



## Broadcast Transcript

**Broadcast:** Daily Hope for Families – Part 1

**Guest(s):** Mark Gregston

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**Dr. James Dobson:** Well, hello everyone. I'm James Dobson, and you're listening to Family Talk, a listener supported ministry. In fact, thank you so much for being part of that support for James Dobson Family Institute.

**Roger Marsh:** Well, welcome to Family Talk. I'm Roger Marsh. You know, a strong, godly led family is so important and fathers are especially crucial to the health of their families. I'm reminded of the words of Proverbs 23:24, which says, "The father of a righteous child has great joy. A man who fathers a wise son rejoices in him." So what if a family is in crisis? A parent may be struggling with a prodigal child or maybe the leader, the father of the household, needs some encouragement.

Well, today's guest on Family Talk is Mark Gregston, and Mark has plenty of experience with families when they are at an extreme breaking point. Mark is an author, speaker and co-founder of Heartlight Ministries, which is a residential counseling center for teens in crisis. He is also the host of the nationally syndicated radio program called "Parenting Today's Teens with Mark Gregston." Mark is the author of 18 books on the topic of parenting, many of which deal with struggling youth. Mark and his wife Jan reside in Hallsville, Texas and have two grown children and four grandchildren, and I love that. At the recent National Religious Broadcasters Convention in Florida, Mark Gregston sat down with our co co-host, Dr. Tim Clinton, and over the next two days, we're going to hear their conversation about encouraging parents and struggling teens. Let's join them right now, right here on Family Talk.

**Dr. Tim Clinton:** Mark, welcome back to Family Talk. Dr. Dobson, his wife Shirley, send their regards. They have such affection for you and the work that you're doing.

**Mark Gregston:** Well, it's good to be here with you. I'm losing my voice talking so much, but it's just great to be with you and I'll push it out for this one.

**Dr. Tim Clinton:** As a dad, looking back over your life, your influence, any reflections on just your own parenting and the influence of stepping into the lives of your kids and meaningful connections, words of wisdom?

**Mark Gregston:** I think what happened was that I grew up in probably a typical home where dad didn't spend any time with us. We didn't have a relationship. Even when he

passed, I mourned more over my dog passing than I did my dad. We just didn't have that relationship, but it was out of a group of people that really pushed us to work hard. And so that's what I thought I was supposed to do as a dad, is work hard. So when I had my kids, I was working all the time and I worked and I worked and I worked, and I look back on it and I go, "Man, I wish I would have as much time with my kids as I now do with my grandkids." The more time I spend with my grandkids, and they're 22 and 17 and 11 and 10, I look at that and I go, "How I wish I would've spent time with my kids the way I get to spend time with them."

And it's a little bit different because I didn't have the money back then. I didn't have the time, I didn't have the opportunity, but I didn't have the wisdom either to say, "Time is probably the denomination that I need to be investing." I got so busy in the minutiae of life and doing things for everybody else that I really forgot to spend as much time with my own kids. So when I look back at that, and I would never go back to those old times, I really just have that feeling that I wish I would've spent more time.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Yeah. Mark, you began an amazing ministry, Heartlight Ministries. It's all about helping troubled teens. We've had conversation about it before and I marvel at the work that God's doing in and through you all. But Mark, as you kind of reflect on those young men and women who come to you, there's a lot of brokenness. Do you see a common denominator in there, maybe often associated with fathers?

Mark Gregston: Well, I do. I think sometimes fathers get lost in knowing what to do when they face the challenges that their kids are going through. I think what happens is that we get this idea of parenting that says, "I'm going to parent this way based upon either what I was taught or perhaps what I did not get, and I want to offer to my kids." So we pursue that, but we think we've got it down. And Scripture would tell us over and over again, think outside the box. Don't lean on your own understanding. And if I lean on my own understanding and am not constantly looking at new ways to engage with my kids or other kids, then I'm going to miss out. And the key is saying, what do I need to do to always be meeting their needs, whatever those needs are. And I think that's moving from a teaching mode, which basically happens the first 12 years, to a training mode the next 12 years.

And so I shift my parenting style to accommodate the new needs of my kids. And I think that's where dads sometimes kind of miss it. Because they're busy and they come home and they want it to be done a certain way that perhaps somewhere if they just sat back and said, "Okay, what's something that I can do different to meet the needs of my child? How do I put my child first before me? How do I look at them and value them rather than always trying to get them to value me? How do I quit talking all the time and start listening to the heart of my child? How do I quit having lectures and move into discussion? How do I quit making their decisions and train them to make decisions?" And I think when we start to make a shift in the way that we engage with our kids, then the

relationship goes deeper. And if you don't have a relationship, I mean, I tell people this all the time, if you have a discipline problem, you have a relationship problem. And so you've got to work on that relationship.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Heard a few years back, Mark, that even the quality of our relationship will determine the effectiveness of our discipline strategies.

Mark Gregston: Oh, absolutely.

Dr. Tim Clinton: So we've got to press in here. We got to get this figured out. Let me stay with Heartlight just for a moment. These men and women coming to you and the broken pieces, Mark, last few years have been pretty tough go. But prior to that, we already had a mental health crisis, if you will, in culture. Since then, we have a disaster going on. It was only intuitive again that we would see an uptick in mental health issues. And our kids are on the receiving end of the brunt of a lot of that. It's showing up in stats everywhere. Even the CDC coming out with statistics about our daughters, 2021 survey said that 30% had seriously contemplated suicide. That's our girls in 2021. The CDC report saying that. Mark, what do you think's contributing to that? I mean, you see, again, you have a place for teens in crisis. They're coming to you and you're seeing it all. What has your attention when you look into the eyes of these teens?

Mark Gregston: Yeah, I mean, it's a wonderful question because I think there's always been trauma. Trauma has happened everywhere. And quite honestly, the violence, regardless of what we see has really gone down over the last 30, 40 years overall. But I think what has also gone down is the ability of kids to develop relationships with one another because of the way they communicate. And not only that, I think the presence of social media, and I'm not an anti-world kind of guy, but the presence of social media has challenged our kids to become more comparative in their thoughts in one another, more distracted in even maturing and growing up, but more delusional about how life is supposed to be and how it's supposed to get you to a better place. So our kids are not growing up, they're faced with decisions that they can't really make because they're so big, and the consequence of those things are so dire.

So I think that's why we see kids that are forced to be alone, whether it be during the pandemic, whether it be through isolation, is that it's the absence of relationship that they're having, that that's what we've got to be working on. And I see that exacerbating everything. It is moving kids to, "I'm going to do everything by myself. I'm not going to listen to anybody else." And so as a result, the American Medical Association has increased the age of adolescence to age 27. They're not maturing. They don't have the ability to make these decisions, but they are losing the essence of true relationships one to the other because they're so consumed and distracted by other things.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Your center focuses on some pretty difficult situations. Families call you, it's kind of like a last ditch effort. We don't know what else to do. How do you screen

these calls? How do you determine, I guess, where you can help and evaluate what to do?

Mark Gregston: We get 15,000 calls a year from somebody that wants to place a child to come live with us. And so we take 60 kids. I mean-

Dr. Tim Clinton: 60?

Mark Gregston: 60 out of 12,000. And so what that means is that we've got to offer them something different. And that's probably where I spend most of my time. That's why I lose my voice because I'm out speaking, doing things, helping parents get to a better place. But I think what happens is, I mean, we look at kids who we know that the litmus test for those kids are, if a parent doesn't think they're going to be around in six months, that my child's going to be gone if I don't do something, we take it based upon the seriousness of the situation and then also of the child's ability to make decisions to get to a better place, and will the parents be involved in what we're doing? And so we look at those three things and then make the determination, how can we put together a group of kids that will constantly be working and living with each other and kind of push one another to love and good deeds, if you will.

Dr. Tim Clinton: As I think about the residential community that you're trying to create, you've got your hands full. I mean, they're coming in and they basically are, I don't want to call them anti-authority, but they're pushing back against everything probably because they don't trust or because they have been violated.

Mark Gregston: Yeah.

Dr. Tim Clinton: They've experienced trauma. They've get complex trauma. And so these kids are ... Broken is not the right word for them.

Mark Gregston: Yeah, they're hopeless. I mean, they feel a sense of hopelessness because they're trying as best they can. I haven't met a kid yet that has said, "I'd really love to be messed up." I've never met a kid. I've never met a kid that has said, "At age 30, I hope I hate my parents." I've never heard those things. Kids are wanting to know what to do and how to take the very Scripture, I think that they've been taught throughout their life and apply it to their life so they can be effective and get to a better place in life. And they don't know how to do it. And so what happens is when they start making poor choices and start getting into trouble or have trauma happen in their life, and they start to deal with some of the difficulties in hardships, that they're lost, they become, they're not rebellious, they're just lost. And parents sometimes get lost in the midst of it too, not knowing what to do.

Dr. Tim Clinton: And all they do is fight.

Mark Gregston: They do. And it's just a constant fight where now all we're doing is managing behavior. And our point is we've got to get to the heart of the issue. And I mean, the behavior that anybody sees is just the visible expression of the invisible issues that are going on in the life of a child. And so that's what we've got to get to. And it's going to happen through a relationship built with our staff, with the people that are involved with them and the people that pour their lives into them.

Dr. Tim Clinton: You're listening to Family Talk division of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute. I'm Dr. Tim Clinton, co-host our special guest, Mark Gregston. He has been working with teens for over 40 years, both as a youth minister and as a young life area director. He and his wife Jan founded Heartlight. It's a residential counseling center for struggling teens and families in crisis. They've helped a lot of families through the years, and we appreciate your work.

Mark, you started some events called Family in Crisis Conferences. No doubt that at the heart of that, it goes back to what you're seeing and then you've got some secret sauce in there somewhere. I mean, I know in our world we talk about empirically supported treatment strategies. What are those "best practices?" How do we anchor it up in Christ? But I wanted to ask you, Mark, maybe you could just share with people, what is it that as a family you communicate to them, "this is what is at the heart of what we do." This is what we've seen helps set the stage, create an opportunity for these teens to "move into a more healthy, vibrant life, relationship with God, and their families.

Mark Gregston: Well, I think there's two things. I think we have to give them a taste of what perhaps what a relationship with Christ is all about, not just in word, but in deed, in the way that we engage with them. And we get this idea that we've got to keep pushing more and more information on them, and that's not what they want. They want a relationship. They want a parent to become flesh and let the word dwell among them just as much as God really sent His son to dwell among us. And when we do that, then what happens is the example that is set before them that says, "You can live life this way." And so that's an important part of saying the example you set makes all the difference in the world, but that's never going to happen if there isn't a restoration of the relationship that has been confused and have become very difficult in the process of seeing inappropriate behavior.

So we've got to stop the behavior, yes. But I think you do that by offering a sense of hope, because if that behavior is that reflection of what's going on in a child's heart and all behavior is goal-oriented, they're trying to get out of the mess they're in, they're wanting something different, but they don't know what that is, we've got to get them there. And it's going to be through them experiencing a true relationship, an unconditional relationship with somebody that is walking beside them, encouraging them, sharing not only the gospel, but their lives as well. And I think that's what's going to bring them out. So to parents, I say this, the first place you start is with you. It is not looking at your

child going, "Well, if they'll just stop doing this, then they'll be okay." Because that child's doing whatever they're doing for a reason.

It's looking at yourself and saying, "What is it about me that is missing the heart of my child? Lord, search me. Know my heart and see if there's any hurtful way in me. "And if I'm doing something wrong, tell me. Let me know. I need to change that. I need to move toward my child differently. And then the second part of it is going to your child and saying, "We need to make some changes because I've made a mistake." Because I haven't done everything right, because I've missed your heart. That's what becomes key. The relational part of a family will last. It'll change the destiny of a family. That is so important. It's more important than having a kid's room be all straightened up and clean and making sure the bathroom's clean and making sure they look pretty all the time and say the right words. It is having a deep relationship that can really change the destiny.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Mary has chosen the greater thing Jesus said.

Mark Gregston: Yeah.

Dr. Tim Clinton: That relationship with Him. Mark, I wanted to ask you, average length of stay, if you will, how long do these kids stay at the residential program?

Mark Gregston: About 10 months. 10 months. And they kind of determine, they go through a level system, they get to determine when they leave.

Dr. Tim Clinton: And so a lot of parents would say, "Listen, probably going to take 10 months to get my kid back on track."

Mark Gregston: Yeah.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Okay. But what they don't probably realize is this reintegration back into the family is a part of the journey here, correct?

Mark Gregston: Yeah. Yep. It is. Very much so.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Is that the tie in with Family in Crisis maybe a little bit? You're trying to educate families pre-problems with kids or in the midst of it.

Mark Gregston: Yeah.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Hey, this is what typically is happening, and this is what we've got to take care of. I think that's a lot of what you were addressing just a moment ago, building that relationship capacity all over again.

Mark Gregston: Yeah. Well, those that have pre-teens that, I mean, you've got to get ready. The time is coming, the things are going to change.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Oh, yeah.

Mark Gregston: If you don't like your child, you need to learn to love your child. Then you're looking at him in the wrong perspective, you're letting your relationship being determined by behavior rather than the heart of a child. And that's probably why they're acting out. Sometimes I say that the kid who's struggling may be the healthiest in the whole family because they're struggling against something that's not working. And I think that's where a Family in Crisis conference is to help those people that don't send their kids to Heartlight. But it's also to give other families a look at this. If you think you're going to be headed towards something that is going to kind of veer off the main road and you're going to be dealing with struggles in the future, there's some things that you can do now to change the way you engage with your child, to hopefully never get to the point where you have to send your child off to come live with me at Heartlight.

Dr. Tim Clinton: That is a sobering thought, you know that? In this twisted world, there's such a battle for kids and we're up against it. I think every parent out there knows it. Those digital devices and more, they've got so much coming at our kids, so much tearing at their hearts. There's so much confusion. And then the pace and the pressure and the pain of modern day life has taken over. The busy, preoccupied parents missing a lot of opportunity to step into the lives of his son or daughter or her son or daughter. Mark, it's a challenge. Dr. Dobson years ago said, "Parenting isn't for cowards."

Mark Gregston: Yeah.

Dr. Tim Clinton: This is work. The privilege, Mark, and I want to wrap up the broadcast today, and I want to speak to parents out there who may be just sucking a little wind. They're in a spin. They're struggling. They're struggling maybe to like their son or daughter. They're struggling with behavior that there's no way they can condone it. They've tried to draw lines and their discipline strategies aren't working. They're frustrated. They know things are escalating. They're even maybe worried about what's going to happen. Mark, what do you say to them and what should they do?

Mark Gregston: Yeah. I think the first thing is say we need to change. I mean, something has got to change and the change can't be that if my kid would just stop doing this stuff, then we'd be okay. The change has got to begin with me. I've got to change my mindset about how I parent. Maybe give up some things that aren't working, put some new tool in a parenting toolbox that will work and say, what do I need to do to counter the effects that this culture is having on our kids? I mean, you and I have said this. We're glad that we don't have to grow up in this culture. Well, our kids do. And because they do, because they do, they're struggling because I mean, we can get out of it. They can't.

And so that means I've got to make some accommodations, maybe not play as much golf and spend more time with my child, maybe not be gone all the time and spend more time with my child. And then when I do that, not just share

information, but share wisdom to give them opportunities, to give them experience, to help them observe things differently, to get them to reflect on life differently. My dad never engaged with me. I figured it out on myself. I don't think I'd be able to do that in today's culture. And so it takes a parent that's involved in the life of their child to get a child to seek wisdom, whatever they observe, whatever they reflect on, whatever they experience, and parents hold the key to making that happen.

Dr. Tim Clinton: That old adage, rules without relationship fuels a lot of rebellion.

Mark Gregston: It really does.

Dr. Tim Clinton: And rules with relationship brings a lot of respect. How about connection?

Mark Gregston: Yeah.

Dr. Tim Clinton: That's a good word. Yeah. Pressing back in. You know that. Closing word, a lot of dads, you talk to them, they think it's too late, that they've blown it and there's no recovery. I've met a few of those dads, or I've met some dads who've tried to reach out to their kids and they won't talk to them anymore. No relationship. That's not an easy spot to be in.

Mark Gregston: It's not. But you know what?

Dr. Tim Clinton: But there's hope somewhere in this.

Mark Gregston: There is, and I've seen the worst of situations. You name it, we've seen it. We've dealt with it. I mean, I know five kids that have died this past year of drug overdoses. I know 48 kids who have taken their life. I know. I mean, in the worst of situations. You look at relationships within families, everything, whatever you can think of, those relationships can be restored at any time, but it's first got to start with a dad who says, "I want to have that relationship." Then you don't stop. I love my kids enough and I'll allow them to hate me.

That's okay, if we're going to get to a better place. Discipline takes on a whole new perspective of saying, "I'm going to help my child get to a place that they want to be, and I'm going to keep them from where they don't want to end up." It's all about the way that I get to engage with them and whether I'm offering them something that a child says, I need this desperately, and I'm convinced that every father out there has the ability to do that. It's just maybe not the way you've been doing it, maybe doing it different. And I don't tell men they're wrong. Men don't like to be told they're wrong. Am I right?

Dr. Tim Clinton: They like being told what to do.

Mark Gregston: Of course. That's right.



Dr. Tim Clinton: Fix it.

Mark Gregston: That's right.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Let's get this thing done.

Mark Gregston: That's right.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Hey, got it. What are we going to do?

Mark Gregston: Yeah. And let's go to the next stage. And I think that's where some emphasis can help all these parents to say, "You can get to a better place. Your child really desires to have a relationship with you. They long to have a great relationship with you." You've just got to be the one in the catalyst that makes it work.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Mark, I know tomorrow we're going to talk a lot more about what you call this brand new devotional, *Daily Hope for Families*. It's about how to do that very thing and oh, how to press through some of those tough issues, like anger and discouragement and frustration and so much more. But Mark, if people want to learn more about Heartlight Ministries, we've talked about that and the great work you're doing down there, where do they go? Where do they turn?

Mark Gregston: Well, the first place, just [heartlightministries.org](http://heartlightministries.org). That would be the place to go to. If you want to talk about a Family in Crisis conference, go to [familycrisisretreat.com](http://familycrisisretreat.com). We're here to help families in any way that we can, so please don't hesitate to get ahold of us.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Our special guest, again, has been Mark Gregston, counselor par excellence. The guy who gets it. He understands today's generations and he's doing a marvelous work for families in crisis. I hope you'll tune in again tomorrow as we talk about *Daily Hope for Families*. On behalf of Dr. Dobson, his wife, Shirley, the entire team here, thank you, Mark. We appreciate you taking time out and pray that God will continue to bless your ministry, your efforts. Thank you for joining us.

Mark Gregston: You bet.

Roger Marsh: If your family is going through a challenging time right now, know that there is hope. Lean into the Lord for wisdom. If you're looking for encouragement, please call us here at the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute and a member of our trained customer care team will be happy to provide you with some helpful resources. Just call 877-732-6825. That's 877-732-6825. And be sure to join us again tomorrow for part two of the conversation with Mark Gregston of Heartlight Ministries and co-host Dr. Tim Clinton here on Family Talk. They will continue discussing the issues families are facing today. And friends, if you have been blessed by our ministry, please consider supporting us with a financial donation. The Dr. James Dobson Family Institute is completely listener-

supported. It's because of you and your prayers and your support that we are able to bring quality content and resources to you each and every day.

Throughout the month of June, thanks to some special friends of our ministry, we have a matching grant in place. Now this grant goes up to \$300,000, and every dollar we receive between now and the end of the month, which is tomorrow, will be doubled for twice the impact. Now only a couple of days left to utilize that matching grant, so don't wait. You can give securely right on our homepage when you go to Dr. James Dobson.org. That's [jdramesdobson.org](http://jdramesdobson.org). Or give our customer care team a call. They'll be happy to process your donation for you. 877-732-6825. That's 877-732-6825. I'm Roger Marsh, and from all of us here at the JDFI, thanks so much for making us a part of your day, and be sure to join us again tomorrow right here for another edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk.

Announcer:

This has been a presentation of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute.