

GED_S01E20_The_Good_Enough_Dad_Michael

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Speaker1: [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 their 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 Michael Ray.

Female reporter: [00:01:05] What's some of the unsolicited advice that's been offered to you.

Michael Ray: [00:01:09] They come in the form of; "you must", "you have to", "you need to". The noise of all the unsolicited parenting advice tends to drown out that instinct, that quiet voice inside you, and it makes you doubt yourself. Am I doing it wrong? And you start to second guess it.

Maggie Dent: [00:01:25] That's Michael chatting on SBS Insight about how damaging unsolicited advice can be for a single dad. When Michael was 51, he became the sole carer for his then two year old daughter Charlie. Charlie is now 11 and Michael flew solo for over five years. Hi Michael, welcome to The Good Enough Dad.

Michael Ray: [00:01:46] Hi, Maggie.

Maggie Dent: [00:01:47] Becoming a single dad at 51 wasn't quite what you expected. So what do you remember about those very early days and months becoming that full time [00:02:00] dad to a little toddler?

Michael Ray: [00:02:02] Oh, Maggie, it was, it was sheer terror. It was, it was suddenly realising that I was about to sit the most important exam that I'd ever been asked to sit, and realising that not only had I not studied for it, but up until that stage ... and I don't think I'm unique in this, my entire preparation for parenthood, I thought, was my mum saying to me, one day you wait until you have kids and see how you like it, and it's.

Maggie Dent: [00:02:33] So helpful.

Michael Ray: [00:02:34] Yeah, and that was it. And that realisation that, uh, gee, I really need to pay attention here because this stuff is pretty important. Up until then Charlie's mum was the font of all knowledge. That was who I could rely on as long as I did what I was told and asked the right questions and followed orders, everything was going to be all right.

Maggie Dent: [00:02:56] *Laughter* I follow orders. Now. You're 50 years older than Charlie, so what is shaped you more being an older dad or being a solo dad to a daughter?

Michael Ray: [00:03:08] I think being a solo dad did it. And I speak with lots of dads and they all doubt themselves because we grow up in that world that says only a mother's love, maternal instinct, mother knows best. And then we look at the media depictions of dads where, you know, Homer Simpson, Al Bundy.

Maggie Dent: [00:03:28] George, Peppa Pig.

Michael Ray: [00:03:29] As long as you don't drop them too often, if you manage to do a French braid and get them out the door looking reasonable, you would think you'd cured cancer. And I have a lot of mum friends and in my mum tribe that become a little bit, um, how do we say not resentful, but just point out, gee, you get all this praise for doing what mums have done for millennia, and then when you point out to them and you say, look, these compliments may come from a well-meaning place, but they come

from a place of we [00:04:00] assume that you're inept. We assume that you're incompetent, and gee, you're not as bad as what we thought. So suddenly you seem amazing.

Maggie Dent: [00:04:09] Nothing in the middle.

Michael Ray: [00:04:10] Yeah.

Maggie Dent: [00:04:10] Either useless or amazing.

Michael Ray: [00:04:12] Yeah. And that's. So we're just parenting, you know? But, you know, don't praise me for being a parent. I don't want to be a good enough dad. I want to be a good enough parent. Judge me at the same level as what we harshly judge mums by.

Maggie Dent: [00:04:25] Do people still give you advice on how to raise your daughter now, or have they worked out that you're actually doing quite a good job?

Michael Ray: [00:04:33] It still still happens, Maggie. But the the most frightening thing is they actually ask me for advice as well. And that's what I say.

Maggie Dent: [00:04:43] Give me an example what are they asking you advice about?

Michael Ray: [00:04:45] Oh, you know, one of the the common ones with the dads I speak with is I've told my kid 100 times and they just don't listen. And my response is usually, well, when do you think that you might pull up on the way that you're telling them, 107? 108? At what point will you go, maybe it's the way that I'm telling them that isn't working, rather than them being some sort of maniacal, manipulative, Machiavellian manipulator. Maybe they just don't understand. So it's like speaking to somebody who speaks a different language. It doesn't matter how slowly or how loudly you speak if they don't grasp it. You need to change the way that you're talking.

Maggie Dent: [00:05:26] I remember in your book that you did get into a mothers group, and there was one thing that made me really laugh a lot was when you get accepted in mothers group, there's an awful lot that is said and spoken, and there was a lot of

serious overshare about stuff. Can you share when you got a little uncomfortable with how women really can be in a safe mothers group, even with a bloke in it.

Michael Ray: [00:05:47] We even got to Currettes after certain things, like, and it was good practice, because I think when Charlie gets older, because I never want to deter her from coming [00:06:00] to me and sharing, that blank look, where I try to remain expressionless and don't try not to make eye contact and just nod quietly. Um, you know, some of the.

Maggie Dent: [00:06:12] You're going to be ready, you're going to be ready to talk about periods and all that sort of stuff. Thanks to those mums who were prepping you way back when.

Michael Ray: [00:06:20] Well, there's there's full face Botox, Maggie, if I need it.

Maggie Dent: [00:06:26] Are there any special challenges about being the older dad in the playground? Because even my good bloke, when he's in a playground with the grandkids, he gets looked at a little like, is that a safe male in that space? Did you ever get that as well?

Michael Ray: [00:06:39] It's happened a lot. I was barred from assisting my daughter backstage at a ballet concert, being challenged and abused for using parents rooms, and even now, when Charlie was a little bit older. So when she was 6 or 7, Charlie's old enough then to use the women's toilets, but at my age, with my bladder, I often have to go to the male toilets and it's not safe to leave her outside the male toilets. So we would often use the parents rooms and leave Charlie outside the sliding door and it's looked at, yeah, there.

Michael Ray: [00:07:18] I've been challenged for taking photos of Charlie at at a park. Two women politely confronted me, wanted to know why I was taking photos of that child. And then when I said it was actually my daughter, they asked me to prove it.

Maggie Dent: [00:07:32] Oh my God, that's awful.

Michael Ray: [00:07:34] Yeah. So all of those things happen. But the sad thing, Maggie, is, after being a lifeguard for a million years when I was younger, you get used to grouping people.

Michael Ray: [00:07:44] So when I see a little child at a shopping centre and I can't figure out who they're with, I'm actually hesitant to go up and ask the child if they're lost for fear of being confronted. So I'll actually send Charlie up to ask a kid, [00:08:00] where's their mum, if they look a little bit lost. And I know I shouldn't, but you can't help but feel a little bit awkward around it. The same with, um, you know, very hesitant with other people's children, just in case somebody is watching for something that isn't there.

Maggie Dent: [00:08:20] It's one of the sad things, too, because that's one of the reasons we don't have as many early childhood educators who are guys, because there's, you know, I'm not sure I'm going to be safe with that. So it's it's pretty sad because we know there are lots of men who are amazingly good with young children.

Michael Ray: [00:08:36] I wrote an article on or got asked to write a piece on co-sleeping, and it was for an organisation. I said, well, you say that it's parents, but you always just have mothers. So they did the right thing; co-sleeping, does it divide? And I wrote an article about how Charlie climbed into my bed every night. It was great. I miss it now that it doesn't happen. And the backlash that came through that article. But I even had a friend warn me, say, oh, are you sure? You know what people might think? And this is my six year old daughter climbing into my bed in the middle of the night, and somehow that's going to be construed as inappropriate.

Maggie Dent: [00:09:15] Yeah, that's really sad.

Maggie Dent: [00:09:22] I'm just going to flip you back to having a look at when you were a lad. What did you learn from your own dad about being a dad?

Michael Ray: [00:09:32] Um, Maggie, it's funny, most of the stuff I learned from my dad, I didn't realise at the time I was learning from my dad. And now that I'm actually a dad, suddenly ... I always thought my dad was the smartest man in the world. But, gee, his stature has only grown in my eyes since I've become a dad myself. My dad let me do everything that you wanted, but he would say to me, son, what's the plan? And I'd say,

well, this is it. He said, well, that seems like a great plan, [00:10:00] but what happens if that plan doesn't work out? What? What are you going to do? But you do it.

Michael Ray: [00:10:05] My dad wouldn't give me advice, but he would ask me questions. And I've tried to maintain that with Charlie. So the majority of dads that I observe, they're big on the what and the how and the why is the last thing to come in. My dad was big on on the why. Well, why do you want to do that? Why does it matter? And then, does it still make sense? And once he would ask me those questions, a lot of the time it would be ... Dad. Yeah, okay, you're right. But he was right about most things going forward. And he gave me the the space to realise for myself, gee, that's not right. I don't have to listen to dad to tell me it's not right. But I've learned it's not right. So that was the biggest takeaway I got from my dad. He wasn't the hands on ... Mum ran the house, mum did most of the caring and I think we appreciated dads a lot more back then. I remember the excitement level, if a dad got into the pool or came into the back door, the backyard cricket, the excitement levels went up because there always seemed to be a bit of a dad deficit. And I think it's it's even more so now.

Maggie Dent: [00:11:22] Was there anything, as you sound like you had a pretty good dad and I'm I'm really glad you did, but there was anything that you've chosen to change that maybe something your dad did.

Michael Ray: [00:11:32] I'm big on expressing myself, Maggie. I remember there was a point where my dad was sick, had, uh, lung cancer. And I remember going up there for Christmas, and I remember saying to the the partner I was with at that stage, she said, you're a bit quiet. And I said, look, the one thing I want to do is tell my dad I love him. And she said, what do you mean? I said, well, I've never actually told him, never doubted it, always thought he knew, but I just said, I want to do it. This could be his last Christmas, uh, with us. [00:12:00] Sat through the whole Christmas lunch in a cold sweat. Couldn't do it in front of everyone. Got out in the car to leave, and the girl I was with said, how'd you go? And I said, I couldn't do it. I just didn't want to ruin the day. She said, well, you go back in and do it now. So I went back in and of course my dad, very sarcastic and great man. But you know, that turn of phrase, oh, great you're pockets aren't full, watch out. My mum's name was Maz. Watch out Maz, he's going to raid the fridge again. I said, dad, I need to speak to you. And he said, what is it? Is something wrong? I said, just come the other room and got in the other room. I said, dad, I just

want you to tell him before I could get it out, it's: "I know", "No, dad, please let me". "I know, I'm not an idiot, I know". "Oh, dad, please", "I know, son, and you know as well. And you just got to look after your mum and your sister, and, you know, you look after yourself as well". Got back out in the car and the girl said, well, how'd you go? And oh, it was a love fest. We're all over each other. And I make sure I don't do that with Charlie. You know, every single night I'm on her bed for 5 or 10 minutes. We have a bit of a performance review where it's; How am I doing as a as a dad? And she'll she'll give me a performance review.

Maggie Dent: [00:13:11] I bet she gives you one.

Michael Ray: [00:13:12] The other night, Maggie was, you know, how am I doing? Is there? Well, dad, I think I could do with a bit more sugar and a little bit more sometimes foods and maybe a little bit later. And I said, well, but you know, all those things you just mentioned, they're the things that I think make me a good dad. So do you understand why we don't? We had the thing and she said, oh, okay, dad.

Maggie Dent: [00:13:34] So Michael, isn't it interesting how difficult it is, this verbal stuff between dads and their kids, particularly boys. And it's one of the things I've noticed over the years when I've given, you know, my parenting seminars, given suggestions to write a note. If you can't say it, write a note to your dad, that there have been times that the whole place has just melted in tears as I share one of the stories about the dad that wrote it on his son's ensuite [00:14:00] mirror. I'm really proud to be your dad, Love, dad and his 14 year old son came running in ten minutes later crying, saying, I didn't even think you liked me and the relationship just changed in that moment. What is it that was so difficult for your dad to hear those words? He knew it. We get that. And what was it? Was it a generational thing?

Michael Ray: [00:14:21] Since I've become a dad, I cry at the drop of a hat. I've become emotionally incontinent. Toilet paper ads will make me, will make me cry. The first time, I saw Charlie in a school uniform, I was getting hugs from complete strangers because I'd completely lost it. I was incoherent that, and it's funny when we look at some of the changes that actually happen to men in response to caregiving, the hormonal changes and the neurological changes. And, you know, my ovaries swell at the sound of.

Maggie Dent: [00:14:53] Your non-existent ovaries.

Michael Ray: [00:14:54] Anything to do with with kids. And, um, I think it's that edge where we know, if we say it, that the emotions, the tears, the things that might flow from it, and suddenly a lot of the expectations on us as dads is to be the leader, to be the calm captain of the ship. But that's why I suggest to dads, you know what?

Michael Ray: [00:15:21] You're setting your kids up to not realise that these things in life are meaningful and moving, and they're meant to be emotional. You're meant to embrace it. It's normal. It's not. It's not abnormal. So, you know, our children need to see us get emotional and and then recover from it.

Maggie Dent: [00:15:40] I've been at a couple of assemblies with a couple of my sons and you know I can. The tears are swelling up and they get that whole thing about, oh no. Jesus. Yeah, there must be something in the air, like they do this whole banter thing, but oh my God, it makes my heart sing to see that I've raised sons that are capable of crying at the assembly [00:16:00] because of some crazy thing that's happened.

Maggie Dent: [00:16:08] Charlie is a tween now heading into puberty, so parenting needs to change for all parents as they launch onto the bridge to adulthood. How are you feeling about this journey, given that you've never menstruated and you won't grow breasts? And what do you worry about with this time of massive change for Charlie?

Michael Ray: [00:16:30] Well, Maggie, the not growing breasts is maybe going to happen for me the way I'm putting on weight. But.

Maggie Dent: [00:16:39] Man boobs. Are you going to join her?

Michael Ray: [00:16:43] And we've had our discussions about period starting and things like that. She's got a couple of boys that she likes, but she's also now growing up in a time where transgender and the fluidity and different sexualities are all commonly discussed. She's got a couple of friends that are, um, not heteronormative. So schools are doing a great job in a lot of that. But I think the main thing is the connection that

comes before the puberty that makes Charlie safe to come to me, the fact that she can discuss anything again, I've learned that poker face where it doesn't matter what she says.

Maggie Dent: [00:17:21] Unshockable face. Yeah.

Michael Ray: [00:17:23] As long as Charlie feels safe enough to come to me. But it's also being comfortable enough to accept that she may not want to come to me about some of the things. So it's not about just me being comfortable. It's about her being comfortable with with what she wants to share and where she goes. But it's about that connection and that bond before she starts having her periods that will do it. But we've already been shopping and they're there because it's what we've explained, bub, you're at the age now where sometime in the next, you know, year, two years, it's going to start happening and it'll happen when when it's meant to happen. But you need to be able to come to me and tell me.

Maggie Dent: [00:17:59] And so the other thing [00:18:00] that we know girls yearn for in this journey is having an aunt kind of figure, a figure who's, who's not mum or dad, because you don't want to share your first sexual experience with your mum or your dad. So do you have an aunt kind of figure or two in in Charlie's life that will be able to be that other safe space? We call it the The Lighthouse?

Michael Ray: [00:18:19] Yeah. Well, thankfully, Maggie, I managed to get married in February to the most amazing woman who is Charlie's best friend as well as mine. So that's come along. But she's also got my sister as well, and she's part of a, believe it or not, a powerlifting team where there's 53 women in that team and she's king of the team basically. So she's got a huge female peer group as well around her.

Maggie Dent: [00:18:47] Fabulous. Females are particularly wired to overthink, beat themselves up. That's why they're still awake, often at 1:00 at night, and they struggle enormously with guilt. Have you ever suffered from parental guilt? And if so, what was that around?

Michael Ray: [00:19:05] I think every parent struggles with their guilt, and there's nothing wrong with a bit of guilt I don't think. Shame is another thing. Shame is terrible,

but a bit of guilt is when it's you holding yourself accountable. Searching for a chocolate after I know I've eaten it. A little bit of guilt there, but also also a life lesson.

Maggie Dent: [00:19:28] I think every parent's done that one!

Michael Ray: [00:19:30] Um, you never feel like you're doing enough. Some of the .. Life's busyness gets in the way, and you know that some things aren't going to be possible, but then it's also a matter of looking at it, just slightly reframing. Go, it's a great life lesson that not everything that you want gets to happen, that there are responsibilities and obligations that make life what it is. So you just look at it and go, this is great. I understand you being upset. I understand you being disappointed, [00:20:00] but but if you can think of a plan where we can achieve both things that are conflicting, I'm all ears and we can work at it together. But how do we do it? And incorporating her in the decision. So rather, rather than just being that authoritative, it can't happen, not explaining why, takes that guilt away.

Maggie Dent: [00:20:20] I think that's a big message for all dads, is that, you know, you're going to have days, you're just going to feel guilty because it didn't go to plan. But you're still a good enough dad because we don't want any perfection in this place because it's really, that's not life.

Maggie Dent: [00:20:39] Michael, I hear at one point, you and Charlie used to get in the ring for a bit of boxing. It's not the typical father daughter activity. Tell me, how did that come about? And do you still do it? Tell me a bit more about that.

Michael Ray: [00:20:51] Charlie's been at the gym because I work in that area. Charlie's been around weights and boxing and training her whole life, and she wants to be part of it, and it's great and I love seeing it. She's just played her first season of AFL and won the Coach's Award and she's a tackling machine. Smallest kid on the field. But she's fearless, which sometimes gets a little bit disconcerting. But she now holds her own Australian powerlifting record and.

Maggie Dent: [00:21:18] Wow.

Michael Ray: [00:21:19] All of those things. And it's just.

Maggie Dent: [00:21:20] Immersing in dad's interest into her own, that's pretty good.

Michael Ray: [00:21:22] And the other thing, Maggie, is I realised my dad wanted me to go on to university. My dad left school in grade four, went back to do grade six, but then didn't have a great relationship with his dad. Grew up on the farm. My dad pushed and pushed and pushed for me to go to university, but I wanted to be exactly, exactly like my dad. And it was always, you didn't do it. So my daughter wants to be exactly like me. Frighteningly enough at the moment, I'm sure it will change. So my realisation from my dad is, gee, dad,

Michael Ray: [00:21:58] Rather than trying to want me to be better [00:22:00] or to have more. If I want Charlie to be better or to be more, then it's up to me to be better and be more so, at 56 into university I went as a mature aged student to start studying developmental psychology. Now Charlie's seeing that and the the little rascal has forced me to actually be better.

Maggie Dent: [00:22:22] I love it when I see dads, you know, who have a passion for something, sitting with their daughter, sharing the same passion, whether it's ACDC or it's, you know, Essendon Bombers or it's a ... Whatever it might be that actually is really powerful later in life after dad has left this planet, because that particular activity brings that sense of closeness back to their dad. And, you know, mine is a country girl, was a lot of the time in the ute and the truck with my dad, who was a farmer, but it was the Seeker's music. Yeah, it was Peter, Paul and Mary that I just have to put them on. And it's like I'm back there with my dad. So those memories are fed by what we do. A lot of that we enjoy together. It's such beautiful stuff.

Michael Ray: [00:23:04] Yeah Maggie, becausee live rurally, especially during lockdown, we'd be off up the hill to catch tadpoles and frogs and bring them back and nature and all of those things. We surf together now. That was always one of the things I wanted was to surf with my daughter, because the surfing went by the wayside when Charlie was young, because I couldn't leave her sitting on the beach on her own. It was, you know, one of those big trips where you'd be out in the water for hours and away for a long time, and now we're surfing together. And now she calls me old man. Like, keep up, old man. Come on. Like I love it. Yeah, and it's great. It just makes my heart fly.

Maggie Dent: [00:23:43] It sounds like she's going to have a really good sense of humour, which is another protective factor in terms of resilience, isn't it?

Michael Ray: [00:23:48] Yeah, definitely.

Maggie Dent: [00:23:50] Love it, thank goodness you're okay to be called old man. I'm not sure I'd like to be called Old Lady.

Michael Ray: [00:23:54] I'm not beyond pushing her off her board when she does it, Maggie, just to show her who's who.

Maggie Dent: [00:23:59] I [00:24:00] know that's become something really important to one of my sons. He goes surfing with his daughter, and I just know the profound joy of sharing something he loves so deeply. I bet there are some things that you've jumped into with Charlie as a girl that may have made you feel a bit uncomfortable, or some that you thought were going to make you feel uncomfortable that you actually really enjoyed. Can you share any of that for us?

Michael Ray: [00:24:25] I can't believe the sense of fulfillment and pride I get, when I learned to do Charlie's hair, I again, consciously and conspicuously incompetent because man buns weren't a thing back when I was growing up. So Charlie noted a girl with great braids at kindy one day and she said, oh, dad, doesn't her hair look great? And I said, do you want your hair like that? Yeah. So I went and had lessons and got really good at it. And then it became a point of pride. And I still remember the first time Charlie said, dad, I want to do my own hair. Okay .. So she tried it and it was a great attempt for a sort of five year old, but I couldn't believe the embarrassment I felt because I thought, I'm going to be blamed for this. I'm going to be assumed that I've done this ratty job. I felt like walking behind her with a big sign saying she did it herself, the way she dresses sometimes, and it's like, oh, you know, I'm the dad and I'm going to be taught. But then again, it's hers. So when I see kids in their their superhero costumes and their gumboots on a hot day, I just think, good on you for letting your child take the lead.

Maggie Dent: [00:25:36] Choose what they ...

Michael Ray: [00:25:37] Yeah.

Maggie Dent: [00:25:38] Autonomy. Yeah, I love it. Now, I believe that Charlie was asked one day who did her hair or implied that mummy did it. How did she respond?

Michael Ray: [00:25:47] Yes, she said no, my dad did it and he's really good at it. And he can do your hair. But one of the worst hair related events, Maggie, was we'd gone to a party and Charlie had done her own hair. I think she was about [00:26:00] six and it didn't look great, but it was a really good effort. She was getting better at it, and while I was away from her, I came back and she was sat on a lady's lap and the lady was redoing her hair and she brought Charlie over, "There. I fixed it for you. You're welcome". And I said to bub, why did you let her do hair? And she said, oh, it was bad, and daddy's no good at this, and let me fix it for you. And I never said anything to that lady. And it really has stuck with me because she just undermined Charlie's confidence in her head. But then she'd also had a dip with dads. And that's what I often say to people.

Michael Ray: [00:26:43] You've got to be really careful when you give that unsolicited advice in front of children. It brings dad down in the children's eyes. It makes mum the expert and it just shouldn't, shouldn't happen. We wouldn't accept a male giving a female advice on leadership or workplace or any of the new areas that women have rightfully ventured into. And yet this it really hit home that day Maggie.

Maggie Dent: [00:27:20] Michael, we all muck up. It's only human and my son's delight greatly and remind me of all my muck up moments. Can you share one of your most regrettable parenting fails, please?

Michael Ray: [00:27:33] Any time I raise my voice at my daughter and you see the look on her face and you see the response, but there's the power of an apology. And it's a wonderful thing. And I think it actually makes a relationship better. It shows that we're all fallible, and I share my failures more with my daughter. So when she says, dad, tell me about when you're a kid, or as she says, the olden days. I tell her [00:28:00] the things that went wrong because with us dads, it's very easy and it's very intoxicating to be the superhero, to want to swoop in with the solutions and the remedies and be heroic and

infallible. But we've got to let them fail. And I often suggest that, dads, you know, what we don't do for our children could be more important than what we do. So letting them fail, letting them struggle if we do it for them, the only thing they learn is dad does it better than me. So yeah, it's just raising the voice or being short, and it's always a point where, you know, I'll pull her in and I'll explain to her. But I shouldn't have spoken to you like that. No one should speak to you like that. I don't care whether it's a teacher or a policeman or anyone. But if somebody speaks to you like that, you need to need to realise that was me being wrong, not you. And if somebody is mean to you or in any way makes you feel uncomfortable, that's because of who they are, not because of who you are. So just just be clear on that. I shouldn't have done it and I'm sorry.

Maggie Dent: [00:29:11] What is your biggest fear when it comes to parenting and raising Charlie?

Michael Ray: [00:29:17] Where do we start? Um. Domestic violence is a big one because it's it's not some stranger lurking in a dark alley. It's somebody that claims to love them and those that are closest to them. It's her falling victim to a lot of the social media pressures, things like that. So the only thing that I can do is to fill her full of values and character and self esteem and herself, so that these things don't matter. And one of the things I try to do is often Charlie will say, dad, what do you think about this? And that's why I say to bub, like, if you did a fart in a bag, [00:30:00] I'd think it was fantastic. You know, I'd think it was the best fart in a bag ever. But it's. What do you think about it, Charlie? How do you feel? Would you do anything different? Did you learn a way to do it better or quicker or differently? So I try and instill that. It's your opinion that matters, and I'm always going to think you're terrific, but try not to worry about what other people think. I've actually trained our cat now to show Charlie. I've trained our cat to sit and beg just to show bub, this is what peer pressure does. So the cat behaves in a certain way because it gets a treat now. So you need to make sure that you're not behaving in a certain way, because sometimes the treat will be the group will let you hang around. The group will like you. If you like this, you need to be able to be strong enough to find your own voice and actually think, gee, dad thinks it's great when I do well in tests, but I don't really like the test that I do well in. I want to do stuff where I don't do well in the tests. Do that, bub, because it's it's about you. It's not about me.

Maggie Dent: [00:31:05] Mm, I love it. Fart in the bag. I can't believe I didn't know about that when I was raising my four sons. I used to sometimes threaten them in the bus that if you keep misbehaving, I'm going to fart and lock the windows. And they think I wouldn't. But I did it once. And yeah, that that worked. From then on, it was horrendous. So even I had to sit in it. Yeah. No way. Worse. Any form of punishment, is mum farting in the bus and locking the windows.

Maggie Dent: [00:31:32] So Michael, that fear of yours around domestic violence, it's incredibly problematic. in the Western world and particularly in Australia at the moment. And I think that conversation again, around having a voice that says for our girls and our boys, no, I don't like it. Stop it. It actually comes right back to listening to their early warning systems when they're children as well. So does that feel okay within [00:32:00] your body? Within your gut? That's a really good thing to talk to all our kids about. So when you feel frightened by something, it's genuine. Like someone slams a door suddenly, what is it in your body that suddenly erupted? Because that is exactly what we need our kids to know about. It's not so much getting anxious before a test. It's what does the body feel when it's actually really threatened. And that would be another thing to pop into that conversation so that we know immediately this isn't okay. Getting out of the car in this dark undercroft area. I'm actually feeling that. So I'm going to shift my car and go somewhere else. So we're actually encouraging her to build her own awareness around safety. And I think that could be really helpful there. I'm. Goodness, you've already talked about how you nail braids, but what's your biggest parenting win and your biggest victory? What do you think that you're really proud of for a dad brag.

Michael Ray: [00:32:55] My cake making Maggie.

Maggie Dent: [00:32:57] Oh, seriously? Come on.

Michael Ray: [00:32:59] Yep, well, I made my own wedding cake. There are some times when I bask in my parenting glory. When I hear the right things coming out of Charlie's mouth. There was one time when we were at the swimming pool and speaking with one of the mums, she said, oh, what class is your daughter in? I said, oh, she doesn't do lessons. I used to be a swim teacher, so sure, she's great. How old is she? Fantastic. And then from the other side of the pool, you hear dad, dad and I looking across and I've watched this. I'm going to do a bomb and I'm on high, ready to give

advice on everything to do aquatic. And then suddenly, is it okay if I pee in the pool? Or do I have to go to the toilet? And it's like, no, I skulked away. But coming up to Charlie's birthday party, I said, but right, what do you want for a cake? She said, oh, I'd like a fox cake. And we looked and we couldn't quite find. She said, why don't we do it ourselves? And I said, oh, bub, you know, you've got a few friends coming and we need to go and look, dad, even if we get it wrong, I can tell people we tried our best. So again, [00:34:00] tick good parenting glory. And she said, even if it goes really wrong, I can just say it's a mutant fox cake because she's all things sort of horror and scary. So, you know, we could say that it was a mutant that got cursed.

Michael Ray: [00:34:14] Okay, so we did it. And this cake turned out beautifully. We did it together, and I couldn't believe how well it turned out. Thanks to YouTube tutorials and the wonderful ladies at the cake shop who wrote me a step by step list, emailed me all along the way, kept getting back to me, and it was at the point at a birthday party where I was ready to slam tackle some kid if they went near the cake before I was ready to to cut it. So we made it and since then, baking cakes has been one of our, um, key things that we do together. We made a great Easter cake for the ambos, who are at a station near us who worked through Easter and Big bunny rabbit cake. And so now Charlie keeps upping the stakes. Dad, I think we can do this one. We made our own wedding cake, which turned out great. So yeah, it's it would have to be because it's a skill we've learned together. And it showed her that bub, you know as little as what I do, but she's also taught me piano Maggie, because she has piano lessons. And that's what I said bub, I need you to teach me. And she's a lot more patient and understanding as a teacher than what I could be. And she said, dad, you're not doing it right. And she offers me little bribes. Dad, we can go to the pool after this, but you've got to get it right before we go. It's, yeah, pretty good.

Maggie Dent: [00:35:33] I love that so much. What would be one piece of advice that you would give to other solo dads out there who have ended up with one or more children? Is there one piece of advice you'd like to give them?

Michael Ray: [00:35:46] Ask for help when you need it. Build your tribe. The thing I've noticed the biggest difference between the mums that I was around and myself. Mums have got a phone book full of people that they can ring at the last minute. [00:36:00] We? Dads

Maggie Dent: [00:36:00] We don't have phone books anymore, Michael. You know it's all on the phone. Yeah, right. The contact list. Yeah.

Michael Ray: [00:36:05] Rolodex, whatever you want. Yeah, but you know, so it became. I noticed the difference. If I was running ten minutes late for school pickup, I couldn't pick up the phone to somebody and say, look, can you take Charlie back to to your house? We dads like to think we're capable of this, do anything for my kids, walk through fire and yet, when it comes to feeling a little bit awkward or out of place, suddenly we balk or avoid those situations. So if your daughter or your son wants a play date with somebody else, you've just got to suck up that. I hope I'm not going to be misinterpreted if I ask for a number so that, you know, Charlie could have a play date and a lot of those things that happened, even volunteering at the canteen, it was awkward for a long time. It was , 'what happened? Don't you work? Why?' And the million questions. And it was. This is important for Charlie. It's important for me to build that community within the school group for that support. And that would be my advice to dads. It's normal to feel awkward, but you've just got to embrace it.

Maggie Dent: [00:37:08] Can you imagine life what it would be like if this you hadn't become a solo dad for Charlie? You know, like, how different would it have been?

Michael Ray: [00:37:17] When I was young, I remember looking at my dad and thinking that fatherhood looked limiting, that it it stopped him doing things. But I found fatherhood has given me that freedom to cast off all of the ego and facade and realise, to cut the wheat from the chaff, you know, that stuff doesn't matter. I get to go surfing with my daughter. I get ... It doesn't matter how bad my day is. It doesn't matter what happens outside of the home. Good, bad or indifferent. I know when I get home, I'm going to see somebody who's excited to see me. At the moment it may change, but we're going to get to cook dinner together and chat together, and everything's made instantly better within, within that home, everything has more purpose and meaning, and I get to look at the world [00:38:00] through the eyes of this kid, where everything is amazing and exciting and new to be explored. A walk in the nature where she'll tell me about the different birds and that call. And this emu, that's a boy emu, because he's got the chicks, and this kangaroo is this type. And it's just, how do you know this stuff? And she's gone, how do you not know it, dad? Like, you're a lot older than me.

Maggie Dent: [00:38:23] So it's been an unexpected blessing. Is that right?

Michael Ray: [00:38:27] The best thing that's ever happened. I've got no doubt Maggie had a situation and circumstances not conspired to push me forward into this role. I would have slept, walked through life with a Hessian bag over my head and miss the best things in life.

Maggie Dent: [00:38:46] What is the one main thing you want Charlie to learn from you as her dad?

Michael Ray: [00:38:53] That I love her unconditionally. That doesn't matter what she does. She's the best thing that ever happened to me. And she's the reason life means stuff.

Maggie Dent: [00:39:03] Beautiful. Okay, so the last question is if you could go back to yourself before this happened, um, and before you becoming a solo dad at 50, what advice do you think you would give to yourself before you knew what was coming?

Michael Ray: [00:39:21] Oh I would have started, I would have loved my dad to meet my daughter. So yeah, that Heraclitus quote where a man can never step in the same river twice because it's never the same river and he's never the same man. And if we change, it's like Jenga. You pull that one block out wood, everything else, all those sliding door moments. Would it have would it have happened? But I see my dad reflected back in my daughter's eyes and actions, because the values he instilled in me are instilling the values in her and in today's life it seems like we think that the only things [00:40:00] of value and the only things of worth and the only legacy that matters is one of things. And it's our kids. You look at that. That's those the stories that they, Charlie will tell her kids if she has them, about the mischief we got up to and those silly little things. Maggie, whether it's the performance reviews on, on the bed, whether it's a silly dad jokes, whether it's the time at the beach, looking in the rock pools, all of those things that she tells her kids. That's the legacy that I want to build. That's what I want her to carry forward, whether it's those silly little traditions, because I still remember them from my childhood, and a lot of them now are showing up in in my relationship with Charlie.

Maggie Dent: [00:40:42] Michael, thank you for your time. Thank you so much.

Michael Ray: [00:40:46] Thanks so much, Maggie. I always love chatting with you.

Maggie Dent: [00:40:51] Michael Ray, author of Who Knew? From Bouncing and Barbells to Barbies and Braids. Michael had lots of interesting things to share about being a solo dad of a little girl, and I thought a couple of them, we need to put on our Good Enough Dad checklist. The first one is speaking. Emotions can be sometimes more difficult for dads, so making sure we show them on our face. So let there be tears. It's okay to have tears at assemblies, or at athletics carnivals or at concerts. Let them see you cry. Tears of joy and tears of sadness. Number two. Sometimes as a dad stepping into spaces where women have usually been, whether it's canteen or mothers groups or dance things, it can feel awkward for a while. However, awkward can become normal. Just keep turning up. Keep looking for your tribe because you matter, dad. And number three [00:42:00]. We know that dads kind of intuitively know how to connect with their boys. But sometimes, as Michael shared with us, find something you can do with your daughter that you do a lot that you both love, and you will create memories that matter for the rest of her life and for beyond your life.

Maggie Dent: [00:42:21] I'm Maggie Dent, and this is the good enough dad. You can follow us on the listener app or wherever you get your podcasts.