TRANSCRIPT

Learning Unboxed

Episode #000
EPISODE TITLE:

Driven by Goals.
Guided by Strategy.
Powered by Intention.

Sean Geraghty:
Let's try to get you to a place where you're doing something that you find inherently fulfilling, inherently motivating. You feel encouraged in doing it. It's the right level of challenge for you. It's something of an adventure. We want to get you to that place.

Annalies Corbin:
Welcome to Learning Unboxed, a conversation about teaching, learning and the future of work. I'm your host and chief goddess of the PAST Foundation, Annalies Corbin. We know the current model for education is obsolete. It was designed to create fleets of assembly line workers, not the thinkers and problem solvers needed today. We've seen the innovations that are possible within education, and it's our goal to leave the box behind and reimagine what education can look like in your own backyard.

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Annalies Corbin:
Welcome to today's episode of Learning Unboxed. As always, I'm excited to talk with another great innovator in the transformative education space. And joining us today is Sean Geraghty, the founder of Reset Coaching and the co -founder of the Center for Teen Flourishing. Sean, welcome to Learning Unboxed.

Sean Geraghty:
Thank you so much for having me.

Annalies Corbin:
We are really excited that you're here. I am super, super excited to dig into your work. So, let's set a little bit of context for our listeners as we get started. Reset Coaching is a national executive function coaching practice that helps teens and young adults build systems for focus, follow through, and confidence. Sean is also the co -founder of the Center for Teen Flourishing, a nonprofit research and innovation lab near and dear to my heart, exploring how teens spend time from 3 pm to 3 a m, and its goal is to help teens go from struggling to thriving, spending more time on sports, arts, work, home, friends, and sleep, and less time doomscrolling. We could all use a little of that.

And as a longtime educator and entrepreneur, Sean's work bridges coaching, behavioral science, and data-driven design. His first book, I'll Do It Later, Surviving

School and Renewing with Love with Your ADHD Son, is co -authored with Mike Goldstein, helps parents translate research into daily wins that stick. So, so much to consume here absolutely, Sean. So, we're excited for the conversation.

Sean Geraghty:
Again, Dr. Corbin, thank you so much for having me. Yeah, lots of different areas to dig in and maybe double-click on here.

Annalies Corbin:
Absolutely. Well, I want to start with the work. It's all super interesting, and we will talk about all the different pieces and parts, but I really, really want to talk about the work that you're doing with the Center for Teen Flourishing and the research that's happening around that time of day and time of life. That 3 pm to 3 am, we all know that that space is a complicated space for our teens. And then, you add in teens with ADHD or dyslexia or just a whole host of socio-emotional things that are going on these days. You throw in the Internet and the influence of influencing and what social media is doing with kiddos. And we've got a lot of kids that are struggling and a lot of families that are like, I don't even know what to do. So, talk to us about the why first of this research.

Sean Geraghty:
It's a great question. I think like many folks around the world, my co -founder and I, Mike, were very struck by the arguments put forth in Jonathan Haidt's book, The Anxious Generation. I'm sure your listeners are very familiar with that. What we liked about the book and what we like more broadly about the argument is that it focuses on something called opportunity cost, which is not just screens are bad, but what are the types of things that screens are replacing or substituting?

So, in our experience, we both have teenagers. We have lots of young people in our lives. We noticed pretty systematically, especially over the past decade or so, what Jonathan was reporting on, which was this. screen is substituting for in-person hanging out. We noticed that in our own lives. We could see it very clearly. And we thought, why is that?

And so, when we double clicked on it, both through the book and just through the larger literature we saw, it wasn't just screen time was displacing hanging out in person, it was also displacing jobs. It was displacing volunteering. It was displacing all sorts of things. And we were wondering about, hey, what are some ways where we can not tell the screens are a bad story, like screens are the boogeyman, but what are some ways in which we can get teenagers engaged in the stuff of life a little bit more?

Annalies Corbin:
And we do, I think, largely, all see this. My youngest son is an undergraduate in

college, and absolutely, all through middle school and high school, this is exactly what we saw. And then, you throw the pandemic in in the midst of that really foundational time of life. And the dependency, I guess, if you will, on that screen time, that virtual, that sort of safe space that says, "Hey, I can have an avatar. I don't even have to show my face. Nobody has to see what I look like or all those pieces and parts. And it really has translated into a fair amount of what I would say real life dysfunction.

Sean Geraghty:
Yeah, I would agree with that. I think that, again, if you look at how the 50th percentile teenager is spending their time, now relative to, say, 2015, even, or 2005, there are big substitutions happening. And to your point, it's not just that, hey, they're hanging out in person less. The skills that you learn as a social being are disintegrating. They're deteriorating.

And so, there are lots of unintended side effects that you see as a result of some of these patterns that are emerging. And so, in our work on the coaching side, when we work with teenagers, one of the humbling truths, and you, as someone who is very experienced here as well would know, is that there's lots of individual preferences, lots of very strong preferences. So, rather than tackling this narrowly like, "Hey, we should just be not doing X, we're trying to think about, what can we replace X with that's interesting to you, that speaks to you as a teenager?"

Some of our folks like weightlifting. Others like hanging out more in person. Others like pleasure reading, which has been on the decline now for quite some time. And so, we're trying to figure out ways through research and through our coaching practice to get them more involved in this, again, stuff of life.

Annalies Corbin:
And so, when you really sort of step back from it and distill down this piece of work, I want to talk really briefly about this before we move into the executive functioning piece, because they're all related. How do you, from that research perspective, distill down the primary things that you have found? Because this is informing the rest of your work. I can watch the progression in the pieces and parts of it. So, how are you taking that research and saying, okay, here's the fine point that we need to spend time, energy, and effort on. How do you get to that?

Because the work is broad, because the impacts are broad. And to your point, we're dealing with a lot of individual students who have disengaged, not just from school, but to some respects from life as we've traditionally understood it. And so, how do you then take all of that noise and distill it down into something that you feel like is truly actionable at the family level and then ultimately within schools?

Sean Geraghty:
I think that that's a great question. So, I think you're very familiar with this as a scholar, but the literature surrounding the effects of, say, smartphones and social media, I think has led to a great debate in academia. Some folks are maybe more on the Jonathan Haidt side saying some version of, "Hey, these are causally related to the increases in anxiety and depression," although we have seen some small decreases recently, which has been very encouraging, but this is causally related to that.

Other folks think that's overstated. There's lots of confounds, the pandemic, lots of other things that are going on just in modern life. I think what Mike and I said was, "Hey, we believe in randomized control trials. We believe in rigorous science. We believe in that. We do think the quality of evidence supporting that is not to, maybe, the highest standard."

So, what we say is, to your question, which I think is the right one, what's the big picture here? Are there any data sources that can provide us with the big picture, conceptually, what's going on? And for us, we like to rely on the American Time Use Survey, which is nationwide, just taking stock of, how are you spending your time? And we can look at and see very clearly in that data, the displacement of hanging out, for example, in person. That's the most striking thing. If your listeners could look at one graph, it's how much were teenagers hanging out in person 20 years ago versus how much are they hanging out in person now? And it's quite striking.

And so, that, for us, was something of, whoa, wait a minute, that sort of bears out with what we're seeing in our own lives when we talk with our friends who are parents. We see that with our own kids sometimes, like this tendency maybe to withdraw. What can we do about that? That seems to be something of a problem. We're not saying that that doesn't come with some attendant, also positive trade offs, maybe some kids who are more introverted or whatever. But the big picture here is, as you said earlier, not engaging with life has led to this deterioration in other skills that we think are important. And so, that's what we're trying to get after.

Annalies Corbin:
Absolutely. And I love that. And I can imagine our listeners, so many folks are like, "Oh my gosh." I could see the thought bubbles across the world of parents with teenagers, and And they're thinking, "Oh, this is completely related to whatever this thing is, X, Y, or Z, in my own life, in my own world that I'm seeing with my own kids." One of the ones that I'm most struck by with my kids, my youngest, in particular, is these kids don't date.

Sean Geraghty:
It's crazy. man.

Annalies Corbin:
It is. And those are foundational skills. Like we have to learn to do that. Like in high school and early college, this is how we learn to interact with another person on a very, very personal and potentially intimate level. And yet, these kids are not practicing that skill. And it is a skill that one needs to practice at home to know what works and what doesn't for you as an individual. And yet It's a big old giant void, especially for our young men.

Sean Geraghty:
Yeah. And you think about what are some of the unintended effects of that, the lack of dating? Seeing that some of that now, I think, in the culture, some of the dysfunction, some of the breaking down, that particular norm being on the decline, I think, has lots of impacts outside of just the dating scene.

Annalies Corbin:
I think it impacts every – I mean, I think they're all related. I don't think this one thing or that one thing or this thing over here is the singular cause or focus that we have to really dig into. I think, again, I'm going to go step back, put my anthropology hat on and say, look, we have to look at this holistically, and we have to understand the ecosystem of the world in which these young people are operating. And we have to understand the ecosystem that is humanity. And then, understand how these multi-systems also interact.

Otherwise, we're never really going to unravel it, my scholarly opinion. We're not going to unravel it without that deep level of understanding, the interconnectedness of these things.

Sean Geraghty:
It's a great point, and you are a scholar, so you're very familiar with this. I think some of the – I don't want to call them academic food fights, or the quality of the literature related to the causal effect or not of smartphones or social media on anxiety and depression, the increasing rates of those conditions, I think is in some ways sort of missing the point. Like, yes, is it a point two effect? Was this precisely controlled for? What are some of the possible consequences? I can understand that. And I appreciate the rigor that's brought to those discussions. We like to dig in and double click on all of that.

At the same time, I think it misses this point that you're making, which is the interconnectedness of this. And so, for us, it's like, what could be more interconnected than how you're spending your time? How are you spending your time? And how is that different from how you might be spending your time?

What we find, what we think is particularly interesting, again, in these surveys is lots of teenagers will report not particularly liking even in the moment when they fall into something of a doom scrolling way. All of your listeners can probably relate to that. Man, where did that hour go? Where did those two hours go?

Annalies Corbin:
Why did I do this?

Sean Geraghty:
All the time. We hear that all the time.

Annalies Corbin:
All the time.

Sean Geraghty:
I don't even really like it that much, man, but I'm doing it. So, if you're not really liking it that much, let's try to call that out and slowly build, think about what those opportunity costs are, what are those things you could be doing that might be more fulfilling, more of a risk to your point, more adventurous, more chill, just hanging out with your friends. Whatever it might be, let's try to put some of that back into the mix.

Annalies Corbin:
Absolutely. And so, then, how do we make the leap, Sean, from this incredible research and the digging that we're doing around understanding time and how time is being spent, and this idea about families and educators often misunderstanding motivation, executive function, and why traditional systems fail, especially when we're talking about those ADHD or those chronically – I use that word, that's my term – chronically overwhelmed students that we are starting to see on an ongoing and regular basis. So, how then does the other piece of your work, like the coaching and the defining,help translate maybe is what we're looking for an understanding that will then ultimately lead to a different scenario for that individual student?

And what I'm thinking about is there's a lot of work that we are doing, and PAST Foundation's work, really around thinking about looking at teaching and learning and that future work from a very different perspective, ideally recognizing that a lot of the disconnect that's happening for our students today, especially our students that are anxious, the very students you and I've been talking about, they are desperate to find a connection to what they're experiencing, what they're learning, or what the expectations are that they will be learning to themselves. That linking of learning and life is really, really missing.

And so, as families and communities and educators, traditional and non-traditional, are really wrestling with all of these pieces and parts, part of it is because they just don't understand the pieces associated, in my opinion, with motivation.

Sean Geraghty:
I think it's very well said. I think that, especially with the ADHD mind, which I think is the condition best understood as variance in attention and not inattention.

Annalies Corbin:
I love that. You know, I have not heard somebody put it out there like that. Thank you for that. I want to steal that.

Sean Geraghty:
Of course, please do. I think that lots of the guys that we work with can very easily fall into states of high interest, high motivation, high engagement. But If it's not there, particularly for the ADHD mind, it's incredibly difficult to get going. And so, part of our work is some of life is unpleasant. Some of it is boring. How can we create something of an operating manual for you such that when you confront those things, you can better manage them.

But I think the bigger picture point is what you're making, which is lots of the folks that we work with, lots of the teenagers that we work with have deep, deep interests that are just outside of the traditional school day. So, if you think about it, their life from 7 to 3 is something of a 2 out of 10 on the motivation scale, on the interest scale.

And so, you might reasonably ascertain or look at or assess that this child is being unmotivated, yet when you talk to them about something else that is of interest to them. It could be leadership at a summer camp. Lots of guys love that. It could be, "Hey, I have this job at a grocery store at a farm." We have lots of teenagers that really enjoy their work. It could be a hobby. It could be something else that they're so incredibly dialed into and clicked into. And it's effortless to fall into a state of sustained attention. Talking about executive skills, they can really sustain attention and task initiate on those things that they're interested in. But the day is shaped in such a way that they're never able to access those things.

So, we like to say to parents, maybe some parents are listening, we like to say to them, think of this time as something of a way station between something you have to do now and an environment that we better match to their minds, maybe professionally, maybe personally, after the schooling experience is over. Unfortunately, for a lot of them, they don't have a way of manipulating the experience now, but that's where we sort of try to take a bigger picture view of like, there will be something at some point that grabs onto them that feels more like a seven or an eight

or nine or a 10 out of 10, as opposed to this, deflating experience that they're having right now day to day.

Annalies Corbin:
So, then, how do you help these families or these students make that transition? Because, first – I mean, and my listeners will know this – I don't disagree with the 7 to 3, 2 out of 10. I hate it. I'll be honest. The fact that those words came out of your mouth, ugh. But that's the reason that we're collectively doing the work because it doesn't have to be that way, and yet we know that in many cases it is. So, it's the constraint we have that we have to work with.

So, we'll set that angst aside and really say, okay, so then how do you help at the individual and family or community level really take that 3-to-3 time and turn it into the thing that sparks that kid to persist with all the rest of it? And at the end of the day, what we hope for is, our young people will find the things that they love and can figure out how to turn those things that they love, that they're deeply passionate and engaged in into potential career for them. So, how do you help with that?

Sean Geraghty:
I think you're describing the gold medal vision as far as it goes, which is let's try to get you to a place where you're doing something that you find inherently fulfilling, inherently motivating. You feel encouraged in doing it. It's the right level of challenge for you. It's something of an adventure. We want to get you to that place.

In the meantime, and even when you get to that, Dr. Corbin, I'm sure you have experiences in your day, like things that you have to do that are not particularly pleasant or motivating.

Annalies Corbin:
Of course, yeah.

Sean Geraghty:
So, we try to say, "Hey, this is going to be something of a challenge for you to get going on stuff that's unpleasant, to get going on stuff that's boring." And the ADHD mind is sort of a fascinating test case for this because it's genuinely very unpleasant and genuinely very boring. What we found is there's a million resources on how to manage it through different strategies – Omodoro technique, using Google Calendar, to-do lists. In our experience, it's not necessarily a knowledge problem, it's more of a performance problem. They're aware of the concept of a to-do list. They're aware of the concept of checking their portal every night. They're aware of these things. How do you get them to do them?

And we find, again, I hate to keep coming back to the same theme, but enormous variation at the level of individuals about what they're willing to do and what they want to do. So, for some folks that we work with, it's, "I'm comfortable, analog, old school, this is my style, writing things down and checking them off when I finish." Other folks need other things to get going.

And so, part of our work with teenagers is something of a discovery of what's going to get you to do this. What does your operating manual look like? So, in trying to get them to do things that they don't want to do, we're trying to build some self-awareness as well.

Annalies Corbin:
Yeah, absolutely. And yet it's really, really difficult because, to your point, these particular individuals struggle with that follow-through piece. It's really tough. Again, I'll go back to my own kiddo. Super, super smart. He's a 2E kid. My listeners heard me talk about him before. He's a 2E. So, super, super smart, severely ADHD and dyslexic. It's a train wreck on some levels because it's like, yeah, I need to write this lab report. It's a big one. I know it's a big one. I know all the pieces and parts that have to go into it. And yet, the night before, I'm going to ask for an extension because I just didn't get it done. And I've known about it since the beginning of the semester.

Sean Geraghty:
Of course. And let me narrate the positive, though, just about what you said, that he knows what the parts and pieces are is something of an executive skill. To be honest, sometimes, like the blank page problem or the stumbling block for lots of folks can be, "I don't even know how to break this thing into smaller pieces." This is just a giant morass in my mind, and it's overwhelming. And so, therefore avoid, avoid, avoid, avoid. I'm just going to not address it. With that, it's more like, I know what these things are, but I kind of can't get going on it. That's task initiation, that's procrastination. That's a difficult thing to manage, but I'm sure he's making progress.

Annalies Corbin:
Oh, absolutely. Yes. Getting ready to graduate. So, it's been a journey, right? And I think that, in many ways, that's a lot of the point of what you're talking about. It is a journey. It's a journey for the individual. It's a journey for the family. It's a journey for the school, the community that's wrapped around whoever this individual happens to be.

And part of the lift here is just recognizing that no two journeys are going to be alike, right? You can go through the same training, you can provide the same resources, the same opportunities to learn X, Y, or Z, but the implementation, deeply, deeply important. And that's that agency piece. We haven't really talked about it, but it's rolled in the mix of all of this. We have to have a fundamental understanding that these

individuals, what we're talking about, that are disengaged or anxious or whatever in the pieces and parts here, they are in fact individual. That agency is a part of powerful, powerful component of what's going on here.

Sean Geraghty:
Especially in adolescence because we have the privilege of talking to lots of parents, some of whom are on their own journeys of discovering late in life, a diagnosis of ADHD, for example, and I've had to create really intricate compensatory mechanisms and systems for themselves. And so, they sort of get it at a high level and are seeing their teenagers maybe struggling with some of the same things that but they have a language and a vocabulary for it now, which is great.

But one of the things that can be a frustration is, you might buy a book, 25 techniques, different strategies for getting going, how to stop procrastinating, et cetera, et cetera. And we always like to say to parents, maybe there's a one in four chance that one of those techniques will work with your child. And we, even as coaches who are experienced in working with teenagers, can't easily guess.

That's the whole premise of coaching is, let's try it out. And how did it go? Does it work for you? Sometimes things work for a little while, then they stop working. So, it's a constant process of iteration and trying to figure out, through trial and error, what to do and how to do it. It's difficult for parents, in our experience, because at exactly the right moment when executive skill demands are rising, desire to hear it from the parent is rapidly declining. And so, there's this gap that exists that you just got to work through and navigate.

Annalies Corbin:
You do. Absolutely. A hundred percent. Can we, as we think about wrapping up the conversation that we've had, I really want to make sure that we don't let go of the idea around how can the work and the research that you're conducting really inform sort of that next generation of schools, programs, but more importantly, the policy piece of what's going on here. I'm really, really curious about that element of your work.

Sean Geraghty:
That's fascinating. I'd love to actually ask you that question when we wrap here. But I think that, for me, what we're trying to figure out is our research lab is first just trying to frame the problem as best we can, and then try to work with different tribes, so to speak, to align our interests around this problem. So, you have lots of different interesting groups working on, for example, getting teenagers to sleep a little bit better than they are now, getting them maybe off their phones a bit more, getting them exercising a bit more, like getting pleasure reading going.

Our whole big picture is like, we like all of that. We know that there's a lot of individual variation at the level of the teenager. And so, we want to bring you guys together as much as possible. Once we figure out through experimentation what tends to work and what tends to not work as well, I think from a grassroots perspective of the individual of the teenager, we think that can then begin informing some of these higher level policy discussions. But we're skeptical of not figuring it out on the ground first.

So, I'm sure you know, as practitioners, part of our work is just working with people can be very humbling. And so, a lot of the bets that we've made internally have not panned out the way that we thought. And so, we can identify what the problem is, we want to research it, but we also want to test some stuff against it before making any sweeping recommendations, certainly at the policy level, but even at the level of the individual. And so, we figure some stuff out.

Annalies Corbin:
Yeah, absolutely. Smart. Because oftentimes, we'll leap into space and then like, oh, yeah, yeah. But that's not really what's happening. We think that's what's happening. But on the ground, that tells a completely different story. And so, I do appreciate that very much because we find that as well.

I'm also curious about, what are you thinking about as the next iteration? I guess to boil it down, what keeps Sean Geraghty up at night? What are you thinking about as, like, "Gosh, we have got to figure this out for these young people"? What is that thing?

Sean Geraghty:
For me, there's a large literature on different therapeutic approaches to treating different conditions that teenagers have, be it anxiety, depression, ADHD, et cetera. I think there's one that is particularly underrated, and it's called behavioral activation, and it ties into our big picture at the Center for Teen Flourishing. Behavioral activation, at its premise, suggests that mood follows action. Action doesn't follow mood. So, do the thing, and then you'll feel better, as opposed to waiting until you feel better to do the thing. And it's done extraordinarily well in different large randomized controlled trials.

And so, for me, the premise of it is audit your day, try to rate your day. It's a little uncomfortable, like scale of 1 to 10, how was your hour from 3 to 4, from 4 to 5, from 5 to 6? Try to think about and be reflective about how you're spending your time. And then, try to make small substitutions where you notice that there are gaps. Like if you're seeing that you're losing the hours of 8 to 11 to anything, video games or whatever, try to get in there at 8 to 8:30 and do something that you derive more fulfillment or joy from. That's what sort of keeps me up.

I think that there's, in plain sight, lots of different ways to reorganize our days that would be more fulfilling and make us feel more energized, make our teenagers feel more active and engaged with life. And I think that this behavioral activation, the premise of it, which is thinking about your day on an hourly basis and trying to make small substitutions and incremental adjustments, can be something of a way forward for those that are feeling a little bit stronger loss.

Annalies Corbin:
Yeah, interesting. It's a fascinating exercise for folks to think about because I think we probably take a lot of our day for granted. I mean, the reason we suddenly look up and "Holy moly, I just spent 11 hours on my computer on a Saturday," is super telling, especially since 10 and a half of those hours, we're not actually doing any kind of productive work whatsoever.

Sean Geraghty:
Yeah.

Annalies Corbin:
I don't think it's just kids.

Sean Geraghty:
That's what I mean. Like when you said, like, "What's keeping you up at night?" I'm, like, "Man, did I actually close the laptop at 10pm last night like I made a commitment?" I was gonna almost say, my laptop is keeping me up at night. When you asked that question, I was like – you know what I mean? So, that's what I mean by it's an ongoing journey. Like some of what we're seeing with teenagers, I think, is also there with adults.

Annalies Corbin:
A hundred percent. I mean, I'm guilty of that myself. So, it's like, "Oh, I have this great idea," or "I've really been thinking about this. Let me get that down. Let me do a draft of a white paper of this concept, because once I do that, then I'll be able to think about it more deeply." And it is an endless sort of spiral of, "Oh, but then what about this concept needs to be added into that?" And I spend a lot of time doing that. I'll be completely honest.

Sean Geraghty:
Sure. You get bogged down, right? Like you're just, like, "Oh, I'm thinking about this and this and this." I mean, while things are just like not being tended to necessarily. So yeah, that's a very common phenomenon. And yeah, I think that this practice of just being a little bit more, that's why we – especially with teenagers, Dr. Corbin, we're very hesitant about large sweeping changes. We're very hesitant because they want the agency that you just described.

And so, if you come in, especially if you come in hot, being like, "Hey, we're going to change a lot of things," that doesn't really work.

Annalies Corbin:
Adopt that co -design strategy, and you will get much further, much, much further. Absolutely. I agree. Sean, thank you so much for taking time out of your day to talk with us about Reset Coaching and the Center for Team Flourishing and the incredible research that you're doing.

We will make sure that in the show notes, we have the information for folks to be able to reach out to find you. We'll also include a link to your new book, I'll Do It Later, Surviving School. And so, we will make sure that folks know how to find you. But again, thank you so much for joining us for the conversation today on Learning Unboxed.

Sean Geraghty:
It was a great pleasure. Thank you so much.

Annalies Corbin:
Absolutely.

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Annalies Corbin:
Thank you for joining us for Learning Unboxed, a conversation about teaching, learning, and the future of work. I want to thank my guests and encourage you all to be part of the conversation. Meet me on social media, @AnnaliesCorbin, and join me next time as we stand up, step back, and lean in to reimagine education.