

GED_S01E18_The_Good_Enough_Dad_Adam

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Anonymous female voice: [00:00:02] A LiSTNR Production.

Maggie Dent: [00:00:04] This podcast was recorded on the ancient lands of the Gadigal peoples of the Eora nation in Australia. I wish to acknowledge the rich and continuing culture, and especially pay respect to the elders past, present and emerging, and to acknowledge and pay respect to any First Nations people from anywhere in the world who may come to hear this podcast. We hope that we may all come to walk with gentle feet, strong minds and compassionate hearts in this global village.

Maggie Dent: [00:00:36] No dad wants to be a lousy dad. Aiming to be a good dad is great. But you know what? Being a good enough dad is so much more important. I'm Maggie Dent, parenting educator and author and champion of boys and men. And this is The Good Enough Dad, where I chat with committed, caring, sometimes confused, and often funny dads about all the ways they've discovered to be good enough at this parenting gig. My Good Enough Dad today is Adam Liaw.

Speaker3: [00:01:06] The food you put on the plate tastes delicious, but it's also got heart, it's got soul, and it's got mind behind it. That is really rare. That intellect will make you very unique in this industry. We're so delighted. We're so excited that you are the master chef of 2010 well done.

Maggie Dent: [00:01:22] Oh, I saw that on your face. That's Adam winning season two of MasterChef in 2010. Would you believe that was 14 years ago?

Adam Liaw: [00:01:30] Yeah, it feels like a lifetime ago.

Maggie Dent: [00:01:31] So since winning MasterChef, Adam has become one of Australia's most popular cooks, turning his hand to TV presenting, cookbook writing and podcasting. He's also an ambassador for Unicef Australia. Oh, that man is busy! But while he has many balls in the air, Adam still shows his love for his family by cooking for them every night, or nearly every night. Adam has three children with his wife Asami;

Christopher, ten, Anna, seven, and Benji, four. Adam, [00:02:00] welcome to the Good Enough, dad.

Adam Liaw: [00:02:02] Thank you so much for having me Maggie.

Maggie Dent: [00:02:04] You still cook every night for your family. Are you the best cook in the house or, uh, is food your love language?

Adam Liaw: [00:02:10] Well, it's definitely my love language. Um, I don't think that. Well, you know, if you ask my children, no, I am not the best cook in the house. It is my own personal shame that they prefer my wife's cooking over mine. She hits the the kids favourite dishes again and again and again. My daughter actually, this morning she had Japanese style tomato curry for breakfast, which she also had for dinner last night, lunch yesterday, breakfast the day before and dinner the night before. This is her fifth consecutive meal of my wife's tomato curry.

Maggie Dent: [00:02:43] Must be a damn good curry, I might have to get the recipe.

Adam Liaw: [00:02:45] I did have a spoon this morning. It was. It was good, actually.

Maggie Dent: [00:02:48] You moved to Adelaide from Penang in Malaysia at three years of age. Can you remember that transition at all?

Adam Liaw: [00:02:55] I, I often think when you try to recall those very early childhood memories, I wonder if they're the real memories of the three year old. Or maybe they're the memories of a ten year old looking at a picture of when you were three years old. And I always try and I try and turn the image around in my mind, like, you know, I can see the thing that I remember from the picture. Can I see what's on the other side that I would have been looking at? And usually I can't. So I, you know, we're talking 40 years ago now, so I'm not 100% sure. But, you know, I think I have definite childhood memories of the transition, whether or not they're the actual ones from the actual time or just recollections, memories of memories. I guess.

Maggie Dent: [00:03:35] Both your parents were hard working doctors, so I understand your grandmother was a big part of your life. Can you tell me a little about her?

Adam Liaw: [00:03:43] Yeah. She migrated to Australia with us. So when my parents were both working, she was the one that was basically looking after the kids, and she lived with us at the same time. She was a very, very. She passed away about four years ago, a very strong woman. She never went to school. She [00:04:00] didn't have an education. She used to tell a story where she would have to take her much younger brother. She had a brother who was about 15 years younger than her I think. She used to have to take him to school. So only the boys went to school, and she would drop him off at school and then run around the back of the school building and listen in to the classes while he was getting taught so she could get an education. She ended up speaking, she could speak eight languages and she was very, very clever woman.

Maggie Dent: [00:04:23] And quite good in the kitchen, I think.

Adam Liaw: [00:04:26] Very good cook too. I mean, that was in her time. That was her job. Her husband passed away when she was very young, about 25.

Maggie Dent: [00:04:34] Wow.

Adam Liaw: [00:04:35] And she had three children, at that time they had no money. Her job at the time was she was a washerwoman. She did laundry at one of the rest houses in Malaysia. The rest houses were sort of these colonial era, small hotels, I guess. And my grandfather was the cook there, and she did the house cleaning and things like that. And when he passed away, she really didn't have enough money to raise children. And she actually won in like the Malaysian equivalent of of Cross Lotto, not a big amount of money, probably about \$5,000 in today's money, but it was completely life changing. It allowed her to, uh, rent a little cafe that she then ran. And because then she had premises, she ended up looking after all of her brother in law's children as well. So she was this one woman looking after about, I think it was 11 children, uh, while running a cafe at the same time.

Maggie Dent: [00:05:31] Oh, my goodness, what a powerhouse.

Adam Liaw: [00:05:33] Yeah, incredible woman.

Maggie Dent: [00:05:34] And do you remember coming alongside her while she was cooking? Would she hand you the knife to chop stuff up or you just witnessed her amazing efforts?

Adam Liaw: [00:05:42] Yeah, it was, it was a lot of watch watching.

Maggie Dent: [00:05:45] A lot of washing up!

Adam Liaw: [00:05:47] Yeah, washing and watching. Yeah. Uh, she didn't really kind of, like, come and cook with me. It wasn't like, you know, hold the spoons to, like, you might see in a Christmas movie or something like that. It was. And I say it was work in the sense that, [00:06:00] you know, she wasn't doing it for fun. She was doing it in order to feed quite a lot of mouths all the time. But that's not to say there wasn't love in it, you know, there was there was a huge amount of culture and love into what she did, but it wasn't like, oh, come on, let's all cook together and have a good time. There was none of that.

Maggie Dent: [00:06:21] Your parents separated when you were around eight and your mum went to live in New Zealand a little bit later on now. Tell me about this big decision around the age of 14, because I'm very impressed about this, that you chose to live where and with who?

Adam Liaw: [00:06:35] Uh, well, I was at that stage in South Australia where I was living, it was sort of a two year matriculation. So I was in my second year 11, second last year of school at that stage because I jumped through school a bit quicker.

Maggie Dent: [00:06:52] Tell me about that. Is that you worked harder or you were incredibly clever? Come on.

Adam Liaw: [00:06:57] Are they.

Maggie Dent: [00:06:58] It's not easy to skip grades.

Adam Liaw: [00:06:59] Grades? Yeah, they just put me in a bit early. My brother is, you know, the the kind of genius that you would make movies about kind of thing. He's a

very, very, very smart cookie. And I kind of rode on the coattails there a little bit. So he went into school when he was, I think, just starting year one at about three and then skipped some grades. So he finished school when he was 14. They kind of just let me go in earlier. I mean, I didn't skip any grades after that. I skipped the first one, but that was it. I just went through earlier, earlier and a little bit faster. So at that stage it was either change schools for my last two years of school or stay at the same school. So we stayed at the same one. My brother was already in uni at the time, so we went and basically moved out by ourselves, not completely alone. My grandmother at that stage was sort of spending six months in Australia, six months in Malaysia. Um, and so, you know, she would look after us for that six months and then for six months of the year, we'd be on our own.

Maggie Dent: [00:07:56] Um, I'm just impressed with that maturity. And I think I have to [00:08:00] celebrate that because so often we hear and from all my surveys I've done for writing my books, that boys keep saying we always seen in such a negative light as though we're just useless and hopeless. And I know I've met many young lads in that age group who are doing exceptional things quietly behind the scenes, and I just wanted to shine a little light on that, to say, make sure you share that story a little bit more.

Adam Liaw: [00:08:23] Well, I kind of do think about that time sometimes and go, oh God, I remember I was I was working at McDonald's. But because I was in year 11 and 14, the only kind of shift I could get was midnight to 6 a.m. and my brother had a driver's license. I obviously didn't, but I would drive his car to work at midnight. Work for six hours overnight at McDonald's, and then drive home at 630 in the morning and get ready and go to school. It was a kind of a not a great lifestyle.

Maggie Dent: [00:08:58] I find that then that there's this pragmatism often in boys and men. Yeah. Um, where that's what needed to happen. So I just step up and do it. Whereas today I think we've got a lot of boys on couches who can't launch because the motivation for you was not only to complete something, it was a value in your family, but also you were the one who was able to either create it or explode it. Yeah, and you can grow up faster than neuroplasticity of the human brain. You can grow up faster.

Adam Liaw: [00:09:29] I should probably correct that. I think I was 16 at that time. I don't think they let 14 year olds work midnight to 6 a.m.. That sounds illegal. when I say it out loud.

Maggie Dent: [00:09:37] It sounds. Either way, it's pretty impressive. So as a former high school teacher, I'm a little bit curious as to how was it you being younger in a higher grade? Was was that a difficult journey with the students rather than because it's unusual? Yeah.

Adam Liaw: [00:09:57] Uh, not really [00:10:00] for me. I went to the same school from start to finish. So, uh, and it was, you know, one of those schools where, you know, you have different people coming in. So I was kind of there from the beginning, so there was no need for me to acclimatise to a new school or anything like that, which made life a lot easier. And I was funny. So I think, and, you know, whether a sense of humour developed ... because, you know, you had to find a way to, to, to fit in and stuff because, you know, when you're two, three years younger than every other kid, it's you can't play a lot of sport at an all boys school sports are very important. And I was quite sporty, but just dramatically smaller than all the other children. So I had lots of friends. I was quite popular at school.

Maggie Dent: [00:10:44] So one of the best defenses against bullying and not fitting in is definitely a sense of humour. It's a protective factor in terms of resilience. So, well done. Pick that up. Good. But you could have probably been a comedian, not a cook.

Adam Liaw: [00:10:57] Well, there's a lot of Asian kids who I think, you know, I was one of at that stage, you know, these days would be very different. But I was one of two Asian kids in the school at the beginning.

Maggie Dent: [00:11:10] Ahh so very different as well.

Adam Liaw: [00:11:13] Yeah, a really different thing. And you do find a lot of intelligent. If you look at an Asian comedian of my vintage these days, you'll often find they were one of very, yeah, lawyer lawyers that were one of very few Asian kids in school had to develop a sense of humour as a coping mechanism.

Maggie Dent: [00:11:30] Yeah, I love it.

Maggie Dent: [00:11:36] Where was your dad in all of this? And who was the biggest adult influence on you during that stage of transition from boy to man?

Adam Liaw: [00:11:45] Uh, my dad lived in the country about four hours out of Adelaide in Whyalla. And so he would actually work the weekdays there and then come back on the weekend. So there was more kind of supervision. He'd actually phone us every night and we'd talk for about an hour [00:12:00] pretty much every single night. And I remember it was, you know, this was the days before mobile phones and stuff and, you know, I'd have half an hour on the phone with my dad and then call up to my brother, and he'd come downstairs and get on the phone for half an hour to dad and that kind of thing.

Maggie Dent: [00:12:15] That's pretty special.

Adam Liaw: [00:12:16] Um, and then he would be there on the weekends, uh, every weekend, pretty much every weekend. I can't actually I can't even think of one he would have missed. Maybe maybe one when he was on call at the hospital there.

Maggie Dent: [00:12:27] That's probably more connection than a lot of dads who live in the same house as their sons.

Adam Liaw: [00:12:31] Yeah, potentially so. I mean, you know, finding an hour to chat with your kids every day is, uh, you know, maybe I should move out of home and call, call my call my kids rather than.

Maggie Dent: [00:12:39] Well now you do all the FaceTime, zoom, Skype and everything. You can see their face. You graduated with a degree in science and law. And then how old were you when you moved to Tokyo to practice law?

Adam Liaw: [00:12:50] I think I was 23, so I graduated at about when I was 20.

Maggie Dent: [00:12:57] That's crazy.

Adam Liaw: [00:12:57] And then I worked for 3 or 4 years at law firms and then moved to Tokyo when I was 23. Yeah.

Maggie Dent: [00:13:05] And that's where you met your wife, Asami there. How did that happen?

Adam Liaw: [00:13:09] We worked at the same company. Yeah.

Maggie Dent: [00:13:12] Not on Tinder?

Adam Liaw: [00:13:13] No, no. Um. And, uh. Yeah, we just got along well, and, um. Yeah. Office romance, I guess..

Maggie Dent: [00:13:22] I love it. Okay, so there's a big leap, though, from a lawyer. To MasterChef and to cook. So you've said before that entering that was an uncharacteristic risk. So have you always played it safe or just predictable or rational thinking? And then all of a sudden that's not rational. Tell me about how did that happen?

Adam Liaw: [00:13:42] Very, very much so. I am not a risk taker, I guess. You know, when you when you grow up in a, I guess, a migrant family, the goal is. I think from a very early age, it was sort of brought up to understand that the goal [00:14:00] is stability. And so stability generally means getting the best or highest paying, I should say not best, highest paying job you can and then working in that forever.

Maggie Dent: [00:14:09] Yeah, that's exactly it.

Adam Liaw: [00:14:11] And you know, now that I am an adult, I kind of realise how important stability is when you don't have it, you know? I, you know, my grandmother was through wars and lived through wars, and my, um, parents migrated. And stability is a, a wonderful thing when you have it, when you when you have it you also don't realise how terrible life can be when you don't have it.

Maggie Dent: [00:14:39] Yeah.

Maggie Dent: [00:14:39] Um, so very, very much, uh, focused on stability and reliability. And so I'd been working in Japan for about eight years at that time, and I was kind of looking to come back to Australia, and I'd never had time off. I hadn't taken I remember from my last law exam to starting my first job in a law firm. I had, I think, three days off, and that was it. And even when I moved to Japan, I was like, I sort of said, can I have a month off leaving my job and then move to Japan? And they were like, no, you can have the weekend. So I finished work at one law firm on the Friday and started my job at Disney in Tokyo on the Monday, living out of a hotel for three months and things.

Maggie Dent: [00:15:25] Were you happy as a lawyer? Were you kind of.

Adam Liaw: [00:15:28] Yeah, yeah, I loved my job.

Maggie Dent: [00:15:30] And yet you didn't know this other thing could happen. So it still seems like, um, like, did it drop in and the idea appear in the middle of the night, or did somebody suggest it? How did you actually get to go putting in an application for MasterChef?

Adam Liaw: [00:15:45] Well, I, um,

Maggie Dent: [00:15:48] Or was it your beautiful wife?

Adam Liaw: [00:15:49] No, I'd never seen the show. Like, uh. And, you know, we weren't in Australia at the time, and it was, uh, I was in the second season, so there'd been one season. And I remember my friends who knew I [00:16:00] loved to cook, because when I was a lawyer, I used to have dinner parties sort of three times a week kind of thing. And, uh, they knew I loved to cook, and they say, oh, this show, it's so popular in Australia. Everybody's watching it. You'd love it. You should put in an application. My friend, who was also a lawyer that I'd worked with in Tokyo, sent me the application form as kind of a joke. And then at that point, it was just after the global financial crisis, 2009. And so in Asia, for American companies, the economic situation was such that there was not a lot of optimism or new projects happening. So I was pretty quiet at work. I wasn't in danger of losing my job or anything. So I just, you know, when he sent me the link on email says, I'll just fill in the application.

Adam Liaw: [00:16:41] And then I remember I was in Cuba, actually on holiday with my then girlfriend, now wife, and I got an email saying, do you want to come to Sydney next weekend for an audition? I was like, no, what? Are you kidding?

Maggie Dent: [00:16:54] I'm on holiday!

Adam Liaw: [00:16:55] Yeah. And so I just said no. And then, um, then they emailed back about three weeks later when I was back in Tokyo saying, actually, we'd really like you to come in for an audition. There's a second round of auditions this weekend. And I was like, I can't go to Sydney this weekend. But then that was actually Jetstar had just started flying direct, direct to Tokyo, to Sydney, and it was a long weekend in Tokyo. And because they'd just started flying the the return flight was \$300 from Tokyo. So I was like, okay, I'm just going to go see my come on, I'm going to go see my friends in Sydney. And if I have time, I'll pop into this audition. And then when I went to the audition, it was just a huge amount of fun, you know? It was, it was really great fun. Yeah. Then I ended up coming back for the next one and the next one and the next one after that.

Maggie Dent: [00:17:38] Oh so good. Now you know that need you explained just before about the safety and security. Do you feel that when you became a dad that was still really deeply embedded in you, or does it bother you as much now that you've matured and done different stuff in your life and had taken some risks?

Adam Liaw: [00:17:58] It's still bothers [00:18:00] me, I guess. You know, I have I've been effectively self-employed now for 14 years, 15 nearly. And I think when you make that leap from getting a regular salary to not, you do have to have a little bit more tolerance for, um, a lack of security particularly, you know, when, when, when Covid hit. I remember and this is kind of evidence that it is not completely out of my system. I had nine months of work planned that went away in a week and a half, you know,

Maggie Dent: [00:18:35] Me too

Adam Liaw: [00:18:35] And I remember it was just terrifying at the time.

Maggie Dent: [00:18:37] 80% off a Cliff.

Adam Liaw: [00:18:38] What is my job now? What is my work for the next year? And, um, you know, we thankfully, I transitioned from doing travel shows, which I'd been doing for a decade previous to that, to doing the cook up, which is now the show that I do, mainly in studio. So there were there were lots of things that we were able to to make work. So, um, I guess I'm more resilient to a lack of stability than I, than I would have been in the past.

Maggie Dent: [00:19:03] Yeah I like that. Now. Your work obviously involves a lot of travel. You certainly get to some places in the world. So that can be a blessing and a bit of a curse. How do you juggle the demands of work with being the dad you really want to be, and still doing the work that you also want to do?

Adam Liaw: [00:19:21] Uh.

Maggie Dent: [00:19:23] Do you have hour long phone calls too?

Adam Liaw: [00:19:26] Not really. I think, you know, I was reading the other day, attention spans have dropped by 33% over the last 15 years. And I'm like, oh, is it only 33%? Yeah, I, I um, uh, yeah, I thankfully now the main show that I do when we're filming, which is we film about eight months, well, six, six, seven months of the year is done in studio, five minutes from my house. So I am home for dinner every single night. I'm usually not there for breakfast because I leave very early in the morning, but, uh, at least I'm home every day. I still do make travel shows now, so I'm on the road [00:20:00] a lot, but travel has become a lot easier, I guess. I don't do the big long three months overseas like I used to when before the kids were born, or even when they were very, very little and wouldn't notice that I was gone. So I try to avoid that now. And I like being home. You know, I, I think people spend so much time at home that travel is seen as being something desirable because they only do it when they go on holiday and stuff. But when you work on the road. You dream about being at home.

Maggie Dent: [00:20:29] That's it. That's me.

Adam Liaw: [00:20:31] Yeah. And I was just saying to my dad, uh, we were just arranging our Chinese New Year plans. I was on the phone to him yesterday, and I was

like, I'm gonna bring the kids down, and I've got to go to Canberra on the Thursday. I'll bring them over to Adelaide on the Friday. Then I've got to go to Gold Coast on the Saturday for work, and then I'll come back on Sunday, pick them up in Adelaide and go back to Sydney so they can be back at school on Monday. He was like, you can't do that. I was like, I'll do it every week, dad, don't worry about it.

Maggie Dent: [00:20:54] Yeah, we all know that as parents we try to do our very best, but we all, we all have muck up moments. Can you share one of your parenting fails, please?

Adam Liaw: [00:21:05] Are you? How long have you got? You know, it took me a long time to realise that when I am angry with my children, it usually is not their fault.

Maggie Dent: [00:21:19] Absolutely. Does he say that again? Because that is just pure gold.

Adam Liaw: [00:21:24] Yeah. When I'm angry with my children, it's usually not their fault. Sometimes, you know, they can, they can they can push the right buttons to do that. But it's usually because I'm sad or because I'm tired or I'm angry in the same way that, you know, I think kids biologically, 99% of the problems they have is just are you are you hungry, tired or thirsty? You know,

Maggie Dent: [00:21:43] Unmet need

Adam Liaw: [00:21:44] Which need which is the thing that you need now. And we'll fix that and then we'll solve all the emotional things later.

Maggie Dent: [00:21:51] Multiple unmet needs get tricky don't they?

Adam Liaw: [00:21:53] Yeah, yeah. So, you know, sometimes I'll find myself and I. My parents [00:22:00] never yelled, and so I see yelling as being something ... My wife and I are very, very different. We are, I would like to say, compatible personalities that are like two jigsaw puzzles that have nothing in common, that fit together quite well. And so, you know, she grew up in a family where, you know, there was a lot of yelling, but some families are just like that. They're loud. Some are very loud families. We were a very,

very quiet family. I can't remember anyone ever yelling in my entire childhood at all. And sometimes you get these in our house where we're yelling. I'm like, where did this come from? I'm like, oh, it's my wife's fault. But it's also, you know, I, I had, in the early stages of our relationship, a real aversion to yelling. And I still don't think it's great.

Maggie Dent: [00:22:44] No, it'll probably trigger you because it's so unfamiliar.

Adam Liaw: [00:22:46] It was really unfamiliar to me. And so sometimes just the the tone or the tenor of a conversation when, you know, you my wife's yelling at the kids and they're yelling back at her and I'm like, I'm not a yeller, but I guess I've got to get into this whole yelling thing. Sometimes I find myself speaking very harshly to my children, to a level that is not either effective, fair, or that has nothing to do with them at all. And I used to be pretty stubborn about that, you know? And I'd be like, well, actually it is your fault, you know, it's not me, it is you. But I now thankfully, uh, apologise a lot. If that happens, I'm very careful to sit them down and go, look, you know, I yelled at you. That was not fair. That was my fault. I won't do it again. Yeah, well, I won't not not, not, won't do it again. But I just wanted to say that I acknowledge that that was not right.

Maggie Dent: [00:23:34] It's the rupture that is followed by repair.

Adam Liaw: [00:23:37] Yeah.

Maggie Dent: [00:23:37] Which is comes from awareness. Come on. Tell me something really specific you've done. That was an obvious mock up, except speaking harshly, because I think lots of us can recognize that one.

Adam Liaw: [00:23:48] I, you know, I, I don't think I get it too far wrong. I remember when my oldest son was rock climbing, and I really wanted him to get to the top of this thing. And I was just, I was pushing him and pushing [00:24:00] him and pushing him, and I he wasn't enjoying it. And then he finally got to the top and he's like, are you happy now, dad? But he was saying in this like real pleading way. I was like, oh God, I'm so ... I've done that so badly.

Maggie Dent: [00:24:11] Ah, so that one is a biggie. Like the whole parental approval, the pressure that we, you know, it is really hard because we're not doing it for a

negative reason. Because sometimes kids need a little bit of coaching and pushing. Yeah. But what I see later is the the kids who don't feel unconditionally love that they feel they get love when they perform. But you saw that in that moment and, uh.

Adam Liaw: [00:24:36] Yeah, that was I mean, that was a good five, six years ago now. So, um, yeah, learning moments for me is that and the oldest child, I think always gets it a bit harder because, you know, we're just not we're not used to it. We need to learn how to be parents, I guess.

Maggie Dent: [00:24:52] Yeah. The L plate.

Maggie Dent: [00:24:56] So your parents brought you to a new country to give you more opportunities. Perhaps they were also afraid that you would not have enough opportunities if they'd stayed where they were. So what fears do you have for your own children today here in Australia?

Adam Liaw: [00:25:20] God, um. Economic, I guess. You know, to me they have a lifestyle so far in excess of what I had growing up or what my parents or grandparents had growing up. You know, my family for 700 years were farmers in the same village. And then my grandfather went to Malaysia, my dad came to Australia, and our lifestyle could not be more different. You know, we've been back to the village since, and my kids have been there too. And I just go, well, you know, imagine if my grandfather had never gone to Malaysia and my dad had never come to Australia. We'd be living in that house there. We still have our house there. And it's it's not [00:26:00] even a house anymore. It's sort of ramshackle, kind of fallen to bits, but it's, you know, it's about about the size of this studio, I guess. And I guess. You know, in some ways, the lifestyle that we're able to live now is the goal. You know, I own my own house. You know that we're not going to starve at any point soon. But I still find myself thinking, Will my kids own a house when they grow up? You know, they'll have a good education, I hope, but I do think still very much in that those practical migrant family terms of where is the stability that, that they're going to have in their lives.

Maggie Dent: [00:26:40] Now, that fear that you have around financial security, um, especially in today's world, is such a common concern for parents. But I'm just going to throw something in here that I work around the other end of kids who don't cope and the

kids who are struggling and our teens who are struggling. And I'm going to say their emotional capacity and their mental capacity is far more important in terms of how they're going to thrive through life. We are finding so many kids who are struggling to complete high school, not because they're not bright enough or don't live in a nice house, but they're struggling with all these pressures of living today that are not giving them the sense of hope that I believe we want for our kids. So I think one of those big messages is absolutely, we want to give them the tools to be able to generate the financial freedom to make the choices they want, but that can be okay if they also want to, you know, have a career that isn't up the top of the tree if they want to be a chef and not a lawyer, if they want to be, um, a teacher, they want to be a, you know, someone who works in retail. Whatever your place is, we want to make sure they're able to do something they enjoy doing that actually allows what I call their innate strengths to come out and to have enough to create a life of comfort. It may not mean [00:28:00] you will own your house in the northern beaches of Sydney, but can you see that's a that's one of the things I want us to be more concerned about. Is my child happy to be who they are as well as giving them the tools to navigate a very unpredictable world.

Adam Liaw: [00:28:15] Yeah, I do, you know, I went to school with a lot of rich kids. My parents are both doctors, but we came to Australia with nothing and they went through a divorce. And so we really didn't have a lot growing up. And I went to school on scholarship. Otherwise we'd never been able to afford the school that my brother and I went to. And I just remember looking at all the kids at school who ... Their parents had wealth that I would never have imagined. All through my childhood, I slept in the garage with my brothers, with my brothers. And it wasn't even. It wasn't like a nice redone garage. It was a literal garage. And then you go to kids houses and they've got like, you know, swimming pools and tennis courts.

Maggie Dent: [00:28:55] Ensuites that are bigger than most people's bathrooms.

Adam Liaw: [00:28:58] I was like can you imagine, like, how easy your life would be if you had this amount of money? I always remember thinking that. And, um, or, you know, if you had a fridge that made its own ice. Yeah, those kind of things. And, you know, that kind of stability is something that, you know, and it wasn't about being rich or, you know, or anything like that. It was just imagine not having to worry about if you can afford your school uniform. That was what I was thinking.

Maggie Dent: [00:29:23] Yeah, exactly.

Maggie Dent: [00:29:30] All right. So it's your chance to brag a little now, Adam, and celebrate. What do you reckon is some of your finest moments as a dad with your kids?

Adam Liaw: [00:29:41] I think I support them very well in what they want to do, and I'm always very kind of aware of the extraordinary amount of projection that is kind of hardwired into the way parents parent, you are in some biological way, [00:30:00] trying to create a second version of yourself that is better than the first.

Maggie Dent: [00:30:04] I know.

Adam Liaw: [00:30:05] Rather than allowing an actual human being to develop in a way that is right for them. And so I'm able to catch it very early on, you know, when I'm kind of pushing them to do something that is not for them, but for me. And so I don't do that anymore. You know, I think I've thankfully managed to stamp that out before they reached their teenage years, because I think that's when it can be a little bit... I do sometimes think, you know, what kind of teenagers are they going to be? Because I, my wife was a rebellious teen. I was the opposite, you know, I was, um, uh, very well.

Maggie Dent: [00:30:40] You skipped the teenage years technically just went straight into manhood.

Adam Liaw: [00:30:43] Yeah, pretty much. So there wasn't any kind of, like, raging against or authority for me. Yeah. And, well, there wasn't a huge amount of authority for me to rage against, to be honest. We were living, I was living by myself at 14. So, um, it wasn't if I, if I wanted to go out at night, I would go out at night. And I just never did.

Maggie Dent: [00:31:01] You're not very good at celebrating yourself really, Adam, I feel I think that there's probably some exceptionally wonderful moments that you've created with your kids, particularly, you know, around your food and around feeding each other and around the kitchen bench and the table.

Adam Liaw: [00:31:18] Yeah. Yeah. I mean, that is that is one of the really important things for me; eating together as a family, not just because I like food, but because it's got nothing to do with the food, to be honest. And I never will force them to eat anything. And one of the things that I really like about our meal times is I don't mind cooking. So if we sit down like, and this has happened at times, we'll sit down at the table and the kids will be like, I don't want to eat that. And I'm like, okay, no worries. What else? And then they'll like snack on a few things and I'll just go and make something else and then come back to the table, which is, I guess, a situation that not many people find themselves in and that would usually turn into a fight. You know, you're going to sit there and eat it until .. I've just worked on that for so long. And so while I have [00:32:00] pride in my food, I also, you know, I don't force them to eat anything.

Maggie Dent: [00:32:03] And I think we underestimate that food's so much more about human connectedness. We gather around food as humans. And culturally, that's what your family would have done right back in that original village.

Adam Liaw: [00:32:15] Well, we, you know, food throughout the human history has been what culture is about. You know, every single celebration that we have comes from an ancient harvest festival that's been translated into something else over time. And so I, in the era of industrial food and processed food, sometimes we see that act of cooking a meal and sitting down to it as being, I don't know, a luxury or something, but I think it is absolutely necessary, you know, otherwise I kind of think like, and I don't say this to knock people. I ate most of my meals ... because I, because I was living by myself or with my brother for so long. I reckon most of the meals in my teenage years were eaten in front of the TV by myself, and then we'd all get together for a family dinner on Sunday when my dad was in town or whatever. But I don't know when you would have time to talk to your children if you didn't sit down to a meal. We actually, my my kids really enjoy playing like word games at dinner. And I've had to kind of suggest that we don't do it all the time because we end up playing these word games over dinner. And I'm like, well, actually, I'm here for a reason. I need to find out what you guys did today. And you know what was what was nice? What went wrong, who did you play with at kindy or whatever, you know, and and it's the only time I really get to to talk to them to find out about their lives.

Maggie Dent: [00:33:39] So one of the researchers I read at one point explains that we have emotional memories that are linked to smell. Now, I'm a farmer's daughter and my mum was an amazing baker. And so for me, the smell of certain soups, cooking or apple pie cooking or a roast lamb because we had sheep, triggers pure endorphins. And it is one of those things [00:34:00] I sort of with busy parents. I keep saying, please, even if you're not a cook, create something that you do fairly regularly because you're going to create memories that go instantly. Yeah, into your endorphin system, whether it's a fry up egg and bacon on a weekend or, you know, you just do whatever. Popcorn with movies. The link goes far deeper.

Adam Liaw: [00:34:21] I mean, I grew up in a family of cooks, so when you say that, I can immediately think of all the smells of my grandmother's kitchen. But if you didn't grow up in a family cooks, you can still understand it when you think about opening a book that you read as a child and you smell the pages of that book, and it has a very distinctive kind of distinctive memory connection.

Maggie Dent: [00:34:36] And I want to go back one little step to that. You know, I'm a bit worried what are they going to be like as teenagers? So one of the things that dads have said to me a lot is that they can find that being a dad up to the teenage years, it's not, you know, it's it's it's actually a lot better than they thought it would once they sleep. But when they get into those teen years and pull away and start being their own person and stuff, it often triggers dads to get really angry because they don't want them to muck up how they did, which is kind of like a little bit unfair because that's part of the growth and the journey. But it's one thing I know we need to be mindful .. if you start really getting and they're often harder on their sons. Yeah, than they are on their daughters. Is for that very reason. So it's a it's an interesting shift you may have coming, but it may not even happen.

Adam Liaw: [00:35:21] Actually I do I do have a win. One thing that I'm proud of. Uh, and it was just the other week, I remember it now we've just gotten back from kind of a skiing holiday, and I took my three children out for a day without my wife to give her a bit of a break. She went into town and did some shopping and picked up some things she needed to do. And so I was there with her three kids. We'd been skiing for a while at that point, so even before they got on the slopes, they were very tired and it was a

blizzard and it was cold. And we got to the point where, you know, all the kids were just melting down.

Maggie Dent: [00:35:58] The trio [00:36:00].

Adam Liaw: [00:36:00] Yeah, and it was just, oh no, what are we going to do? I just give up now? Do we take them home? And my son asked me, we're going. I said, let's do one more run. And if we're still as we are, then let's just call it, because this is not going to work for any of us. And, um, we're going up the gondola on the way back up and my son was like, dad, do you think we can turn this around? And I was like, oh, yeah, I think we can. And we did.

Maggie Dent: [00:36:25] That's great. That is exactly it. Do you reckon we can turn this around?

If there's only one thing that you want your three kids to have learned from you because they have you as their dad, what is the one thing?

Adam Liaw: [00:36:45] Oh, uh, kindness, I would say. Yeah, I think it's important for them to be kind.

Maggie Dent: [00:36:53] Beautiful. And your final question, if you could wind back the clock and go back to Adam before he became a dad, what advice would you give to him?

Adam Liaw: [00:37:03] Oh, God. Uh, God, what is it? Um. And you can even see in the answers that I've given you today that I'm still not have not learned this. Like it's not. It's not just about what they're going to become in the future. I think that's that to me is kind of an important part. Like I often, I remember when when the kids are young, it's kind of like, oh, you know, what's their personality? What are they going to turn into? And you're trying to extrapolate this adult from a nine month old baby sometimes, and it's just like, what a ridiculous thing to think about. I remember my grandma, who was obviously a very good, she was a very good mother and a very good grandmother, I'd say. I say to her, you know. I think you know, such and such kid's got a got a real mean streak or something because he's, you know, pulled his sister's hair or something like that, and she's like, what are you talking about, you idiot? Like, you know, that's not

that's he's a very good [00:38:00] kid. Like, she's seen enough kids and seen enough kids grow up to know that all of these tiny little things that we might fixate on as parents that are, are usually not a big problem.

Maggie Dent: [00:38:09] Yeah, yeah. And that we really need to surround them with that presence of significant, loving, caring humans who can accept whatever turns up some days, whether it's the spectacular poo or it's the moment of the meltdown out in public, that this is exactly what children do to grow, to be able to navigate the world around them, provided they can land on a safe base at the end.

Adam Liaw: [00:38:37] Sure,

Maggie Dent: [00:38:37] Adam. Thank you. Thank you for our chat.

Adam Liaw: [00:38:40] Thanks Maggie. It's always a pleasure.

Maggie Dent: [00:38:44] Adam Liao, Cook, TV presenter, writer, ambassador for Unicef Australia.

Maggie Dent: [00:38:52] Adam has some great ideas on how to be a good enough dad, so let's add them to our checklist. Firstly, when you're really angry at your kids, it's probably not your kids' fault. It's probably your anger. Secondly, don't underestimate the power of family meals together. Yet you don't have to cook like Adam. And yeah, they don't always have to eat it. But let's get in that habit of human connectedness over food. And thirdly, avoid predicting or aiming to predict what your kids will do in their life. Just surround them with love and allow them to grow up to be whoever they're meant to be. I'm Maggie Dent, and this is The Good Enough Dad. Follow us on the LiSTNR app or wherever you get your podcasts.