



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: Protecting Your Middle Schooler During Those Turbulent Years

Guest(s): Dr. Brenda Hunter and Kristen Blair

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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: Welcome today to Family Talk. I'm Roger Marsh, and here we are landing on the first day of September. Hopefully the kids are starting back up with their classes, be it at a Christian school or perhaps a public school, maybe even homeschooling this year.

Most of us have very fond memories of our time in elementary school. So many new things to be learned, reading, writing, and arithmetic, of course. You might remember playing with friends at recess or celebrating the seasons with fun activities. And then, right out of nowhere, here comes middle school. Puberty begins, and you and your classmates are all trying to figure out your place in the world. It's a time of many changes, and middle school in today's world is even more challenging. Everything is connected through the internet. Most kids have cell phones and mobile devices and, well, bullying is no longer limited just to the school yard, it takes place in many different forms.

As children enter adolescence, it seems like the challenges that they're facing are somewhat insurmountable. So how do we protect our middle schoolers against the trials and tribulations that they will soon face? Well, today, on this classic edition of Family Talk, we will explore the big issues and offer some helpful solutions, featuring a conversation with our own Dr. James Dobson and his guests, Dr. Brenda Hunter and her daughter, Kristen Blair. Dr. Hunter and her daughter will be sharing about the book that they co-wrote, entitled *From Santa to Sexting*, which talks about how fast kids are being pushed out of childhood.

Now, since this program was originally recorded several years ago, Dr. Brenda Hunter has since gone home to be with the Lord. That happened in 2017. She was 76 years of age and is survived by her husband, Don. Dr. Brenda Hunter was an author and a practicing psychologist. She appeared on many national TV shows, like *The Today Show*, *CBS This Morning*, and *Larry King Live*. Brenda and Don raised two grown daughters, Holly and Kristen, who you'll hear from later on in the program.

Kristen Blair is an education columnist and an author. Now, I know her mom must be very proud of her. She also serves as the communications director of the North Carolina Coalition for Charter Schools. Kristen Blair is married to her husband, Greg, and together they have two children.

So let's join this classic edition of the Family Talk broadcast right now, featuring Dr. Brenda Hunter and her daughter, Kristen Blair, with our own Dr. James Dobson.

Dr. James Dobson: I was thinking, in preparation for this broadcast, that the junior high years for me were terribly difficult. And I'm not unusual in that, because nearly everybody goes through that. But I've had such a happy life. I had great parents, and I just did not suffer much all the way through, and married well, so things have gone well for me. But those two middle school years were horrendous. Just the social pressure of the whole thing and a lot of stuff I don't want to remember real well.

But it's nothing compared to what today's middle school students are going through. It seems at times like the culture is determined to warp and destroy those children and to keep them from being kids, force them into adolescence and beyond. So we really do need to talk about this subject. Fortunately, we have some folks here who know a lot more about it than I do. A longtime friend of mine, Dr. Brenda Hunter, with whom I've done a number of radio programs through the years, is back with us. Brenda, you and I have not seen each other in 11 years, is that right?

Dr. Brenda Hunter: At least 11 years, yes. We left Washington, DC, my husband and I, about 11 years ago.

Dr. James Dobson: You have done a lot of great work through the years.

Dr. Brenda Hunter: Well, thank you. Appreciate that.

Dr. James Dobson: I have admired you, and I'm delighted to have you here. Your daughter is here with you also, Kristen Blair. The two of you together have written a book on the subject, *From Santa to Sexting: Helping Your Child Navigate Middle School and Shape the Choices that Last a Lifetime*. Kristen, it's good to have you here. You collaborated with your mom in writing this book.

Kristen Blair: That's right. Thank you. It's great to be here. We did work on this quite a large project together and learned a lot about writing a book as a mother-daughter team.

Dr. James Dobson: Now, you're a columnist. You write on this subject.

Kristen Blair: I write about education during the K-12 years, that's right. I've written a number of articles about technology that interface with kids in the K-12 years too. And I'm the mother of a 10-year-old and a 15-year-old, so this is very personal.

Dr. James Dobson: So you're living it as well.

Kristen Blair: I am in the trenches with all those moms and dads out there.

Dr. James Dobson: Brenda Hunter is Dr. Brenda Hunter. She's a psychologist, got a PhD from Georgetown University, and she is also a psychotherapist in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and has a wonderful perspective on home life and on marriage and raising children. It's been a wonderful career for you, hasn't it, Brenda?

Dr. Brenda Hunter: Well, my life has never lacked a sense of meaning and purpose, I tell you. Our first show together was *Where Have All the Mothers Gone?* I met you in Washington, DC, and then you commissioned my publisher to pay my way. I think it was California. That's the first time I ever was on your show.

Dr. James Dobson: That's where we did our first program.

Dr. Brenda Hunter: No, I tell you, everything I have read, the work I do with people in their 20s, 30s, and 40s, I'm absolutely convinced that that attachment relationship a child establishes with mother and father in that first year of life puts them on a trajectory to be emotionally secure or insecure. We found research when we did this book, a connection with bullying, actually.

Dr. James Dobson: Well, that's a subject that greatly interests me. In fact, I wrote about it in my book, *Bringing Up Girls*, because the attachment either occurs or doesn't occur early. It's why I really regret the fact that many young mothers who would like to be home by choice, especially for infants and one and two-year-olds, because that attachment is so important from that foundation. But they don't have that choice because of financial reasons and so on.

I want to read something that is from your book, *From Santa to Sexting*, and this is what you wrote, "Not long ago these kids were in elementary school and some believed in Santa Claus. They were fresh and free. They rode their bikes, they brushed and braided their dolls' hair, and stacked Legos. They doodled, consumed delicacies from their Easy-Bake Ovens, and memorized their math facts. Barely on the cusp of adolescence, they are now thrust into an adult world, stripped bare of the parental protections afforded to previous generations. Marketers have coined the term age compression to describe the brevity of contemporary childhood. Sadly, for some, childhood ends at age nine." Is that actually true?

Dr. Brenda Hunter: That's what we are learning in the research and in talking to some parents.

Kristen Blair: I actually attended an internet marketing summit in the fall, and the keynote speaker commented, "The gatekeepers of society have lost their keys." So I think from there what we are looking at is a situation in which in too many homes, the walls that protect children have been dismantled. We have returned over and over again to this motif of the Book of Nehemiah. As you know, Nehemiah who was cup-bearer to the Persian king, went back to Jerusalem and assessed the damage and found that the gates were burning and the walls were broken down. But what we loved about that was that he brought the people together to rebuild the walls, and people were stationed by family to rebuild these walls. So it's our hope through this book that we can shed a light on what is going on for this age group, this pivotal time of life, but also to encourage and empower parents to begin to rebuild in those homes where the walls are dismantled.

Dr. James Dobson: That's one of my favorite passages in scripture, because the Jewish people had been taken into exile and they had been there for 70 years, and finally, King Cyrus began letting them go. And Nehemiah and Ezra were two of the first that came back to Jerusalem and immediately began rebuilding.

The passion of those two books, Ezra and Nehemiah, is extremely meaningful for me because they were rummaging around in what was left of the temple, and they found the old scrolls from Moses, telling people how to live their lives, righteousness, and the principles that had been in scripture, and it so moved them that they pulled everybody together. You remember what I'm talking about?

Kristen Blair: Mm-hmm.

Dr. James Dobson: They had all the people who had been returned to Jerusalem to gather. And Nehemiah stood on a large stand and began reading the commandments and God's word, and they were all weeping because they saw again what had happened to them as a culture. I wish there was a parallel today where more pastors and more school teachers and more parents would understand those old principles still apply, and we should weep before the Lord at what we're doing to our own kids.

Dr. Brenda Hunter: I agree. The thing that came to us so clearly is the gates of Jerusalem are burning, the gates of the family are down. And we just feel that it's so important that the gates be rebuilt, because when the gates are down, anything can go in and out of the family. That's what we have in so many American homes.

We interviewed, for example, a principal of a Durham, North Carolina Middle School who said that she buses all of her kids home to empty houses. The empty house is something we don't talk about in our culture. It's sort of the elephant in the middle of the living room. But the empty house, at the very least, is a lonely place. At its very worst, it's a place where sex can occur, where drugs can be taken, or where just endless time can be spent using social networking devices.

So we are asking kids to raise themselves without parental availability, emotional availability, and physical availability.

Dr. James Dobson: And they can't do it.

Dr. Brenda Hunter: They can't do it. They never have been able to do it.

Kristen Blair: What we are looking at is just a revolution in terms of how kids consume media, and this has been brought about by this explosion in mobile devices. Just to provide a little bit of context in terms of time, we wondered how much time do kids in this age range use, how much time do kids in this age range spend with media each day. The answer is that kids in the 11 to 14 age range are actually the heaviest media users of any group of children along the K-12 continuum, and they spend on average, nine hours per day. So we're seeing a real sea change in terms of both the accessibility of media and the amount of time that kids are spending with it.

Of course, when you bring mobile devices into the equation, those are often used outside the parameters of parental guidelines or offsite, at school and the car, at sports practice, et cetera. So there's been a huge change.

Dr. Brenda Hunter: And isn't it true that on average, kids send 3,700 texts per month? Is it per month?

Kristen Blair: Right. Well, and almost I would say half of teen cell phone users send between 3,000 and 6,000 text messages per month. So it's quite a bit of time.

Dr. Brenda Hunter: And you notice our title has the word "sexting" in it. Just an ordinary cell phone can be used by a child to send a nude image to a boyfriend or to a girlfriend. And there have been two very sad suicides, one of a 13-year-old in Florida. Because what happened, she sent a nude image of her breast to her boyfriend, and he sent it to other people in the school and it went viral. And she was shunned in her middle school and she couldn't handle it psychologically, so she hanged herself.

Dr. James Dobson: You talk extensively about cyberbullying in your book. Talk about that to parents and what its implications are.

Dr. Brenda Hunter: I think we both can address that. We interviewed one principal of a middle school who said that when she arrives at school on Monday morning, she will find a line of parents complaining about cyberbullying, about the accusations, the hurting words that their children received through the internet over the weekend. Cyberbullying is constant, according to the school personnel that we interviewed.

Kristen Blair: That's right. They said it's the biggest problem that they deal with. This is in middle school. And it's really not all that surprising when you think about the

fact that bullying peaks in middle school, because of where kids are developmentally, and then so many of them have the tools of technology. So you have this sort of volatile combination coming together, and it is, as we heard, something that administrators are dealing with all the time.

Even if it doesn't rise to the level of cyberbullying, one father told me that his daughter was going online and she was always hearing about things that she wasn't invited to and she was always feeling left out just constantly. So that didn't even rise to the level of real persecution.

Dr. Brenda Hunter: Name-calling.

Kristen Blair: But it was-

Dr. James Dobson: Kristen, I'm sorry to interrupt, but there is an example in the book of you talking about your own childhood. You went through a tough time too, didn't you?

Kristen Blair: I did. I did. In fact, I write about this in the book. Seventh grade was pretty painful. I was a student at Sparta Junior High School in Sparta, New Jersey, and I actually had this enormous orthodontic appendage called a Bionator, which was a top and bottom retainer all in one, so that certainly didn't help matters. But one day, as I entered the cafeteria, I noticed that a piece of paper was passed around the table of girls with whom I ate lunch. I discovered, as I asked the ringleader of our group, that they had voted me off the lunch table. That they had circulated this piece of paper. That was extremely painful. I still remember. And I resonated with what you said at the beginning of the broadcast, that this can be a really difficult time.

Dr. Brenda Hunter: I think the middle school, we called it junior high, it's always been a painful period. It's a pivotal age, but it's a time of physical changes, hormonal changes, when kids don't value what their parents say as much as they used to. So it's always been that kind of experience. But then you add onto it the layers of home invasion that we're talking about here today, and then it becomes potentially really awful.

I just want to say something that came across my desk recently. It's part of the recent CDC, the Center for Disease Control, study on youth risk and surveillance study. It says that 25% of middle schoolers, and this is in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg County area in North Carolina, had thought seriously about suicide the preceding year, and that one out of nine said they had attempted suicide. We're having mood disorders, depression especially, escalate among kids of this age in America today, and that's of great concern.

Dr. James Dobson: In my book, *Bringing Up Girls*, I wrote extensively about the hormonal changes that are taking place. That the brain is assaulted by estrogen, speaking of girls, and testosterone, speaking of boys. And if your kids seem a little crazy-

Dr. Brenda Hunter: They are.

Dr. James Dobson: ... they are. They are. The brain has not developed yet-

Dr. Brenda Hunter: No.

Dr. James Dobson: ... and it is being bombarded by these hormonal influences. Not only estrogen and testosterone, but many others as well. So you really do have to kind of hang on-

Dr. Brenda Hunter: You do.

Dr. James Dobson: ... during that time. My advice to the parents is just get them through it. You're not going to straighten them out. I mean, you can-

Dr. Brenda Hunter: That's good.

Dr. James Dobson: ... sit down and have a little conversation about not being so goofy, but you've got to wait.

Dr. Brenda Hunter: That is true. My little mantra when my girls were in middle school was, "Hang on, Snoopy, hang on." There was a little song over at that time. You do.

It seems to me, as an older parent, that parents really have lost their whole sense of authority in their children's lives. This is what we heard repeatedly, that parents now want to be friends, they want to be buddies, and that role reversal lives. That parents ask their children what they should do about certain things, and that children sometimes rule the roost. And then the consequence of that is that a lot of children have no respect for their parents. And what we heard repeatedly is they don't respect their teachers or the principals in their schools. They walk into the school and they say, "These are my halls, these are my classrooms. I don't have to do what you tell me to do."

So there's been this sort of loss of authority in the home. And we urge parents to reclaim their God-given authority with their children and to remember that they're shaping hearts and minds and souls. And as one mother we interviewed said, "I'm going to have to stand before God someday and talk about the parenting that I've done." That's pretty heavy. That's pretty serious stuff. And it's more important than, "Is my kid going to be cool on Monday morning because he played a certain video game?"

Dr. James Dobson: Kristen, let's go back to what you said about not giving cell phones and other advanced technologies to kids very early. Let them get into high school. Is that your position?

Kristen Blair: That's my position personally and it's the position that the two of us take in this book. The rationale for that is not, again, that these are bad things, these are

great tools, but that kids in the 11 to 14 age range, they're just not there developmentally. I think it was Dr. Walsh, a psychologist, who said that in those early years of adolescence, they're ready for a NASCAR-paced adulthood, but they have the brakes of a Model T. And unfortunately, the internet is not very forgiving for someone who has the brakes of a Model T. Once it's out there, it's out there.

I came across a survey by TRUSTe, which is the top provider of online privacy seals, and they tell parents the internet never forgets. It's very difficult, once you have put something out there, to get it back. And one of the things that concerns me as I write about education is safeguarding a child's digital footprint, because some of these things, for kids who overshare, may come back to haunt them when they're looking for a job and even earlier when they're applying to colleges. And we see now that about a quarter of admissions officials at colleges are now looking at applicants' social networking pages. And for some kids, I think about 12%, this is negatively affecting their chances of getting in, which is pretty devastating. If you've worked hard on your GPA and your overall resume and have made some bad choices online.

Dr. James Dobson: You're telling me that what a child has done on Facebook is available there and can be accessed by admissions officers?

Kristen Blair: That's true. Now, some kids use-

Dr. James Dobson: Oh my goodness.

Kristen Blair: ... privacy settings, so they're restricting the audience that can view their information. I think we see about two-thirds of kids use privacy settings. That means about one-third of teens do not use them at all. But here's something that got me, which was 60% of kids use the privacy controls to conceal information from certain friends, including their parents, and that about 42% accept friend requests from strangers.

Dr. James Dobson: You know what? Time has gone. We are going to have to end the program today. The title of the book is *From Santa to Sexting*, and it is written by Dr. Brenda Hunter and her daughter, Kristen Blair, and the subtitle is *Helping Your Child Safely Navigate Middle School and Shape the Choices that Last a Lifetime*. I do hope that our listeners will get a copy of this. If you have a child in that age range, you owe it to yourself to get this book and read it, understand it, and apply it.

Thank you all for writing it, for being with us on these two programs. There's going to be a lot of folks out there who will really be appreciative of what they've heard, so-

Dr. Brenda Hunter: Thank you so much-

Kristen Blair: Thank you for having us.

Roger Marsh: We must keep our children and grandchildren in our prayers, especially our middle schoolers. They are facing more and more perilous issues that are sometimes beyond what they should have to deal with, and doing so at such a delicate and vulnerable age.

You've been listening to a conversation featuring our own Dr. James Dobson, the late Dr. Brenda Hunter, and her daughter, Kristen Blair here on Family Talk. If you'd like to share today's program with a friend or a loved one, or give it another listen yourself, simply visit our website at drjamesdobson.org/familytalk. That's drjamesdobson.org/familytalk.

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I'm Roger Marsh, and on behalf of Dr. Dobson and all of us here at the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute, thanks for listening and have a safe Labor Day weekend. Be sure to join us again next time 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.