



## Broadcast Transcript

**Broadcast:** Tools of the Trail: Raising Adventurous Boys – Part 1

**Guest(s):** Mark Hancock

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**Dr. James Dobson:** Welcome everyone to Family Talk. It's a ministry of the James Dobson Family Institute supported by listeners just like you. I'm Dr. James Dobson and I'm thrilled that you've joined us.

**Roger Marsh:** Welcome to Family Talk. I'm Roger Marsh. You know, the development and growth that occurs during childhood is so critical for building the foundation in which boys and girls will live their lives. And for young boys especially to receive guidance from Christian men is incredibly important, especially if they come from a home where Dad is not present or is not standing up to be the spiritual leader of their family.

On today's classic Family Talk program, Dr. Dobson will talk with the founder and CEO of Trail Life USA. Mark Hancock. Mark's Christian Outdoor Ministry works to teach spiritual lessons to young boys in very practical ways. Let's join our special guest, Mark Hancock and our own Dr. James Dobson right here, right now on Family Talk.

**Dr. James Dobson:** It's been two years now since I had a chance to talk to a man that was leading an exciting outdoor adventure program for boys and young men, and he still has that responsibility. It's called Trail Life USA, and it's been growing by leaps and bounds. That CEO of the program is Mark Hancock and he's back in the studio with me today to talk about their continued focus on biblical values and how they're teaching and mentoring the boys and young men and their care.

And he's an award-winning writer and international conference speaker. He's been an associate pastor, a global events director and a marriage and family therapist, specializes in father issues. A good man, he cares about kids, including two of his own boys, and he has been one of the founding members of Trail Life USA and has been from the beginning. Mark, glad to have you back.

**Mark Hancock:** It's great to be here, Dr. Dobson.

**Dr. James Dobson:** You live in South Carolina.

**Mark Hancock:** I live in Greenville, South Carolina. That's where they headquarters of Trail Life USA is located.

Dr. James Dobson: You came all the way to Colorado Springs.

Mark Hancock: I did, and I'm privileged. It's an honor to be here with you, Dr. Dobson.

Dr. James Dobson: Tell me about the growth of Trail Life. It really has caught fire, hasn't it?

Mark Hancock: Trail life continues to grow at an amazing pace. We're just almost four years old. We're in 48 states. We're chartered in over 720 troops, mainly in churches across the country, somewhere around 26,000 members as I'm speaking to you. We've seen some tremendous growth.

Dr. James Dobson: Now, Trail Life finds its identity not only in taking boys out into the outdoors and giving them that experience with their fathers and teaching them a lot of things we're going to talk about, but finds its identity in being different from the Boy Scouts. Is that an accurate statement?

Mark Hancock: I think it's very accurate. There are some key differences between us and the Boy Scouts. First of all, the obvious one is we are specifically and unapologetically a Christian organization, that's our foundation on the Word of God. We're not a scouting group that's having a Christian experience. We are at our core, a Christian ministry that is using the outdoors, that is using these character building skills, that's using these leadership developing skills in order to reach young men for the gospel.

Dr. James Dobson: Now, in the early days of scouting, the Boy Scouts of America they also found their identity in a spiritual component. I don't know if it was always Christian, was it in the early days?

Mark Hancock: When it started they talked about their duty to God. It was accepted at that time. Everybody understood who God was. Now of course, this culture is headed in the direction that is, we find it more and more necessary to define who God is. So they started with that duty to God and it was just assumed that there was a Christian emphasis. Just like in our culture 40 years ago it was assumed everybody was a Christian and that's kind of how Boy Scouts was. But in the last four or five years in particular, we've just seen a string of decisions on their part that just shows that they've kind of left that course and they are kind beholden to this cultural slide that we see going on.

Dr. James Dobson: Mark put flesh on those bones. What has happened to Boy Scouts?

Mark Hancock: Some of the things that have happened specifically, and they're not necessarily in the membership of Boy Scouts but in the leadership of Boy Scouts, is that they've kind of embraced some of this cultural slide or this direction that the culture is headed in. They announced that they were comfortable having open and avowed homosexual boys be a part of their program. Now of course there's probably always been homosexual boys in the program, but the open and

avowed thing was very difficult for many churches to go along with and continue to charter troops.

And then one year later they opened up to open and avowed homosexual leaders, and then about six months later they opened up to transgender or girls who want to live as boys to be part of their membership too. So we just think that there's a series of decisions that have been made frankly we think are dangerous for boys and girls who could be confused about their sexuality.

Dr. James Dobson: What has that done to scouting? Tell me why you, and I agree with you so this is not a challenging statement, tell me why you think it's a big mistake to have homosexuals as leaders of scouting.

Mark Hancock: Well, I think that if we want to set examples for our young men and if we adhere to the timeless traditional biblical values that as believers we embrace and it's very difficult to put a leader in front of a young man who lives a lifestyle that could be confusing. And I remember a quote that you made, Dr. Dobson, you say it best in your call to parents when you said, "Protect your boys and girls from those who would seek to confuse their sexual identity." And I think that is such a mandate for parents.

Dr. James Dobson: I'd forgotten that, but that's a pretty good statement.

Mark Hancock: It's good stuff. It's good stuff, because of all the confusion that goes along within our culture, this cultural slide, there's no question who's left to stand strong to say that these timeless biblical traditional values that really brought us here today, they're not to blame for the mess. Who's going to build a generation of courageous young men that honor God, that lead with integrity, that are concerned about these types of things. And so if you begin to give up your moral compass, you've lost your way. And I think that's what we've seen in Boy Scouts of America where they somewhat have lost their way. And at that point it's kind of like anything goes. You no longer have that anchor that holds you to your sound beliefs.

Dr. James Dobson: Read it again. That's so good. I want to hear it again.

Mark Hancock: Well, you said "Protect your boys and girls..." This was a call to parents, "Protect your boys and girls from those who would seek to confuse their sexual identity." And that does fall to the parents to do that.

Dr. James Dobson: And boys would ask him the leading questions. They're like that. They want to know what do you think? "You have a male friend who lives with you, do you love him?" Who knows the conversations that could take place around a campfire like that and I wouldn't want that to happen.

Mark Hancock: Well turn that around to what it is we do in Trail Life USA. We like to think in terms of tools that you need for a hike on a trail and a compass is an important

tool. So when you lose that compass on the trail, you're in big trouble. When you think about Trail Life and our unapologetically Christian stance, the conversations that are going on around the fire there where you're having a Christian mentor who's discipling these young men in the ways of the word of God, who's teaching them things like courage and conviction and integrity and talking about these biblical foundational kind of principles and growing up, we've shorted boys in that type of experience. And where else can you go?

It's an environment where it's all males who are focused on outdoor adventure and enjoying the comradery of being together, enjoying the outdoors and taking on challenges. Not only do boys need a compass, they need a mountain, they need a challenge. In our culture, we don't challenge boys anymore. We've taken all the challenge away. You don't see any Red Rover, Red Rover in the schools anymore or Tag or any of those other things because someone has told us that those are bad for their self-esteem. We've taken away the challenges and we forced them -

Dr. James Dobson: Do I disagree with that!

Mark Hancock: I'm sure you do. That rough and tumble stuff is good for boys and if you see them and they're running around and laughing and playing rough and tumble, that's very different from a boy who we're thinking, oh, he's developing in an aggressive act and he's going to be some sort of trouble. But somehow we've lost sight of that.

And so where else do the boys go to have this kind of opportunity to grow like that? And we feel like in Trail Life USA, we're offering that. We're offering a challenge. We're challenging them in their terms of their character. How can you do that if you don't have a compass? If you don't have something firm to say this is right or this is wrong?

We're not into that trendy political correctness. We're into traditional principles of conviction. And so that's a totally different environment. So you look at that same fire and a man sitting around the fire sharing with those boys, we really believe that nowhere else in culture boys are having this opportunity to really be boys, to just let boys be boys.

Historically, a boy who's allowed to be a boy takes on these rough and tumble kind of things and achieves his challenges. His self-esteem is growing. But we've chased him out of the outdoors and because they have an inherent desire to take on those kind of challenges, now they're finding it in a video game. So they're inside, they're fighting the battles in virtual reality instead of outdoor reality.

And I was talking to a single mother who said that she sent her son away for a week on a hiking trip with this Trail Life troop he had just joined. She said when he came home he was taller. He said he went out there and he said, "Mom, I

wasn't sure I could do it. I just wasn't sure I could do it. And the first day I was tired and I thought, how am I going to accomplish this?" But he stuck it out and he hung in there and he carried that heavy pack and he climbed that mountain. She said he came home taller.

What a blessing for a single mom. She's got four boys in Trail Life. What a blessing for a single mom to know that there's men who will take him out and let them experience that. Counter that to a boy who says, "Hey mom, I just accomplished the 42nd level in my video game." Well, are you going to cheer that on? Look at what it is that we're offering boys. Boys need that kind of adventure. They need a compass. They need a mountain to climb. They need that kind of challenge.

Dr. James Dobson: They need to know what it means to be a man.

Mark Hancock: Exactly. And that's why it's confusing. If you begin to mix up that gathering and you have boys and men who are unsure of their sexual identity, you lose the opportunity for that dedicated time where they get to feed off of each other, figure out who it is that they are, with men, godly men, who are showing them who it is that they can be. There just isn't anything like that.

Dr. James Dobson: Talk about the organizational structure of Trail Life. I understand about 99% of those programs originate in the local church. Is that right?

Mark Hancock: Exactly. Our mission, our vision is that the Trail Life troop is an outreach of a local church and that's how a Trail life troop starts. Members of a local church will have a vision or passion for mentoring young men, discipling young men, giving them into the outdoors, giving them a robust award program, and they'll contact us and say, "We want to start a troop." And they can do that at [traillifeusa.com](http://traillifeusa.com).

They contact us, say they want to start a troop, we talk with a pastor because we want to ensure that that church has mission alignment with Trail Life USA and we also want to make sure that that church is not just letting the troop meet there, but that church is recognizing that in the most powerful use of the program Trail Life USA troop is an outreach of that church. And I was telling you earlier about the church that I ran into where the pastor has turned his entire Wednesday evening service over to Trail Life USA and American Heritage Girls, kind of the girl counterpart to us.

Dr. James Dobson: Yeah, they're both great.

Mark Hancock: And that Wednesday night, they don't have a midweek service anymore. He's told the people in his church, "If you have boys in trail life, you come on Wednesday night and you put them in Trail life and you serve. If you have girls, you put them in AHG, American Heritage Girls and you serve. If you don't have kids, you come here because there are boys and girls here that need your

influence. They need your wisdom. They need a father-like to help them get through these difficult times."

Dr. James Dobson: Well, speaking of that, suppose you have a boy whose father is not interested. He considers himself too busy to participate, to go into the outdoors area and he just is not going to be supportive of you. What do you do? Is that boy still eligible?

Mark Hancock: Oh, absolutely. We have a lot of boys whose fathers don't attend and then we have a lot of boys from single mother homes. And we have a lot of men in our program, they feel that is their call. We have a lot of them in our program don't have sons in the program. I met a gentleman in Texas a couple of weeks ago who he lost his father when he was young and he had a male mentor who came along and he told me this with tears in his eyes. He says, "Mark, I care about those fatherless boys."

And in that troop he's reaching out to those boys without dads and providing them a place. Now if you have a father who's just not interested in the program, my experience is that those are dads who are struggling with how to spend time with their son. Had a man at an event take out of his trunk, a box with a tent in it, and it was brand new tent and he tore it open and then he took out two sleeping bags and tore the bag open and set them up. I ran into him the next morning, he said, "I got to tell you, this is my first camping trip ever with my son." At that moment, his five or six year old son came running up to him, threw his arms around his leg, gave him a big smile and then just went running away.

And you knew that at that point, and we were both standing there choking back a tear because it was just such a beautiful moment. So there's a dad who may not have had the opportunity or didn't know what to do with his son. Remember we've got a generation of a lot of men who did not have the traditional fathering that we know from the generation before. They don't know how to raise their sons. And so that's another part of our ministry is dads get to be alongside other dads and watch how they're connecting with their sons.

So we don't just think of ourselves as a mentorship organization for boys, although it's our primary focus. We see dads who are coming alive. It was in an event in Ohio and a father came up to me and said, "This is my first time ever camping with my 11-year-old son." He said, "I got to tell you, I was walking from one event to the other and my son was walking with me and he reached up and he held my hand." I said, "Really?" He said, "Yeah." He says, with tears in his eyes, he says, "I thought that was over. I thought I would never have that type of connection with my son because I didn't have that with my own father. And now I'm looking at our future with Trail Life USA, which is going to take us on these events as much as we can bear it and I'll be able to share these experiences with my son in a way that my dad was never able to share it with me."

So even if you have a father who's not interested in the program, we put them in front of other men just to watch. Because remember, they may not have been fathered properly, but they can see other fathers who are interested in pouring into sons.

And that father-like figure in our troop, that mentor, that Christian mentor in our troop, they're background checked, their child and safety youth protection trained, they're such a powerful force because they're taking these boys who have not had a father and they're bringing them along.

Dr. James Dobson: All right, what's a typical weekend event like? You drive to some place that's designated, you get out and you set up tents and make a campsite and then you begin hiking?

Mark Hancock: Well, there's a great variety. If you were to look at our Facebook page today, you'd see the numerous posts of what our troops are doing. Some are going for a weekend, like you said, of backpacking. Some are going zip lining, some are going bouldering, some are going kayaking, canoeing, whatever it is that that troop is interested in. A lot of times it has to do with what region they're in or what state they're in or the time of year. The variety of activities in our troops is just always amazing to me.

Dr. James Dobson: Do you do any repelling?

Mark Hancock: Oh yeah. They do a ton of that. I'll see troops posting on our Facebook page and I'll be, well, I wish I was in that troop. They're out. Well, I have two sons and I won't call out, which is which, but we did a repelling thing and one of them hung on the edge of that thing for the longest time and had to be talked through it and the other one just jumped right off and he was gone.

But we hear the boys overcoming those challenges of heights or those challenges of carrying a heavy pack up a mountain and that's powerful stuff. We don't have that anywhere in our culture today. And it's tragic that boys are not being challenged in that way to able to grow in that way. We treat them like they have some sort of disease or something just because they're boys, they have a social disease that they can't do the things that we expect from them. Sit still and be quiet and follow the rules.

It's amazing when you set up the right environment, which boys, they love an outside challenge in a hierarchically structured environment. They thrive there. They just want to know, tell me who's with me? Tell me who's in charge and tell me what our mission is. And if you're not answering those questions, then they'll make up their own mission and they'll pick their own leaders and they'll do it the way they're going to do it.

It's amazing when you can line boys up in a structured environment like this and let them be wild. Let them enjoy being a boy. That's how we get adventurous

men. That's how we get men that are confident, that do things, that stand up in front of their families and protect them is by giving them this experience of boyhood and we're sheltering our boys from that experience when they're growing up. So we're so thankful that Trail Life USA is here to give the boys those experiences.

Dr. James Dobson: The last time you were here, we talked a little bit about my book Bringing Up Boys. This I do recall, telling you that it is now well established that boys are not born knowing how to be a man or even how to be a boy. They spend a lot of times with their mothers, a lot of time with their teachers who are usually female and they don't know what it means to be male or masculine.

Mark Hancock: Yeah.

Dr. James Dobson: That's one of your objectives, isn't it?

Mark Hancock: It really is. It's tragic that, and this isn't a statistics you can brag about, but the United States leads the world now in fatherless homes. Isn't that tragic?

Dr. James Dobson: Is that really true?

Mark Hancock: Yeah. And the statistics are daunting. We have four times the poverty level in a home without a father, twice the childhood obesity, seven times a teen pregnancy rate, twice a dropout rate, three times illegal drug use, all in homes because there's not a father there. And so boys need along that trail, they need a map. And a map is evidence that someone has gone before you and has written down what that trail looks like. They need some sort of direction like that.

Boys don't have that in that fatherless home. So we provide a father-like leader, a Christian man in that troop setting who can help the boy to understand the way to what it's that you're talking about. How do I become a man? What is a man? What does a man look like? A lot of them have female teachers and they're with mom all the time.

They don't have that image. So we provide that for them and they need a guide on a hike. Someone going to walk along with them for those treacherous parts, those dangerous parts when the path gets narrow or hard to determine which way the path goes. And we provide them with that, not just the men who are walking along with them, but also the other boys.

When you set an environment like Trail Life USA where we have an oath and a motto that we encourage our boys to live by, you set that environment and the boys are holding each other to a higher standard too. Instead of it being a, I'm going to win your favor by doing something bad now they're winning their favor by standing out as a Trailman. And I got to tell you, Dr. Dobson, my experience -



Dr. James Dobson: Is that what you call them Trailmen?

Mark Hancock: They're called Trailmen. Trailmen are the best men I know. And these adult leaders that I run into across the country, they're an amazing group of men. They're committed to this cause they understand what it is that we're all about. They understand that there's something bigger going on here than just a hiking organization. They get that God is in this and God cares about boys and God cares that they've been stripped of this opportunity to be boys and have fun in a specifically unapologetically Christian boy environment where being a boy is okay.

You don't have to sit there at that desk and be quiet and listen. If I was leading that group of young boys, I'd clear the room of chairs. I'd throw a bunch of Legos and bunch of toys on the floor and say, now let's talk about tying knots and let them do all this stuff. Remember we used to say, you have to change the channel on boys about every five minutes because they don't have a long intention span. Now they say you've got to layer the message to boys because they're getting so much stuff all at once. I've seen that in my own boys. They can listen to music and play a video game and do their homework all at the same time. So we're teaching our leaders, you've got to layer these messages with boys because they're different than girls.

Dr. James Dobson: There are an awful lot of people in this country, including feminist movements and others who do not believe that and they're blind to it.

Mark Hancock: They are.

Dr. James Dobson: They don't want to believe in it. They want to believe that it results from male patriarchic bias of some sort. The truth of the matter is we are made different. Male and female, made He them.

Mark Hancock: Absolutely.

Dr. James Dobson: Men and women, and to deny that is to miss half of humanity. One's not better than the other, but I can tell you that I never felt like a man as much as I did when I went hunting with my dad and I was with him out in the woods. And we would be there before the sun came up, and it's kind of a scary environment. My dad would leave me and go a half mile away. I was out there by myself. I was proud of myself.

Mark Hancock: Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely.

Dr. James Dobson: Even the time when a coyote walked up on me scared the daylights out of me. But those things made me a man.

Mark Hancock: There's something about the outdoors that does that. And I think we are designed to be there as men, and if we steal those opportunities from boys to

pursue that adventure, to do something difficult, we're stealing their opportunities to be men who are going to face difficult things and know that they can overcome them because they overcame them as a boy. This is important stuff.

Dr. James Dobson: Our guest has been Mark Hancock and we've got one more program to do because I want to have you describe what these Boy Scouts do in the way of badges which they put on their chest. And you've got another plan and I want you to describe what it is -

Mark Hancock: I would love to.

Dr. James Dobson: ... because it's clever. Be with us again tomorrow, will you?

Mark Hancock: I would love to.

Roger Marsh: Well, today here on Family Talk, you've been listening to a fascinating conversation featuring our own Dr. James Dobson and his special guest, Mark Hancock of Trail Life USA. Be sure to tune in again tomorrow when you'll hear part two of this conversation. Mark and the Doctor will be discussing some of the very poor decisions the Boy Scouts of America have made over the years, and they'll also talk about what Trail Life USA can offer Christian families as a substitute.

Now, if you missed any part of today's broadcast or if you'd like to learn more about Trail Life USA, simply go to our website at [drjamesdobson.org/familytalk](http://drjamesdobson.org/familytalk). And if you'd like some encouragement as you raise your son to become a God-honoring man, you really should get a copy of Dr. Dobson's bestselling book called *Bringing Up Boys*. This valuable resource is yours as our way of thanking you for a suggested donation of \$20.

And you can get your own copy today by visiting [drjamesdobson.org](http://drjamesdobson.org). Just select the resources tab when you go there, and then click on store again, that's [drjamesdobson.org](http://drjamesdobson.org). Select the resources tab and then click on store. You can pick up the book *Bringing Up Boys*, along with the accompanying DVD as well.

I'm Roger Marsh, hoping you have a great rest of your day. And from all of us here at the JDFI thank you for making us a part of yours. Be sure to tune in again tomorrow for another edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk.

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