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FATHERS AND DAUGHTERS

Interview with Matthew

“Sometimes you just open your mouth and shove your foot in there before you've thought to yourself that might not be a good idea. It helps you to realize how much you have to listen to be able to learn.”

This is Messages of Hope and I'm Celia Fielke. Today we're talking with Matthew, a father of 3 boys and a girl, about what he's learnt from a father daughter relationship. Matthew your daughter is 15 now and it's a tricky time. Thinking back to where you were from, you know, the birth and all of the possibilities and things ahead of you, and now you're 15 years down the track. Tell me a little bit about that.

Matthew: Yeah, I guess the first thing I want to say is I've never been a 15 year old girl, obviously! And I just think to myself, you know, it's so hard being a 15 year old girl, wow, the world that they live in with all those relationships and how important relationships are, and I can't remember ever having to think so much about the world I was in when I was 15, compared to what my daughter has too. And if you've got a grumpy dad as well, how much harder is that!

Celia: There's a lot of drama happening.

Matthew: Oh, look, I don't think my daughters a drama at all and yet, there is a lot of just drama that goes from being a 15 year old girl.

Celia: And trying to navigate that. So what helps you to help her?

Matthew: Yeah, I think, recognizing just how critical relationships are. When you think you've talked it through and it's sorted and the next day they're friends but then, two weeks later, it's still going on and you go, what happened to the fact that it was okay just before? You just think, “Oh, how do you, as a young woman even know what it's going to be like for you today?”

And so then you recognize the stress that they must carry walking into that. If my workplace was like that, I don't know that I could handle turning up for work each day. Sometimes I've talked to her, and she's going I don't look forward to this class because when I'm in this class, this person will sit with that person and will ignore me and usually we're friends. And then when they're with that person, I'm no one. But when they're not with that person, I could be their best friend. And I'm just going, “oh, how do you handle that? How do you do that?” And yeah, you just feel like going and banging their heads together.

Celia: I'm looking across from you and going, oh my gosh, you are the father of a 15 year old. I can see it in your face.

Matthew: Gray hair? Is that what you were going to say?

Celia: Just the sheer - I've got no idea what's going on.

Matthew: My head feels like it's going to explode.

Celia: Matthew have you seen a change in your role as a father, between the day you first held your daughter in your arms, to now that she's a teenager. How do you find the balance between their independence and your desire to protect them or empower them?

Matthew: When your kids are little, you still have a sense that you'll always be able to protect them. When they get to be teenagers, you know they're entering the world where you lack influence, and that feels scary. But it just reinforces the need to have them equipped, to be able to handle their world and to be able to develop their character. Not just a reliance upon you as a parent but for them to be able to feel like mum and dad think they can handle this and just for them to be able to walk into a situation with that sense of power, boy, I think that makes a difference.

Celia: That's really important for them to know that you believe they can do it.

Matthew: Yep, yep.

Celia: How do you find that balance between protection and empowering them?

Matthew: I don't think there's a perfect answer to that Celia. Maybe it's about being aware. So the strong part wants to just fix stuff but I think the sensitive bit goes, how can I listen to what's going on for you? How can I allow it to be what's happening for you rather than about what's happening for me?

It's her life and she's got to work that out and the solution might not be the one I was hoping for. And if I'm honest, most of the time, I don't really know exactly what the solution could be, but it's her solution.

Celia: So when everything in you wants to fix the situation and you feel powerless. How do you, I guess, live with it?

Matthew: I think, recognizing that, if I've taken the power to fix the situation, then where's her part in that. And so sometimes in order to allow somebody else to have a sense of power in this situation, you need to not take it. Sometimes your role is to be the cheer squad on the side rather than, you know, in there, sorting it out for them.

Celia: That feeling of wanting to protect, how intense does that get?

Matthew: It's almost like a primal feeling rather than it being an intelligent feeling. It's that feeling of how dare you treat my daughter that way? It taps into some of the feelings I had as a teenage boy and the way that the girls could cut you down, just like that. And you hear them doing that to your daughter, and you go, I want to sort you out. I want to help you to understand exactly the impact of what you're doing and what that's doing to my daughter. And I want you to pull your head in!

Celia: How do you feel when you actually, well, you can't actually do that?

Matthew: No, you feel like there's this beast inside of you, that's trapped in an outwardly appearing, calm person but in my guts, that's just churning. Because you know, I'd just go, no, don't do that. Don't do that.

Celia: It's a really tricky space.

Matthew: Oh Yeah.

Celia: So what helps you calm the beast?

Matthew: Yeah, what helps me calm the beast? Well there's more than one thing. I think practice helps me calm the beast. Breathing helps me calm the beast. Some of it is remembering the pain of what it's like when you haven't calmed the beast. So, you know, remembering just how much of a mess you can make when you haven't done it right. And I guess, you know, just reminding yourself in amongst it, just how hard it is for them. My daughter has a beautiful heart and she thinks about everyone and how they're all feeling and all that sort of stuff. And I'm going well if, if I put on her the burden of how am I feeling about it as well, it's just another brick in the backpack. And she doesn't need that? So, you know, in my good moments, when I get to calm the beast, that's what helps.

Celia: So I'm guessing there are times when you can't hold it together, where do you go from there. How do you bring it back?

Matthew: So we all get it wrong sometimes. And that's where relationships are so critical, if you haven't already proven that you're actually on their side and you care, and you're trying to understand that world, then, when you mess up that's all I've got. So you've got to work on listening, even to the stuff that you think is not as important as what else I've got on my to do list today. You've got to listen to all that stuff because that's where that great stuff comes in, you know, just being able to be a part of their life. So if you're investing in that relationship, then when you mess up, there's the possibility of grace.

Celia: Every parent, and every child, have times when they mess up the relationship. How's that been for you in your family Matthew?

Matthew: When living with any teenager, this isn't specifically about daughters, there are times that they aren't going to have any filtering before they say or do what they're doing. You know, that's just part of growing up and I'm sure I did the same thing. So you get plenty of opportunity to show grace. To go, actually, that hurt, but I love you anyway. And somehow, to show that and to display that you can come back from anything and our relationship will still be okay. Oh, that's the hardest thing in the world, sometimes but anyway,

Celia: That's what grace is for you?

Matthew: That's what grace is for me and it's probably just as well, cause I need forgiveness. As you know, sometimes you just open your mouth and shove your foot in there before you've thought to yourself that might not be a good idea.

Celia: That's too late. It's out there.

Matthew: Yeah. Yeah. I've come to just accept that happens sometimes. So in those moments, sometimes you have to be honest and go, well, actually I've thought about that and maybe you have a point that I didn't listen to in the moment, and I'm really sorry. Can we have another chat?

And sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't so well. I happen to think my daughter's pretty extraordinary. So that sort of, that helps.

Celia: Where do you find, in those moments when you regret how it's turned out, where do you find that grace and that forgiveness to enable you to go and ask for it from your daughter?

Matthew: Yeah. Yeah, a few things come in to that. My faith definitely comes into that and I suppose that desire for that to always be a part of our home. That sense of grace and forgiveness, just recognizing that even though we mess up in life all the time, somehow God still loves us. And you know, I'd love to say I've got that sorted in my head, but I struggle with that still. But at the same time it is part of my life. I feel God's love even when I mess up.

Celia: What do you want your daughter to learn from you and her brothers?

Matthew: I think the word respect is the number one word in amongst what you want? I want all of my kids to recognize that they need to respect others for who they are, even if they're different to them and not define them on some sort of narrow framework about either you're a male or female, therefore you go into this category or that category. So I don't want my kids to feel that way. I don't want my daughter to feel that way.

Celia: Yeah and I guess it's that sense of developing within themselves that sense of self respect. So that no matter what they come across, they are strong enough in who they are and what they believe, in their values, that, it's that respect others, but also know who you are so that you respect yourself.

Matthew: Yeah. If I can teach my daughter that she's respected for who she is, that's a protective factor then isn't it. Wow, that's pretty big.

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