**Pod165 Fatherhood**

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[Speaker 1]

This is a very special episode, completely unique and not one that we have done before. You see, this Sunday is Father's Day almost across the world and so I decided that I would interview a father and I actually put out a search on LinkedIn for people to connect me with great fathers and then one day I was sitting there and I was thinking actually probably the greatest fathers I know are the ones that are closest to me, one of whom is my husband of 30 years. And so I asked Philip if he would be my guest on Sense by Meg Fora today to share some nuggets of wisdom from his journey as a father.

Welcome to Sense by Meg Fora, the podcast that's brought to you by ParentSense, the app that takes guesswork out of parenting. If you're a new parent, then you are in good company. Your host Meg Fora is a well-known OT, infant specialist and the author of eight parenting books.

Each week we're going to spend time with new mums and dads just like you to chat about the week's wins, the challenges and the questions of the moment. Subscribe to the podcast, download the ParentSense app and catch Meg here every week to make the most of that first year of your little one's life. And now, meet your host.

[Speaker 2]

So welcome Philip. Thank you. It's nice to finally crack the nod to be on your podcast.

[Speaker 1]

Yes, I think it is way, way overdue and you do bring a lot of wisdom. So I'm really, really chuffed to be able to ask you these questions. And I think in some ways, I mean, for those of you listening, our eldest child is 26 years old, James, and he's entering into a phase where he's going to probably become a father.

And I know it's something that's on both of your mind, both your mind and my mind quite often is to, like, how do we prepare him for this phase? Because fatherhood is absolutely critical. And we both know that what has happened to our kids and the development that they've been through has been not in any small part due to the father that you've been.

So let's go back 26 years. In fact, it's almost 26 years, just two months away from 27 years. Can you throw your mind back and cast your mind back and think about what it was like to become a new dad in your mid-twenties for the first time all those years ago?

[Speaker 2]

Yeah, I think the most striking thing is that you actually have no emotions that can describe how you're going to feel. There's a part of your heart that opens up that you didn't know exists. Exists, there's suddenly this new person arrives, and he's just a whole range of emotions you just can't explain.

Of course, it brings you to tears when you realise that this is part of you. And the responsibility you have grows and you realise that life has changed forever for the better, for the better.

[Speaker 1]

I mean, I remember when you used to go off to work in the morning and I would think, oh my gosh, like, why would he leave me with this child? I mean, I'm quite certain that I'll never get through the day. My anxiety was very high at that time.

What are the things going through your head? Because now you're in your mid-twenties, you've got this massive responsibility. I mean, is there a sense of overwhelm for fathers, or are you kind of numb and going through the motions at that time?

[Speaker 2]

Yeah, look, in the early days, it's obviously survival for both parents. You're living on little sleep and chaos in your lives, and it's been disrupted forever. So yeah, it's a tough phase that we all have to navigate.

I guess for a father, there's an overwhelming sense of responsibility. One has to support the mom as much as possible, because in the early days, she does generally carry the larger burden. So it's a matter of being there, listening, supporting, and doing everything you can to give her a break when possible.

But of course, your responsibility is obviously to go out and also now provide for this new family. So there are pressures. There's a lot of pressures all around.

[Speaker 1]

Did you go through days where you were a bit resentful for not being able to do the stuff that you'd been able to do before? I mean, because what you're talking about here, I'm hearing you say that you were out there, you were earning the money, you were trying to maintain the lifestyle, you'd get home, try to give me some respite, you could feel my anxiety. And so when you wanted that golf game on a Saturday morning, and I would say no, or you would not even ask me because you were terrified about what was going on in the household.

I mean, surely for dads, that level of kind of letting go of the old and taking on the responsibility must also feel pretty overwhelming at times.

[Speaker 2]

For sure. It's definitely a moment where you realise you are going to have to sacrifice certain things. That life is never going to be the same.

So yeah, there is a sense of loss, I guess, in certain ways you've had. But I think the new phase, it does take a bit of time, but you start to appreciate the new phase and the new things you're going to be doing. I do think it's important in those early days to also give each other a bit of space, a bit of time to do certain things that give them purpose and happiness and some relief from the ongoing chaos.

So it is a matter of allowing each other the space to do certain things, because if anything, it supports the tough times.

[Speaker 1]

Yeah, for sure. I mean, I certainly found that loss of freedom and that me actually very, very hard in the early days. And I'm sure you had aspects of your journey into fatherhood that was also pretty tough.

And we've mentioned a couple of there, like the loss of freedom to do your own thing. If you look back now, what was the hardest part about becoming a new dad?

[Speaker 2]

The hardest part is definitely the lack of sleep. Yeah, it is. And those wake ups in the middle of winter to change nappies and deal with the chaos.

And then, of course, you know, those early mornings getting up. I remember having to get up early because you would have maybe done night feeds and take the child at 5am or whatever time it was, put the sling on, pass around the lounge, watch a bit of TV. Yeah, and just try and survive the day.

[Speaker 1]

With no sleep. Yeah. I mean, one of the things that made a massive difference was your mum.

She lived just 40 minutes away and we used to go to her for the weekend. And I think that was amazing respect where, you know, that village comes in and she would take over James in the morning and you and I could both sleep in, which was amazing.

[Speaker 2]

It's something that I've often told people about. Absolutely. I think it's a tragedy that a lot of us in the Western world don't have the extended village around us.

[Speaker 1]

Yeah.

[Speaker 2]

Mothers and fathers to step in and support your siblings. That is a pity. So we were very fortunate to be able to go out to my folks house on weekends and my mum in particular gave us a bit of time out to catch up on a bit of sleep.

[Speaker 1]

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, when I think back to those days and, you know, this episode is obviously going out to mums who will hopefully share it with their partners who are about to, you know, become new dads. There were some things that you did that absolutely made the difference.

One of them was that you were a baby wearer. You wore our babies in a sling. We always had slings.

And that became a tool. I mean, I can remember you saying to him, you can't go out unless you've left me with the sling, you know, the sling and the dummy, because then you knew you could get a little one to sleep or you could carry them. So I definitely think, you know, being involved like that was amazing.

I think back to changing nappies, you weren't scared of that, not for one minute. So I never had that burden. In fact, I'm sure that you and I both think we changed more than the other person, just most parents.

Are there any other tips that you'd give dads, men coming into fatherhood? He's going to be giving, his wife's going to give birth in the next couple of months. Any other tips on how to support your partner to make it a little easier?

[Speaker 2]

Yeah, I do think the bottom line is get involved. It's definitely a 50-50 responsibility. It's in different ways.

We'll all go through ups and downs and have moments of, I've got nothing in me. What have you got? Can you do this?

Or I've got some more, I'll take over.

[Speaker 1]

And sometimes we both had nothing left.

[Speaker 2]

Yeah, yeah. But it is just trying to really be involved, pick up the load and also just be non-reactive. I think the biggest issue is when you're tired and grumpy and missing things that you tend to respond.

So, you know, communication is absolutely key, I think talking, expressing how you feel. And yeah, I think for a guy, it's probably just bite your tongue at times and suck it up. But use the tools as well.

So the idea of the sling was amazing to be able to put the baby in and pace around. And I think as they got older, having the backpack to put a kid in and go for a walk with the dog. And then even older, having the bicycle with the seat on the back to take the kid and do stuff with was very important.

[Speaker 1]

Yeah. And that gave me respect, which is very true. And you've mentioned a couple of things already just in that section on kind of how you prioritised or kind of gave me a little bit of space.

How do you prioritise a marriage and how do you actually come out of the other side of those first seven years and actually still feel in love with your partner? Because certainly there's, I mean, we've often said, we've watched our friends go through it as well. Those first seven years of young children.

So kids under seven is just brutal. And there's a lot of marriages that actually don't survive it. I mean, we had that in our circle of friends.

There were just marriages that just didn't survive that time. What do you think the secrets were behind our marriage, not just surviving that, but actually coming out and, you know, years down the line being really awesome?

[Speaker 2]

Look, I think we were both very fortunate in having parents that demonstrated support and love for each other. And we were together through the children. So we were very fortunate.

I know that's not common these days. So, you know, having that modelling for us was really huge. But I think most importantly is the unconditional love.

You need to really commit to see through the tough times. And it's not just having children, it's throughout life, throughout your challenges in work and family and friends or whatever it is, is the ability to realise that things will get tough and at times you'll move apart. But of course, it'll come back again.

But it's through those deviations that you've got to just hold your line. As they say in cycling, you know, don't turn to the side or you're going to come off your bike. And yeah, communication, making space for date nights.

I think we did that quite a lot. Fortunately, we did have a nanny or babysitter we could pull in. But although we said Thursday nights was date nights, it didn't always happen.

But making that time was very, very important.

[Speaker 1]

Yeah, I mean, I've always said that our date nights, and we almost consistently did date nights through our entire children's early childhood. And I mean, we did some crazy things when we didn't have a babysitter the one night. I remember the kids had a jungle gym tree house outside.

And I invited you for a date in the tree house. And we took out, I took out some picnic. And we put candles all the way around it.

And next thing we looked out of the tree house, and we looked up towards the house. And we saw both of the kids, the two older kids peeping out the window to see what we were doing. And I think that sort of demonstration of love is something your kids also need to know, because it'll help them with their marriages, you know, where they know that, you know, their parents actually love each other, maybe even more than we love our kids.

I mean, obviously, that really maybe isn't always true. But I mean, our kids need to know that there's a very solid foundation. And that's something that's a priority.

[Speaker 2]

Absolutely. And it's modelled every day. They look and listen, they're sponges from an early age.

And they're watching you.

[Speaker 1]

Yeah.

[Speaker 2]

And they will, they will see the genuine love. Yeah, okay. You know, even just the gestures, the holding hands.

Yeah, just unconditional love is so important to demonstrate.

[Speaker 1]

Yeah, absolutely. Having said that, you and I can have a good fight and a good bicker. And, you know, Emily, I'll never forget a couple of years ago, because we're both very strong said to us, are you guys going to get divorced?

And it was a really good caveat for us to be a really good opening line for us to be able to say, actually, this is what real marriage is, that there's going to be differences.

[Speaker 2]

Yeah, I think letting them see disagreements is good. But also then seeing that you can come back from it. Resolution.

Resolution. Absolutely. So you can work through it.

[Speaker 1]

Yeah.

[Speaker 2]

You may be grumpy for a short while. But to see through it, express your love and move on.

[Speaker 1]

Yeah, absolutely. Well, I mean, I'm sure everybody can hear that you've got a couple of wise words. And one of the best parts about our parenting journey, one of the funniest parts is that we have a great sense of humour in our family.

And from a few years ago, our daughters were running YouTube and TikTok channels and whatever. And they came up with this thing called wise words with Phil. And they're always very funny.

And everybody laughs. And actually, one of our kids' friends doesn't even call you Phil. He calls you wise words with Phil, because that's what everybody came to know you as.

But I'd love for you to share just maybe three or four of the wise words from Phil that the kids have loved.

[Speaker 2]

Yeah, it just started by Emily having a GoPro camera, starting to make YouTube videos. And unprepared, would approach me with the camera and ask for some wise words. And, yeah, there was many that happened over time.

But I guess, you know, one was, you know, children don't stare into the sun. Very wise, Phil. Or wear sunscreen.

One of the ones I tried to get across was, you know, think about bush TV, you know, sitting around a fire and look at the flames, your iPhones and your tablets and so on. You know, chocolate milk doesn't come from cows. Oh, my goodness.

[Speaker 1]

And I think they all speak to the sense of humour that you really brought into our family, which is absolutely incredible. You've also believed all the way through the years that education is absolutely important, absolutely vital, but that education is not just about school and formal education. Can you talk a little bit about the educational values or the values that fathers can kind of immerse into their kids or instil into their kids and, you know, in terms of day by day lessons?

You have to start with the basics. Yeah, basically. But I guess, you know, something I've learned is that, you know, if you don't have the right knowledge and the right education, how are you going to have the right relationship with your child at that age?

I mean, you know, if you don't have the right education, as you know, the right children don't always understand what's going on. And then you get old and you get older and, you know, you just don't get the right relationship, right? It's important to know that, you know, terms of day-by-day lessons?

[Speaker 2]

Yeah, my view is unfortunately a lot of people outsource the education of their children to the schools. I have generally issues with a lot of the schooling systems. I do think they play a part in all sorts of things, teamwork and sport and, you know, learning how to do all sorts of things, spelling, reading, blah, blah, blah, they play a really important role, but the real education actually happens at home.

Who your kid becomes, their values, how they treat people, the respect they show for older people, their view on life, you know, just a small thing sitting around the table every night, which we prioritised for dinner. We've learnt that it's not actually that common, which was a surprise to both of us, but actually just the conversations, even from a young age, was an opportunity to listen, talk on all various topics, from politics to economics to planning holidays to talking business. You know, in more recent years for the older kids, just having conversations around entrepreneurship and, you know, everything from charity to conservation to whatever it is.

The kids love it and those conversations are so meaningful. So, you know, the best, actually the best classroom is around the dinner table. It absolutely is.

And when they're older, a glass of wine and having conversation and get them to ask questions. Also, interestingly, when the kids sort of leave home to go to university, at that point, you seem to be less important. They don't really want to take a lot of advice from you, but post-university, we've had our two older children come back at different times.

And actually gave us the sort of last year of education. And that was when they actually wanted advice. They respected our judgments and our information and our wisdoms and our lessons.

And we were able to give that sort of last input in terms of launching them into the wild, chaotic world.

[Speaker 1]

Absolutely. You know, that dinner time is something that I think, I mean, I can remember with James when he was really little, we did one night a week. I think it was a Wednesday night.

It was family dinner. And from the time he could speak, like one year old, he would ask family dinner. He'd come and ask me almost every night, is it family dinner yet?

Because he knew that that was the night that dad would sit at the table. And I'll never forget that the one night, the first time he did it, he couldn't have been more than 18 months old. And he looked at you and he said, how's your day in one word?

How's your day? And we both kind of looked at him and realised he'd actually learned that from us, you know. And that's really always been everybody gets a turn.

We go around and, you know, we talk about ideas. It's very, very important.

[Speaker 2]

I absolutely agree. The other great classroom is the car. Yes.

You know, if you do spend time taking kids to school, which is obviously frustrating for everybody. Sitting in the traffic. But it's an opportunity, not every day, but when time allows, not to have the radio on and to have what you've described as parallel conversation, where you're both staring forward, but having a conversation, particularly as they get older.

Yeah, absolutely. To let them talk and share their day and their frustrations and so on. Yeah.

[Speaker 1]

And I mean, I think one of the things that's important, and you know, this is a theory by, you know, in psychology called good enough parenting, which actually shows that parents who parent perfectly really mess their kids up because that the whole world revolves around that child and that their whole world has to be perfect all the time. There's never any crying and you don't say no. And it just ends up.

And I mean, I suppose in the old days, we would call it permissive parenting. The other names for it now. But the reality is that we all do and should stuff up some of the time, because that's how we learn about life and about reality.

So I know that you've stuffed up and you know that I've stuffed up. When parents stuff up, when dads have messed up and they just haven't been a great role model or they haven't been, they've lost their cool. And I know that you can probably think back to times when that might have happened for you.

How should we be addressing it? What do we do? How do we repair?

[Speaker 2]

Yeah, look, first of all, on the kid's side, allowing them to mess up is very important. So to push the boundaries and we can set the boundaries and let them test the boundaries. I think it's very, very important.

Let them mess up and know that it's OK. Because just reprimanding kids for messing up or breaking the boundaries is not the right thing. You've got to let kids test the limits.

But likewise, when we mess up, you know, they need to we need to be open and clear with them that actually, I'm sorry, I've messed up or you're right. I shouldn't have done that. You know, I was in a bad mood or I lost my cool or whatever it might be.

But kids need to know that parents are not perfect. And they actually, at the end of the day, I mean, only older kids will understand this and our youngest daughter will tell us that we're actually just young kids in older bodies.

[Speaker 1]

Yeah, yeah. We're learning along the way as well.

[Speaker 2]

We're learning as we go as well. And so we are going to make mistakes and we have made many.

[Speaker 1]

Yes, like the time that you brought two rats while I was away on holiday. So, yeah, I mean, that is something you were always a very fun father. And I think that I think, you know, I think sometimes I feel like this kind of gender neutral world is hard for parents to navigate because, you know, it's making both parents hold both roles equally.

And actually, we are genetically different. And when I used to go on holiday or not on holiday, on business trips, you and even if I did go away with the girls so we can, you would instantly spoil the children with added animals in the household. And I would get furious with you.

Like, you know, this is not the way we should be parenting, having all these extra pets come into the home. But actually, that's you were the dad. You were different, you know, and you were the irresponsible one.

Some of the time, you know, with those type of things.

[Speaker 2]

Yeah, I do think moms and dads have very different roles.

[Speaker 1]

Yeah.

[Speaker 2]

And at varying times for different genders. Absolutely. So at certain times, the daughter needs the father more and at other times, the son needs the mother more and vice versa.

So, you know, we definitely need to play to our roles. Kids need strong fathers, even if it's not the father in the home. I really believe a brother, an uncle, a grandfather or something is important in the role.

They bring a different perspective and a different view on life. I mean, deep down in our brains, men are hunters and women are gatherers. You know, it hasn't gone away.

And there's different lessons in that. And yeah, I'm not saying everyone has to be manly, but I do think having a man that shows strength, power, ability to provide safety, security, all those sort of things is important. That's the role of the hunter that used to be, you know, as the father.

And so, yeah, you know, my view is you need fathers to be strong in the house, but also show the deep unconditional love to the mother and, of course, the children.

[Speaker 1]

Yeah, absolutely. And then they can model off that, you know, so sons would be able to model off that. So let's talk about your son.

I mean, he's going to come up for being a father, hopefully within the next few years. We know that that's something that is on his heart, that he does want to be a dad. And there are lots of kids in this generation who don't want to be parents.

He does. So, I mean, if this is a recording that we play to him in a few years time, his wife is pregnant, he's expecting fatherhood, what would you be saying to him? What is the nugget that you would give to him as a gift?

You know, what does he need to know?

[Speaker 2]

I think the number one is protect your marriage at all costs, because that creates the foundation to set everything else up. Of course, we know the high probability of divorce is there, but it makes the road a lot harder, you know, if there is a separation. So ideally, you know, put everything into that marriage, protect it.

Get yourself a t-shirt that says love. Yes, dear. Yes, dear.

[Speaker 1]

I even had to put the words in your mouth.

[Speaker 2]

Let's say that again. Get those t-shirts called yes, dear.

[Speaker 1]

Which you genuinely actually had and would piss me off. But anyway.

[Speaker 2]

Call the boat after that. But it is really just, yeah, accepting being that support for the mom. Yeah.

And setting the example for your children through your actions. And ultimately, that's what parenting is about. It's your kids learning through your behaviour and your actions.

[Speaker 1]

Absolutely. So I love that. And that definitely will be something that James will take away.

I can tell for the dads who are listening who are going to have daughters, what I have seen is that a woman gets her worth in terms of what she expects from the world, from her employers, from the men around her, from the way she is treated by her father and the way that she sees her father treat her mother. And, you know, I think when you talk about the need for a strong father and a loving father, that is what codes for the next generation to be able to have successful marriages and be successful mothers and fathers. Because if a woman has seen her father cherish her, put her on a pedestal, tell her she's the most beautiful princess in the world, and that she should never ever stand for anything, for anybody who ever speaks to her in any other way, she learns that.

And if he has lived by that to her mother as well, and never, you know, kind of used awful words and abused her mother, then it becomes her code. And she will not settle. And that, for me, I think for dads of girls is critically important.

[Speaker 2]

Yeah, 100%.

[Speaker 1]

So without any pressure, dads, you are absolutely critical. I mean, I think what has come across in this podcast is that you set the tone for how your son is going to father. You set the standards for which your daughter will settle.

And by protecting your marriage, you give your kids the best of everything in the world. And that really, at the end of the day, is what it's all about. Because they can then go on and, you know, make a success of their lives, which is ultimately what we want.

[Speaker 2]

And I think just accept that there's no such thing as perfect.

[Speaker 1]

Absolutely.

[Speaker 2]

Yeah, we all are actually just children in older bodies. Yeah. And learning as we go.

And we are going to mess up. And that's part of life.

[Speaker 1]

Yeah.

[Speaker 2]

We just cannot be too hard on ourselves.

[Speaker 1]

Absolutely.

[Speaker 2]

But teamwork at the end of the day is absolutely key as parents.

[Speaker 1]

I love it. Well, thank you so much, Philip. I can't believe I have waited this long, almost 200 episodes, to have you on the podcast.

And I think it's a very good space in which I can say thank you for everything that you've done to support me and my business and everything we do. Because I know that ParentSense is part of your vision. And it's part of your vision for good parenting and for supporting parents to be great parents.

And so thank you for your support in my work and in our marriage. And of course, absolutely in our kids' lives.

[Speaker 2]

Thank you. It's been a good journey together. And I think we're approaching 30 years this year.

[Speaker 1]

Yep.

[Speaker 2]

And yeah, hopefully we see another 30.

[Speaker 1]

Excellent.

[Speaker 2]

It's been a good journey.

[Speaker 1]

It has been an amazing journey. Happy Father's Day.

[Speaker 2]

Thank you. What's my gift, by the way?

[Speaker 1]

Thanks to everyone who joined us. We will see you the same time next week. Until then, download ParentSense app and take the guesswork out of parenting.

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