

Episode 26: Strangers Aren't the Problem with Dr. Paul Renfro

Christy Keating 00:08

Hi friends and welcome to the Heartful Parent Podcast. I'm your host, Christy Keating. In this podcast, we talk about it all, our parenting, our partnering and our professional lives, because they are all a part of us. And we were never meant to do this alone.

Christy Keating 00:40

Hello, Heartful Parents, Podcast Listeners, Friends, we have a real treat for you on the podcast this week. As I tipped you off to last week, we have Dr. Paul Renfro on the podcast this week, and I'm so excited for you to hear from him. Dr. Renfro is an Associate Professor of history at Florida State University. And he is the author of a book called Stranger Danger: Family Values, Childhood, and the American Carceral State that was published in 2020. It is a phenomenal book that really dissects the history of this sort of notion of Stranger danger that is, has been and continues to be really pervasive in our culture. And we're going to dig into really a lot of the details about this kind of how the, you know, this phrasing came about, how it, it gained traction, at least here in the US, and it is certainly spread beyond the borders. At this point, we talked about the reality of risks to our children from strangers, as well as what the statistics are that are out there, and how sort of perception and reality they don't align. In this particular case, as is often the case when, you know, sort of the forces of the media get involved. And we talked about the impact that this phrasing has had disproportionately on the LGBTQ community, on our black and brown members of our culture.

And it's, it's a really fascinating conversation with a really interesting, smart guy who knows his stuff. I think you're gonna find this conversation really, really valuable. If you are interested in the work of Dr. Renfro. He has another book coming out in the near future that focuses on Ryan White and the 1980s 1990s, HIV and AIDS epidemic. And he also has writing that has appeared in the New Republic, Time Magazine, The Washington Post, Teen Vogue, slate and dissent. And he's been interviewed for countless others, including in the New Yorker, elle, Mother Jones, Jezebel and Vox. So you can find his work and his talk about this book all over, and I highly encourage you to seek it out.

Like I said, he has done really deep, interesting work, and I think you're gonna find this conversation fascinating. Without further ado, Dr. Paul Renfro.

Okay, welcome, Paul. I am so happy to have you here on The Heartful Parent Podcast. Thank you for joining us.

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Dr. Paul Renfro 03:30

Thank you so much for having me, I really appreciate it.

Christy Keating 03:32

So I want to dig into this book that you wrote a couple of years ago called Stranger Danger. And you know, my listeners have heard me talk about Stranger danger. Anyone that's followed my work for any period of time know, that knows that I would love to eliminate that from our sort of national vocabulary or maybe international vocabulary at this point. But I'd love to start by asking you, How did you get interested in this subject? You're a professor of history. And I know obviously history plays into this. But why this?

Dr. Paul Renfro 04:03

So when I was doing my grad work doctoral work at the University of Iowa, I learned about these cases of missing paperboys, which took place in the early to mid 1980s in Iowa. And I was struck by the ways in which Iowans spoke about the cases and this was 30 years on and they still very much remembered these cases vividly and spoke about them as kind of a moment of disjuncture, a break from this kind of idealized past, which of course was not accurate in any real way. I mean, there had been these antecedents to these cases. You know, there had been awful things that happened in Iowa before. However, folks kind of viewed these cases as kind of exceptional and really noteworthy in in their own personal lives and in their imaginations kind of the trajectory of their states and perhaps the region, the Midwest. So I wanted to dig into that. And eventually, I settled on a dissertation topic t

hat focused on missing children and child kidnapping as a kind of national phenomenon in the late 20th century. And I wasn't sure exactly what sort of angle I wanted to take. But eventually, as I undertook the project, I saw the ways in which these cases, these really exceptional cases that were high profile that generated a great deal of national attention, news media attention, they led to the development of what I call the child safety regime. And that entails really new parenting strategies, new approaches and understandings of the dangers that faced children and families.

And also, there's a carceral dimension to this or a punitive dimension to this, you know, as we all know, mass incarceration explodes. In the late 20th century in the US, the US begins to incarcerate more and more people. But oftentimes, folks forget or overlook the fact that sex offenses really drive a great deal of this incarceration, and then also kind of generate new or enhanced forms of surveillance, such as sex offense registries. And I show in the book, how these cases kind of lead to the development of this discourse, and this understanding of a particular problem, or, as I show or suggest, a kind of imagined problem, and how this connected to these these larger sorts of developments when it came to the criminal legal system in the United States.

Christy Keating 06:42

I mean, the whole thing is, you know, you and I were talking before we hit record, and as a former prosecutor, I mean, the whole subject of this is fascinating to me, not just in my work, as you know, that I do now is that working with parents, but in my previous work, because a lot of the history that you go into, I remember bits and pieces of it as, as a kid. But the bigger context that all of this sits in, you know, was certainly not fully aware of. And you mentioned that you sort of uncovered the fact that the perception of Stranger danger and these missing children cases is different than reality. I want to talk a little bit about that. What is the perception? Or what are sort of the rumors that have persisted about this since the late 70s 80s. Today? And what's the reality?

Dr. Paul Renfro 07:40

Yeah, so in this moment that I write about beginning in the late 70s, and moving into the 80s, folks, you know, you might call them kind of moral entrepreneurs, or bereaved parents, law enforcement officials, politicians are kicking around really, really gaudy figures, when it comes to this issue of Stranger Danger and missing children. They're suggesting that something like 50,000, American children were abducted by strangers, any given year in any given year. And this is a figure that folks really kind of focus on and use again, and again, sometimes folks are actually deploying statistics that are even higher, or numbers that are even higher, they're saying that 1 million children are abducted by strangers in any year.

And all of that serves to kind of generate panic, right. And folks are incredibly concerned about what many people perceive to be a new problem or an enhanced problem. And this is completely divorced from the reality of the situation, the the actual figures, and this is something that was borne out by studies later in the 80s. And and beyond. It's difficult to find exact figures, but it's safe to assume that something like 100 to 300 children are abducted by strangers in any given year in the United States, and in a country of 300 plus million, not to diminish the severity of those incidents.

But it's, it's not nearly as grave of a problem as a lot of folks in this moment are suggesting. And something I sort of gesture to throughout the book is that even as these statistics are debunked in the 80s and beyond, folks internalize that or they absorbed some of that, however, the panic never really subsides. And a lot of it has to do with the ways in which the news media really focused on this story of these stories and, and spun narratives about the dangers that face children. And stranger kidnapping becomes in many ways, it's kind of exceptional, intense sort of fear, right? And the reality of the situation doesn't actually matter, right? The the statistics of are completely divorced from from the actual incidents. Nevertheless, the ways in which people kind of narrative eyes, these stories and the ways in which they stick in the national imagination, it's so powerful. And that kind of overrides any sort of effort to debunk these statistics or to kind of offer a rational sort of approach to these sorts of problems.

Christy Keating 10:27

Yeah, you know, it's so interesting to hear that I'm familiar with those statistics. And I was reading a recent article that you were interviewed for, and back in 2020, I think you'd said or, or the article was sharing the statistic that 79 children were kidnapped by strangers in 2020. Now, you know, 2020 was an unusual year, in the sense that COVID hit and so, but it wasn't dramatically different than what we'd seen in previous years or years since. And yet the fear that I hear from parents is so pervasive. And I'm just so interested in how we got there, you know, I mean, obviously, the media, as you mentioned, is sort of spun these stories. And now, you know, more than ever, we're on this 24 hour news cycle. How do we maybe this isn't a fair question. Anyway, how do we start to combat that with parents, you know, I live in a suburban neighborhood in with very low crime rates, like it would be tough to find, you know, too many places that people felt safer. And we live about a half a mile from the elementary school, very walkable, and the number of parents who will not let their children walk to school, for fear of being kidnapped, or will not let them play outside with other kids without a parent supervising or won't let them ride their bike up and down the street. You know, I'm sort of the anomaly where I'm like, I have a six year old and like, go go ride your bike? I don't. I'll see you in an hour. How do we combat that?

Dr. Paul Renfro 12:11

Yeah, it's a it's a tough one. I think we as a society are very distrustful. And I think a lot of that has to do with many of the historical processes that I seek to uncover in the book. I mean, beginning in the 1970s, specifically, folks, they began to identify a certain set of threats that faced the American family. And this is amidst deindustrialization, so economic instability. This is in the wake of various social movements, the women's movement, the gay rights movement, the African American freedom struggle, of course. And there is a great deal of sort of skepticism about the future and uncertainty about the future. And anytime you're talking about the future, you're talking about children, and in the fit the family, the stability, and the sanctity of the family, which has, obviously a deep history in the United States.

But it also in the 20th century served as the sort of imagined bulwark against communism and all these threats that, that face the country, and in many ways the nation and the family were linked. So as things in people's minds, you know, begin to fall apart, then the family requires some fortification, it requires, it becomes a site of all these different fears. And it requires fortification, and people are seeking a reaffirmation of kind of parental authority of adult authority of institutional authority. And that is how I think a lot of people kind of agree to or consent to many of the developments that I write about in the book, the construction of kind of a more punitive carceral states, something to kind of crack down on folks who perhaps seek to threaten or kind of undermine the stability of the family and by extension, the country.

And, you know, you can also look back into the 20th century with the rise of you mentioned suburban landscapes and in the kind of atomized home, you know, the household This is where the family resides. And in so many different communities, those households are divorced from the households that surround them. And this is supplemented by or enabled by the, the construction of the built

environment, cars, you know, so again, kind of atomized, people are alienated, they don't interact with their neighbors. That breeds suspicion, and it breeds this kind of uncertainty. And I think that never really went away.

In fact, perhaps it's become even more intense given the rise of the internet people are more and more likely, speaking very generally here. or to kind of find by news and find narratives in the the internet's and maybe be divorced from reality or divorced from kind of the people who surround them in their communities. Right. So that alienation, I think, breeds that sort of suspicion, because in the sort of account that you just provided about your child walking to school or riding a bike, you know, the principal danger in my mind is cars. You know, I mean, cars are so incredibly dangerous and and so many children die in car accidents, or are gravely injured in car accidents. And yet, that is not where the parents mind goes initially. Right? It is other dangers, it's these sensational dangers.

And I think a lot of that reflects sort of the the class standing the class status of the the folks who are I think promulgating a lot of these fears, or a really are the drivers of, of a lot of these panics or crises, because they, it's almost a privilege in a way to kind of have to worry about those sorts of things, rather than hunger and poverty and educational inequality, those needs and those desires are met. And so the the threat kind of has to be in some ways, kind of sensational and monstrous. And so, you know, I think all of that has roots in these different phenomena that I'm talking about. But it's it's particularly visible right now, I think, with the rise of Q anon. And I think the pandemic did a lot of damage to people's, their faith and community and their faith in society more broadly. And so all of that kind of feeds into what we're talking about here.

Christy Keating 16:42

Yeah. Yeah. It's, I mean, you know, I hear about some of the rumors around child abductions that stem from that Q anon movement. And, you know, I would say that, at least the parents that I interact with aren't subscribing to those particular rumors, I still think they kind of fuel the fire overall, that this is like a massive problem that we all need to worry about.

Dr. Paul Renfro 17:08

Yeah, absolutely. And I realized I didn't answer your question, I was just kind of identifying the problem. But I think I think, you know, very generally speaking, fostering community, kind of fortifying our social infrastructure such that people are actually interacting with people rather than being stuck in cars all the time, you know, which again, pose a major danger to human life, you know, that I think, can help to melt away some of those suspicions. And in those fears, right, to undercut those fears, and to enable people to kind of realize that, you know, probably not a kind of monstrous stranger, who is going to you know, abduct my child, that's, that's really not the danger that I need to be worried about.

There are dangers in the world. And in many ways, the United States is a dangerous place, given our, you know, our pension for gun violence and other types of violence. But, you know, going back to this

conversation about the family, and people viewing that as a sanctuary, it's exactly the opposite. Right. And because the the family and the idealized familial household are so divorced from communities and society more generally, that kind of incubates the very sorts of abuse that people like to project onto the sort of faceless stranger, the sort of monster when you know, it's actually the call was coming from within the house, you know?

Christy Keating 18:31

Yeah, yeah. It's so interesting. You know, as you're talking, I was thinking about, before you talked about gun violence, even we know that the number one leading cause of death for kids in the US is our guns, right. And you also mentioned cars. And it's funny, because when my daughter goes out, my younger daughter goes out to ride her bike. I'm not talking about strangers with her, I'm talking about you need to look out for cars, right? Like, look out for who's backing out of their driveway, pay attention to that sort of thing. And I'm not looking to supplant one fear with another here. But it is interesting that these bigger things, guns, cars, that really can be quite dangerous to children are not at the forefront of parents imaginations, right? Or worrying about something that the odds are so incontestable when it comes to the number of kids in the country, as to really be a non issue.

Dr. Paul Renfro 19:28

Part of that is understandable, because these narratives are so so tragic. And these cases really remain in people's minds. You know, everyone knows these these cases and the names of of many of these children who have been abducted and exploited and slain, right. But I think it was Lenore Skenazy, who made the point that, you know, that actually is clear evidence of the fact that these are exceptional cases because you know the names of these people right? You have only A handful that you can kind of remember right? And and they have this sort of outsized impact on on how we understand the dangers that face young people in the United States.

So, you know, part of it is understandable, but at the same time, there are these quotidian threats, right? For really all families. Yeah, we have cars, we have gun violence, right, the latter of which is very much, I think, despite what people may think, you know, very much associated with violence within the home. And so that, again, is not an excuse maybe to sort of divert, or we configure the stranger danger threat. It's not the stranger Wielding a gun who is threatening the child, despite the fact that obviously there are these very well known cases of, of school shootings and mass shootings, in which children are often victimized, it's, it's domestic violence, that that kind of leads to the sorts of tragedies in the main right. And you can include suicides in that as well. You know, it's guns, it's cars, which affect people across class strata. Working class people, poor people are disproportionately affected by that as well, given the built environment in those spaces is less conducive to pedestrian traffic, to cycling. So poor working class folks, black and brown folks are disproportionately affected by that.

And I think even more kind of invisible when it comes to threats are many of the ones I mentioned a little earlier, hunger, poverty, educational inequality, which are rampant in our society, but do not

generate the sort of interest or news media attention or political attention that these exceptional sensational cases or incidents do.

Christy Keating 21:53

Yeah, I mean, I remember growing up, and you talk about this in the book, you know, so I was born in the early 70s, child of the 80s. And I remember the sensationalism around many of these cases, although as a child that didn't, I didn't have the context for that, or understanding that that was a sensational thing. But seeing, you know, the milk cartons with the pictures of missing kids, on them, and then learning as an adult, because the prosecutor and in the work that I do now, that really the overwhelming majority of those kids, I mean, the overwhelming majority of those kids are kidnapped by family members, right. So deal disputes or you know, or are runaways, right? And not that those cases are not tragic or scary are awful for the kids and parents involved. But it's a really, that's a really far cry from, you know, this creepy guy in the white band, snatching your child off the street. Absolutely. Um, one of the things that you touch on in the book that I'd love to have you talked about a little bit is how this whole narrative about, you know, missing children has really disproportionately affected the LGBTQ community. You know, you mentioned a little bit ago that the family was kind of seen as the protection against all of these terrible threats, communism, etc. And we know because we're seeing it in this day and age, that, you know, there are certain I was gonna say, individuals, but it's obviously quite larger than that, that are painting out the LGBTQ members of our community to be dangerous to children. What's the connection and sort of how did we, how did we get there? What impacted this? Missing Children? Narrative? How about that?

Dr. Paul Renfro 23:50

Yeah, so I think what's happening now the the discourse is very, very similar, eerily similar to what you saw in the 70s. And the 80s. You know, there are a lot of parallels that can be drawn between the kind of cue inflected dialogue discourse concerning grooming and recruitments. A lot of that can be traced back to I mean, it has very deep roots, but the kind of shallow roots are in the 70s and 80s, with Anita Bryant and the Save Our Children Campaign, the idea that in Bryant's formulation, gay folks, and this is in the wake of gay liberation, the heightened LGBTQ visibility, she asserts that because gay folks, queer folks cannot reproduce, they need to recruit. And well, she's kind of harnessing the power of the family to exclude queer folks from the family, this kind of heteronormative idealized family and essentially say, well, they're coming for your kids, right?

And this again, feeds into this idea that the family and the child At the heart of that family are under threat or are in danger in new ways or more intense ways in this moment of instability, economic instability, political instability, cultural instability, etc, right? This is also in the wake of the Vietnam War, Watergate, right, there are all these crises that are buffeting the nation. And again, this is kind of twinned with a family, they're, they're united in a way. And so any crisis that faces the nation is facing the family and vice versa. So I think I mentioned COVID, a while ago, I think, in this moment of instability and uncertainty, you know, are my kids going to be able to go to school? Am I going to get

sick, you know, am I going to be able to go on vacation, you know, which is kind of a good problem to have, if you if you're kind of in that in that echelon, I guess.

But, you know, I think all of that breeds these sorts of narratives. And this idea that the family provides protection serves as a bulwark against threats and dangers and uncertainty. And so, you know, it's, it's, I don't want to say natural, but it is kind of not surprising that folks who are often imagined to be outside of the family, especially in a moment in which queer folks have been some queer folks have been trying to insert themselves into a particular vision of the family. And this is not, you know, I don't mean to use insert in a kind of negative connotation, but you know, they're seeking to make claims on the family or to expand, I should say, understandings of the family. And you see in Obergefell, and other developments, the sort of inclusion of a queer folks in the vision of the family that had been so exclusionary for much of the 20th century and into the 21st.

So as that's happening, there are these efforts to kind of reclaim the family or to draw lines, kind of fortify lines around the family kind of reinforce this understanding of the family as exclusionary, as heteronormative as a dual parent sort of space, and one that queer folks are not sort of allowed to inhabit or embody, right? I think that is the context out of which a lot of these claims about grooming and these legislative attacks on queer folks, that's the context out of which it comes. And, you know, I think the sort of glue there is, or the the link is, is this kind of 80s and 90s moments of, of carceral expansion of intense focus on this sort of figure of the pedophile or the sex offender, which, again, is a very misunderstood sort of, or misused sort of trope, right? Because as we've established, it's, the threat is primarily coming from the family and from acquaintances, right? Oftentimes in trusted institutions, right, such as the school or the church, or the synagogue or the temple. And it's not this sort of stranger that people imagine.

And yet, that that stranger, and that kind of creep around the corner, has such power in our national imagination and shapes. A lot of this discourse of grooming, recruitment, sex trafficking, you know that that is a huge component of cue. And I think the sort of linkages are so clear, right? And it speaks to maybe the fact I would say that the panic that is really at the core of my book never really subsided, right, if we haven't really sort of reckoned with a lot of what happened in the 80s. And the 90s. And I'm not even touching on in the book are really in this conversation, the satanic ritual abuse, panic, right, which is sort of related to what happens with the sort of Stranger Danger discourse, and is a clear sort of response to the feminist movement and anxieties about women entering the workforce, you know, if your child is going to daycare they're going to get abused is the narrative. And that serves to, again, emphasize the the importance of the family and its need for fortification, its need for stability in in moments of chaos and uncertainty.

Christy Keating 29:33

I mean, I suspect that everyone listening to this is, as I kind of was that they read your book, kind of mind blown, because although I've known, you know, and I preach as often as I can, you know, 93% of

child sexual abuse happens at the hands of, you know, people known to us family members, acquaintances, coaches, teachers, you know, priests, etc. And, you know, give people an alternative to use to stranger danger because I think stranger danger puts blinders on for us, right? If we're so worried about three years, we're not looking closer to home, which is where the threat is more likely.

But, but my mind was kind of blown by this larger history and sort of the the way that this all evolved into this really pervasive societal narrative that, you know, I mean, I can throw statistics at parents left and right, and, and, you know, you can as well, and it's still, and I'm not immune to this, right, I'm still like, I know, the likelihood is next to nothing. But is it something I think about when my child goes somewhere, of course, because that narrative is just so pervasive? And you know, I grew up? Well, I guess I was in college at the time, but *Silence of the Lambs* this terrible, the awful story, that one Best Picture, you know, kind of played on all of those fears, too. And I feel like that narrative, it just expanded this narrative even further. And maybe the younger generations now don't don't know that movie, but it certainly was a big part of my formative years.

Dr. Paul Renfro 31:19

Yeah, but they have other texts, right. I mean, the true crime craze is just enormous right now. And I think a lot of that, and some scholars and activists have kind of pointed to this, that it, it's uncritical, oftentimes of, of the very sort of concept of crime. And, you know, in the cases that these sorts of texts emphasize, they're oftentimes reinforcing the very narratives that we're trying to destabilize here, right? They're pointing at, you know, the stranger, the suspicious person, right?

Rather than interrogating the kind of the family forms, the structures that do sort of nurture in some senses abuse and an exploitation and violence. So yeah, I think there are, there are always new expressions of this. Something that I've returned to again and again, and maybe I'd like to write something about this one day is the the franchise taken the film franchise, you know, which totally, I think serves as a precursor to the kind of Q anon moment where people have these really vivid and completely outlandish visions of their child, you know, oftentimes, you know, whites sort of photogenic child being snatched, taken for use in these really elaborate sex rings, right? And the truth is that that just doesn't really happen. And yet, it is fodder for so much kind of discourse. You know, in certain sectors of the internet, there's that new movie with Jim Caviezel, right, which is all predicated on that, in very much kind of the expression of these kind of Q anon fever dreams.

So I think, you know, these texts serve to shape and reflect these broader fears. Right. And as you suggested, it's not, I don't mean to kind of localize it all within the kind of far right Q anon segment, because it's so you know, in my book, it's a lot of liberal folks, it's a lot of centrist folks who are contributing to this narrative and to, to the kind of carceral state build up that that kind of justifies or serves as kind of an expression of many of these fears.

Christy Keating

Yeah, I appreciate you pointing that out. Because obviously, there is this, you know, this sort of talking about grooming and you know, the underground sex ring that's in the pizza parlor, and not, you know, all of these, these sorts of stories do come from that far right, kind of contingent, but it's perpetuated across the spectrum. I mean, you know, probably, there aren't very many listeners to this, who haven't at least seen one episode of Law and Order SVU which, certainly, among many other of those true crime, real crime, you know, podcasts and shows, and all of that, perpetuates all of this in which by the way, as a prosecutor were my worst nightmare because people have these ideas about the way the criminal justice system and investigations should and could work which were, again, completely unrealistic but, but have also served to perpetuate this.

You know, something that you've touched on a couple of times is really that this is in many ways, a fear. That is I don't know that I love the sport, but the luxury of the middle class and upper class because you know that those segments of the population aren't worried about feeding their children, you know, basic daily needs, and also touched on the idea Yeah, that, you know, often, especially when it's perpetuated in media stories, or law and order, or, you know, whatever, we're talking about attractive white kids. And yet, we know that there is an impact to all of this to the black and brown community segment of our population. I'd love to have you just touch a little bit more on that, you know, we talked about the disproportionate impact or the way this has impacted the LGBTQ community. And the way we, again, keeping them out of that family structure. What is this doing from a racial standpoint?

Dr. Paul Renfro 35:35

In the 70s and 80s. context, it's almost exclusively white kids who are the subjects of these cases that generate a great deal of national attention. The exception is the Atlanta youth kidnappings and murders of 2930 young black folks in in Atlanta, some of whom were children, and some of whom were in their 20s that were predominantly male. And this does generate a considerable amount of national attention. However, it takes quite a while and this entire saga plays out over several years, but it takes about a year for law enforcement to really connect the cases. And to publicize these cases, in large part because the city of Atlanta its leaders don't want this sort of case or these cases to get out.

You know, they don't want news of this to kind of sully the reputation of Atlanta, which is imagined to be this kind of progressive, very forward thinking city in the city too busy to hate is, you know, it's its mantra for a time in the 20th century. Essentially, the argument is that it's it's not like other parts of the US South it is it is progressive, its race relations are, you know, cordial, and that sort of thing. So this obviously, is a blight on all of that a bunch of black kids, young people going missing and ending up murdered. The ways in which I talked about this in the book, the news media, and of course, this is kind of a kind of white establishment news media that really kind of bungles these cases and and the ways in which they talk about these individuals is really sort of demeaning, and it's totally different from the ways in which the 18 pates case or the Adam Walsh case or the Iowa paperboy cases are discussed in

in the news media. There's a bit of victim blaming here. There's this idea that these young people were out running errands, you know, they, they were kind of not suspicious enough of strangers. And that sort of contributed to their downfall. And of course, that's not the the narrative when it comes to the Iowa paperboy cases.

You know, these folks, that is Johnny Ghosh and Eugene Martin in Iowa, are also out running errands in a sense, right, they are delivering papers, and this is how they go missing or this is the context in which they go missing. Never. Are they sort of the subject of kind of skepticism, or are there sort of intentions? I guess, question. Right. And I think the that legacy lives on, right, I think we see again, and again, how cases involving young white people attractive people tend to generate the most interest and the most news, media attention. And that is, I think, you know, just a clear reflection of the racism that kind of shapes our society, right. And that shapes news, media and political discourse, et cetera, right, there are these understandings of white innocence, that, that are so powerful, and and so, so deeply kind of shaped the ways in which we perceive crime or a slate of other issues.

You know, I'm thinking of the Natalie Holloway case. I mean, the Gabby Petito case, right, right. You know, you can just list tons of, you know, individual cases, right, that, that have counterparts in black and brown communities, but which don't generate the same sort of interest. And yeah, it's a reflection, I think of deeper sorts of divisions and deeper sorts of inequalities in our society. You know, it bears noting that, you know, we talked about the disproportionate impact that this discourse has on on queer folks on trans folks. And this is kind of manifested not only in the sort of legislative attacks and other sorts of attacks that we're seeing now.

Again, the kind of whole discourse concerning grooming and recruitment, that is largely sort of focused on queer and trans folks, but also LGBTQ folks are disproportionately represented on sex offense registries and in jails and prisons, right. And that that's a clear reflection of these inequalities. Right? Even though it should be noted also that queer folks are not in any way more likely to perpetrate sex offenses or anything like that. Quite the opposite, right? Nevertheless, you know, they are disproportionately affected by by these laws. And the same thing can be said for black and brown folks, like, you know, again, there, there isn't evidence to suggest that clearly, there's not to suggest that they're more predisposed to committing certain acts. Nevertheless, they're, they're more likely to be represented in the carceral sphere.

Christy Keating 40:46

You know, it's this is not an official study. This is not a statistic I can cite. But I will say overwhelmingly, in the work that I did, the perpetrators were straight white individuals to the group that sex crimes, and I so appreciate you adding that, you know, that queer folks, LGBTQ folks are absolutely not any more likely, and perhaps less so to commit these types of offenses. And that's borne out in research again, and again. And I and I also appreciate sort of the recognition of the disproportionate stories that are told when black and brown children or, you know, individuals are impacted by this, and then when white

individuals are impacted, because I think that's something that we all need to think about, as we you know, if we continue to perpetuate these narratives, it's not a harmless narrative, to perpetuate, right? It's not just while I'm protecting my kid, right? It is, there is a larger societal impact to all of us that we need to be aware of, you know, your book is, there's so much stuff in there that is of such interest. But as I said, especially given my background, and we can talk for hours about it. I, in the interest of time love to kind of wrap up with this question, which, again, might be an unfair one, but I'm going to ask it this way. Which is, you know, where do we go from here? And and what advice would you have for these parents who have this sort of? Well, yeah, but Right, yeah, I know, it's not likely. But I'm going to not let my kid do these things anyway. Because just in case, do you have advice for folks who have a tendency to kind of fall back on that thinking?

Dr. Paul Renfro 42:48

Yeah, I think, you know, I don't want to tell people how to parent, you know, again, I'm not a parent, and I don't know what's best for your child or anything like that. However, I think it's, it's quite clear that this is not the stranger danger is not the concern that people thought it was in the late 20th century, and that many people think it is today, when you're invested in these narratives, and you're reinforcing them, in a sense, you know, think about the work that that does. And, you know, again, I'm not blaming people for the existence of these narratives, and the staying power of these narratives, but you know, by contributing to them, you're giving them power, and that is that, you know, they need that sort of power, they need that sort of life in order to survive. And it's easier said than done, but you know, letting go in a sense, is, is, is so such a powerful sort of move, right, or a potentially powerful move. And that's not to say that, you know, you just let your children do whatever, right, but recognizing that there are larger problems, much larger problems, that that don't often occupy people's minds in the same way, I think that can be really liberating. And it seems to be the sort of parenting that you're trying to cultivate, through this program and through your work. So, you know, I would say embrace that, you know, embrace uncertainty. At the same time, acknowledge and kind of realize that this is not the major problem that so many people think it is and, you know, let go of that and don't let it ruin your life and ruin your parenting and, and kind of, you know, grip you in, in the ways that that has demonstrated that it can, you know, don't don't give it that power.

Christy Keating 44:44

Yeah, I'll just add for for folks who are listening. So you mentioned Lenore Skenazy, who is a colleague of mine, she spoke in the Safe Parenting Summit that I hosted earlier this year. Some of our listeners may have heard her, and she has a fantastic organization called Let Grow You can find her at letgrow.org. And she gives a lot of great practical tips for parents about sort of how to let some of this go.

And then we also hosted Dr. Peter Gray on the podcast who's a professor at Boston College. And he talks about the importance of play and letting our kids unsupervised, unstructured, multi age play, and he's actually a board member for the left row organization. So those might be two good places as well,

for parents to start with, with, as you said, the letting go of some of this, and recognizing that it's both not helpful to your own child and your own parenting. And it's not helpful to the larger discourse. And part of this, my goal of creating more equity and inclusion and acceptance of LGBTQ folks and black and brown votes and all of that. So, yeah. So, Paul, thank you so much for this conversation and for putting this important work out into the world. I think, you know, this is how we chip away at it is one step at a time. So I really appreciate you being willing to have this conversation today.

Dr. Paul Renfro 46:15

Thank you so much for having me, Christy. I really, really appreciate it.

Christy Keating 46:17

All right, podcast listeners, I hope that you found that conversation, interesting and informative and thought provoking. I know that I did, I mentioned this a few times through the interview. But I found Dr. Renfro, his book to be really interesting, particularly as a former prosecutor and recognizing that there was history, to some of the things that we were working on, you know, as in the criminal justice system that not all the players are really privy to or aware of. And I found it to be just a really interesting academic piece from that standpoint.

But more importantly, from a parenting standpoint, I think the work that Paul has done in this space is really important for us all to kind of wrap our heads around and sort of grasp. And here's my challenge to you as we head into a new school year, let your kids walk to school, if you live within walking distance, let them ride their bikes out in the street, you know, let them play unsupervised, let them explore and be kids without your constant sort of Hawking over them. You know, that's, that's my challenge. And I recognize that, for many of you, that will feel like a really big challenge that that's a really big ask. And so as I mentioned at the end of my interview with Dr. Renfro, I encourage you to check out the Let Grow organization run by Lenore Skenazy. You know, her book Free Range Kids is fantastic.

I also encourage you to listen to the podcast with Dr. Peter Gray. And to really get reflective about this and to think about not just the impact to your own child or children, but to our society as a whole.

So with that, I hope that was really helpful and we will be back next week with another episode of The Heartful Parent Podcast.

Cheers.