

Medicine for Digitally Addicted Boys

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Robert J Marks:

Welcome to Mind Matters News. I'm your bucolic host, Robert J. Marks. There is an epidemic of digital addiction, especially for today's youth. There are prescriptions to recover from digital addiction. Some programs to achieve recovery remind me of diets. It's a list of things to do and a list of things not to do, but as one that has struggled with weight for most of my life, diets based totally on self-control rarely work. There are also some specific organizational medicines available to achieve digital wellness. For youth, there are church groups like Awana's and organizations like the Boys Girls Clubs of America. It used to be that the Boy Scouts of America was a great organization. It got young boys out in nature. They camped, they built fires, they worked with their fathers and their mentors. It groomed boys to be good and honorable men. Communing with nature helps youngsters forget about TikTok and other social media. Well, at least for a while.

Founded in 1910, more than 130 million Americans have participated in the Boy Scouts. Before January 2014, the Boy Scouts prohibited quote, known or about homosexuals. They changed that policy. They also changed a policy that now allows girls to join the Boy Scouts. So they had to change their names and they're now called Scouts BSA. Nobody talks about what about BSA stands for, but that's Boy Scouts of America. So it's Scouts BSA. The BSA looks to be in an acronym with no meaning. No matter how you feel about the Scout's policy change, their customers didn't like it. Before this change in policy, Boy Scout membership peaked at six and a half million members, six and a half million in 1972. As recently as 1998, the membership was 4.8 million. After adoption of the Scout's new policies, membership has dropped like a hot potato.

Here's the most recent data. This is from the Associated Press. I saw it on the web, so it must be true. The Associated Press says there's just shy of 2 million Boy Scouts. Now, this was in 2019. In 2020, this dropped to a bit over a million. That was a 43% drop in membership. There was a further decline in 2021 to a bit over three quarters of a million members. So their membership is really anemic, and I haven't checked the latest figures, but it doesn't look too good for the membership of Boy Scouts. And they have problems other than memberships. They lost a whopping two and a half billion dollar sexual abuse settlement. According to Reuters, 80,000 members have claimed sexual abuse from top leaders as the result of being Scouts. Let me repeat that number because it blew my mind. 80,000 members are in this lawsuit.

Scout's BSA was forced into bankruptcy by this big fine, and it's a big problem. There is even an organization of the formerly sexually abused Scouts. It's called the Coalition of Abused Scouts for Justice, Coalition of Abused Scouts for Justice. And they say that the settlement will bring, quote, some justice to tens of thousands of survivors, men and women, many of whom have been waiting decades for this day to arrive. So the Boy Scouts promised to be some medicine for digital addiction and to get away from some of the pitfalls that happened with social media. But a lot of these people fell into other circumstances, which were very unfortunate. It turns out that I was a Boy Scout before their pivot to progressivism. My father was the leader of my Cub Scout pack back in Garfield Heights, Ohio. I have great memories from the Boy Scouts up through my middle teens. That's when the Boy Scouts kind of stopped.

And I experienced during that time no abuse, nor did I ever see a hint of such problems. This was before the days of today's digital addiction. But I got to admit, the Boy Scouts got me away from TV. I just took

a little quiz online. If you can name 30 out of these 40 old television shows, you have an IQ of a million or something like that. And I got them all right, except for one. So yeah, I was a TV addict. My Scout troop did great things got me away from the television. We hiked. We learned great skills. We bonded with our fathers and our mentors. It was great. Today I have pause about Scout's BSA, given their history. I would not recommend that my grandsons join the Scouts.

But if not the Boy Scouts, where do kids go today for the great digital wellness medicine of outdoors, especially city boys? Many boys today don't even have fathers. So how do these kids safely enjoy the activities I enjoyed as a kid? One great answer is an organization called Trail Life. A friend of mine, Brian Kraus, we're working on editing a book together. He recently moved from Seattle to Tennessee for the same reason a lot of people were leaving progressive states, and he has some boys who joined Trail Life.

Brian was talking to me on a Zoom call and he was enthusiastic about the organization and asked me if I had ever heard of Trail Life. I had. It turns out that my cousin, Kent Marks, was in on the founding of Trail Life and he's our guest today and we're delighted to have him. Here's a little bit of background. Ken is the founder of the Marks Building Company in the Cleveland, Ohio area. He's been in business for 35 years. He's also an Eagle Scout under the Boy Scouts of America. And after that, he was a Boy Scout leader. He spent 43 years in the Boy Scouts of America, but he came disillusioned and the Scouts are now a distant memory in his rearview mirror, and he is fully invested in Trail Life. Kent, welcome.

Kent Marks:

Hey, Bob. How you doing?

Robert J Marks:

I'm doing just exactly right. Got some questions for you. I looked on Wikipedia. There's a list of Eagle Scouts. Now, you earned the rank of Eagle Scout and you, it turns out, are among some pretty elite people here. Here's some cherry-picking from guys that have been Eagle Scouts. Neil Armstrong, first man on the moon was an Eagle Scout. This one surprised me. Steven Spielberg, Sam Walton, founder of Walmart, Supreme Court Justice Steven Breyer. Bill Gates' father, William H. Gates was an Eagle Scout. Presidential candidates, Michael Dukakis, Ross Perot and Rick Perry were all Eagle Scouts and current US senators, Mike Lee and Rick Scott are Eagle Scouts, as well as former president Gerald Ford was an Eagle Scout. Now you went through the gauntlet to become an Eagle Scout. What does it take to be an Eagle Scout?

Kent Marks:

Well, it's not easy. It was a difficult thing to do, and it's supposed to be difficult and really prepared a young man for the realities of life, to set goals and challenges and go exceed those and weave yourself through the path of all the distractions to accomplish those goals. And I got my Eagle Scout two days before my 18th birthday, which is the deadline. So I got my full gamut, but it was very difficult to do as a teenager. And I look back today, and that was the basis of my life as the character building and the way it took to prepare to be a man.

Robert J Marks:

So in the Boy Scouts, you can only be a member up until the age of 17. When you turn 18, you're out. Is that right?

Kent Marks:

Your 18th birthday, you're an adult. Yes, that's that's true.

Robert J Marks:

Okay. Now, if I remember right, you had to write a bunch of merit badges and they have some strange merit badges. What were some of them that you earned? Do you remember?

Kent Marks:

Well yeah, I remember I had to earn 24 at the time. I was part of that 6.5 million back in the '70s. So there was a lot of us, but there was some merit badges to this day. American Business, I remember that one. Citizenships. Emergency Preparedness was a very difficult one. I enjoyed the Camping and the Wilderness Survival merit badges. There was a whole selection of life skills that were required and electives to become an Eagle. Some of them were very, very, very fun. I enjoyed it.

Robert J Marks:

Well, that's great. Baylor's reputation, I teach at Baylor University, their reputation goes up and down depending on how many football games they win, believe it or not. And when the wins go up, Dan, we have a lot of applicants. When we're doing bad, the applications kind of fall. So there is kind of an up and down, according to the brand. With the recent disgrace of Scouts USA with this lawsuit, 80,000 kids. Oh my gosh, that blows my mind. With the disgrace of Scouts USA and the tarnishing of the brand, do you think the status of being an Eagle Scout has also been diminished?

Kent Marks:

It has been diminished. The requirements have been created to make it easier. I was upset with it when they made it where you could be a 13-year-old and get Eagle Scout. Heck, those 13 year olds are still afraid of what's behind the door in the closet, and they're not men yet. And it's been watered down. And then of course, I hear that girls are in Boy Scouts now and there's Girl Eagle Scouts. Well, I have nothing against girls. I have two granddaughters. I love them to death. But there's programs for girls and there's programs for boys. And combining the two, it made it difficult. But yeah, it's been diminished. It's been diminished and it's still looked upon as the pinnacle, but people look at it with a question in their face.

Robert J Marks:

Yeah, I got to think that indeed is the case. And there's something called Goodhart's Law, which says that anytime you start counting beans, that the number of beans that you count becomes an ineffective measure for what you're trying to do. I would imagine, I don't know this, but I would imagine Scouts would say, we have 200,000 Eagle Scouts, and that was a big brag. And of course they would want to make that number bigger, and so they would diminish the criteria it would take to become an Eagle Scout. And that's what you're saying. That's very interesting. Can you think of a specific way that they reduce the requirements to become an Eagle Scout?

Kent Marks:

Well, of course, they dropped the merit badge count. I'm not sure what it was, but when I left it was 21. When I was there, it was 24. The service projects, which really, it's a life skill where you plan and implement, take leadership on a project that's approved by your mentors. I know those have been watered down quite a bit. So that number can stay higher because there's less that are vying for that are in Boy Scouts. There's less that are vying for Eagle because there's less candidates. So they're trying to

make it as more attainable. But it's watered down with most of the requirements. Used to be when we did a service Eagle board reviews, we would ask, what is your stance with God? And now that question's not asked. So it's just part of the Scout oath and the law that's been watered down as well that's part of becoming an Eagle Scout. More can attain it without having the Christian principles that were founded by the founder of Boy Scouts as Lord Baden-Powell. So that's been changed over the last hundred years.

Robert J Marks:

Now you were a Boy Scout leader and you were associated with the Scout for I think 43 years. Is that right?

Kent Marks:

Yeah, I count the 43 years is when I was a Cub Scout. And my father, which is your uncle, and your uncle were both Cub scout leaders. And I was quite happy to hear that my Uncle Jack was a Scout leader. But yeah, 43 years I was a Scout master for 27 of those years. And then of course gotten district level and helped out with multiple troops. But yeah, I've seen a lot of changes in the last 15 years when I was in Scouts. I could see changes coming from the professional end of Boy Scouts, where the district executives used to be trained to support the volunteers. And then gradually it changed where those district executives were trained and taught to lead, and tell the volunteers what to do. And that's one of the downfalls of the Scouts, in my opinion, is the dynamics changed. The volunteer base was told what to do instead of having support to exceed in the successful path that Boy Scouts was.

Robert J Marks:

Yeah, that reminds me, by the way, Eisenhower, after World War II, before he became president, I think in 1950, was it '50? It has to be divisible by four, so it must have been '52. He was the president of Columbia University, and he came to the university as the president because he was very prestigious and all that stuff. And he said, "It's great to be here among all the employees of Columbia University." A professor interrupted him and he said, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, President Eisenhower, President of Columbia." He says, "We are not employees of the university. We are the university." And certainly that's changed in the university. No more were the professors in charge of the university. It was run a business. And it sounds kind of like that's what happened with Boy Scouts or Scouts, if you will, that it became administrative heavy and that it began to dictate all of the possibilities to the low citizens, the serfs, if you will.

Kent Marks:

Well, we could see that the Friends of Scouting, the financial campaign used to be a two-month campaign, and then all of a sudden it changed to be a year long. Everything was about paying the salaries and the highest salaries. But I got to tell you, Bob, I'm with Trail Life now, and I look at the Boy Scouts of my time, and I believe that the Lord prepared me and many others in the Scout program to be ready for this new program. So I have a hard time saying bad things about the BSA during my time.

Robert J Marks:

Yeah, exactly. I think when you and I were in it, it was probably a lot more like Trail Life is today. It was.

Kent Marks:

Absolutely.

Robert J Marks:

Yeah, it was really, really cool. So let's talk about that. When you were the Boy Scout leader and you took your boys out, we're we want to talk about digital wellness, getting them away from the things of just the routine of life and out into the wilderness and such. What sort of things did you do with them?

Kent Marks:

We did that. We went out on purpose, we did camp outs every month. We planned big adventure trips. We took the boys to Canada every couple years to portage canoes, four or five miles to inland Lakes and to live off the land, the blueberry. I never thought I'd get tired of blueberries and fish, but after a while you get tired of blueberries and fish. But we made men out of boys when we took them out in the wilderness and out to see God's creation. We made it on purpose to go to a place called Philmont every couple years. And that's a 10-day backpacker in the Rocky Mountains in northern New Mexico. And by the way, Bob, it's a great weight loss program. I lost 24 pounds in 10 days.

Every couple days I'm putting another notch in my belt so my belt could tighten up a little bit more. But it was a great opportunity to get these young men out. And it's the video game of life. These boys sit in front of these screens, and they want to play these video games. But you get these young men out and it's a real video game. You've got to go from point A to point B and there's no start over button. And you've got obstacles, you've got rivers, you've got creeks, you got mountains, you got valleys, you got wildlife, you've got bear tracks, you've got bobcat tracks. You've got all kinds of things that you've got to navigate through that video game of your real trip. And it gives the boys a different perspective of, wow, this is a real life video game. And it's men making for sure.

Robert J Marks:

And it's a lot more fun than playing a video game too, isn't it?

Kent Marks:

It is. You can't mimic the reality compared to what you see on the screen. You can't mimic the smells, the sounds, the beauty, the roughness, the challenge ahead of you, the mental aspect of being out in the wilderness, the mental aspect of knowing you have a hundred miles ahead of you to backpack, or you've got class 3 rapids up ahead of you and you can't get out. You have to go through that and overcome the obstacle in front of you. And again, that's something you can't do unless you get these young men out there out there in the wilderness, outdoors. Not even wilderness, but the outdoors.

Robert J Marks:

Great. You mentioned that you became disillusioned with the Boy Scouts, now Scouts BSA. One of the things you mentioned was that the administration became a little top-heavy and started to dictate everything that was going on, just like universities do today. Professors no longer are the university, it's the administration and a bunch of people that think they know how to run a university. So the same thing happened with the Boy Scouts. I think, if I remember right, your disillusion with the Boy Scouts became gradual. It wasn't a single event, but there were a number of events. Is that right? Or was it singular events?

Kent Marks:

I can look back at a few moments that I would stand back and think, "That is something that I can't support." The changes with the moral values. The Scout oath, "On my honor, I will do my best to do my

duty to God and my country, to obey the Scout law, to help other people at all times, keep myself physically strong, mentally awake and morally straight." I saw the definition of the word morally straight changing ever so subtly where you really didn't notice it unless you really paid attention. I saw the God aspect disappearing. I remember a time when we were at Klondike, 4 or 500 boys and their leaders on a winter camp out weekend, and I was in charge of this event, and I was getting a little pushback on saying prayers.

I could care less of what people think about. If I want to say a prayer, I'm going to say a prayer. And we always had these placards, like the Philmont grace. "For food, for raiment, for opportunity, for friendship, we thank thee, oh Lord." That was all it said. And everybody just read it, and it was like robots reading words and had no meaning or definition of what they were saying. So I said a real prayer and the pushback I got after saying that prayer was one of those moments when I stood back and said, "Something different is going to happen someday, and I hope I'm part of it because I cannot be part of this too much longer."

Robert J Marks:

So who gave you that pushback? Was it somebody in ...

Kent Marks:

Other leaders, parents that were at that event. I remember a father coming up saying, "How dare you say a prayer and say and saying the word Jesus." And I said, "Well, how dare you come tell me what I can and I can't say, because Jesus is everything to me, and I just want to make sure that we keep the word reverent in Boy Scouts." Of course, he was picking on the wrong person because I do stand my ground when it comes to Christ. But it was one of those defining moments, it wasn't just him, it was other people, even weeks and months later and say, "Hey, boy, that was pretty brave to say that prayer." Why would it be brave to say a prayer? And I was just seeing some subtle changes and starting to actually starting to push back on some of them.

Robert J Marks:

Were you involved in the Scouts when they did the policy switch to allow gays to become involved?

Kent Marks:

Well, no. What happened was I was a district chairman.

Robert J Marks:

What's a district chairman do in Boy Scouts? What'd you do there?

Kent Marks:

District chairman is a volunteer. I'm in charge of about 70, 80 troops and they're volunteers and the leaders. I'm the volunteer leader that chairs that district of three counties. And I remember in February of 2013, the national office of the BSA sent out a statement, news statement stating that the vote coming in May, the national conference was going to vote whether they allow gays into Scouts or not. And I made it a point to tell my committee that if that vote changes the dynamics of the BSA that I'm out. Well, when May came along, May 25th, 2013, the BSA had their national convention and they voted and 70% of the votes were in favor of the change. And that's the day I turned in my resignation.

Robert J Marks:

Really? Okay.

Kent Marks:

Yeah, it was amazing to see that it was 60, 70, somewhere in there. It was not close. However, the person, we sent out our delegate from our council, which was 400 and some councils, our delegate we sent out, said that he was going to vote against it. And when he went there, he voted for it. So things happened, we're not sure what happened, but reminds me of recent elections actually. But that's the digress. Anyway, I remember coming home that day and my wife saying, "I just heard the news that the BSA voted to allow gays," and Bob, it was like a family member died. You're in this for 43 years, and the awful grief of knowing that I can't be part of that anymore. It's been all my life, but my wife looked at me and I remember this to this day, she looked at me with that face and she's not one of these to speak up. She goes, "What are you going to do about it?" I remember those words to this day. "What are you going to do about it?"

Robert J Marks:

Okay. And Trail Life was the answer. We're going to talk about this on the next installment of that. So thank you, Kent. This has been a great topic. Next time we're going to talk more about Trail Life and your involvement. You were a founding father of Trail Life and it's doing really well. I'm surprised how well it's doing. We have been talking to Kent Marks. He is the founder and president of the Marks Building Company in the Cleveland, Ohio area. He's also an Eagle Scout, former Boy Scout leader and a founding father of Trail Life.

Next episode, as I mentioned, we'll talk about Trail Life as a medicine to attain digital wellness because that's where we want to focus, getting kids away from their cell phones and all the media that consumes them, and how to take steps to avoid what happens to the Boy Scouts. We don't want what happened to the Boy Scouts to affect Trail Life. And they've taken, I think, some extraordinary steps to ensure that doesn't happen. So until then, be of good cheer.

Announcer:

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