



# Maggie Dent: *Dealing with Diabetes*

Australia's premier childhood advocate, Maggie Dent, is a somewhat famous figure for parents, early childhood educators and teachers in Western Australia.

With almost 10,000 Facebook followers, Maggie has authored four books focusing on nurturing, building resilience and self esteem in children and adolescents. Maggie is a passionate supporter for the healthy, common-sense raising of children to strengthen families and communities.

Maggie grew up in a large family on a farm in rural south-west Western Australia before becoming a high-school teacher for 17 years. Maggie then worked in counselling young people and their families in suicide prevention and palliative care.

Maggie's greatest experience comes from being the mother of four grown boys. Her third son Al, now 28, was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes at the age of 17. This is their story and their advice to others.

## *Maggie on Al's diagnosis*

"The week of the diagnosis is etched in my mind so deeply. Al was recovering from a knee operation so I was caring for him and he was disappearing in front of my eyes – dropping weight every minute it seemed!

I left a glass jar in his bedroom to use if he needed to urinate over night and when I went to empty it on the third day it was colourless and odourless and I knew something seriously weird was going on.

The moment of diagnosis was big. The doctor said: "Al, we believe you have sudden-onset, adolescent type 1 diabetes." Al and I looked at each other and Al asked, "So how do we fix this?" When the doctor said, "It's a life-long condition requiring regular insulin injections." Al stretched back on the hospital bed, thought for a minute, then turned to me and said: "Hey Mum I thought my knee recondition was a long-term proposition but this diabetes is gonna be a really long-term proposition eh? Let's do it!"

Al is a bright, cheerful, confident and optimistic personality – also highly resilient thanks to having two older brothers – and he took his illness as a bit of a scientific experiment. I am sure more sensitive, gentle kids and teens would take it very differently.

Our biggest worry in those first weeks was to stop worrying and

trust. Stress really messes with blood sugars and so the calmer we were, the better everything was."

## *Al's advice to the newly diagnosed*

"Well, the key to coping with all set backs in life is resilience. Diabetes is no different.

The person being diagnosed needs to be assured that diabetes is not going to ruin their lives, and they can very easily live a normal, happy life. The needles these days are 0.5cm long, and are painless and fast to administer. You can do it without detection quite easily so it shouldn't affect where you go, and when.

What is really important is if the person with diabetes isn't the world's best patient at times, that's OK. They're not a bad person for having a burger, too much to drink or a cigarette."

## *Maggie's advice for parents of children with type 1 diabetes*

"The diagnosis of any serious illness or disorder or the loss of any physical functionality for anyone is a loss experience. For parents this loss is especially devastating as every parent wants their child to be healthy, happy and capable to enjoy life.

Just like with a death, the first step to recovering from the loss is accepting the reality and allowing our preferred, expected future dream to re-shape itself to the new reality. This part of the journey is full of emotions – fear, anger, worry, anxiety, sadness and deep questioning – "what if?" This confusing time is also when the whole family is learning how to manage the new reality and with diabetes it is a bit like having a crash course to speak another language in a few days.

For Mums it is particularly challenging as we are more prone to "catastrophising" and we run scary worst-case scenarios in our worried brains that make things really stressful. Many worried Mums can make their child feel worse and more frightened than they need to be and it is simply because we love them so much and we want to fix things. Yep, we tend to nag, and ask endless questions and many adolescents have told me "Mum is doing my head in!"

*“..with diabetes it is a bit like having a crash course to speak another language in a few days.”*

Becoming well informed is essential and allowing the newly diagnosed adolescent time to understand their illness on their own is incredibly important. Even for young children, they can learn how to manage the illness with guidance from the experts who have been educating children and teens for a very long time. Giving them permission to take the journey of management and care by themselves as much as possible is helpful.

They will know that at any point you are available as parents to help – but that developing autonomy and their own coping skills builds capacity and resilience that will help them their whole life. Al had to tell his Dad to step back as he was calling every day to check his blood sugar levels. For me, my background as a teacher and counsellor of adolescents helped me enormously to allow Al to explore the condition on his own. Don't worry, I grieved and cried and spent hours talking with girlfriends and my sister without Al knowing how worried I was in those early days.”

### *Al's advice to parents and friends*

“Parents and friends need to be supportive, not negative and pushy. The person with diabetes is well aware of the health risks, and knows their body better than the parent/friend does.

The worst thing you can do as a parent or friend is claim you know more about diabetes than the patient. Typically, someone with diabetes get hours and hours of education from doctors, specialists, diabetes educators and dieticians. After years of check ups and appointments, they will begin to understand the condition thoroughly. They will learn what foods are good, what foods aren't, how drinking affects you, how exercise affects you, etc. For someone who's not a doctor or diabetic to tell you otherwise, to tell you that “you can't eat that, it has sugar in it” is infuriating.”

### *Maggie's thoughts on dealing with diabetes during adolescence and early adulthood*

“The educators who worked with Al helped him know how to be a uni student – how to party safely, what to watch for and what to be vigilant about. They were worth their weight in gold. Al lived with his brothers in Perth while we, his parents, lived in Albany, so we couldn't just drop in and check up. After the grieving and the full acceptance of his illness, we have not had one challenging moment. His treatment of his diabetes has been



*Maggie and Al*



spot on and we are lucky that he comes from a family who loves good food, being fit and he knows he is surrounded by people who love him.”

### *Al's thoughts on dealing with diabetes during adolescence and early adulthood*

“When you're a teenager, you want to be a teenager. You want to drink alcohol, you want to eat loads of food and you want to live normally. Well, you can do all that; it just needs to be within reason. You are only a little bit different. You just need to understand how food, drink, alcohol and exercise affects your body and how much insulin to take. You don't have a debilitating disease, you just don't produce insulin.”

*Maggie will be Diabetes WA's special guest at an evening workshop for parents of children with type 1 diabetes on Thursday, 27 March 2014 (venue to be confirmed, Perth metro location).*

*For more information, contact Deanne Dymock at Diabetes WA at [deanne.dymock@diabeteswa.com.au](mailto:deanne.dymock@diabeteswa.com.au) or call (08) 9436 6204. ●*