



## Broadcast Transcript

**Broadcast:** Rescuing Fatherless Boys - Part 1

**Guest:** John Smithbaker

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Dr. James Dobson: Hello, everyone and welcome to Family Talk. I'm your host, Dr. James Dobson. Today, we're going to be talking about an issue that I believe is at the heart of the crisis our families are facing today. Fatherlessness is pandemic in this country. About 50%, if you can believe this, about 50% of the children in America will go to sleep without their biological father in the home. And 25% of those are boys.

Dr. James Dobson: I could cite many statistics and may do so as we go along today, but I could talk about the impact that this lack of fathers has on children in our society. And we'll get into some of that later. For now, I just want to say that almost every social ill faced by American children is related to the lack of dads, fatherlessness, and particularly those that are committed to their families. Poverty, educational achievement, problems, crime, drug use, and all of those connected things that are related to the plight of fatherlessness.

Dr. James Dobson: As I wrote some time ago in my book, Bringing Up Boys, "The future of Western civilization depends on how we handle the crisis of fatherlessness." And I believe that's more true now than it was then. The numbers are disheartening and it's not time to just wave a white flag. We've got to do something about it. My guest today is committed to the task of saving as many fatherless boys as possible and to change their futures. His name is John Smithbaker. We're of like-mind and like-hearts on many things. John, I'm so glad you're here.

John Smithbaker: Oh, thank you so much. It's a privilege and an honor. You've just been such a hero of mine growing up and reading your book, Bringing Up Boys when I became a father and had a son and looked into his eyes and wondered, "How do I do this?" Since I didn't have a father to show me-

Dr. James Dobson: Yeah. How do I do it better than my dad did.

John Smithbaker: That's right.

Dr. James Dobson: In fact, your dad abandoned your family before you were born, didn't he?

John Smithbaker: Yeah, that's correct. My mom was pregnant with me and I had a three-year-old sister. He actually encouraged my mom to have an abortion and kill me because I was not wanted by him. And thankfully I had a strong mom.

Dr. James Dobson: And you know that for a fact?

John Smithbaker: I do. My mom told me and I even asked my dad.

Dr. James Dobson: Why would she tell you that as a little boy?

John Smithbaker: Well, she didn't tell that as a little boy. This was in adulthood when I asked. I was seeking truth and wanting to understand the circumstances of why and when he left, and she shared that with me.

Dr. James Dobson: Well, when we met before and talked, I was touched, deeply touched by what you went through as a child, because you were a vulnerable tender kid, weren't you? I mean, some boys go through fatherlessness and are not affected by it as much. Most are, but some aren't. But you felt it, you knew it. You were lonely. You longed for a relationship with a dad, and it didn't get better as the time went on. Describe that for us.

John Smithbaker: Yeah. I mean, I didn't really understand, but I knew I was hurting and I was broken in a lot of ways. I mean, looking back, I just knew something wasn't right. It wasn't the way it should be. I remember my mom telling me that I didn't even speak until I was five years old. She took me to specialists because she thought I had a problem or whatever else, and they tested my IQ and said, "No, your son is fine, but he's just quiet." I don't know what all the reasons were, but I just remember her telling me that.

Dr. James Dobson: How early do you remember that other kids had a dad and you didn't?

John Smithbaker: I would say it's probably around six years old. My mom worked nights and I was shuffled around to daycares. And thankfully I had a grandma who took some of that burden off. But I remember my mom leaving and me just screaming and begging her not to leave me at this institutional daycare, because I just knew that wasn't the way it was supposed to be. I was already lonely. And now I'm pretty much lonely 24 hours because my mom had to work evenings to pay the bills. And we barely got by. So I didn't see her during the day and I was sleeping at night. So I didn't seem like I'd ever saw anybody.

Dr. James Dobson: Who took care of you?

John Smithbaker: Well, I mean, in the evening I was sleeping and my grandmother would come over or a babysitter or somebody, and then during the day I was at a daycare. So from a family perspective when I look back, I never saw anybody it seemed like to me.

Dr. James Dobson: Many people fail to realize just what impact that has on boys. Boys are not born knowing what it means to be male. It's interesting how God designed us, but girls know what it means to be a girl, and then they grow up to be a woman, they understand that role. Boys don't. They have to be taught it. When there's not a loving dad on the scene, something's missing. Something's aching inside. Something longs for...

John Smithbaker: That's right.

Dr. James Dobson: I remember seeing Jonathan Winters. You remember the comedian, Jonathan Winters?

John Smithbaker: Yes, I do.

Dr. James Dobson: I think he's gone. I remember a moment when he was being honest and he was being interviewed, and he was very serious. He wasn't trying to be funny. And he said, "When I was a child, my mother and father got a divorce and we never saw my dad again." He said that boys teased him about not having a dad. That was a different day. Divorce was not so common. He said that the boys would make fun of him and say he didn't have a dad. And he said, "I'd beat them up. I'd fight them. But then when they weren't looking, I would go behind a tree and cry." Can you imagine that he said, this is the key line, "All of my humor is a response to sorrow."

John Smithbaker: Well, I explain it to when I talk now that the father-son relationship is the foundation of the world. I never really understood that until I became saved. And when that's broken, the soul is broken and hurt. My experiences that I believe the child has a decision to make. When that happens, they decide to fight in a weird way for their father's affection or they flee from it, and they rebel. And that's why so many of them, most of them flee from it. They become angry and bitter, and they rebel against the system, and they get in a lot of trouble in a lot of ways.

John Smithbaker: I tried to fight for my father's affection. So I decided that I would be the perfect kid, get good grades, excel in sports. So why wouldn't my father love me? Why wouldn't he come back?

Dr. James Dobson: Was there something wrong with me? Did you have that thought?

John Smithbaker: Yeah. Well, I said if there was something wrong with me, I was going to fix it. So I had this driving gene in me now, it seems like that I want to be perfect and all that. And that's unhealthy too. I explained to it that it's just as destructive. So 85% of these kids get adjudicated some way. And then the other 15% become perfectionist nut jobs like that I had to win or achieve everything at all costs. So I would want feel worthy. And two, maybe my father would come back.

John Smithbaker: And it's hard because if I wasn't saved when I was, when I started having children, thank the Lord he saved me when he did, I have no doubt I would have probably abandoned my children through divorce because I would put career and fame and ambition trying to fill that hole in me above being a father to my children and a good husband.

Dr. James Dobson: You and others call that a father wound. Explain what that means.

John Smithbaker: Well, I'm sure it means some things differently to different people. But for me, it really was I felt confused and alone because nobody was there to shepherd me into manhood. Compounding that, I would have the bitter response from my mom talking bad about my dad. I would have society telling me that I didn't need a dad. Pat me on the head and said, "Big boys, don't cry. You'll get over it." So I suppressed this hurt and anger deep down inside because I thought, "Well, something's wrong with me?" Because I know I'm broken, but everybody's telling me I'm not. So I just knew that something was wrong and I didn't really know how to address it other than try and win, and do, and achieve things, so I would feel worthy.

Dr. James Dobson: Do you get acquainted with him later? Did you ever meet him? Did you ever-

John Smithbaker: Yeah. That's the other thing. He just lived across town. He just lived across town.

Dr. James Dobson: And he had nothing to do with you?

John Smithbaker: Well, not in the early years. My mom had to take him to jail to pay child support. He remarried, put his time into other kids. So that compounds that salt in the wound. Not only did he leave, he was putting his time and energy into a new family. So that just hurts. Then when I got a little older, he would promise to come pick me up and me and my sister, and then not show. So that just picks the scab and it hurts you even more.

John Smithbaker: Then every once in a while he would pick me up, but then he dropped me off at his new house and he would go play golf and I would be a stranger in a home. And I thought we were going to spend time together. So it's just all those compounding things that just drives that wound.

Dr. James Dobson: When a man kind of responds in that way, I always want to know what his childhood was like. What was his relationship with his dad? Do you know anything about your grandfather?

John Smithbaker: I do. On my dad's side, yep. They were the son of immigrants and worked hard. It was sad because I would get glimpses of them in my life, but I didn't know them. When the divorce happens, those extended family relationships get broken too. So you don't only lose a dad, you lose a whole half of your family life. So in high school, when I was excelling in sports and stuff, he would try to come back, and because I guess I was doing something special. But then my

mom and dad, they wouldn't even hang out together like, say, at the football game and they would... I wouldn't know what to do at the end of the game. Do I walk to one and hurt the others? So I just walked in-

Dr. James Dobson: So they didn't even sit together?

John Smithbaker: No. So who do I go to? What do you do? You put such strain and thought process and emotional strain on a young soul that you don't know how to deal with it.

Dr. James Dobson: It's really different for a girl, but it's hard for a girl too to not have a father. A girl's self-esteem hangs precariously on our relationship with her dad. If he tells her she's pretty, if he tells her he loves her. If he builds her up, if he makes an investment in her, she feels good about herself. And if he doesn't, it's really hard for the mother to make up for that. My wife, Shirley grew up in the home of an alcoholic father. He was not a good man. He was okay when he was sober, but that wasn't very often.

Dr. James Dobson: He would, every Friday night, go to the bar and drank up all the money. So they were just destitute. It was a really unbelievable childhood of her own. Fortunately, Shirley's mother was wise enough to get her two kids into an evangelical Sunday school.

Dr. James Dobson: She wouldn't go because she was working six days a week. Then she had to iron and clean and wash and do all the things to keep the family together. So she didn't go. So Shirley and John as small children, Shirley was about five, went to this little church. And the Sunday school teacher there told them about Jesus and told Shirley about Jesus. That made sense to her, and the Sunday school teacher said that Jesus was building a mansion for them and they lived in this little lean-to.

Dr. James Dobson: I mean, it was a really kind of pitiful and yet because of that, Shirley and John are whole people today. When Shirley was six, she went to an altar on her own. That means she was down there by herself and prayed and gave her heart to the Lord.

John Smithbaker: Praise God.

Dr. James Dobson: And then learned to pray. You can see that as a prelude to the national day of prayer, which she has been handling for 25 years. So the church can make a huge difference, but you didn't have that either did you?

John Smithbaker: No. my mom always would call herself a Christian looking back and I remember the first time I heard the name of Jesus, I was young. But we were cuddled up on the only little heater we had in our house, and we were cold and my mom was crying because she had no food in the refrigerator and she was crying out to

the name of Jesus. I remember that's the first time I heard the name, Jesus.  
Single moms-

Dr. James Dobson: There was no safety net?

John Smithbaker: No. My grandmother was probably the only one that helped, but my mom was so prideful that she wouldn't tell people that she needed help.

Dr. James Dobson: Do you remember being hungry?

John Smithbaker: I do.

Dr. James Dobson: Seriously hungry?

John Smithbaker: Well, I can't say I was like starving like the pictures you see, but I remember saying, "Well, we're not going to have dinner tonight." You know what I mean? But my mom worked two jobs. Strong woman. Thankfully, she was a strong woman. But she had to work. She had to work and pay for daycare. She didn't have a car so she lived in neighborhoods she could walk to. All those things that you do. It's just tough. It's not the way God intended it to be.

Dr. James Dobson: Yeah. Fortunately, you were a good athlete.

John Smithbaker: Yeah.

Dr. James Dobson: And that helps. That helps a boy. And yet it wasn't enough for you. I talked to you about this when you were in my office. It didn't make up for the fact that there was no dad over there cheering for you and hugging you when you made a touchdown or did something unusual.

John Smithbaker: I was motivated by all the wrong reasons. I was motivated because I didn't want to deal with the fact that I was broken or hurting, and I wanted to find worth in my life. So the accolades that came with sports provided some level of worth. I would have male coaches that spoken to my life in that regard, and I had somebody that I wanted to please. I've received some forms of affirmation in that process. But looking back, I did a lot of the things that I shouldn't do trying to find my manhood, girlfriends and all those things.

John Smithbaker: How do I know I'm a man? What does a man do? How does a man act? And all those things. You just go on a search trying to find what it means to be a man versus somebody explain to you what a godly man is.

Dr. James Dobson: I don't promote my own stuff a lot. I just don't feel that's what I'm here to do. But my book, *Bringing Up Boys* is written for families that have sons that are struggling along this way. And they really have not yet found their sea legs underneath them. There is a way to do this and I've talked about the fact that if a father is not there and frankly a mother is not equipped in her physiology and

in her brain to teach a boy how to be a man. Some people get irritated by my saying that, but it's just not.

John Smithbaker: It's the truth.

Dr. James Dobson: The man has to teach a man. And if there's not a father there, then there needs to be a father substitute. There needs to be a coach or a grandfather or somebody who can come in and relate to a boy. You had one and his name was Uncle Bucky. I've read your story.

John Smithbaker: Amen.

Dr. James Dobson: Uncle Bucky. Who was that man and what did he do for you?

John Smithbaker: Yeah. Thank the Lord for Uncle Bucky. He's my mom's brother. He would come by and hang out. He would bring a ball and a glove and throw baseball. He would throw it to the moon and back so I could catch it. That's what it felt like. To have a glimpse of a man and his roughness to me and how he spoke and that we would wrestle, then we would go fishing. Those kinds of things just give me glimpses of hope of what a man, how he acted, how he talked to all those things. Because as you know, I mean, being raised by a mom, not only can he not teach you how to be a man, but honestly there's additional wounds that are created. One's being overly bonded with your mom because too many things are hoisted upon your shoulders. And being overly bonded with your mom is not a good thing.

John Smithbaker: That creates a wound of you have to break. you have to leave. It is a compounding issue. Besides trouble you can get into, the emotional issues. But I'm very thankful for Uncle Bucky. He was the one man in my life that stepped up and it was not a lot of time. And that's what I've encouraged people. It's not a lot of time. It's like a safety raft that somebody throws you that you can grab on and have a little bit of hope to get you through the years until your mind develops and your worldview and your perspective. So it helps you through the tough times.

Dr. James Dobson: I'm not able to identify the people and what I'm about to tell you because it's very confidential, but an NFL coach and I sat down together. I was in his training camp. I observed the relationship of the coaches to the men. These are big burly dudes. I met with this coach and I asked him a question. I said, "What is the difference in your players between those who had a father at home and those who didn't?"

Dr. James Dobson: He said, "It's night and day." And you'll be surprised by what he said. I say, "Explain what the difference is." And he said, "If you want to get the best performance out of the men who didn't have fathers, you have to treat them like women." "Are you kidding me? These guys on a football field are killing each other." And he said, "Well, they've grown up with women, mostly their mothers,

their aunts, their grandmothers, and their school teachers have been women. They don't know how men think and how they act. And they're very, very sensitive."

Dr. James Dobson: He said, "If you really want to build men, you have to recognize that sensitivity. You don't make fun of them. You don't yell at them. You don't threaten them. You don't try to get more out of them by yelling or abusing them. You let them know you're on their team and you put an arm around them and you become a father to them, and everything changes." Isn't that interesting?

John Smithbaker: That is amazing. That's good insight though. It's good insight.

Dr. James Dobson: You can see why I can't tell the story with the people involved because these men would be very offended if you said you have to treat them like women. That doesn't mean to be soft and not to expect the highest performance out of them, but it does mean that you recognize that they think more like women because they've never had a man to teach them.

John Smithbaker: Well, I look back, and when my son was playing little league, eight, nine, 10 years old and I was the coach, even in Wyoming, in this little town, so God's country as we used to call it, out of the 10 boys we had on our team, eight of them are fatherless, in God's country. This is not the inner city. This is not the third world. We don't define fatherlessness in what I believe it should be. When a dad divorces and leaves, even if it's across the town, most of the time, we don't call that kid fatherless. But that kid is fatherless in his mind because somebody is not fulfilling the God given roles of fatherhood in their life.

Dr. James Dobson: We've been talking to John Smithbaker about fatherlessness, and he has experienced it. We need to move right on next time into the ministry that has grown out of that because it's called Fathers in the Field. And our time has gone. We can just tease it a little bit here. But God has taken your father wound that you experienced as a child, and has turned that into a ministry for other boys who are hurting. And we're going to talk about that next time. Thanks, John for being with us. I love talking to you.

John Smithbaker: Thank you. Thank you very much.

Dr. James Dobson: And we'll pick it up next time.

John Smithbaker: Okay. Thank you.

Roger Marsh: You've been listening to John Smithbaker, the founder of Fathers in the Field, a Christ-centered mentoring ministry for fatherless boys with Dr. James Dobson here on Family Talk. I'm Roger Marsh. You could hear the pain in John's voice as he described the fact that his own father had not only abandoned the family before he was born, but actually advocated for John to be aborted.



Roger Marsh: That father wound motivated him to find his worth in athletics. Well, thank God that John came to Christ at the age of 40. And in the power of the Holy Spirit, he was able to forgive his father. That's the freedom that fatherless boys, no matter their age, need to experience from the weighty burden of unforgiveness.

Roger Marsh: Now, to learn more about John Smithbaker and his book, *The Great American Rescue Mission*, or the Christ-centered mentoring ministry, *Fathers in the Field*, please visit our broadcast page at [drjamesdobson.org](http://drjamesdobson.org). That's [drjamesdobson.org/broadcast](http://drjamesdobson.org/broadcast). Now Dr. Dobson, of course, is continuing to work on his latest book. He's enjoying the Southern California sunshine with his bride, Shirley, and he'll be back in the studio this May.

Roger Marsh: But before we go, I want to tell you about a very special premium resource that Dr. Dobson has created for families of all ages and in all stages of life. It's the eight DVD set called *Building A Family Legacy*. This collection contains eight hour long films based on some of Dr. Dobson's bestselling books and teachings, including *Bringing Up Boys*, *Love For A Lifetime* and more.

Roger Marsh: Dr. Dobson's wisdom and humor in the *Building A Family Legacy* series will help strengthen your marriage and give you insight into raising your own children. Now, to receive your copy of the *Building A Family Legacy* eight DVD box set, drop us a line at [drjamesdobson.org](http://drjamesdobson.org), or call us at 877-732-6825. We'll be happy to send you a copy as our way of thanking you for your gift of any amount in support of the ministry of the James Dobson Family Institute today.

Roger Marsh: Please keep in mind a box set with eight DVDs, and it typically has a retail price of \$50 or more. So give generously when you call or visit us online. Again, go to [drjamesdobson.org](http://drjamesdobson.org) or call us at 877-732-6825. That's 877-732-6825. We are here for you 24/7.

Roger Marsh: Be sure to join us again tomorrow to hear part two of John Smithbaker's powerful conversation with Dr. Dobson entitled, *Rescuing Fatherless Boys*. For everyone here at Family Talk, I'm Roger Marsh. Thanks for listening.

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