

BEHIND CLOSED SCREENS

Workshop notes from Susan Doherty

Random thoughts, stats, ideas and further food for thought...

Monday Rent Boy: Book themes

1. Childhood Trauma

As the novel delves into the long-lasting impact of traumatic experiences during childhood, it examines how these early events shape the characters' lives, behaviors, and emotional well-being.

Undoing childhood trauma starts with connection and mentorship which lead to resilience and better coping skills.

Despite the difficult circumstances faced by the characters, the theme of resilience runs throughout the book. It highlights the characters' strength and ability to cope with and overcome significant challenges.

2. Identity and Self-Discovery

The journey of understanding and accepting oneself is a central theme. The protagonist's struggle with identity, particularly in the context of societal and familial expectations, is a key focus. If a student has self-esteem, staff connections, friendships, it's harder for abusers to pierce the surface and make in-roads

3. Exploitation and Vulnerability

The book addresses issues of exploitation, particularly in the context of vulnerable individuals. It sheds light on the ways in which marginalized people can be taken advantage of and the consequences that arise from such exploitation. As a school, can you easily identify the students

who need more emotional support? Students navigating death, divorce, parental addiction and the likes places them in a vulnerable situation and more likely to be preyed upon.

4. Human Connection and Isolation

The novel explores the importance of human relationships and the impact of isolation. It looks at how characters form connections, the support systems they rely on, and the effects of loneliness, which can and does lead students to seek out connections on social platforms

5. Healing and Redemption

The possibility of healing and finding redemption is another important theme. The narrative often revolves around characters seeking forgiveness, making amends, and finding ways to heal from their past wounds.

Monday Rent Boy is the story of two boys. Your boys. My boys. Anybody's boys. My hope is that some of my research will resonate and that you go back to your schools empowered to foster awareness, inspire empathy, and create a safer environment for all students.

Ten worrisome trends that our boys face on an ongoing basis:

1.Sexting:

Increasing numbers of teenagers are sharing sexually explicit messages and images of themselves. This behavior can lead to significant emotional and legal consequences, including cyberbullying and exposure to exploitation. It often starts with a simple text message with mildly sexual content.

2. Online Predation:

Teenagers are vulnerable to online predators who use social media and chat rooms to groom and exploit them. Adult predators looking to groom children online often **visit social media websites** that are popular with young people and will pretend to be their age. Predators often manipulate teens into sharing explicit content or meeting in person. Amanda Todd in British Columbia took her own life after being duped by a stranger. Her perpetrator also focused on boys.

3. Revenge Porn:

The non-consensual sharing of intimate images, often by ex-partners, is a growing issue. This can lead to severe psychological distress, social ostracism, and legal battles for victims. The anger and outrage at the end of a relationship can trigger abhorrent behaviour, especially in boys who are not fully mature and have given little or no thought to the future consequences.

4. Easily Accessed Pornography:

Easy access to online pornography, including violent or extreme content, can shape unhealthy attitudes towards sex and relationships. Exposure at a young age can also lead to addiction and distorted views of intimacy. Boys as young as nine are typing “Sexy Girls” into a browser on their phones. Is denying young children a cellphone the answer? Perhaps it’s too late for that measure. Educate without shame. Understanding media literacy, discussing family values, without denying the existence of these sites are important parts of the discussion. Telling the child that just like owning a driver’s license or viewing certain movies or even learning calculus... they are not quite ready for it!

5. Abundant Sexual Content on social media:

Platforms like TikTok and Instagram often feature sexually suggestive content. Teens might imitate these behaviors or feel pressured to conform to sexualized norms to gain approval and likes. Teenagers who do not use the privacy settings on their devices (often to gain more “LIKES”) are especially vulnerable to predation.

6. Catfishing:

Teenagers may be deceived by individuals who create fake online identities to engage in romantic or sexual relationships. This can lead to emotional manipulation, exploitation, and abuse.

7. Cyberbullying:

Teens may use sexual content as a means to bully and harass peers, leading to shame, depression, and, in extreme cases, suicide. **Nate Bronstein** was a 15-year-old student at a prestigious Chicago private school who died by suicide after being cyberbullied by his classmates. His parents say the school could have done more to stop it.

8. Pressure to Share:

Peer pressure can compel teenagers to share intimate images or engage in sexual conversations online. This pressure often comes from within their social circles or romantic interests.

9. Lack of Privacy Understanding:

Many teenagers do not fully grasp the permanence and public nature of digital content. They may unknowingly share private information or images that can be easily distributed beyond their intended audience.

10. Inadequate Sexual Education:

Often, sexual education does not adequately cover online risks and responsible digital behavior, leaving teenagers unprepared to navigate their online sexual experiences safely.

How is resilience fostered through human connection?

Resilience is the ability to recover from adversity, adapt to change, and keep going in the face of challenges. It is often fostered through human connection in several key ways:

Emotional Support

Human connections provide emotional support that helps individuals cope with stress. Friends, family, and colleagues can offer comfort, encouragement, and understanding, which are essential for managing difficult situations. This emotional support acts as a buffer against stress and helps people feel less isolated in their struggles.

Social Networks

A strong social network provides a safety net during tough times. People with robust social connections can share resources, advice, and practical help. These networks can help distribute the burden of stress and provide diverse perspectives on solving problems.

Positive Role Models

Relationships with resilient individuals can serve as powerful role models. Observing how others navigate challenges can inspire and teach effective coping strategies. Mentors and peers can provide

guidance and encouragement, reinforcing a person's belief in their ability to overcome obstacles.

Sense of Belonging

Human connections foster a sense of belonging and community. Feeling part of a group or community can enhance self-esteem and provide a sense of purpose. This belongingness can be crucial during difficult times, making individuals feel valued and understood.

Shared Experiences

Sharing experiences with others who have faced similar challenges can be incredibly validating and healing. Support groups and communities of shared experiences offer a space where individuals can express their feelings openly and receive empathy and support.

Communication Skills

Interacting with others helps develop communication skills, which are vital for expressing needs, setting boundaries, and seeking help when needed. Effective communication fosters better relationships and provides avenues for support during adversity.

Encouragement and Motivation

Human connections can provide the motivation to keep going when times are tough. Encouragement from others can boost a person's confidence and resolve. Knowing that someone believes in them can be a significant motivator.

Research and Social Support

Research has shown that social support is linked to better mental health outcomes and greater resilience. According to a study by the American Psychological Association, strong social connections can help

mitigate the effects of stress and improve overall well-being. Another study published in the Journal of Applied Psychology found that social support at school can enhance resilience and academic performance.

In conclusion, resilience is significantly fostered through human connection by providing emotional support, building social networks, offering positive role models, creating a sense of belonging, sharing experiences, developing communication skills, and offering encouragement and motivation. These connections play a vital role in helping individuals navigate and overcome life's challenges.

Students are generally better able to handle adversity through mentorship and connection. Research and various studies have shown that strong social support systems, including mentorship and connections, play a significant role in fostering resilience among students. Here's how mentorship and connection contribute to their ability to handle adversity:

Emotional Support

Mentors provide emotional support and guidance, helping students navigate difficult situations. They offer a safe space for students to express their concerns and fears, which can alleviate stress and anxiety. Mentors can also share their own experiences and coping strategies, providing practical advice on how to manage challenges.

Development of Coping Skills

Through mentorship, students can develop essential coping skills. Mentors can teach problem-solving techniques, stress management strategies, and resilience-building exercises. This guidance helps students learn how to approach and overcome obstacles effectively.

Increased Self-Esteem and Confidence

Positive reinforcement from mentors and peers boosts students' self-esteem and confidence. When students feel valued and supported, they are more likely to believe in their abilities to overcome challenges. This increased self-efficacy is crucial for resilience.

Being part of a supportive community or having a mentor fosters a sense of belonging. This feeling of connection and being understood by others who have faced similar challenges can be incredibly empowering. It reduces feelings of isolation and enhances overall well-being.

Academic and Personal Development

Mentors can help students set realistic goals and provide feedback on their progress, which is essential for both academic and personal development. This structured support encourages students to stay focused and motivated, even in the face of adversity.

Encouragement and Motivation

Mentors and supportive peers offer encouragement and motivation, helping students stay positive and persistent. Knowing that someone believes in their potential can inspire students to keep going, even when they encounter setbacks.

Research Evidence

Several studies support the positive impact of mentorship and social connections on student resilience:

- A study published in the "Journal of Youth and Adolescence" found that mentoring relationships positively influence the

academic and emotional outcomes of students, helping them develop resilience and better cope with stress.

- The "American Journal of Community Psychology" highlighted that social support from mentors and peers significantly enhances students' ability to handle adversity and promotes overall mental health.
- According to the "National Mentoring Partnership," students who have mentors are more likely to attend school regularly, achieve higher academic performance, and develop positive attitudes toward education, all of which contribute to their resilience.

Virtuous Pedophile:

According to Dr. Fred Berlin of the Johns Hopkins Sex and Gender Clinic, "People don't choose what arouses them — they discover it. No one grows up wanting to be a pedophile."

We need to have systems in place where those who identify as a non-offending pedophile (virtuous) are offered treatments and counselling to maintain their commitment to being non-offenders.

Cyberbullying anecdote:

The summer following his high school graduation 18-year-old Tyler Clementi began sharing that he was gay. Clementi's college roommate during his freshman year at Rutgers University, Dharun Ravi, used a webcam to stream footage of Clementi kissing another man. Clementi discovered through his roommate's Twitter feed that he had become "a topic of ridicule in his new college environment. On September 22, 2010, Clementi committed suicide by jumping off the George Washington Bridge. The U.S. Senate and the U.S. House of Representatives introduced the *Tyler Clementi Higher Education Anti-Harassment Act* to expand bullying prevention programs. Awareness and proactive measures by educators, parents, and policymakers are

essential to address these trends and support teenagers in navigating their online sexual experiences responsibly.

How is excessive pornography consumption affecting boys?

Distorted Views of Sexuality and Relationships:

Excessive exposure to pornography may lead to unrealistic and distorted views of sexuality, intimacy, and relationships. It can create unrealistic expectations about sexual performance, body image, and consent, leading to confusion or misunderstandings about healthy relationships.

Impact on Sexual Development:

For adolescent boys, repeated exposure to explicit sexual content at a young age can influence their sexual development. It may affect their understanding of sex, intimacy, and appropriate sexual behavior, potentially leading to premature or inappropriate sexual behavior.

Psychological Effects:

Excessive pornography consumption can impact mental health, leading to feelings of shame, guilt, anxiety, or depression, especially if boys feel they are unable to control or stop their consumption. It might also contribute to low self-esteem or body image issues.

Relationship Issues: It can affect boys' ability to form and maintain healthy relationships. Unrealistic expectations or behaviors learned from pornography can impact their interactions with peers and romantic partners, leading to difficulties in communication and intimacy.

Desensitization and Addiction-Like Behaviors:

Excessive exposure to explicit content can lead to desensitization, where boys might require more extreme or novel content to achieve the same level of arousal. This behavior can resemble addiction, with

increased tolerance and withdrawal symptoms when attempting to reduce consumption.

Impact on Academic Performance:

Excessive consumption of pornography might lead to distraction, decreased focus, or reduced academic performance, as it can become a compulsive behavior that consumes significant time and attention.

Social and Emotional Isolation:

It might contribute to social isolation or withdrawal from real-life social interactions, as excessive consumption of pornography can become a solitary and secretive activity.

Underreporting:

Many cases of online child abuse go unreported due to fear, shame, lack of awareness, or difficulty in recognizing signs of abuse.

While the child pornography predates the digital era, smartphone cameras, social media and cloud storage have allowed the images and videos to multiply at an alarming rate. Both recirculated and new images occupy all corners of the internet, including a range of platforms as diverse as Facebook Messenger, Microsoft's Bing search engine and the storage service Dropbox. Images have the potential to exist on the internet in perpetuity moving from device to device.

Challenges:

Global Nature:

The borderless nature of the internet makes it challenging to enforce laws and collaborate across jurisdictions to combat online child abuse effectively.

Technological Advancements:

Rapid technological changes create new avenues for abuse, such as the use of encrypted messaging apps and emerging technologies that can obscure offenders' identities.

Trauma and Mental Health:

Children subjected to online abuse often experience severe trauma, leading to long-term psychological and emotional challenges that require specialized support and intervention.

Cases that have attracted world-wide attention

More than 300 million children a year are victims of online sexual abuse and exploitation. These findings were published in a 2024 report by the **Childlight Global Child Safety Institute** at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland, in partnership with **UNSW Sydney** as part of the first global index of child sexual exploitation and abuse prevalence across three indicators: victimisation, perpetration, and availability of child sexual abuse material online. The report coalesced data from more than 36 million reports and 125 studies, including the work of criminologist Professor Michael Salter from the School of Social Sciences at UNSW Arts, Design & Architecture.

“The world needs to know these atrocities are affecting children in every classroom, in every school, in every country,” said Professor Deborah Fry, an expert in international child protection at the University of Edinburgh and lead investigator of the **Childlight** project. *“These aren’t harmless images: they are deeply damaging, and the abuse continues with every view and the failure of taking down this abusive content.”*

2021 Australian of the Year, Grace Tame, a survivor of childhood sexual abuse, said the figures in the report showed that child sexual abuse is a *“global public health crisis that is steadily worsening.”*

These cases illustrate the pervasive and harmful nature of online abuse affecting children globally, highlighting the need for increased awareness, preventive measures, and robust legal frameworks to protect vulnerable children.

1. **Amanda Todd (Canada):** Amanda Todd, a Canadian teenager, was targeted by a man online who convinced her to flash her breasts on a webcam. He later blackmailed her by threatening to share the images if she didn't provide more explicit content. Despite changing schools to escape the harassment, Amanda continued to be cyberbullied and eventually took her own life in 2012. Her case drew international attention to the dangers of online predators and cyberbullying.
2. **Drake Bell (United States)** appeared on an episode of Dear Media's podcast Tuesday where he discussed the aftermath of opening up about sexual abuse he faced as a minor by Nickelodeon voice coach Brian Peck in the "Quiet on Set" docuseries and the fallout after he was accused of sexual contact and grooming an underage fan. **Although it's impossible to be statistically concise, it is reported that 30 % of abused children become abusive adults.** Learned behaviour is perpetuated. Notably, child victims are at far greater risk of future substance abuse, depression, suicidal ideation, persistent traumatic stress (PTSD) or criminal aggression than of becoming child sex offenders.

3. **Nicole Lovell (United States):** In 2016, 13-year-old Nicole Lovell from Virginia was lured and killed by an older teenager she met on the messaging app Kik. David Eisenhauer, an 18-year-old college student, developed a relationship with Nicole online before meeting her in person and murdering her. This case highlighted the risks of teenagers meeting strangers they encounter online.
4. **Breck Bednar (United Kingdom):** In 2014, 14-year-old Breck Bednar was groomed by 18-year-old Lewis Daynes, who posed as a successful entrepreneur in online gaming communities. Daynes manipulated Breck and eventually convinced him to meet in person, where he killed him. This case underscored the dangers of online grooming through gaming platforms and the need for parental awareness and intervention.
5. **Kayleigh Haywood (United Kingdom):** In 2015, 15-year-old Kayleigh Haywood was groomed by Luke Harlow, a 27-year-old man she met on Facebook. After back-and-forth messaging for several weeks, Kayleigh agreed to meet Harlow in person. She was held against her will, sexually assaulted, and murdered by Harlow and his neighbor Stephen Beadman. Kayleigh's death led to the creation of educational films to raise awareness about online grooming.
6. **Alicia Kozakiewicz (United States):** At 13, Alicia Kozakiewicz was lured by a 38-year-old man she met in an online YAHOO chatroom. The man convinced her to meet in person, abducted her, and held her captive in his home on January 1, 2002, Scott Tyree lured Kozakiewicz into meeting him near her Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, address. He coerced her into his vehicle and then drove her back to his home in Virginia. Over the course of four days, she was held captive, shackled, raped, and tortured in Tyree's basement. Tyree filmed the abuse and broadcast it online, live via streaming video for others to witness.

Alicia was the first known victim of an Internet luring and child abduction situation that received widespread media attention. Her story and message have been chronicled on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, *Good Morning America*, *Dr. Phil*, CNN, MSNBC, and the A&E Biography Channel. She has been the subject of an award-winning PBS Internet safety documentary, *Alicia's Message: I'm Here to Save Your Life*,

International Impacts/Initiatives

1. Thailand:

The Thailand Internet Crimes Against Children (TICAC) taskforce reported a significant increase in online child sexual abuse during the COVID-19 pandemic. Boys, alongside girls, were targeted by cybersex predators who exploited the increased online presence of children due to school closures. The taskforce rescued over 100 children in just two months, a record high since its inception in 2016. (As reported in Thomson Reuters)

2. Canada - Amanda Todd's Case:

The tragic story of Amanda Todd, a Canadian teenager, brought to light the severe consequences of online abuse. Although Amanda was a girl, her case involved a Dutch man, Aydin Coban, who also targeted boys with similar tactics. Coban used fake online profiles to extort explicit content from his victims, later using this material to blackmail them (UNICEF).

3. Australia - Sextortion Scams:

The Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation (ACCCE) has highlighted cases where boys have been victims of sextortion.

Predators coerce boys into sharing explicit images, then threaten to distribute the content unless the boys provide more images or money. This form of online abuse has led to significant psychological distress among the victims. As reported by UNICEF.

4. United States - Social Media Exploitation:

In the U.S., there have been numerous cases of boys being groomed and exploited through social media platforms. For example, a case involved a 14-year-old boy from Michigan who was manipulated into sending explicit photos to an online predator posing as a young girl. The predator then blackmailed the boy, demanding money to prevent the images from being shared publicly ([UNICEF](#)).

5. Philippines - Livestream Abuse:

The UNICEF report on online sexual abuse and exploitation of children in the Philippines revealed that boys are increasingly being targeted for live-streamed sexual abuse. The rise in mobile phone ownership and internet access has facilitated this form of exploitation, with many boys being coerced into performing explicit acts for paying viewers ([UNICEF](#)).

Special Note:

When talking to an elementary (a six-year-old) child about the dangers of predators, it's important to use simple, clear, and reassuring language.

1. **Strangers:** "Sometimes, people we don't know might try to talk to us or take us somewhere. It's important to always stay close to someone you trust, like a parent or teacher."
2. **Safe Touch:** "There are good touches, like hugs from family, and bad touches that make you feel uncomfortable. If someone

touches you in a way that makes you feel uncomfortable, tell an adult you trust right away."

3. **Secrets:** "Some secrets, like surprises, are fun. But if someone asks you to keep a secret that makes you feel bad or scared, you should tell a grown-up you trust."
4. **Personal Space:** "Your body belongs to you, and no one should touch it without your permission. If someone tries, you can say 'No!' loudly and find a trusted adult."
5. **Trust Your Feelings:** "If someone makes you feel uncomfortable or scared, it's important to tell an adult you trust, like your parents, teachers, or another family member."
6. **Stay Together:** "Always stay with your friends or family when you're out. If you ever get lost, find a safe adult, like a police officer or a store worker, to help you."
7. **Use Code Words:** "Have a special code word with your family that only you and they know. If someone comes to pick you up and they don't know the code word, don't go with them."
8. **Emergency Plans:** "Know your full name, address, and how to dial 911 in case of an emergency. Practice what to do if you ever feel unsafe."

When talking to a 12-year-old about the dangers of online predators, it's important to use clear, direct, and age-appropriate language.

1. **Understanding Online Predators:** "An online predator is someone who uses the internet to try and take advantage of kids. They might pretend to be your friend but have bad intentions. These people often lie about who they are. They might say they're a kid just like you, but they could be much older."
2. **Recognizing Red Flags:** "If someone you don't know starts chatting with you online, be careful. Never share personal information like your full name, address, school, or phone number. Be cautious if someone you meet online asks you to keep your conversations

secret, wants to meet in person, or sends you inappropriate pictures or messages."

3. **Safe Online Behavior:** "Only talk to people online that you know in real life. If a stranger tries to talk to you, don't respond and tell a trusted adult. Use privacy settings on social media to control who can see your posts and personal information."
4. **What to Do if You Feel Uncomfortable:** "If someone makes you feel uncomfortable online, stop talking to them and tell a parent or trusted adult immediately. It's important to remember that it's never your fault if someone is being creepy or inappropriate. You won't get in trouble for telling an adult."
5. **Encouraging Open Communication:** "Always feel free to come to me or another trusted adult if you see something online that worries you. We're here to help and protect you."