



Helping Latter-day Youth Transition to Adulthood | An Interview with Mark McConville

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Hey everyone, Kurt Francom here from Leading Saints. All right, so we're publishing this in the middle of the young saints virtual conference that's happening right now, but I'm glad you're also taking time for the podcast or maybe you'll listen to this later, but this episode you're back to here is actually from a session and upcoming session in the in the young saints virtual conference and it's with Mark McConville and he's the author of failure to launch while you're 20 something hasn't grown up and what to do about it. Phenomenal book I've had an opportunity to review it and I actually was made aware of Mark who's not a latter day saint, but awesome researcher PhD psychologist definitely has a lot to teach us, but I first heard him on the from crisis to connection podcast, which is hosted by Jeff Stewart, who's a phenomenal therapist in southern Utah, latter day saint, and he's been on the podcast on the participate in other conferences. The leading saints have put on. So check out his podcast as well, but this discussion was so helpful. Eye opening, asking, you know, this psychologist who studied and worked with as a therapist so many young adults, youth, about this transition into adulthood and I asked him some questions about what this looks like when we have a tradition of being a missionary and leaving your home at 1819 years old and is that a good or bad thing is a better way to approach that and anyways just some phenomenal concepts that especially youth leaders could consider, especially bishops of how do we begin to mentor these individuals so that we're preparing these young people for adult life and what does that look like and what are some best practices there. So phenomenal discussion, listen to it here, go to the leading saints

dot org slash leading saints dot org slash youth to sign up for the rest of the virtual conference. There's still time to hear all of the 20 plus sessions that we have part of this conference has been so good. You got to hear it. So here is my interview with Mark mcconville. The author of failure to launch. Hello and welcome back to another session of the young saints virtual conference. My name is Kurt Franken, and today I have the opportunity to sit down all the way in Cleveland, Ohio area, Mark, the conville. Did I say your last name, right, Mark? You did, you got it right. Yep. Good. And you are just outside of Cleveland, right? Just outside of Cleveland, Ohio, I had the good fortune of marrying a Cleveland girl and my destiny took me and directions. I'd never anticipated. So were you originally from? Rochester, New York. Oh, nice. Very good. And my mother was Canadian. So I'm half Canadian. Let's say that. Oh, good. And you are the author of failure to launch why you're 20 something hasn't grown up and what to do about it. And when I actually heard you on an interview with Jeff Stewart, who is a good friend of mine, he's been on my podcast and some of the other conferences we've done really a brilliant therapist in southern Utah and he had you on his podcast. And, man, I got to get a hold of Mark. This is perfect content. And so that's what led to this meeting, this recording here, but I have to ask you, Mark, obviously this audience is a very, you know, latter day saint audience. And whenever we have a non latter day saint on, I always have to ask, do you have any random experience or interesting run ins with missionaries or neighbors that are a good Latter day Saints, any connection to the latter day saint church? No, other than I grew up not too far from Palmyra, New York. And so as a child, I heard stories about Joseph Smith, I didn't know what to make of them. I mean, I was truly a child. And I think only when I got to the point of graduate school and beyond, did I read enough and heard some interviews and I think when I, you know, Mitt Romney, who is maybe not quite my political affiliation, but someone I have enormous respect for. And sort of through his eyes, I have this great appreciation for the emphasis of on character development in New York tradition and that's just I just did something I admiring of. Oh, good. Yeah, I appreciate that. It's been mostly positive experience or whatever. Cool. Well, maybe just give us a little bit about your background and what led to you writing this book failure to launch. Sure. Well, you know, background that's awfully wide window. Your professional background, maybe. Well, let's say, while I grew up in a different era and there weren't as many ways to get in trouble as there are today. But I think I was in a mild sense kind of a troubled teen didn't take school very seriously. I underachieved I felt frustrated and, you know, just not sure I was going to find my way. And when I did get into college and I bumped into the study of psychology, which was a more remote science back then.

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There were no high school courses in psychology. I got really very curious about trying to understand, first of all, myself. But also people in general, and people human beings have seemed to me to be the infinitely entertaining, fascinating, compelling puzzle. And so I probably,

you know, I sometimes joke, but it's actually not a joke that the way I avoided growing up, the way I avoided the whole crisis of launching was I decided to just stay in school by the time I was ending college. I'd kind of figured out the code and had gotten pretty good at it. And so I went undergraduate work and really quite by accident fell into working with young people, primarily teenagers at the time, nobody wanted to work with teenagers. And nobody really knew how, and I just, I love a problem. I love wrestling with something. So it led to my first book, which is on adolescents and psychotherapy with adolescents. And what started maybe 25 years ago to get around to this current book is I and my colleagues more and more, we were receiving referrals for people in their early 20s who were failing out of college and not doing anything constructive in the parents. And this oddly, this would almost only happen with parents who are particularly supportive that I would get the complaint that he's living in the basement. He's playing video games. He won't get a job. He failed out of school. What do we do? You know, what do you do with a 20 year old? Do you send them to their room? You know, do you have ground them for the weekend? I mean, parents were really just flummoxed about what to do. And I would these kids would sometimes be sent to me in therapy, and we might have very interesting and provoking conversations, but I realized in time that they really weren't getting better because they went back home and lived the life of a 16 year old rather than maybe the 22 year old that they were. And so this is where there was no satisfactory treatment model for these kids who really were not coming to counselors as adults. And yet chronologically, were not being seen as candidates for family therapy. And I just worked through my journal writing, trying to solve that problem and began to realize how absolutely critical it was to include parents in the process. And so the book is written for parents because they are the ones who feel sometimes such a sense of powerlessness. And they bordering on despair, like, what do I do to help my 22 year old because the leverage is so different than it was when they were teenagers and living at home and the law really gave parents the last word in things. So the book came from trying to solve a problem that presented itself to me as a clinician. And I would imagine, I mean, most generations would think back to their developmental years, especially that as their aging into adulthood and think, yeah, it was crazy. What sort of lazy then or I was wandering, I didn't really know, but I mean, is it different now? Is the problem getting different as far as it's becoming more difficult for those teenagers to grow into adulthood? Yeah, I think so. I think it takes a lot more. For one thing, adulthood is more daunting. You know, every economic trendline, real wages have not kept up with cost of living, the cost of housing is significantly greater. When I, I'm a generation ahead of you, when I graduated from high school, I could have taken the bus across town to Kodak and gotten a job that would have given me a substantial living wage, I would have bought my first car by the time I was 19, I could have put a down payment on a small house by the time I was 20 or 21. Those jobs that manufacturing economy doesn't really exist today. We're now in a service economy where you want to enter the adult world and be a viable contributor, you need a lot more education. So stay even getting a college degree for some people, it's enough for others that's really not. They need to go on and specialize. So those demands of preparation for being kind of fit for the adult world. I think are much more extreme, probably somewhat more so than when you were that age, certainly much more so than when I was at age. Yeah. So it may be a grandparent could look at their grandchild that's 18, 19 and think, you know, all you got to do is go out and get a job or be a little more active. And then it'll work out because it worked for me, right? But that may not always be reality

nowadays. Well, I think that that is a mistake that parents and grandparents have been making probably for millennia.

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What do you mean you can't? You just pull yourself up by your bootstraps. But it's more complicated than that. Yeah, for sure. And we were talking a little bit before we recorded it. You're a little familiar with our missionary program where we have when a young man is 18 and graduated from high school. He has the opportunity to spend his application to go on a mission and a young woman when she's 19 and obviously graduated from high school can do the same. And it's interesting to sort of see to monitor this tradition we have as a missionary, like 21 years ago, I was 19, and I put my application in and served a mission I had gotten a year of college in beforehand. And it was really difficult for me, but it was just a remarkable opportunity by the end of those two years. I came home as a much more mature adult ready for that next step of adulthood and really, you know, moving on with my life. And now, for whatever reason, as people, and I'd be maybe Ryan, I don't have all the statistics and whatnot, but it seems like these youth like that that used to be a really good healthy bridge, but now that bridge scene is maybe too long or too difficult for to expect an 18-19 year old to wander into that and do okay. And so a lot of parents sort of send their missionary out across their fingers and literally pray that they make it for those two years because they know you'll be a good opportunity, but they're afraid that maybe it's too much. What thoughts come to mind? Well, certainly there is some evidence that kids are in terms of traditional characteristics of adulthood, independence, sort of moving into financial independence, independent decision making. It's taking longer to establish those traits for them to emerge. The kids are growing up more slowly. Now, in some respects, there's some good aspects to that. Today's 18 year olds are more likely to be close with their parents to sit around the dinner table and participate in conversation than say when you were that age or certainly when I was that age. So I think it's taking longer for kids to be kind of ready to step out into the adult world and to participate in it. Even in a provisional fashion, like, you know, being on a mission. So yeah, there's a lot of evidence that suggests kids are taking longer. I'll give you a statistic that I think is, to me, it's my favorite statistic in all of behavioral science. There's a psychologist named Jeffrey Arnett, who has become the world leading expert on what's called now emerging adulthood, the ages between 18 and 30. And he's given questionnaires to literally tens of thousands of people in that age range. And one of the questions that he asks on every questionnaire is he puts out a statement. I feel like an adult. And then he gives a 5 point scale. Hardly ever, some of the time, half of the time, much of the time, most of the time. And here's the statistic that I just fell in love with. It's not until 26 and a half years old. That half of the population reports feeling like an adult half of the time. So this subjective transformation of, I feel like a grown-up, at least a lot of the time, and which equates to saying, I feel like I can take myself seriously. And if we look over the broader span of history

when I was in that stage coming from my late teens into my 20s, adulthood was not defined by your subjective identity or feelings about yourself. It was defined by these critical life events. In my particular generation, you might be sent off to Vietnam and you're carrying a weapon and you're fighting a real war and there's just no way to not think that you're part of the grown-up world doing that sort of thing. Or the marriage, the age for marriage was much younger when I graduated from college. So, you know, by the time I was 24, I had two children. And a family to provide for and take care of. Now, I may not have subjectively felt like an adult, but it never occurred to me to wonder about that. How am I going to take care of business here? So being an adult then was defined more by these benchmark events that made you go into the subjectivity of it. Today those benchmark events, people are getting married later. People are staying in grad school, education. The other thing that's very, very interesting is that today's parents of young people, this is a huge plus and a small minus. The huge plus is they are by far the most supportive generation of parents in history.

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They really look after their kids. So I'll give you just a textbook example. Let's say you're a 14 year old, 8th or 9th grade boy, you have the misfortune of having a learning disability, maybe reading is rather difficult for you, maybe organizing your work is very difficult for you. In my era, you were diagnosed as lazy, careless, not appreciative of your teachers and parents, not appreciative of your opportunities. That was your quote diagnosis. Today, they take a much closer look at what's preventing this kid from performing in school. And they probably do it way before age 14. They probably do it back in second or third or fourth grade. And they discover, oh my goodness, he has trouble decoding words on a written page. And you are more likely to be put into a support framework so that all of a sudden you're not ashamed about how slow you read or how math is more challenging for you than other kids. So that kind of support meant it means that today's young people have a much greater chance of becoming a competent students than say the same brain functioning as when certainly when I was young and to some extent when you were young as well. So that's the real plus. And you can look at it. I have grandchildren who are been very, very wonderful students, but also committed athletes. And I grew up in an era when you made your own team. I was the coach in general manager of my grade school football team, and I called other schools to get games. Now, I understand, wow. I grew up in the late 1700s. But so I watch my granddaughter, who's a very committed soccer player. She plays in two different leagues, all the adults who are involved to make it happen, the extra coaching she gets in a special coaching clinic. And I just think, God bless these adults for making this such a satisfying competitive experience for these kids. So there's a lot of plus to be pointed to. On the minus side, we do get some kids who sort of spill over. They fall off the support system and they have failed to really learn to take care of themselves or look after themselves or just to reach out and seek out support, you know, I talked to many college

students who are reluctant to approach a professor to say, can I meet with you? I'm just confused by this material because they've had 18 years of life experience where the adults reached out to them. The teacher came up and said, Kurt, could we talk after class? I just I was a little concerned about your last quiz, right? And you find yourself sort of recruited into some informal tutoring that you may not have put today. Once you get beyond that sort of controlled world of high school and family, that ability to go out and seek support on your own is a critical skill and I'm just giving that as one example of kids who haven't developed sufficient independence. Yeah, that's really fascinating. And I'm just, again, putting overlaying that over our mission tradition of, you know, sometimes maybe a teenager for the last 15 years has had sort of that supportive system structure around him and then 1819 comes around and says, great, hey, we're going to ship you off to Europe and good luck, you know, and don't worry, you can call home every once in a while. That's going to maybe be a little bit staggering for them. So is there a way that maybe we can better prepare those youth to make that bridge? This is where my ignorance about the missionary system comes up. How much, but it's the first question that comes to mind. So when that kid goes off to Europe, how much of a local support structure is there for him or her, something that is, you know, it's not quite the family. It's not quite a secondary school, but it's not just being left to kind of blow in the wind of the adult world either. Yeah. No, that's a great question. And it really depends on, I guess, the location, generally speaking, every young missionary goes to a mission that's run by a mission president and a wife. And so they're sort of the mother and father of the mission of maybe say 300 missionaries at a time. So they can always reach out to them and say, hey, president son, so I'm struggling with this or that, or they'll have regular interviews. But generally speaking, day to day, it may be, you know, you as the missionary, you're always assigned to a companion, but you're in the jungles of Peru and you're knocking doors day to day. So have support may not be there. And you get a call home once a week, you know, on Zoom or whatever to touch in with family.

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But it can feel. It's very, it can be very dramatic shift in life. Sure. Well, speak, I'm just speaking as a psychologist. I'm not commenting on religious traditions or training. But I would want to see more structure. And I think I mentioned to you before we started the interview. My two children went and did a kind of a kind of missionary work in a under the umbrella of a religious tradition. But they did it post college. So for starters, they were more like 22, 23. And they were put in and now they weren't sent to the jungles of Peru. I want to tell you that they were sent to the apple orchards of Yakima, Washington, and to the inner city of Portland, Oregon. But there too. So they were part of a community of maybe 6 or 8 other young people. And there was some, while they kind of ran their own community, there was adults sort of popped in and they did some in service training, you know, things that so there was some adult oversight, but it was, it wasn't, it wasn't micromanaging. So I just, as a developmental psychologist, I like that idea of, well,

they're on their own, but not completely on their own. And they're part of that sense of being part of a group of others. I think, I know, I would have been terrified to do it at 22 or three. I can't imagine that I could have done it at 18. Yeah, I mean, let me tell you, my first 6 months of my mission, I was a very homesick boy. That's for sure. But over time, I got used to it. And with hindsight, it was a great blessing. But the principle I'm taking away from what you're saying is, you know, especially these mission presents, they have a lot of autonomy and maybe to support they offer and structures and whatnot. And so maybe just being aware of how supported these individual missionaries feel made help you decide what area to put them in where maybe I'm going to put him in an area that has a lot of missionaries that can get together often or whatnot. And just being aware of that support. I'm a huge believer in the importance of community for the human condition and we could certainly say a religious community serves a lot of that. But I see when I see, let's say a young college grad today, and let's say graduates from school in Cleveland and he's taking a job in Chicago. My first question is, do you have community there? Now, that may mean extended family. It may mean, oh, I have several of my college friends. We're from Chicago, and I'm going to be around them. It may mean, well, I'm going to work for a company that hires a lot of new college graduates. But to me, the presence or absence of community is one of the critical variables in predicting success in the enterprise of going off and starting a new phase of life. Yeah, that's really helpful in what also comes to mind is there's also even though they may be in the jungles of Peru. They are surrounded maybe or in touch with local members of the church there who are feeding them dinner and these types of things. And so sometimes it can be hyper focused on how many people are you teaching, how many new people are you bringing in the church, but to maybe see more value and just being surrounded in the community that isn't your home community, but it's still community nonetheless and that will be a good support for them while they're in the middle of the jungle, right? Yeah. I mean, I think the sort of productivity is important. You know, going off to college, we want to know how you're going to class. Are you learning? Are you being successful? But there's this other dimension of how do you feel about being on your own? What do you do when you just, you're on the edge of a panic attack because you've got a big exam coming up. Who do you go turn to for that kind of emotional support? And to me, the presence or lack of that is a big part of what gives people the courage to push themselves. That's really helpful. Really helpful. So I'm curious, just in the what about those teenage years or those late teenage years as you know that there may be a junior senior in high school and you think I want to make as a parent or a church leader, I want to make sure these individual youth are ready for the next step in life. Is there any hard and fast rules that you default to or general advice that you give for those adults? Yeah, I have a model, in fact, this is subject of what I hope will be my next book. So cool. I look at, you know, developmentally, there's a tremendously broad literature on the developmental stages that kids go through. But nobody has written about the developmental stages that parents or that parenting goes through. And so I have given that a great deal of thought.

So I look a lot when I see teenagers who are struggling. Of course, there are some teenagers that really profit from having a counselor or a mentor or a priest or a minister or a rabbi, someone some adult that they can turn to for support. But I always look at the parents. And I say, well, what can the parents do to really promote this developmental process? We expect our 12th graders to be a lot different. And a lot more self reliant than, say, our 8th or 9th graders. So I watch parenting through across this spectrum. And I'll give it to you in a nutshell. There are three primary ways. There may be a hundred others, but three primary ways that parents influence their children. You know, influence the way they behave the way they think the way they act. One is supervision. So if you're the child and I'm the parent, I'm the boss. Now I may have a very gentle touch in doing that or I may be a bit of a drill sergeant, but the fact is, it's time to turn the TV off and it's time to go upstairs and take your bath and light's going to be out by 9 o'clock and that's the way it's going to be because that's what we do in our household. I'm the supervisor. That's really critical. When we find parents of younger children who can't do that, you inevitably have trouble. Now, when your kids move into their teenage years, that begins to create some problems. And you say to your 16 year old, okay, time to turn off the TV. You can say it, but you may get some pushback. So the second parenting skill that we use with small children, but it becomes critical in the teenage years, is negotiating, right? So negotiating might be as simple as all right, finish your show. That's another ten minutes, but promise me, as soon as you're finished, you'll empty the dishwasher, and then you'll walk the dog, and you'll be up and have, you know, be at your homework by 9 o'clock. So if you were my 16 year old, we just did some horse trading. You know, I gave you some of what you wanted, but I told you what I wanted. And of course, if you're 13 or 14, you're going to be a terrible negotiator because you'll never follow through. The poor dog will not get walked, right? Yeah, yeah. And so I will kind of come down heavy on you. And by the time you're 16, you'll get it. Like I better walk that dog or the next time he's not going to listen to me. So that's the second way we influence kids. The third way, and again, you can see this at all age levels, but it becomes critical when we get to the end of adolescence in the beginning of emerging adulthood, is when the parent acts as a consultant. And a consultant is, look, I've got an opinion. I really think you ought to consider doing it this way. It may be here in Cleveland. I may say, look, if that's the jacket you're going to wear to the game, I think you're going to freeze yourself to death. And no, you know, you insist, I say, all right, I'm just telling you what I think. So I'm a consultant. I've got lots of wisdom, lots of knowledge. I'm going to present it to you, but I'm going to concede the power for making the decision to you, right? And so we may do that with 5 year olds, but it's a supervisor who decides when that's appropriate when it's not appropriate. But by the time you've got someone who is moving through high school toward the end of high school, you know, the thing about me, if you were my teenage son, and I'm a consultant, you're part of that deal is you become a self supervisor. You know, when I say to you, you know, I'm not sure I'd leave my homework till Sunday Night. I'm not sure that's a good idea, but what the heck you're 17, I'm kind of giving you an opportunity to maybe show up some Monday morning where you're working not completed where you're kicking yourself. And then you're learning the lesson, you know what? I think I better get on my homework earlier in the weekend. So you're part of the dance is that you're learning to become a self supervisor. And my part of the dance is I'm learning to take a step

back and give you that opportunity. Now the challenge for me is a therapist as a parent apparent guide is where the parent wants to take a step back, but the kid is not stepping up to the plate and beginning to self supervise her self manage. And then I do some very hands on coaching with parents about giving small opportunities, okay, I'll let you finish your watching Monday Night Football. I'll let you finish it, but you got to promise me that when you get up tomorrow morning, you're not going to be a bear and terrorize your younger sister in the kitchen. You're going to be serene and polite and be up on time and when the next morning you fail to do so. Because you only got 6 hours of sleep, we're going to put that off till next Monday night because next Monday night when you ask me, oh, I got to, I got to see the packers play, I'm saying buddy, that's not in the cards.

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I made the deal with you last week, and you tortured all of us Tuesday morning at breakfast. So sorry, TV goes, you know, so I'm in that, I'm teaching that teenager, the lesson, the value of making a deal and then keeping your end of the deal. And if you've learned that lesson by the end of high school, you're going to be pretty good at I know I have to take initiative. I have to follow through on commitments that I make. And part of what kids learn in that process is that they since I'm more of a consultant now, I'm not going to impose my will on you, but you may come to me and say, hey, dad, would you read my essay? I want to, you know, I know you're really good at spelling. Would you so now you learn the act of seeking out resources and support? And if you've got a kid who's at the end of high school and they can self supervise, they tend to use adults as resources rather than as policemen, then you've got a kid who's probably ready for that next step. Yeah. One dynamic we always try and stimulate in our latter day saint faith tradition is we hope individuals feel youth feel comfortable reaching out to their youth leader or to their bishop, especially if life's tough or maybe they're struggling with pornography or other unwanted behavior and maybe their parents are really shaming so they don't feel comfortable there, but we hope that they reach out to somebody. And so, and it sounds like, you know, more and more we want to encourage as they mature, you sort of set that set up that consulting dynamic. But any thoughts as far as helping them feel comfortable to reach out to adults that are outside of the parent relationship. Well, one of the things I outlined in the book. And I drew this directly from my work as a therapist where I asked myself, so what are the things I end up working with these kids on that seems to make a difference in the course of counseling? And I came up with three. This is what developmental psychologists refer to as a developmental task, a developmental task is the thing you need to master at this stage so that you can go on to the next stage. For example, if you've got a toddler, we know they have to master bowel control because if they don't, they're not going to preschool. And in preschool, they've got a master rudimentary socialization. Because if they don't, they're not going to kindergarten. So each stage has those tasks. And the tasks in the transition from adolescence

to emerging adulthood. Three primary tasks, and you've just named one of them. One of them is managing administrative responsibilities. You know, the nuts and bolts of meeting deadlines scheduling appointments, rescheduling appointments, getting your library books in on time, paying that parking ticket, all those sort of no fun, but necessary things. But the second developmental task, which you have described, is learning how to initiate inquiry and to procure support. So figuring out who knows more about this than I do. And how do I get to that person? Now, it may be a peer who's just more mature than I am or a better student than me. They understand physics where I don't. It may be a minister or a pastor who I think they've got some wisdom and perspective on life. And I want to hear what they have to say. And learning to do that to take initiative is one of the most critical learning things. When I run into these kids who have indeed failed to launch, one of the most common findings is they won't reach out to people, either they're ashamed, they have a mistaken notion that to be grown up means you do it all on your own, which could not be farther from the truth. That true adulthood is not really marked by independence. It's marked by interdependence. You know, you and I are a team, I count on you, you count on me. So what can you do about that? You can always ask thought provoking questions. Who do you think knows about this? I don't know what I'm supposed to do, go to the college register to change this class. Do you know anyone else at school? Who's done that? Dropped a class and signed up for another one. Well, yeah, there's some kids on my floor who have done it. And said, why don't you go down and ask them how to go about it? You know? And the more directive you are with that kind of kid, the more they resist. Don't tell me what to do. You know that kind of thing. But asking the sort of innocent question. I wonder if anyone knows more about that. Who would be a good person to ask? And so that may be something that you're even practicing in high school years, right? Absolutely.

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Absolutely. That's one of the things in the marker event in the schools where I consult. And these are non these are secular private schools with a very high value on education and college admission. So that's kind of their profile. And so the college admission process is huge. And they really look at the kids begin to take initiative. And do they begin to seek out, you know, do they go to the English teacher and say, hey, look, would you take a look at my essay here? I just want to know what you think. And seeing that ability to identify the appropriate resource and that's a whole part of the kid who can do that is a pretty good bet in college. And both of those schools, there is a massive emphasis on have you talked to your teacher about this? Have you talked to your teacher? Why don't you make an appointment and see what he or she has to say? Because it's some kids are too embarrassed. I don't want to talk to the teacher because the teacher is going to think I'm dumb because I'm going to ask a dumb question. So there's the shame component. And then there's also the arrogance component, like I can figure this out on my own. I don't need someone telling me what to do. Those are real obstacles to maturity. So as

of course, as a therapist, I'm trying to dismantle those resistances all the time. But I think parents and thoughtful teachers can do it as well. Yeah. And then you gave us the first two. What's the third one? The third one is, and this is more subtle. It's a little harder to put your finger on. It's forming a relationship with the future without knowing your destination, right? Because the truth is, at 18, 19, 20, 21, you may tell yourself, I'm going to be an astronaut. But you know, the odds are pretty good that you're not. I mean, when I was, if you'd asked me at 18, I would have said, well, I'm hoping I can become a professional golfer. Well, I just want to tell you that was not in the cards. But kids at age, they have trouble envisioning the adult world. And so the world can feel kind of mysterious, or they may have a bad vibe about it. You know, neither of my parents seem to like their jobs. And so my goodness, why would I want to wander into that same desert? Meeting adults who really seem to love what they do is a very inspiring thing for young people. But it's a relationship. It's what the philosopher Gabriel Marcel called hope. I don't know what's coming, but I have this an outlook of expectation and welcoming that something is going to happen. And I'm going to try to help make something happen. I've referred to it. I mean, people will say, well, you know, you, young people, have to have goals. And I cringe when I hear that, I think, a little softer way of saying, you need a sense of direction. So I tell kids kids, I'm old enough that I have that prerogative. There are 18 or 19 or 20. It's time to declare a major. And they're like, I don't know what I want to do with my life. I think you're really think that people your age know? No, but what there are two things you do need to know. You need to figure out at that age. What am I good at? And what do I like? Well, I'm good at writing. That's what my teachers tell me. Okay. It's good to know. Do you enjoy it? Well, yeah, actually, I do. So we're figuring out what you like and what you're good at. And you don't need to know where that's going to take you. You just need to make your post secondary education as interesting as you can. Even people that get on, I mean, there's a very interesting piece of research I mentioned, you know, the age when people begin to feel like, well, maybe I'm an adult. There's a piece of research where same guy Jeffrey Annette identified people in their 40s and 50s who, when given the question, I love what I do for a living. I can't imagine doing anything else. And in his research, that was about 17% of his sample size of his sample. So what he did is he pulled that 17% out. And he interviewed them, a life history interview. Tell me about yourself, tell me how'd you get into this field? I want to know that the path that you followed to become a youth minister. How did you arrive at that? And it's almost always an interesting story, but what he found is that people that had found that niche that just seemed so like this is me, the average age at which they discovered it was between the ages of 28 and 32. Holy cow. Yeah. And so that's a very common misunderstanding that young people have. And then they feel bad, like there's something I'm behind the pack. I'm behind schedule. And even if you look at people who are in dedicated training, like medicine, you know, you may be in pre med at age 19, but you don't, you don't figure out that you want to be a pediatric oncologist until about 30, you know, when you're doing your residency rotations.

And you figure out this is the thing for me. So it just takes, you know, there's a lot of growing up that happens during the 20s. And people, for the most part, on average, this is our next research. People aren't really ready to make those long-term life commitments. This is my life's work. This is the relationship. This is the person I want to be buried next to. Those kinds of the depth and maturity of making those commitments doesn't typically come until around that age. Yeah. I'm surprised by that. Statistic, but I guess if I sit and think about my own professional journey, you know, I graduated marketing and had a few jobs and things during my 20s, but it wasn't until I was about 30, 31 and this current profession that I have become enjoy most and will probably do for a while. So amazing how that that's reality. It really is. I remember when I read that statistic, I said, not so for me. I was a psychology major at age 18. And then I thought, oh, wait a minute. When I was 20, 6, or 7, I was going to be a university professor. Oh, yeah. But that felt true and I got this job at a mental health center and nobody wanted to work with teenagers. And I said, what the heck? I'll do it. And I was and how old was I? 30. Oh, nice. Yeah. Yeah. So, and another principle that sort of comes to the surface for me is you talk about that that, you know, if there is maybe a church youth leader who's striving to be a good mentor, it makes sense for them to take time to say, hey, do you want to hear about my journey? And I was 25 and I didn't know what I wanted to do, but this is sort of what happened in that sort of gives them hope of that it's going to work out for you. They're absolutely spot on. I think that can be very comforting for young people. I try to tell them, look, you think the road to your future is like a highway. And I said, no, no, no. It's more like a climbing wall. You're trying to find your first foothold and your first handhold. And then you're like, okay, where do I go from here? Oh, okay. Reach up here. All right. And that is the progression that most of us went through something like that. Now, occasionally not, my wife knew she was going to be a teacher when she was ten or 12. And she just retired from a long and satisfying career as a teacher. But for most of us, it's more of a search and a scramble. We don't know what's really out there. And what's available. Yeah. You mentioned some about goals in general, you know, because we have a tradition in our faith that during those youth years, we try and practice this the act of setting goals, maybe a spiritual goal, maybe an intellectual goal. And sometimes it's more difficult than maybe it seems on the surface. So what advice would you give in general with setting goals with teenagers or would you say don't do it at all if maybe try a different approach? I think the goals there are goals that are not useful and goals that are. And the ones that are useful are usually on the near horizon. So if I'm saying something like, I'll go to where I'm more familiar is the academic terrain. And I want to get I want to bring my grade point average up by this many points. I want to get an A in that philosophy course. I think that's a very worthwhile goal because I can start working on that this afternoon, right? When someone says to me, I want to be a Hollywood actor. I think, okay, it's wonderful to have aspirations. But let's talk about how you might join your high school theater group. And audition for waiting for Godot. Maybe you could go and get that from the library and start to memorize the lines. You know, I like goals that are, I can use them as they pull me forward today. As far as the long-term, I just don't, I don't know. When a 16 year old says to me, well, I want to make a lot of money. I just, I cringe. Oh God, no. We have to save your soul here first. Yeah, so it sounds like just the more you can bring them to present day or the closest to present day, the gold can be the better. Right. And I think of that longer term thing.

That's where I use the word direction. Well, I'm studying and preparing. If I really want to be that have a career on stage or in music, I'm taking guitar lessons. I'm forming a garage band with my buddies. I'm taking voice. You know, whatever. I'm doing something that points in that direction. It may lead I may end up being a middle school band director. You know, I really don't know what my destination is. But I may know that I love music. I love entertainment, or I love computer science, or I love literature, I love science or get on that train and head west.

00:45:05 - 00:50:01

You know? I often analogize to I'll say to one of these kids, look, it's 1840, and you live in Philadelphia, and you've had it with the east coast. And you have decided to head west and you have signed up on a stage stage line that's wagon train that's heading out west. Now you don't really know if you're going to end up in Cincinnati. Kansas City, Salt Lake City, San Francisco. You don't know. But you have you're moving yourself in a direction that somehow reflects some essential value and something about your nature. You know, if I'm a science guy or I'm a humanities guy, I know that's about my nature. And I want to head in that direction. Awesome. Going back to these three sort of this framework with the managing admin responsibilities and then the sort of this habit of reaching out and initiating support. Are there any during those teenage years any tips on how to practice that? Or what are parents are leaders doing during those times? Yeah, well, certainly giving your kid responsibilities is this is I'm old fashioned this way. The kids have chores and that the chores matter in some way, like we can't really start dinner and tell you emptied the dishwasher or the dog has to be fed or, you know, something that look, you're part of this community called household. So that's your starting point. But I think with some kids, it's very easy because they just are natural administrators. I have a 13 and a half year old granddaughter that I think could run a small corporation. And then I have another ten year old granddaughter who is just a gifted artist, but I don't think she could run a lemonade stand. So there is native our brains are sort of designed in a certain way. So if your kid is a natural, you don't have to work hard at it. It's your kid's not a natural. You as a parent really need to try to make opportunities and be prepared for failure. Be prepared for the dog didn't get walked. Be prepared for that form that you had to fill out to give for the field trip. It's really sitting at the bottom of your kids book backpack. You've got to be prepared for those things. And I think when you get into high school, there's more opportunity and there's more expectation, teachers, you know, in most schools, okay, now you're in 7th grade. It's time to learn how to use an assignment notebook. And an assigned notebook is just a tool for self management. And so you really kind of try to support that sort of coaching that comes from the adult world. It's mostly, you know, at that age we're looking at chores and schoolwork that's your job. Usually you're a student. And I expect you to do your job. And if you're bad at it, I'm going to try to coach you. I'm going to try to tutor you. I'll give you one of my favorite little examples. And this happens with 18-19-20 year olds all the time. I have this young man contacting me. This is two

summers ago. And I'd seen him as a teenager. I hadn't heard from him in a few years. So he's home from college, he's 19, and he asks if he can come in to see me. And I said, what's the deal? He said, my mom and I are just we're fighting all the time. So he comes in and he's just he goes into this litany of complaints against his mom. Very coincidentally, his mom had driven him to the appointment because they had to take the car in for an emissions check or something. So usually a parent wouldn't drive a 19 year old to a visit, but she was out in the waiting room. And I said to him, would it be okay if I brought your mom in? He hemmed and haw and said, okay, so she comes in and I just said, I thought this might be an opportunity for the two of you to talk to each other. And then I just sat back and watched. And they were off to the races. And the particular argument that day was he had an upcoming dentist appointment that conflicted with his new summer work schedule and his mother wanted him to call the dentist's office to reschedule the appointment. And he, I don't have time, I'm too busy, you need to do it, you know, it was just watching them go round and round and I just sat back in amazement and finally, I interrupted, I said, Scott, what do you think happens when someone calls a dentist office to reschedule an appointment? And he looks at me and he says, they get pretty upset with you. Now, time out, any adult knows that the healthcare providers who suffer the most no shows are dentist offices. That's right.

00:50:01 - 00:55:07

And if you call your tennis office to reach Kelvin appointment, they want to send you a bouquet of flowers. They are so thrilled. So I said to the mom, hey, would you mind calling, but put the call on speakerphone? So she does. And she calls and they're like, oh, I'm a smith. No problem. Thank you so much for calling with Friday afternoon. You know, you just exactly what you would expect. They were delighted that she had the forethought to call. She hangs up and I turned to Scott, and I said, again, they looked at my mother used to give me or I kind of look over the top of my glasses. They're like, what do you have to say for yourself, look? And he just, he does this. He goes, oh. Well, it's an iconic little vignette because young people, young adults, there is so much about how the world works, that they don't know because they've never done it. And they sometimes make reasonable inferences as he did that turn out to be incorrect. And so they need tutoring. And I say, parents sometimes think, well, either, I do it for them. I just call and reschedule the appointment, or I leave them on their own. Okay, if you don't make the appointment and they charge us, you're going to have to pay for it. But between those two extremes, there's a kind of involvement that's not shaming. It's not humiliating, but it's here. Let me show you how I do that. And some kids are more open to that than others. But there are so many things that once you do them, you're like, oh, I can do that. But it's all you've done them. You're mystified. And you're convinced that you're going to make some small mistake where you look stupid. Yeah. Yeah, that's fascinating. And there's so much there that I remember as a young teenager, I needed to reach out to my local bishop and set up an appointment because I

had some things to get straight in my life. And I remember calling his secretary to do that. And I thought for sure the secretary would be mad at me or that I have to tell him all the details of why I was wanting to meet with the bishop and whatnot. And I remember that phone call, I finally got the courage to do it and it was the shortest boring, you know, just this time out at two, great. See you then, and I was like, oh, that's it, right? Yeah. I love this, even if a parent, you know, going through these day to day administrative tasks, maybe take a few phone calls on speaker and just show them how this how this works or for a bishop to say, hey, do you know what? We say when you call and set up appointment or if you text me, I just say great. Let's do this. I'm excited, right? And then getting them familiar or exposure to these everyday processes we take for granted. Yeah. I have come to call it my synagogue experience. And the rare opportunity when I might go to like a bar mitzvah of the son of a friend and a synagogue. And I walk in and I have this feeling of, I know there are rules, but I don't know what they are. And I'm going to do something terrible to embarrass myself. And of course, that's ridiculous. But I think that's how so many young people feel in so many situations. You know, I don't want to take the bus because I don't know, do you pay when you get on or do you pay when you get off? And I'm going to look dumb, not knowing how to do it. Just over and over and over, those kinds of experiences, those sort of minor humiliations. Yeah, that's really helpful. You talked a little bit in your book about the concept of shame. And you know, in a religious context, we sometimes get a bad rap that they're too many commandments, too many standards, and especially in those youth years where you're making some mistakes and maybe you do need some help, but the shame of it all just sort of buried you and you rather just go down to the basement and play the video games and not worry about it. So anything we need a better understand about the concept of shame in this. It's such a, you know, we could do a whole hour on that. The people who, in my profession, the academic psychology, who really took a look at this, a group of theorists called affect theorists. And they look at human emotions and they do it kind of from the standpoint of evolution, like why did our species learn to have this feeling? What function does guilt serve? Now that's just one lens, right? It's not a religious lens. But it's a lens. And their consensus about shame is that shame served to keep order in communities. So there are behaviors that you would be shamed if you did them in the context of a community. So you're not going to do it. You hold back because it wants to be shame. So that's apparently the evolutionary origin. But in modern day, I would call shame the most toxic of all emotions. And you really nailed it just now when you introduce the subject because what shame motivates us to do is to withdraw from content.

00:55:08 - 01:00:12

So if I'm ashamed of something, the last thing I want to do is tell you about it. The last thing I want to do. In fact, I don't even want to look you in the eye. I want to crawl under the rug, I want to run from the room, shame, isolates us from interpersonal contact. And the antidote for shame

is interpersonal content. You know, if I have something I'm deeply ashamed of and I decide to confide in you and you don't respond by condemning me, but you respond by understanding me and trying to understand how difficult that must be for me. And how proud you are that I had the courage to come and tell you, that transforms my experience. It's like, oh my God, I thought you were going to kick me out of the village. I thought you were going to put me in the stocks, you know, in the center of town, but you're not. You're much more accepting of my humanity. Now, maybe there's a problem attached to the behavior that does need to be addressed. You know, I certainly work with kids about your pornography addictions. And it's understandable that they're ashamed. And in a way, you know, there's a part of me that says, well, they should be. That's an appropriate response. But still, if the shame only serves to make them keep it private and to never reach out for support and understanding, then the shame is not serving a useful developmental function. So I want them, you know, I may, if I meet with that kid, the first things I may say will be de shaming. I'll say, you know, I try to be funny. My wife says sometimes I am, sometimes, I'm not. But I might say, I'll bet you're the only kid in your school who looks at pornography and he'll look at me like, are you putting me on? And I'll say, well, the statistics say it's somewhere around 85% somewhere around there. So you're not unique. That's the first thing is to say, we're not going to throw you out of the village. And only after you've neutralized the shame, do you go into the problem solving? Look, this is just eating away at your self esteem. You're losing your own respect for yourself. And you know, pornography is it's just it's a terrible deal for women. It's create such negative and hostile abuse. So I'll go into my like, let's do something about it because that's really a good thing to do, but you can't get there and tell you neutralize the shame. Yeah. And I love that just when they do talk to with you, just showing that you're still part of our village. Responding that way. You're not the only one who's dealing with this, right? Right. I love to say to kids, hey, welcome to the human race. Yeah. You're one of us. Yeah, that's awesome. Well, Mark, this has been so insightful and fantastic. I got maybe one more question for you, but if people want to check out the book, obviously you can go to Amazon and that's how I got it anyways. So you can go there. But any other place you'd send people if they want to learn more about your work? Oh gosh, if you go to my website, I have an article that was published in The New York Times on the subject of how do you know if your kid is ready for college? And then I had an article published in The Wall Street Journal on so your kids have left home and you think you're done, right? You know, and there's links to both of those articles. I would not recommend that people go back to my earlier book, published in the 90s called adolescent psychotherapy and the emergence of it because that was really written for therapists. If you're an adolescent therapist, I think you might find my perspective is a little different from some, but for parents, I'm not sure that it's a particularly useful resource. But I think that you check out failure to launch and find a great resource. I guess maybe two more questions for you. When I'm just thinking that I know there's some parents out there youth leaders who are just, they've sort of surrendered to the fact that youth are maybe maturing at a slower rate. And so they're just going to hang on until maybe at 26 years old, they wake up and say, you know, I think I'll go get a job. I mean, is that an okay strategy? Or no, it's a terrible strategy. Because he may wake up at 26 and say, hey, this has worked for me so far. Why not continue? No, there is really part of the book addresses this issue. I mean, the first part of the book is, so what are your kids going through? Because if you understand them better, it's easier to be compassionate and thoughtful in your parenting. But the second part is, okay, given that

your old repertoire isn't working, you can't ground them, you can't scold them, giving them lectures is usually counterproductive. But what you can do, and there are things parents can do to reset the ground rules of the relationship, right? So if you are that 19 or 20 year old who's just been put on academic probation and you're spending your staying up until four in the morning playing Fortnite and you're sleeping until two or three in the afternoon and then coming down and asking me what's for lunch.

01:00:13 - 01:04:07

You know, I may announce that well, you know, since you're here and living and you're using most of the Wi-Fi, our Wi-Fi Bill is a \$180 a month. And we think your portion of it is about a hundred. So we're going to expect you to contribute in order to have access to it. Oh, and by the way, you sense you're not in school anymore. Here is your portion of the cell phone bill. And this is what you have to do. Oh, let's go up to the bank and I'll help you open a checking account. And you know, since you're not in school anymore, you have to be to live with us. You have to be doing something constructive. Now, that could be really committed volunteer work. It could be courses at the community college. It could be a full-time job. Some combination of all three, but to remain with our ongoing support, you're going to have to not sleep until three and you're not staying all night. If you want to do that, you can do it, but not here. So I'm not going to yell and scream at you and I'm going to try to create a condition where you begin to feel the pull of necessity. Like, okay, summer camp is over. It sounds like that, you know, I think that's maybe more natural for a parent to do. But even maybe a youth leader, church leader, should feel empowered to engage with that person, encourage them and ask where you can help and there's nothing wrong with that. You're not going to come down too hard on them. If you're that struggling 20 something, having an adult that sort of is an emissary from the adult world who cares about you and is interested in you. I mean, that's what we therapists do. You guys do the same thing. You know, at least from the standpoint of child development, you're serving the same function. Awesome. Well, any final encouragement you'd give to an audience of youth leaders who are just striving to help them help them launch into life. Well, you matter. I've often I've said this to teachers that we therapists are just we're the guys in the bullpen. You know, the primary need is having relationships with adults who are representatives of that real world beyond adolescence. And, you know, you don't really want therapists involved. Therapists get involved when there isn't an uncle that they can turn to or a youth minister or an English teacher then go to those relationships are a huge part of facilitating development. And my tribe, we just come in when it hasn't worked. All right, a phenomenal discussion. I hope you enjoyed it as much as I did. This would be a great one to send to a youth leader, especially if they're not familiar with leading saints, say, hey, you know, through a quick text, listen to this, this podcast I'm linking to. I think you'll find it helpful as you mentor, youth, in your calling, and then hop on over to leading saints dot org slash youth and register for free and jump into the conference

that's happening right now, which will go for a few more days. You're still a chance to see all the sessions, and so definitely check it out at leading saints dot org slash youth. Register for free. It came as a result of the position of leadership, which was imposed upon us by the God of heaven who brought forth a restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and when the declaration was made concerning the all and only true in living church upon the face of the earth. We were immediately put in a position of loneliness. The loneliness of leadership from which we can not shrink nor run away. And to which we must face up with boldness and courage and ability