's pretty clear, like, moms and dads live together, and that was how you're a father, to a world now where, because we haven't generated a really positive model of fatherhood, which is not dependent on marriage or the mother, a lot of fathers, as you say, as a result, are bent, not just culturally, but also by policy.

And that's a tragedy.

One of the statistics I came across when I was doing my own work that really stopped me in my tracks is that within six years of their parents breaking up, about a third of kids don't see their dad again.

We can't think that's okay, but I don't think the solution to that is to somehow find, magically find the way in which we can keep parents together,

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because the glue that held them together before was non-trivially economic. And so instead, we've got to move forward to a model of fatherhood that is independent, of the institution of marriage, which is in no way to be against marriage, and we've already talked about, we're all married, et cetera, and it is easier. But I do, I really fear that the kind of conservative message, and Ian and I have already debated this before, which is like, they're basically saying dads matter when they're husbands, and to be a good father, you have to be a good husband. And some people on the other side of the argument saying, yeah, do dads really matter? And most of us are in the middle just trying to do the best we can. All right, Ian, I would love to hear your response. Sure, sure. And again, running schools is an interesting thing, because most of these children that are in our schools are children of single parents. And so deal a lot with unmarried fathers, and very much are not that you're benched. We need you more than ever, even if you're not married. So I think there, we have to deal with reality. I mean, the non-marital birth rate in the district in which I run my schools is 84%. So you have to deal with the reality of how do you get more men, in particular, unmarried men, to be very engaged with their children. The challenge is, what's the incentive? What have we learned throughout history as the most effective mechanism to actually get fathers to be engaged? And that's where perhaps we differ, that are there artificial interventions that we can think of, like paid leave and other interventions that might have some incremental benefit, perhaps. But I think we all know that the greatest incentive for a father to be an effective father is the first connection that they make with the mother of their children. And that's typically through marriage, because unfortunately, this isn't a hypothetical. Richard just cited just one piece of data on the six years. But not only are men not connected to the children that they have fathered outside of marriage, within a few years, because of multiple partner fertility, they may have gone on and fathered another child and then another child. And so the quote, unquote, lived experience, we've observed the world in which fatherhood is divorced from marriage. And unfortunately, the outcomes aren't good. So again, we have to deal with reality, but we can't just magically believe we can overturn what typically happens when men father children outside of marriage. The data is overwhelming that within a few years, they're literally disconnected from their own children and may have started that cycle with another child. Well, they might. I mean, I think that the data on multi-partner fertility suggests that that's true of some, but it's not, we shouldn't overstate how many men are going on and having many more children.

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I don't have the thinkers to hand, but I was surprised that it was lower than I'd been led to believe by some of the commentaries on this.

But I guess my fear about this Ian, and I'd love to hear what Eli and Ryan think of this is, it's a bit of a vicious circle.

The danger is your argument, something of a self-fulfilling prophecy rather, which is that we're telling fathers, look, you have to be married to be doing the job well. And then when they're not married, we wonder why they don't feel like they're doing the job very well and get more detached from their kids.

And I agree that over the last, I don't know, couple of hundred years or something, the evidence about marriage and fatherhood is, as Ian suggests, not without its problems, of course, and it was based on a fundamental economic asymmetry between men and women.

But we're in the early days of figuring this out.

And if you take a longer span of history, of course, in tribes and clans and in kin groups, and so on, fatherhood has had a much more capacious model than the one we think of as the quotes traditional family, which is really post-war, right?

I think you'd agree with that, Ian.

If you go back further in history, it was a much more extended family.

It's much less around this kind of binary between mothers and fathers.

So there's lots of different ways to father across human history,

I guess is what I'm saying.

And that we shouldn't hang our hat only on the nuclear family married model, especially when what I see in the data is that it is going anyway.

And so we might as well, as you say, we have to be realistic and work with the world as it is, rather than the world as we wish it to be.

You know, it's interesting.

I think we do see the world in a similar way after the act of fathering and separation has occurred, right?

And it's difficult.

You can't sort of unscramble the egg, which is why I wish we could all spend more time on how do we avoid these issues in the first place?

What is it that we need to do with the rising generation of young men and women so that as they're starting to make their decisions that they enter young adulthood, they're having relationships, they're making decisions around having children, that the calculus that we're hoping that they'll sort of figure out after the fact, they figure out before the fact, and that they make decisions that they can date, they can have relationships, all these things.

But the decision to have children is one that we want to create a transformation regarding.

So I wish that that were more of an area where we could lock hands on, because I think we both agree that you got to deal with the real world after the fact.

But too many young people, particularly, you know, young people 24 and under, you know, the nonmarital birth rate of women 24 and under is, you know, 71 percent.

The numbers are staggering.

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How do we get that group of young people to think differently about how they form their families in the first place?

You know, Ian, I just wanted to ask maybe kind of a step back question, which is that when you have a failing marriage that sometimes the best thing to do is to have a separation, and obviously you can still be a father in that.

Of course.

OK, I just want to make sure, because there was a stigma for a long time.

I mean, Nelson Rockefeller was shunned by some of his fellow Republicans because he deigned to have a divorce, and we no longer live in that kind of America.

And I don't think we're ever going to go back.

No, no, no, of course.

I mean, and maybe this sometimes gets lost in these arguments.

But if anyone's, again, being a pragmatic human being that lives in the real world, you know, not all marriages work.

And I say this all the time that, again, I have children in my schools who are, you know, children of single parents who will crawl through broken glass for their kids and do everything to make that life great for their kid.

And I've also had kids who are, you know, raised and married to parent households that are completely dysfunctional and things don't work out.

But overall, the data, it's just undeniable.

But you can't then say, if you're in a domestic violence situation, you're going to be shunned for escaping it.

Of course not.

After the break, adoption, toxic masculinity, and if gender norms impact fatherhood, stay with us.

All right.

I want to move on to the topic of adoption.

And I want to go back to Ian here.

You've done a lot of work with adoption organizations.

So why don't you just tell me a little bit now about your history with this work and why adoption is something that you care so deeply about?

Years ago, David from wrote an article in The Atlantic, which talked about the sort of order of decision making of what occurred when a young woman had an unplanned or unwanted pregnancy.

And the basic order of decision making that now, of course,

I'm going to have to make sure I get this right.

But there were four choices back in the 40s, 50s, and 60s.

Basically, the first choice was marriage, you know, the shotgun marriage, then adoption, then single parenthood, and then abortion.

That was the order of decision making if a young woman had an unwanted or unplanned pregnancy.

Well, fast forward, you know, 40, 50 years to present day, currently, the sort of order of decision making now is literally almost exactly reversed, where single parenthood is now the first option, maybe abortion,

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adoption, then marriage.

Okay. Like literally, it's almost exactly flipped.

And so we can all talk about why there have been shifts in marriage as a choice.

But it's interesting that adoption has just literally just fallen out as a culturally acceptable choice of how to form strong families for vulnerable children.

You know, I am Chairman of the Board of Spence Chapinus, which is one of the premier adoption agencies in the country.

We formed 30,000 families over the course of our 100 years for vulnerable children, starting in early 1900s in New York City when literally children were being left on the street.

We were pioneers in interracial adoption in the 50s and 60s, so Black children could be accepted into loving families versus language and foster care or other kinds of adverse settings. So I'm a big believer that children most desperately and from the earliest possible time are raised in loving families that have made a deliberate choice to have a family.

And in today's world, a lot of young women, like those young women 24 and under, adoption is not even on the radar. And the whole nature of adoption has shifted from clothes or the baby scoop era where young women were sent away in shame. All of that has literally been eliminated. Now there's a much more empowering environment where a young woman can make a choice.

I mean, she can literally choose the parents and in many cases build an ongoing relationship.

And I just think that as another empowering alternative to create strong families for children needs to be on the table. Well, I want to follow up now with Ryan,

because on your podcast, The Daily Dad, you talked about the role that adoption played in forming the five good emperors of Rome. I'm a nerd for this stuff. So I love it. And maybe you could just tell us how adoption was a key part of the ancient Roman government. And what might that tell us in terms of lessons about the importance of adoptive fathers today and their unique opportunity to impact their children? Yeah, thanks. It is interesting. There's basically

four emperors in a row who don't have a male heir, which sets up this unique succession plan in the Roman Empire where the emperor has to select who's going to take his place. And this culminates ultimately in the ascension of Marcus Aurelius. The emperor Hadrian, probably gay, does not have a son. And so he wants to adopt a young Marcus Aurelius. He's too young. So Hadrian adopts an older man named Antoninus Pius, who had had children and they had not survived to adulthood. So Antoninus Pius becomes emperor, who in turn adopts Marcus Aurelius, who becomes the sort of penultimate philosopher king. The irony, the end of the five good emperors, is that Marcus Aurelius has several sons. None of them survived to adulthood except Commodus, Joaquin Phoenix, and the movie gladiator, who turns out to be the worst of the possible options. They see uniquely bad. Is Marcus Aurelius a bad father? Does the trauma of being raised in a family where you lose all your brothers contributed to it? We don't know. But yes, in the Roman Empire, there is a much more socially accepted form of adoption. Often, in many cases, families that have kids, the oldest son, or the firstborn son, would inherit everything. And so the younger sons would often get adopted. This famously intersects with Christianity. Seneca's brother, known as Gaio in the Bible, who lets St. Paul go free. The reason he's not Seneca in the Bible is because he's adopted by a man named

Gaio and takes his name. So there was a more common form of adoption then. I don't know exactly

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what

analog this presents to us today, but I do think the Marcus Aurelius Antonina story, as we celebrate Father's Day here, is an important one to celebrate the importance of stepfathers, who in this discussion we're having, often sort of get the short shift. I do think it is such a wonderful, beautiful thing when someone steps up and does the very difficult role of being a father for someone who is not their biological kid. I've always found that to be a beautiful moving thing to witness. And for mothers too, of course. Can I just say one thing quickly on this? Absolutely. Yeah, for sure. The first thing to say is that anybody who fosters or adopts children, I think, deserves a technical label of angel, in my view. Just extraordinary grace and giving of people. But it's also relevant to this whole conversation about parenting and fatherhood because it's really striking that the outcomes for adopted kids on almost every measure are at least as good and usually better than their comparison in non-adoptive families. And it's certainly true in the UK and it's true in the US. And so what's going on there, I think, is that we're getting what Ian's calling for, which is intentional, chosen, responsible parenting. And it's even more true for same-sex couples who adopt. And so the key message from all of this is that people who choose to embrace and become a parent, not rather than just have a kid, which I think is where Ryan started us off, the evidence on outcomes for adopted kids shows us that that's what really matters most is this kind of deliberate decision to become a parent, even if it's an unusual way. And the other thing is that even if they're not your own kids, I really loved what Ryan said about stepfathers, but I'd broaden it to social fathers. One of the most stroking findings in recent social science is the work from Raj Chetty finding that black boys in neighborhoods where there were lots of black fathers and didn't have to be married, but they were an intact family. So that's good news for Ian's argument, but they weren't necessarily married. The boys did better even if their own father wasn't present. So being in a neighborhood with lots of dads around is good, even if your own dad's not around. So I think we need to think of fatherhood outside of the family in a much more community way. Well, I actually kind of want to pick up on that, because I think our next topic, which is this issue of masculinity and fatherhood, really ties well into that point. It seems that we're really at a crossroads. It seems like the old definitions for what being masculine meant don't necessarily apply, but at the same time, there seem to be some folks who will say that masculinity itself is kind of a toxic concept that we should probably repress. My sense is that it's probably in the middle and more nuanced, but I would really like to start again with you, Richard, on this question. How do you approach being a father and a male role model in an age stripped of all these other kinds of conventions? So Richard, what do you say to that? Well, I'll be really honest and say it's been a real struggle for me, and it's something that in my own journey as a father, it's taken me quite a while to adopt an identity as a father. And the reason for that was because in this era of gender equality, I made the mistake of thinking that basically, I'll say it more crudely perhaps than I should, but that fathers too often treated ourselves as defective mothers. We're basically malfunctioning women, especially when it comes to raising kids. And it took me a long time to shed the idea that unless I was doing everything exactly the same way as the mother of my children, I was getting it wrong. And I could actually sometimes do it my own way. And I think that's because of this sense that we're trying to get away from this old quotes patriarchal model of the father and into this new world. But along the way, we sort of forgot we're still men, we're still fathers. And there is a

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distinctly masculine way of being a parent that's complementary to an overlapping without being a mother. I knew I wasn't the kind of father my own father was, fantastic and wonderful though he was,

which was primarily a breadwinner. But I'm also not a mother. And I think there's a lot of men in this position now who are trapped a little bit, that we know we need to be different, but we also know that we're not mothers. And we don't yet have a very good new script for that. And so I honestly think a lot of us are improvising and with mixed results as you'd expect, but that's a good thing. We're in a very difficult period, but let's keep improvising. Let's keep figuring this out. Let's keep leaning into it and taking joy in it, but also accepting the fact that, yeah, it's quite difficult time to figure out this whole equation right now.

I think that's well said, Richard, because just as it's hard to be a father, let's say, if you didn't have a father, right, then there are those of us who did have fathers, but it's hard to have an emotional range that parenting demands today. I think for good reason. I think it's what kids need. But it's hard to have, demonstrate, maintain, access an emotional range that you did not see modeled, that you did not experience. It's hard to give what you didn't get. And so I think this is obviously an easier problem than a child of an absentee father trying to be a present father. But it is, if we think about what the world is asking of your modern 21st century father, it is asking you to do things and to be a thing that you may well still be learning how to do yourself.

Yeah. This area, I think, especially again for the rising generation,

it's enormously complex because where there used to be certainty, whether we liked or not, there was certainty about what the roles of a father, mother, man, woman are were.

Now there's just this malleability where nothing is certain. I mean, even some of you may have seen the cover of Glamour Magazine UK has a photograph of Logan Brown, who on the cover, this person is

pregnant. And it turns out Logan Brown is a transgender man who's biologically female, who unexpectedly became pregnant. But now this transgender man, Logan Brown, is being celebrated

as a transgender man who's pregnant. And I can go down the line of what young people are experiencing

right now around what it means to be a boy, a girl, are there any differences at all? So again, I feel like those of us who are talking about these roles, I think have to step up more and say there's got to be some guardrails that we're providing for young people. Otherwise, who knows what it

means to be a man? Who knows what it means to be a woman? And I think we're abandoning kids right

now in a way that's just not healthy. I would push back on that. I'm not saying that that isn't disorienting or a little strange and certainly an edge case, but sort of an edge case in popular culture. I guess what I was trying to get at that I think people could use more help on and certainly more common is like my wife and I were talking about this the other day. We sort of lost our temper at her son, but it wasn't anything he was doing is that we were stressed. We were trying to make it to the airport. And so the experience of deciding to go, hey, we're going to sit our kids down and apologize to go like here. Look, we lost our temper because of this reason. We're aware of

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why we were behaving for the like and to sit down and have a conversation with our kids and awareness of our emotions and taking responsibility for them, which we think, you know, they should

have. But to also have the ability to step back and go, I can't recall my parents ever apologizing to me for any reason under any circumstances. I think that is a much more common disorientation or struggle of parenting that we're not talking about as a society because we're sort of caught up in these culture war edge cases that are not actually affecting that many people. Well, I agree with that.

And we should be encouraging that. I mean, if we could be as a society talking about how to become good parents, period, regardless of fathers or mothers, but it seems though that there is a broader obsession with tearing down these institutions or at least filling the narrative with what you're calling the edge cases. I'm with you, but how do we stop these larger narratives from getting in the way of more rational conversations about marriage, fatherhood, motherhood, and parenthood? Ian, if I could press just for a second there,

I mean, I understand that it's disorienting, but I mean, it's a big world. I mean, is it possible that there are going to be people who are going to have very untraditional gender roles and they're going to have very untraditional families? Do you really think that's going to have some sort of effect on the broader culture of how people understand what masculinity is or what a father is? You know, I mean, it seems to me like it's a trend in journalism. There's certainly an element of the left that loves to sort of celebrate this stuff. But I don't know, I just don't think that they're going to have much success in getting people to stop saying mother or father or things like that. Well, it's interesting that you say that. So another one of my roles is that I'm, you know, elected to the school board of my own hometown in New York. And we get a lot of guidance

from New York state, and New York is not alone in this, but there is an increasing focus on essentially blurring the lines between male and female. I mean, this is out of an assignment that we just received, the gender binary is oppressive to anyone that does not conform to dominant societal gender norms. And let's have a discussion about it. So what you're saying, no, no, I'm genuinely asking the question. I think that the radical transgender movement are Don Quixote. I think they're just tilting at windmills and they're never, it's never going to work just because we are born with parts and it's natural to understand that sex is related to gender. And there will be some people who don't agree with that. But I don't think that there is a danger for this becoming a new norm. Can I weigh in here? I just, yeah, absolutely. I sort of, I can feel it playing out even in this conversation, which is this is the dynamic of a classic culture war issue, isn't it? That each side just sort of takes the exceptions, imagines that they're much more common than they really are, and then freaks out and overreacts the

other way. And so each side polarizes the other. And around this whole issue of masculinity, femininity,

gender identity, it's great that there's more fluidity and more choice, but we can have exceptions to a rule and neither dishonor the exception nor ignore the rule. So most people are still going to define themselves in line with masculinity, femininity, fathers, mothers, etc. And the fact that some people won't, and there's always been people who haven't, and actually it sounds like

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we have more historical knowledge on this call than I've got, without in any way destroying the norm. And so that's, I find this debate very frustrating that one side seems to think that in order to have full human dignity to the people who don't conform to the norm or to the rule, we have to abolish the rule or the norm. And the other people who say the rule and the norm are determinative. And somewhere in between, the crazy people on one side saying your gender and sex are fixed and determinative and decide everything about your life, and it's the most important thing about you. And the people saying there's no such thing, are the vast majority of ordinary people. And the danger is that we're kind of losing that sense of just an honest conversation, like my parents raised me in a traditional family, they're relatively traditional, they had gay friends, my mum worked with a trans person for a while, there was no sense that because of that, that in some way the culture was leading us in that direction, it was just part of the diversity of life. And I really fear that we're all kind of losing just a little bit of comfort in our own skin, because everything's starting to feel existential. And I do think here in that kind of picking like one example, the way you just did, it's not that it's not true, it's just that I'd be really cautious not to overweight how much it actually matters in the lives of our kids. You've got to tell you, my three sons all in their 20s figuring out their relationships, their jobs, their careers, they're not worried about who's on the cover of UK Glamour magazine. So I want to go now to Ryan, because on Joe Rogan's great show, you said that you moved to Texas because you would like to have normal kids. What does that even mean nowadays? What makes

a normal kid? And how do you raise one? Yeah, I certainly wasn't meaning a normal kid, you know, removed from sort of culture war excesses on the coast so much as I wanted to live somewhere that was affordable. I wanted to live somewhere where not everyone worked in media or technology. I picked my kids up from their grandparents' house or from school and they come to the bookstore that I own where they sometimes work behind the counter or help me clean up or just hang out on my couch while I'm working and we can walk across the street to a diner. It's a slightly older school way of life, not in the political sense. I'm actually not a particular big fan of the politics in Texas. I retain my affinity for how I grew up in California and talking about things like acceptance and tolerance and, you know, some of these things. But I do think it is hard to raise kids in a city that is very unaffordable in a city where we tried to set up a life in which our kids spend a lot of time outside, not a lot of time in the car, just sort of doing, you know, we live on a dirt road, just that kind of life. That's what we chose. And perhaps that's a little bit of a reaction against our specific peers and the sort of lifestyles that they lead, but it's been a wonderful and rewarding set of choices. All right, before I let you go, Ryan, I got to ask you about this. Fathers, their job is to be a gardener, not a carpenter. Could you please explain the distinction for our audience? Yeah, certainly this isn't something that I made up. This is Alison Gopnik, I believe. But her point is your job is to help your kids become who they are, not to make them what you want them to be. And I think this is particularly relevant with some of the sort of old school fatherhood stuff that we have been talking about. The idea that your kid is your kid, and they have their own unique talents and skills, you are not building an error. You're not building someone to carry on your legacy or to make the family this or that. Your job, I think, it's a humbler one as both a parent, but specifically as a father, to help your kids figure out who they are and what they were put here to do and help encourage

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and facilitate that as opposed to building your replica. Right. Okay, Richard, now I want to turn to you. The last time you were on this podcast, you discussed how the education system isn't structured in a way that suits boys and men. As a possible remedy, you suggested holding boys back maybe for a year so that their brain development can catch up to the girls who are biologically developing sooner. I'm just curious now at this point, maybe you could sort of delve into that and explain maybe what that insight about the development of the brains of boys would mean in terms of advice for the father of boys and how you should maybe differ in that as opposed to how I'm going to be raising my daughter. Yeah, well, as always, the caveat here is that we're talking about averages and overlapping distributions. But it's interesting that the claim that boys develop later than girls, particularly in the frontal lobe area, which is where all the organization and planning skills are, is later than girls. It's like, I haven't yet to find anybody that doesn't say something like, well, duh, tell me something I didn't know. Fancy Brookings Scholar didn't need you to tell me something that's blindingly obvious to anybody that's ever been in the world where I had kids. And yet it's not in our education policy. Right. And so we have an education system that doesn't acknowledge the fact that there are different paces of development between different groups, but especially between boys and girls. And so I think as a dad, especially if you have both, so I've only had boys, right? And there is a case I think for specializing, you know, and some people should just have the girls and other people have boys, you know, so that we can like specialization of labor thing, but it's a really, really hard policy to enact. But so I speak as someone who's only done sons, but I do know that even though we didn't have siblings, they did have friends and we have nieces and so on. And I know that I was comparing them to them. So I couldn't say, why can't you be more like your sister? But I did think, why can't you be more like your friend? I did think what's wrong with you when they couldn't get their act together. They kept forgetting their homework. And so I realized that I just wasn't being compassionate enough, both at an individual level, but also understanding the fact that there was something about the system that was just harder for boys on average to negotiate. And I really lacked compassion until I realized that. So just breathe a little bit and recognize that they're all different, but your boys in particular, they're going to struggle. And in fact, I quote a colleague of mine, Camille Bousset, who sat her teenage son down when he started high school and she said, listen, the school system assumes that you have a fully developed prefrontal cortex. You don't. So I'm going to be your prefrontal cortex for the next four years. Okay. And they shook hands on it and said, okay. And so she was his stand-in prefrontal cortex for four years. And I've got to tell you, I think a lot of parents will recognize that story, that they're doing that more for their boys. And so just accept the fact they're going to need a bit more help. They're going to get a bit more compassion, again, on average. And that's okay. But above all, we mustn't make the mistake that I think some educators make, which is to treat boys like malfunctioning girls. We mustn't do that in our own homes. Okay. Well, for our final question for the round table, I want to ask something that I think is very important, which is imagine you're having a conversation with a young man who is expecting to be a father. I want you to maybe approach it like this. What would you tell this young man or maybe middle-aged man who's expecting to become a father? How his life will change once that baby is born? And I want to start with Ian and we'll go around the room. Well, first of all, I think that I would say congratulations that you're about to join the fraternity of men who has the

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opportunity to build a lasting legacy, to build a great family, to pass on the greatest values and virtues and wisdom that we as a society know, and that you have taken on a supreme responsibility

that goes even beyond the responsibility that you have to the woman, hopefully wife, that you have partnered with, because you have now joined together to make a joint decision. The most profound decision that human being can make is to bring another human being into the world. And so I think I would want this man to reflect on the profound commitment that he has now made and very likely the sacrifices that he will now have to make going forward in his life.

My hope is that he will have thought about this decision, thought about the relationship he has with hopefully his wife, thought about how they want to raise their child from a faith perspective. It's something we haven't talked about at all in this conversation. I'm always surprised how separated the conversation of faith is apart from fatherhood. And I guess I'd also thinking very long term, I'd share with him some of the ideas around happiness, and in particular the Harvard study, the longest running study on happiness. There are a lot of factors, but it seems like one of the biggest is the extent to which you had very deep relationships in your life. And that includes friends, but prominently it includes spouses and healthy relationships with your spouse and your children are some of the most profound ingredients to leading a life of choice and happiness. So those are the things I would say to that young man. Richard, I'd start with the bad news, which is that you're about to have less sleep, less money, less sex, but you will also be very, very glad. And I think it's very important to acknowledge that up front and not being dewy-eyed about this. And I agree with what Ian said about being responsible and intentional about this, but it's really, really tough and be honest about that. But the genuine joy and laughter that you will get along the way, you'll never laugh harder. You'll probably never cry harder either. You'll never worry more. But that sense of connection you have, I've just come off the back of a road trip with my three sons to North Wales where my mother is from, she's well speaking. And we went to a graveyard with my great uncle and he led my sons around the gravestones

and dusting off the stones and finding them out. And they found the gravestoner, their great, great, great, great, great grandfather from the 17th century and all the generations in between. And my son's just that sense of like, and these Welsh people, just the sense of connection to family and continuity and legacy that Ian talked about is great. And then we laughed harder in the car ride, almost than I would with kind of any of my friends. And the last thing I will say, and this might sound like a double-edged sword, but I've really noticed it among my own peers as well,

children are the ultimate narcissism destroyer. Almost inevitably, your world revolves around yourself until that moment. And it is like a Copernican revolution in your life, because suddenly that's just not true anymore in a way that's impossible to describe until it happens. You can't be a narcissist and be a parent, not if you're really parenting, you just can't.

And so it both shrinks you in terms of your own sense of yourself and importance in the world, and it expands you because it connects you to those generations and gives you exactly that sense of kind of meaning and purpose that we all on our best days get from our kids. And the last thing, you're going to screw up a lot. And I like the phrase from Donald Winnicott, which is strive to be a good enough parent. Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good. I remember one

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Christmas when my wife was terribly sick and we decided to delay Christmas, we had beans on toast, which is a very British dish with my sons. They still talk about that because some days, beans on toast is okay, even on Christmas day. I like that. Ryan, you get the last word. What would you tell the young man expecting to be a father? Yeah, the tough part about that question is there's so much practical advice you could give, and there's so much philosophical and sort of spiritual advice. But I think I might go more with the latter, which is I would say you have to let this change you. You have to let this open you up. You have to accept, in the Stoics would say, ascent to all the things that it brings up in you. And I guess that's practical as well as philosophical. You have to let your schedule change. You have to let your priorities change. But I think most of all, this is going to be one of the most emotionally and intellectually challenging and overwhelming experiences that you've ever gone through in your life. And so if you fight that, if you think that you know, you have these sort of preconceived notions of how it should be or how it should go, what you're doing is not letting yourself be sort of washed over by it and affected by it. And I think even when I think about how it changed me, I was resistant to it at first. And now all the things that I've embraced are some of my favorite things. And I wish that I'd done them early. So I guess I would say, let it change you. Because when people say that parenting changes you, it doesn't change everyone. Some people say the same. Some people get worse. I think you have to let it change you for the better. Let it open you up and transform you in the way that it so beautifully can't.

All right. Well, I want to thank our panel. This was a great discussion. You are listening to honestly.