

How To Be A Man

DJ ACE: Some say the definition of masculinity has changed and what it means to be a man is very different from what it once was. As someone who grew up without a father, I found that I had to make my own path in the journey to manhood. Now a father myself, I find it imperative to give my sons the tools to manhood without making some of the mistakes that I may have made along the way. Now during this discussion we're talking about how our ideas of masculinity are shaped in a large part by our fathers, friends and peer groups and how we need to break certain patterns of what it means to be a man and what we can pass on to the next generation of young men and boys. Now I'm joined by three authors who have all written about this subject absolutely brilliantly. Firstly, we have the award-winning musician and writer Guvna B who is recently published a book called *Unspoken Toxic Masculinity: How I faced the man within the man*. A powerful, personal account on what it means to be a man and what it takes to survive. What's going on Guvna?

GUVNA B: I'm good, bro, how you doing?

ACE: I'm good bro, good to see you. We also have the phenomenally successful comedian Russell Kane who's entertaining and moving memoir, *Son of a Silverback: Growing up in the shadow of an alpha male* about fathers and sons and education has hit a chord with readers. What's going on Russell?

RUSSELL KANE: Yeah, good, yeah, the books there in shot, just scan that, get it up on...

ACE: Plug it, plug it, plug it. Love that. And finally, we have the award-winning novelist Alex Wheatle, AKA wheats. I loved 'Small Axe', whose live show you saw recently dramatized by director Steve McQueen for his 'Small Axe' series on BBC1. He is the winner of The Guardian Children's Fiction Prize for his novel set on a fictional estate in South London, *Crongton Knights*. His most recent book *Cane Warriors* goes back in time to slave revolt in Jamaica and he is a man who has thought a lot about masculinity and male role models. Hello Alex Wheatle, AKA Wheats.

ALEX WHEATLE: Hello Ace. Lovely to be with you.

ACE: We are talking masculinity today. Let me first ask all of you guys, what books shaped your ideas about masculinity growing up. Let's start with Alex.

ALEX: With me it was probably *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* that I read in prison. Now many people don't know about Malcolm X he was a hustler individual when he was a young man. But prison really changed him where it was made known to him that being a man was not always about hustling or getting a girl you desire or not always about this making bare money. Being a man is about what you can contribute to your community, to your society and so that book kind of taught me that. And there was another one as well. I remember watching a film later on I read the book and that was *To Sir With Love* by ER Braithwaite who was a, he came from British Guyana, and he couldn't get a job in the engineering field in London but he was offered this job as a teacher in a school. And he had to work with

these East End kids and make them respect him and make them respect themselves as well and, again, it wasn't all about them just trying to be these hard men on the East End because sometimes in that kind of community, you have to show how tough you are, and how manly you are with aggression and intimidation. But ER Braithwaite he kind of spun that around. He tried to make them become more cultured. And more kind of, you know, he tried to interact with society rather than always be this aggressive kind of figure as an East End working class man so that really impacted on me.

ACE: Russell, what about you, what books did you read growing up?

RUSSELL: Well, I'm going to answer the question even more brutally because I noticed when Alex answered that he was reading in prison so I'm assuming you was at least older than 16/17/18 at the time. Talking about books growing up as a child, well the brutal truth of it is for most working class, particularly boys, you don't read. It's a real problem in our culture. That's why I fan girl a bit with young adult authors because to get boys to read from the ages of I suppose 10-18 is near enough impossible. And I'm afraid I was no exception. I mean, my house, my mum and dad were great, but it was two books on the shelf and I'll never forget them. If you're going to ask what books shaped me it was the microwave cookbook, my mums, and the scuba diving handbook of my dad's. But do you know what, that's what taught me about the world – women cook, men smash rocks under water wearing aqua lungs. That was what initially formed me, and the rest was a pushing against it. That's why you find me a few years later over the park with all my friends smoking by the bins or whatever we were doing. I would be starting to read and think there's another world out there. I was hearing of this place called Radio Four. It was like a secret signal coming from the middle classes - we're over here. And it started to dawn on me that your accident, your birth doesn't need to dictate your education and final destination. So, it took me a little longer, didn't get to uni until I was 21 but I was glad because I was able to hang out with the eighteen-year-olds and had three years of doing bum jobs that taught me, I can read and I do love literature and then boom I was in. I would struggle to say whether it's a Jane Austen or a PG Wodehouse or Richard Dawkins biology books. I would struggle. It was like that Cambrian explosion of life. All these fossils and moss started growing in my brain and I'm like I'm going to read everything. And I'll perform all the kids that started ahead of me. Angry reading. I read to rebel. My dad was like you want to get a trade look at my proper job hands, that's work. And I'm like yeah but what do you think of Baudelaire Daddy, would just mess with his head and that's it. But I started reading angrily but then you get hooked and all this language and everything starts to fall into place. So, I was doing what you should be doing at 11 and 12 but now at 21, 22. But now you can't stop me.

ACE: Guvna, did you read any books about masculinity growing up?

GUVNA: Not really. I can kind of relate to what Russell was saying I didn't really have a lot of books in my house and when I got to secondary school and the teachers were like right everyone go in the school library and pick a book and it was actually quite daunting for me as I didn't really come from a background where we read a lot of books. But the book that kind of stood out was one by Benjamin Zephaniah called *Refugee Boy*, and I think the only reason it stood out to me was because I could relate a little bit - I am a first generation Brit -

my family came over from Ghana to England and my dad had to make sacrifices and because of those sacrifices, like, you know, working extra hours, having a couple of jobs at a time - he struggled with the emotional side of being a father and the part that means you have to be present. You know what I'm saying? He was there but he wasn't really present in the moment because of the sacrifices he had to make. So, in the book *Refugee Boy*, the kid has to grow up a lot quicker than he would have hoped because his dad is out working and he doesn't want to go back to Ethiopia and so, yeah, that one really stood out to me and I thought, I like this book because I can relate to it a little bit and then Benjamin Zephaniah became a bit of a hero for me when I was a youngster.

ACE: Legend. Alex, you grew up in care. Not a most promising start for a best-selling author. What did being a man or acting like a man mean to you when you were young and how did that like come into your books?

ALEX: Well, when I arrived in Brixton in about '78 when I was 15, I felt kind of intimidated because I guess with young men, if they don't have anything, and they're working class, for example, they haven't got much money to carry around, the only thing they can trade-off is how tough they are and how intimidating they can be. So, that is how I found Brixton when I was 15, 16, 17. You couldn't go anywhere, a party, or blue's dance, town hall dance or any kind of gathering, without putting on this kind of veneer of toughness. I had issues coming from a children's home obviously, you know, I was physically abused and so on. I had a lot of stuff that I wanted to shout out to the world, but I could never find a space where I could do that, to be honest about the way I was feeling inside. And I only found that space when I entered prison and I had Simeon who offered me space where I could be vulnerable, and I think that's the important thing. I was allowed to be vulnerable and express the way I was feeling inside. And that was, I guess, the start of me becoming a man because I think to become a man is not only to show perhaps how tough you are but to show how honest you are feeling inside. And I really needed to do that to overcome my mental health issues. That was very important for me. And so, for me being a man is being honest about how you want to feel and express and becoming who you want to be. Because, again, living in that kind of community. If I wanted to be an athlete, a boxer, a hustler or whatever when it came to things like academia, when it comes to things like being a poet or even indeed a writer, then you looked all weird like, what, you want to be a writer? Shut up. So, I had that to overcome with. Being in prison was good for me because it allowed me to come out and express myself.

ACE: You just mentioned Simeon, I watched the 'Small Axe' episode, the relationship you see with him did change you a lot. What can you tell us that he actually taught you? How did he change your perception of masculinity?

ALEX: Self-love.

ACE: Okay.

ALEX: Self-love, he used to say to me, "Alex, yeah you had a bad past but never let that hamper your future always believe that you have a future, always believe you can

contribute and don't just believe you have to copy everyone else." "Be yourself," he always used to say to me. "Alex, you have your own mind, you don't have to follow anybody else's journey or path or whatever. Be courageous enough to let what's inside you flow." And that was like, ongoing mantra he would teach me. He instilled that in me that belief that I could contribute, that's the most important lesson I had. It's so easy living in those kinds of communities to follow the bad men, the waste men, or whatever. And rather than setting up for yourself, this is what I want to do. this is what I need to do. I feel like I'm a comedian, a writer, a rapper, a carpenter, whatever. So, we have to have the courage to follow what we want to be. That's what is being a man is to me about.

ACE: Guvna, you wrote really movingly about growing up on that east London estate, that tough east London estate. Obviously, I've got friends that have grown up on estates all over the country – know what I'm saying? A lot of us can relate to that. Who were some of your role models growing up? Apart from your dad obviously but who were some of the people that you looked up to when you were coming up?

GUVNA: Yeah, I think even though I grew up on an estate and it gets a bad rap a lot of the times there were positive people that had a significant impact on me. The first one is one that you wouldn't expect because most people don't like the education system on estates, but my head teacher was sick man at primary school, her name was Miss Arneson, and she was the first person that told me I was good at something. I got chucked out of a lesson once and I was in her office and she was like you keep messing about, but you don't realize that you're really good at writing stories and you need to focus a lot more in English because you can go on and do something great. Up until that point, I come from a very loving family like great parents and stuff, but they never really told me I was good at stuff. She was the first person to instil me with a bit of aspiration and I walked out of her office six foot tall. Another person that was a role model to me was my youth leader, I went to the local youth club and he was just someone I could relate to and he was a bit different. On the estate there's temptation to get into things that you shouldn't be getting into, drugs and I was handed my first gun at 11 years old. There's a lot of ways to take a wrong turn and so my youth leader was instrumental in helping me redefine what I viewed as success. Because as a young boy, teenager, I just thought success was the guy that's got the best car, got all the girls, got all the money and that kind of stuff. To me it looked like the local drug dealer, know what I'm saying, because that's what I could visibly see but at the same time there was the guy who works at JP Morgan's and he's doing well for himself but he dressed in a suit and shoes rather than Air Force Ones. So, you don't really clock that he's successful. So, my youth leader just helped me redefine what success was to me, man.

ACE: That's dope. Russell, you grew up in the shadow of a classic alpha male, your dad Dave Kane, such a character, man, I'm sure you miss him, but he was the epitome of the reconstructed man, the hard-hitting Essex builder, sometimes dormant and he was not going to bend or break especially when it came to what it meant to be a man. What did he teach you about masculinity?

RUSSELL: So, that was my only male role model, there was no oxygen for anything else. And it's funnily enough hearing some of you talk about your dads, why they couldn't express

their emotions because they just come home, they're working so hard. My dad always used to say, "I didn't have a dad, so I didn't have anyone to tell me how to be a dad." So that was his – I'm blagging it here. In fact, one of the worse things, I got in trouble for was when he said I never had a dad and he heard me say "you lucky so and so" under my breath. So, it was an all-consuming masculinity and where I grew up in a first of all, I experienced all sort of levels, started just because we couldn't get housed like in a mother baby hostel where my dad would visit. That was only for a few weeks. Then we got a council flat, then I was in a council house, posh, then we bought our own council house. So, I experienced - listen, I'm not like a Tory voter or anything but there's no doubt about it if Margaret Thatcher hadn't ruined all the social housing for everyone coming through now, I probably wouldn't be sitting here giving it the biggens with my literature degree. Because as soon as my old man bought his old house that's when I was taught how to be a man. His chest went out, bricks and mortar, it wasn't – we didn't look at the drug dealer with his car, we thought he was a mug about who was about to go to prison, that was all fake, he's going to go down soon enough – look at my hands, I built this. We had pillars on the front of our house. Brick built pillars on our council house and an overhanging bit. My dad dug a 21-foot-long ditch in the garden. Sunk a swimming pool. That to me is just a shallow materialistic expression of masculinity. But it was sort of like a Christ like thing where every night dad would come in with his cross and be like "the traffic jam I've been in, the amount I've suffered, the sacrifices I've made, the blood on my hands, gather around disciples" a sort of Christ like moaning. "I'll die early because of the work I've done for you. Extracting asbestos from lofts to make money for you." And that's what I thought a man was someone who slowly killed himself grafting himself to death. No doubt about it there's traces in my DNA of that work ethic that are probably completely unhealthy. Do I need to do an unpaid gig in Croydon just to stay sharp in the middle of the week? Probably not. Will I do it? Yes. He's still in there.

ACE: Still in there?

RUSSELL: Yeah, that aspect of it is. There is something toxic - I don't like the word toxic because it implies we can all catch it. I actually reject the term a little bit. Toxic masculinity. I find it a bit modish, and it puts off other men who would like to join this debate to be honest. So, I think there's like an infection or an error in the coding of how you should be living your life. And as we just heard when Alex so inspirationally spoke, how to turn your life around and fix that code he reminded me of Malcolm X's own story. Because funnily enough I've just finished studying him for a program I'm making about him. He had the same journey. He went to prison, learnt how to be a man, and came out. Funny enough it was someone suggesting that he be a carpenter that switched the light on in his head. Because he wanted to be a lawyer and someone said do you want to be a carpenter and a gasket just went poof and he went off on one, went into prison came out on the other side a butterfly.

ACE: Guvna, you mentioned a female teacher that you were very close to you and that was your role model. The one that inspired you to start writing. Do you feel women are in the best position to teach men masculinity?

GUVNA: I wouldn't say best position. But I definitely recognize that, you know, with me, women have played a super important role in me becoming the man that I am today. And learning things in life. A lot of my friends didn't grow up with father figures, dads in their life and I've seen them achieve exceptional things because of the women in their life. I think, you know, it's sad but women have to pick up the pieces a lot of the times and cover for men when they fall short and it's not the way things should be. But they do it and for that, I'm truly grateful in my life. I look at my wife. She showed me an incredible amount of loyalty, strength and grace when I lost my dad. And I was the most difficult person to live with ever. I think she even said to me, she googled one time is my husband grieving or being really annoying. I think women step into that role and fill in that gap when necessary and I've got a huge respect for the women in my life that have had an impact on me.

ACE: Do you feel like your attitude to women changed when she started to help you explore your masculinity?

GUVNA: Yeah, definitely. I think I realized that the big thing for me was my mum. When my dad passed, and even before that, she had a lot of anxiety. She's a really anxious person and when I looked to the root of her anxiety, I think it was because she was carrying the emotional responsibility of the household because my dad didn't communicate, because I didn't communicate, because I wasn't vulnerable because my dad wasn't vulnerable. And so, I guess exploring my masculinity I'm like I don't just owe it to myself I owe it to the women in my life that shouldn't have to pick up the emotional responsibility for me.

ACE: Russell, now being a parent as well, has that changed your idea of masculinity at all, like what you are going into a parent now, you obviously had a relationship with your parents and now you're a dad yourself. How has that changed how you feel about what you give to your child?

RUSSELL: Well, so far as always providing no matter what. I think like I say my dad's put that one in there. That's in the DNA. That would be like trying to make my hair grow blond or something, it's not going to happen. So, I've got to the stage now that even if I had limitless money and hundreds of gigs and every show on the TV, the stalking monster in the back going but what if it all gets taken away, what if you end up with nothing, and what if you go back to living in a council flat like what you were little. It's always like this little monster following me down the street. At the same time, I'm not having a go at my old man, if he hadn't put that monster there, I probably wouldn't be as successful as I am. So, it's a bit of a toss-up. The other thing I want to say, I don't even know if you can say it in 2021 but I'm going to say it anyway because I feel like this is a safe space guys is: I've had a daughter and I grew up being told the whole time by my mum - it's just me and my brother James - "if only you had a sister it would have melted your dad like butter. He'd have been a different man if only he had a girl." So, I do wonder am I having a different experience because a lot of the problems I had with my old man was - I have these pictures of him holding me as a nine-month-old baby and I can't even connect to that. The man was so not affectionate. I see it and it weirds me out like someone's done it on a computer or something because as soon as I was three, four, five, I was just a small geezer. "Why can't he do it?" I was just a small bloke. I should be as tough as a bloke and there's Jewish blood back in my dad's family

and obviously you're a man by 11 in Jewish culture even though no one's been Jewish for a hundred years in my family my dad still believed you're a man at 11, a man. So, my pocket money stopped, everything stopped, and I was expected to earn my money doing the paper round. Again, you could say it's a good thing, stop being such a snowflake. It is different with fathers and sons and it is probably an unfashionable thing to say because at the moment it's all Disney princesses and all that. There's less - we're not doing archetypically male things. Believe me, I've tried. I've been to pink stuff, over and over again, I've been in fake Barbie heels but because we are doing different types of activities, more arts and crafts stuff, like out and about like screaming into the wind playing armies 24/7 I feel like it's taken away the masculinity battle between me and my dad. Please don't troll me on twitter for saying this, I'm just trying to be honest. That's what's put into me as a little boy, if it's a father and son there's going to be a power battle but if it's a father and daughter it's going to be okay. So, that said my daughter just tells me what to do and I do it.

ACE: Guvna, you've got a son?

GUVNA: Yeah, he's a year and a half.

RUSSELL: Did you find that? Did you have a panic attack when you had a boy, thinking oh my god is history going to repeat itself and my emotions going to switch off like that. I had a relief when the scans showed I was having a girl. I'll admit it now. Men have a reputation for having son's - I was relieved when I was having a daughter. I don't have to replay that tape.

GUVNA: Yeah, I was in a different, the head space I was in was a lot of people see things when they're growing up like in their parents. Things that they think their parents can improve on and they think I'm going to be the complete opposite and be the best at that thing ever because my dad was so bad at it and some people just subconsciously slip into what they've been conditioned to see their whole life and for me, I knew that I had subconsciously just turned into my dad. Like emotionally, the way I communicate, everything. And I knew that the effect it was having on me when I started going to counselling. 27 years of my life I didn't think it was a problem. Started my counselling session and I was in tears because I was like oh, yeah, I can actually improve, I can improve in this area in my relationships by taking this stuff seriously and so when I had my son, it was almost like another chance, you know? It was like, so a lot of pressure, like Russell was saying, I'm like my decisions don't just affect me. He's like a sponge, I was in the bathroom the other day just brushing my teeth, he comes in and he's going like this, watching me, watching everything and so I'm like I've got to take this seriously, man, because it's legacy. He's coming after me, you know?

ACE: Alex, I saw the end of your 'Small Axe' episode about you that you had opportunity to go and actually meet your biological dad.

ALEX: Yes, I did.

ACE: What was that conversation like when you had the opportunity to sit down with him as a grown man, man to man?

ALEX: It was very tense and awkward because I discovered that he was the one who placed me into care, and he returned to Jamaica. And so, when I finally saw him in 1987, I wrote a letter to the paper in Jamaica and also the radio company and he heard that. He read something in the newspapers, and he responded. And so, when I went to Jamaica, when I was sitting on that plane, I'm not lying Ace, I was thinking of doing him something. Yeah, I was because he was the one who I poured out all my angst and bitterness against. That first meeting was very, very tense and my uncle drove me to his house. He lived in old harbour about 30 miles west of Kingston and he was sitting on his veranda and he was afraid because he saw me walking up and my face was like thunder and we just saw on the veranda and my uncle sat in between us to kind of keep the peace. But in the end, he said to me, "Alex, I don't know what to say but you want a drink?" And so, I said, "yeah," he went down the road and bought me a rum and Coke and I think it took about five rum and Cokes so we could begin a conversation. And then, he was talking about the pressures of being a black man, a single father in mid-1960s London and I kind of recognize after a while, not the first night, but after a while, how difficult that could be. And, again, that was part of me growing because sometimes when you are in a situation like myself, and you are growing up without families, you idolize the family ideal. You think, oh, isn't this nice. Two parents, two children. 2.4 children. What a wonderful kind of thing? In my experience, no family is ever perfect. And grown-ups they make bad mistakes, you know, I've made bad mistakes and so gradually, very slowly we have come to terms with each other and in the end, I appreciated him. Because at least he opened his house to me. He took me around Jamaica. He taught me things that, you know, he took me to Bob Marley's birthplace at Nine Mile. He took me to Noel Coward's property, the Firefly estate on the north coast because he knew I was interested in writing. And so, the time we did have I treasure it even though it started off awkwardly and so on. I still learned something about him from becoming a man.

ACE: That's awesome, man.

RUSSELL: Did you notice, were you like him or anything like that? Mannerisms or energy.

ALEX: Yes, that freaked me out. Oh my gosh, the way he would scratch the side of his face and the way he would cross his legs and the way he would walk. I think, oh my God, that's me.

RUSSELL: It's all proper talking about this. The nature/nurture thing is important to what we're talking about. Because me and Guvna are running around circles trying to not be like our dads but you do think how much is in me DNA-wise. Crossing your legs is one thing but what else is in my personality trait from my old man?

ACE: We're hearing about this kind of crisis in masculinity. A lot of bad things are coming from it. Do you guys feel like the response is responsibility for the rise in crime and violence in men at the moment? Guvna?

GUVNA: I don't know. I just think in life when we're talking about the big issues, for me, the goal is to try our best. To get all the cogs to turn at the same time so if that's parenthood. Like parents taking responsibility. That's the education system taking responsibility. That's

government legislation. That's youth clubs and places for young people to spend time and that kind of stuff. If one of them is out of kilter, it's likely we're going to have problems and my mom told me it takes a village to raise a child and the reality of it is at three years old guys don't - we aren't inherently bad as human beings. We learn behaviours from the primary people in our lives and so I always think when it comes to masculinity, there's truth about it. That alright guys can do better in certain areas but there's also a grace and an empathy that I have. Every action is a reaction. There's always stuff that happened in our lives that we are the result of all those things. And so, I think guys should take responsibility in terms of looking after their mental health because it helps us view the world in better ways, but I also think if our environment is not one that enables us to thrive physically, mentally, emotionally, like guys can try their hardest but there's got to be pathways into counselling and government legislations that help us and villages that really pull together to see young men thrive, man.

ACE: Russell, isn't like fighting part of the culture of manhood. Isn't that seen as part of our culture. You tell quite a few stories in your book there's a time when you dad fought his shirt!

RUSSELL: My dad used to be like a proper semi-competing bodybuilder, silver back dormant type thing. This was before I was born. Him and my mum turned up to a nightclub and there was a guy in the queue for the club wearing the shame shirt as him and he lost it because the guy was wearing the same shirt as him so he drove around, ripped his shirt off, cut his shirt off with a stanley knife and drove home topless. My mom was petrified. She married him. Go figure.

ACE: Is that not seen as part of the culture of man?

RUSSELL: The honest answer to that is I think some boys don't learn regulation properly. So, there's a bit when you're growing up where you can like kick a hole in the door and you need someone in your life that actually says you have to catch it before you kick the hole in the door. If that part of your brain that gets atop on that lava that fizzes up, if you can't control it mentally, that lava is going to fizz up and you might hit someone in a pub or something before the brain is engaged and there's some evidence to suggest that the more broken the home. I'm not going to genderise the issue but the more broken the home the less likely you are to learn that self-control. In answer to your question that you asked Guvna which is given everything going on in the news this week, the most important question, is it related to the rise in gun and knife crime, we shouldn't just focus on that. Let's look at what's going on if I've been born and gone to Eaton and everything else. Are there still more posh lads going to Eaton killing themselves as well as people who grow up in Enfield and Tottenham and where I'm from stabbing each other. The answer is yes. So, across the board male suicide is going up. Doesn't matter whether you have a silver spoon or no spoon. If you have a time machine from first wave feminists and went come with me first wave feminists from 1960, I've got good news and bad news. The good news is women have become a little bit more equal but there's still a lot more to go but the bad news is men have dropped down. They're shaving their bodies. They have got bulimia, they're killing themselves. We developed these traditional neuroses as well. So, there's something going

on in masculinity and being a man across the board which isn't just isolating on the Tottenham council estate with gangs stabbing each other. It's across the board, it's wider than that, that takes the class and race element out of this discussion. Secondly, what is going on? I did a talk - I was doing it on a talk recently and I was thinking, you know like if you're born a woman there's loads of these challenges and it's still awful and it's still unequal pay and it's a mountain covered in spikes but at least there's a mountain. There's a mountain but it's covered in spikes but sometimes when you're a boy you can't even find the mountain because no one is actually saying this is what a man is supposed to be anymore. Am I supposed to be hairy? It sounds like I'm joking but I don't know if I'm supposed to shave my chest. Am I supposed to be a bit aggressive because it's a turn on but not really aggressive when we get back home or the pub or am I just supposed to read books and be soft but then girls don't find me a turn on? It's so confusing. There're so many mixed messages about what's arousing for a straight woman. I just sort of give up, watch the twilight boxset, have a box of chocolates, drop me out.

ALEX: I can relate to that because – I remember my time when I used to visit my friend's houses when I was 15/17/18, living in Brixton and on most occasions my friends had very strained relationships with their fathers. It was something that they would only intervene or say something if my friend is misbehaving in any kind of way. They were always reading the newspaper, listening to racing or whatever it was or going to the pub. There was never any really constructive communication between them. In my observation. You know, I grow up without a family so, you know, I am really focusing on this. And most of the communication was between son and mother. But between son and father there was nothing really there, nothing really being developed. They were just expected to find a trade, expected to earn an income and that was about it, there was nothing really else going on. Now when I speak to my old friends, they said to me, “Alex my dad never took me to the park and showed me how to ride a bike, my dad never done that.” And many of my friends say that, white and black and I'm thinking. How did this disconnect happen? Have we become too much involved in our computers, our devices and so on where it's so easy for fathers, maybe sometimes mothers as well to say to little Johnny, you've got your entertainment see you later. You know, make sure you get up to go to school tomorrow. So, I think this is an aspect we need to really need to deal with.

RUSSELL: And it's also, that's the hidden problem I think that's going on, Ace is that social media, if you're working-class lad now, I mean can you imagine, it was bad enough if I had high techs rather than Reebok pumps when I was at school but at least it wasn't all over Instagram when I'm scrolling. If Drake has a new pair of trainers, you know, that day Drake's got a new pair of trainers. That can't help with driving your body dysmorphia, your greed. You not being happy with what you got. You know what you can turn a phrase on its head here, it takes a village to raise a child, but it doesn't take a city. You shouldn't be looking at what ten thousand people are doing all the time if you got a 14-year-old brain. You throw a bit of weed on top of that like most of us smoked and it can be a toxic combination because you start to have unrealistic things that you're reaching for that can feed into that materialistic anger. I had a lot of that when I reached 18, why haven't I got that, if I was born a toff, I could have gone down a different path but if I didn't have social media constantly showing me a six pack. Showing me a Lambo. Showing me the latest trainers

24/7. It couldn't be good for us. And like Alex said we're spending half our lives on these bloody devices as useful as they are.

ACE: You think social media is making the problem worse in regard to how we view masculinity?

RUSSELL: Definitely. Yeah. It's like moistness under our plaster that's already cut. That's what it is.

ACE: Guvna, one of the biggest issues for men is that we are always being told it's unmanly to cry or express our emotions. Was this true for you?

GUVNA: Yeah. Definitely, man, I think I learned that from a young age that the definition of a man, you don't cry. Stiff upper lip. Get on with things really quickly. There's work to do and I think council estate had a bit to do with that. You don't want to be a victim because vulnerability didn't go down that well but also a first-generation Brit. Seeing my parents have a couple jobs each and my dad wasn't too fussed about sharing his emotions because he was busy making rent that month. But I think after he passed, I tried all that stuff. Never crying, being strong, I'm the eldest child and it resulted in me breaking down on a beach in California like three months later. And after I cried it was the weirdest thing because I felt the most freedom I had felt for a long, long time and that's when a little light bulb went off in my head and I thought maybe the way I've been viewing myself as a man isn't the best way and that's when I started to, you know, reshape my masculinity a bit but I always say to guys, like, not crying isn't a bad thing. Being strong isn't a bad thing, being dominant isn't a bad thing but when your mind and your body is telling you, mate, you need to be vulnerable right now or you are at capacity or is there anyone in your life that you can be honest with and you don't listen to that voice because you're trying to live up to these ideals then that's when it becomes a problem. I think people, you know, think toxic masculinity, think what's wrong with being strong or what's wrong with never crying but that's not what I am saying at all. I am saying we have to listen to our mind and our body when they're telling us that we are at capacity, you know?

ACE: Alex, how do we unlearn this, how do we pass this onto the young boys and young men, that it is cool to show emotion, that it is cool to talk and let out our feelings.

ALEX: Hopefully in the education, in the schools that we go, hopefully there'll be someone to reach out to or we have a young child that can access to and the need to reach out and be emotional and be vulnerable and inside the family homes as well. Hopefully we can produce those people. I mean, I was very fortunate that I had Simeon where it wasn't this one night where I just cried my eyes out. It was on a number of occasions and like Guvna B I had that realization point where I could not just hold it in anymore and I had a breakdown. I had a breakdown when I was 22, I think it was. 22. It was after my first son was born and I didn't know what to do, I didn't know how to engage with this - being responsible for another human being. And I just didn't know how to express that, and I think that triggered me in a meaningful way and I had to recover and just kind of relearn. I had to reach out to people and speak about this. And so, I just hope that today we can make sure that these spaces are available for young men who can express themselves. I mean, I used to do a lot

of work in young offenders' institutions in prisons. And it's really marked how a young person is behaving in front of a crowd amongst these peers and then opposed to being one-on-one with me. Being one-on-one sometimes they'll cry, they would say "I've let my mum, dad, I've let my family down. I don't want to be here. I don't want to do what these other boys expect me to do." And so, it's all about offering those young people spaces to be themselves and express themselves and showing a vulnerability. I think that will help us enormously.

ACE: I agree. Russell, you have a podcast called Boys Don't Cry.

RUSSELL: Yeah. I do.

ACE: Talk to us about that.

RUSSELL: What I noticed was there's loads of stuff happening in this space now like today, for example, really important but what men like us have to remember is we have to check out our emotional privilege. We are now in the minority of men who can sit and have a conversation like this. Most men would rather die and be buried in a ditch than talk about when they cried on the beach or had a breakdown at 22. So, we have to, although that's not ideal we have to acknowledge that back out there in the real world most of your Gary's, Lee's and Dave's they're probably not even watching today. So, I was like, how can I get those men who have -who can't - I'm not trying to be dismissive but can't put the cardigan on and have the digestive biscuit and the cup of tea which I do all day long. But the way I've observed is men use humour a lot of times to access those spaces. I would say that wouldn't I I'm a stand-up and Guvna would probably say it's music. But what I've noticed is in a man's WhatsApp group for example, if you compare the mans WhatsApp group with the girls WhatsApp group. Like if Lindsay is on the WhatsApp group, my wife, and she's like oh my god I've split up with Gavin, they're like are you okay babe, prosecco ambulance, we'll come over, we'll do a drive by, we'll do a socially distanced visit straight away they're on it. Whereas on a man's group you have to look for the information. Arsenal shut up you Arsenal scumbag, Tottenham, Arsenal, Tottenham, rude picture of a goat, Dave's feeling depressed, what was that, and you have to scroll back through like five messages to notice that Dave is being depressed. So, I thought what if I create a show where it's all humour but we're talking about the big things. Yes, we talked about suicide and body issues and masculinity and race and all the things you would expect me to talk about but the most triggering longest record we ever had was a warmup subject I was doing with just the mic's rolling about height. I was asking the guy's what height they were. You cannot believe, funnily enough, I was talking to a comedian about this the other day how much men are messed up about how tall they are.

ALEX: I was.

RUSSELL: If we talk about prejudice. Like we can't change, well you can change what gender you are born with, but broadly speaking you can't change if you are born a man or a woman, born black or white, but do you know what else you can't change, how tall you are!

ACE: 100%.

RUSSELL: It dictates what wages you get, how successful you are, how many women you get if that's what you are into, which I am. Do you know what I mean? How messed up are men, that I can ask a warmup question on a panel – are you five foot ten and it links to everything. Now the fact that is linked to masculinity tells us a number of things. We can sit here and be 2021 as much as we like men are still the bigger and taller I am, the better I am. That is neanderthal stuff, guys, there's so much stuff to talk about. This is a great space for humour. Little joke, little laugh. What do you feel? And sometimes if anyone is listening to this and you think you've got a friend of yours who isn't listening to this and doesn't have the emotional literacy or confidence to express themselves, you'd be surprised how much, when the pubs open, a pint and a little bit of humour can just get that little bear out of his cave just to the edge there and humour sometimes the way. It's not always the way.

ALEX: Russell, how do we get away from that with so much popular culture tells us that it's good to be a figure to always celebrate the physicality of sports stars and so on? How do we wean ourselves off this male ideal if you like? I mean, just to - my father, one of my first questions to him, he was six foot two. I said you couldn't even give me your height.

ACE: You know what, guys --

RUSSELL: That's everything.

ACE: We're going to have to wrap up. I'm so sorry –

RUSSELL: Can I give a one-word answer.

ACE: Yes, of course you can.

RUSSELL: No one wants to be like David Brent anymore do they? We make fun of the manager of The Office. Let's make the road man figure a figure of fun. Let's make toxic masculine figure a figure of fun that we laugh at when we see someone say come at me.

ACE: Yeah.

RUSSELL: No one wants to be someone that's laughable in the wrong way. Humour is a weapon when deployed correctly.

ACE: Awesome, look guys I'm pretty sure we could have done another two to three hours on this and again, I want to say thank you guys for joining us. I want you to make sure that you guys check out the books from Guvna B, Russell Kane and Alex Wheatle. Thank you so much for joining us today and thank you guys for watching at home.