

Dad-ing, Sleep & Settling

with Dr Chris May & Dr Dan Golly

An SMS4dads Podcast

Dr Chris May interviews Dr Dan Golly about his experience of having a dad, being a dad and working with dads. Dr Golly is a Melbourne-based paediatrician who specialises in sleep, settling and fathering.

Tune in as Dr Golly shares about the importance of being present as a dad – both physically and emotionally – and the gifts you get back when you fully participate as an involved, hands-on dad. And why you should not simply accept an unsettled baby who is not sleeping through by six weeks. There are things that can be done – and a tonne of benefits for dads, bubs and mum!

TRANSCRIPT

Welcome to this brief podcast from SMS4dads, a series of podcasts where we expand on information that SMS4dads is sending to thousands of new dads across Australia.

Today we're talking with Dr Daniel Golly about his experience of having a dad, being a dad, and working with dads. Dr Golly is a Melbourne-based paediatrician with a strong interest in sleep, settling and fathering.

Hi there Dr Golly. Thank you for joining us for a chat about dad-ing, sleep and settling.

Before we start talking about your clinical experience, it would be good to get to know a little bit about your experience as both a son and as a father.

How would you describe your dad as a father? What did he do well?

I'm the youngest of three boys and my dad is quite an exceptional human being. I say that because he taught me, through practice, about the real meaning of sacrifice – which of course as a child you don't realise. But when you become a father and gain a bit of maturity and life experience you really see it.

I can look back now and see just what he sacrificed in terms of providing for his children and for his family. But what I remember most as a child was his presence. He was as present as possible. When he was physically present, he was just

completely there – both physically and emotionally. And you know, this was a time when we didn't have phones and distractions like we do these days.

He was also always unbelievably hands-on, you know, if you said, "Dad, I want to do jumps on my bike," the next thing we were in the garage building a jump and jumping God knows what – a half pipe you know. He was very, very hands-on and good with his hands. He could fix anything.

He was and is also an unbelievable teacher. I mean, you know, nothing was ever too much.

He was incredibly patient, and incredibly present. And basically, the answer was always, "yes" but we were never spoilt. We were always very, very physical, almost all the time. We were outdoors, riding bikes, running with the dog, kicking the football, cricket...anything you could imagine. So, I had a very, very blessed childhood. We didn't have much money, but there was absolutely nothing that I went without.

He sounds like a terrific bloke. If we asked him, if there was anything that he could have done better as a dad, what do you think he might say?

It's a great question. I don't know the answer to that. He has always been very bothered by his eyesight – he doesn't have fantastic eyesight – which has been an issue for him since he was three years old. So, I would imagine that he probably wanted to be much more physically active with us. You know, I couldn't play tennis with my dad. I couldn't play basketball with my dad, or cricket – you know to a great degree. Just because his eyes didn't allow it. So, I would assume that that would have bothered him, because it certainly would bother me. But yeah, it's sort of hard to speak on behalf of him, but I imagine that he probably would have loved to have been more involved in the ball sports. But it was fine –because as three boys growing up – we were always playing something.

It sort of almost begs the pun that he wanted to have a better vision for fatherhood – but I'll stay away from that. So, do you have children of your own?

Yes – two daughters and a son.

Can you tell me a little bit about them then? What are they like?

My kids are incredible. They are ten, eight and six now. They have taught me more about life than anyone or any textbook. They constantly teach me. They are my constant source of joy, and my intermittent source of frustration. If I can do half as good a job at parenting as my dad, then I'll be pretty pleased.

So, they have all come out of the same stable, but are they different?

Yes, they are vastly different – and we try to encourage that. So, my oldest is incredibly sporty – she just wants to play and enjoy every single sport under the sun. My middle child, my son, is more of a creative – he loves to read and write – he is always writing a novel. And my youngest is an entertainer – so she loves to dance and sing and perform and make us laugh. We just try to never force a child to do something that they don't enjoy. We try to cater to each one and reap the benefits along the way.

Sounds like that thing they call 'sensitivity' – trying to follow your child's lead.

What do you think is the most important thing that you, as a dad, can do for your children?

I try to be present – I try to take that example from my dad. It's very hard in my line of work and also with society at the moment to be fully present. But one person who is incredibly good at it is my wife. I learn from her every day, and she sets an incredible example. When she is with the kids, she is with the kids. She won't look at her phone, she won't answer her phone, she's not thinking about what has to be done next, or what chores need to be done.

I figured out that she's very, very present and I really try to emulate that as much as I can. I try to be very hands-on too. So, if one of my kids is in a basketball team, I'll put my hand up to be the coach. My daughter plays footy, so I am the runner. I'm always willing and happy to take them to activities. If there's a play date, I'm always driving them. I want to walk the dog with my kids... you know I always try to do as much as I can with the kids. And when it comes to sport, I really try and get involved as much as work and time will allow me to do that.

Thank you. Thank you so much. So now down to the business of your work. I am really curious about how often dads are in attendance when a family turns up to the paediatrician.

Certainly not as often as mums for obvious reasons, but it is getting better.

"There is a societal shift that we're seeing, that I'm really proud of and I am really excited about. But I think we're about 5% of the way there. Unfortunately, we need to do much, much better. But we are headed in the right direction with dads being more involved, more hands-on, asking more questions and taking charge when it comes to parenting."

I just want to see more and more of that and anything I can do to encourage that is better.

And then there's the other side where, if we're talking about dads as parents, we need to talk about the elephant in the room and that is dads who may not be enjoying being parents.

"There's a lot of talk and a lot of air-time about post-natal depression and post-natal adjustment problems in mums – which is an unbelievably positive step in terms of the coverage it's getting. But we're not talking enough about dads. We're not talking enough about paternal post-natal depression and how dads can get support when they need it."

I ask the question about whether or not they are enjoying this period (the newborn period) and how I can help, and how others can help to improve the situation for them.

I'm going to slip a question in here that we didn't flag, as I have a colleague who has done a lot of work in this space and has published the idea that sure – dads experience depression but the evidence suggests that for many of them, it might be more of a case of anxiety. What do you think about that?

Absolutely, and I preface this answer by saying that I'm absolutely generalising here, but there is a typical male brain, a male way of thinking – like men are from Mars, women are from Venus – that kind of concept. Dads in general – and again,

"I am generalising but dads in general like to fix things. They see problems as opportunities. They like to fix things and are solution seekers. Babies don't work like that – especially unsettled babies. You can't just solve it. You can't just fix it. And that can be a real source of frustration, which can then lead to anxiety."

I think anxiety, I think depression, I think adjustment disorder – these are very, very real things. And I don't think there are many dads who don't experience a degree of discomfort and despair around this period. Whether it is an unsettled baby or not. But when you do throw an unsettled baby into the mix, the figures increase dramatically. We definitely don't have good data on the incidence of these problems affecting dads, because dads unfortunately don't talk about it as much as we need to."

And the reasons for that are something for another podcast really, because they're probably not as entrenched in machismo as many people think they are.

What is something important that you've learned from dads during your work?

The more you give, the more you get. When I see dads who are very hands-on, very involved, who know the answers to the questions just as much as mums – they really benefit from it. So, you get back A LOT. And it doesn't matter what your work is, it doesn't matter what goes on behind the scenes. You get so much back from your children, from your babies and from your partner. Basically, it's a wonderful transaction – the more you give, the more you get.

When I see dads who are involved, I see them enjoying the process more and I see the whole family thriving better.

Another unscheduled question, but of course part of the gateway for that for dads is the relationship they share with mum in parenting, right? Do you see much evidence in your work where dads are not only trying to get there but the mum is 'opening the gate for him' if you like, to give him the chance to have that parenting experience and for it to be everything it can be.

Absolutely. And there are some mums who don't open that door. It's part of the problem – some mums want to take control of everything, and so my message to the parents out there is to do it together. Because babies need BOTH parents.

"Having dads more hands-on is of huge benefit to dads, it's of enormous benefit to the baby, and it is incredible support and a huge benefit to the mum. Because we know through my work and through research as well, that when fathers are more hands-on in that early post-natal stage, we have lower rates of paternal and maternal post-natal mental health problems. We have babies who sleep through the night earlier (and I know that everyone benefits from better sleep). So, it's one of those cases where everyone wins if we share the load better."

I think there is evidence that it even improves their romantic relationships?

You're absolutely right.

Now that we've started talking about sleep... We know that all babies are different. So just as your children – three out of the same stable, are all different – some are much more settled as babies than others. Therefore it raises the question – do you think that parents can change what's going on with their baby's sleep and settling?

100% yes. Everybody is different and temperament certainly comes into it. But every baby is a wonderful communicator and they are communicating with their parents' temperament as well. So, if you've got a very unsettled, unhappy and anxious parent, that child is going to mirror those emotions as well. So, if we can improve the parents' experience, we can improve the babies experience – no question.

"There is always something that is manageable in the settling of an unsettled baby. Whether it is a baby that has got excess wind, a baby that has for example eczema, or whether it may be reflux (although that's not particularly common), there's always something that we can do to help that baby be more comfortable and closer to sleeping through the night if that is what's desired by the parents.

There is always something that we can do, there is always an improvement that can be made. All we need to do is look for the problem and not right-off this newborn period as some sort of torture that parents have to just survive – that is not the case."

And being kind to each other I guess as well in trying to get through it.

What do you think is the most important thing that the dad can do when the family is struggling with an unsettled baby?

There is nothing that a dad cannot do unless we're talking about a breastfed baby and even in that setting, breastfeeding is the only thing that they can't do. So, they can help with a bottle if it's a bottle-fed baby or mixed-fed baby. They can give a bottle of expressed breast milk as well. That dad can burp the baby, can dress a baby, change baby, settle a baby, swaddle a baby. All of these things. They can take the baby for their immunisations, they can attend GP and paediatrician appointments...

"There isn't anything that a dad can't do – that is the message that I want dads to understand. And as I said before, the more you do, the more you get back."

There is the other side of it, which is the way that he supports and works with the mum. Have you seen good examples of that?

Certainly, I've seen fantastic examples. And I've also seen some terrible examples, where the father turns around and says, "No that's mums' domain," or "I can't breastfeed so there's nothing I can do," and they head off to work. And that's absolutely the wrong approach.

That's the societal change that we really need to extend.

And then I've seen dads who are absolutely phenomenal. They really see it as a joint venture, which is exactly what it is. You know, I had a dad in this room where I'm sitting right now who left about an hour ago. He looks after his unsettled baby during the night while maintaining a full-time job and I said to him, "Mate, I'm impressed. I like to see that," and he turned to me and said, "I might have a full-time job, but my wife is full-time looking after a human being." So, he fully understood it – he got the

perspective. The only time, and I sort of joke about it, but the only time that I'll let a dad sleep in another room and protect his sleep if the baby is unsettled, is if the dad is a pilot or something and is in charge of a lot of people's lives and we need that person to be very well slept. Other than that scenario, I really can't see a justification for dads not being extremely involved, especially through the night.

That's fantastic, thank you. I think that's pretty close to the end of the questions I have for you today. Thanks so much for taking this time to talk with us. It is of course, precious time that you're not spending with your family, so I really appreciate that and understand that your time would be very precious. Hopefully though, this is going to help some other dads navigate their way through some of the challenges they face.

Before we go, as I've sort of been at the steering wheel, is there anything else that you think you'd like the opportunity to say to a lot of dads who are involved in SMS4dads?

Look, I think that if you are listening to this podcast then you've already taken a step in the right direction. If you are receiving the SMS4dads messages, if you are talking about your experience, talking to other dads, and dads-to-be – experienced dads, first-time dads... if you are just having the conversations – then you're doing the right thing.

When it comes to your individual circumstance, my most important piece of advice is – don't accept it if your baby is unsettled, feeding frequently, not sleeping through the night by six weeks / circa six weeks / 5kgs. There are things that can be done. There are resources out there. Go and have a look at my content, which you can find online: DrGolly.com

Look at different ways of settling your baby and supporting the family. And obviously supporting others too. If you've got people around you or colleagues at work or siblings who might be struggling at the moment as well.

But you're already doing the right thing. Just keep heading in that direction. Keep talking about it, keep looking for support and help – you won't regret it.

That's great. Thank you so much for your time today.

ABOUT THE PRESENTER & GUEST

Dr Daniel Golshevsky (Dr Golly) is a Melbourne-based paediatrician and father of 3.

With a growing social and media presence, he is a proud Red Nose Australia Ambassador & perinatal mental health champion for PANDA.

As a general paediatrician, he cares for babies, children and teenagers of all ages, managing physical, mental and behavioural development as well as illness and emergency.

Over the last decade, Dr Golly has sub-specialised in unsettled babies and poor sleep. His philosophy is centred around empowering parents, protecting mothers and the heavy involvement of dads and non breastfeeding partners. His online Sleep and Settling Programs have quickly become the essential guide for thousands of families across the globe.

Dr Golly hosts a weekly Listnr Podcast - [Dr Golly & The Experts](#) - interviewing parents who have had to navigate significant challenges in their parenting journey.

His NEW Book '[Your Baby Doesn't Come with a Book](#)' is Dr Golly's Guide to the first four weeks of parenthood. Published by Hardie Grant, it's on shelves 20th September 2023 and available for pre-order now!

For more information, see his website drgolly.com and follow him on socials [@drgolly](#).

Dr Chris May has a long-standing interest in fathering and parenting partnerships. He moved into academia following a career in paediatric nursing and currently works with the Fathers and Families Research Team, Family Action Centre, University of Newcastle. His PhD explored the importance of parenting partnership quality in families where there is a child on the autism spectrum.

He has designed and facilitated paternal antenatal classes for over 15 years. His current work focuses on the facilitation of partner support, the assessment of co-parenting quality and the use of technology to provide supportive intervention to new fathers and to those parenting in challenging circumstances.

For more information tips and advice especially for new and expecting dads visit SMS4dads.com

SHOW NOTES

Being a new parent can at times be tough. If you think you and/or your partner are experiencing post-natal depression and/or anxiety or you'd simply like to talk to someone, reach out to the following organisations.

PANDA.org.au

The National Perinatal Mental Health Helpline [1300 726 306](tel:1300726306)

9am – 7.30pm Mon – Fri (AEST/AEDT)

Australia's only free, national helpline service for women, men and their families affected by perinatal mental illness.

The PANDA helpline is managed by highly trained and caring counsellors who provide a safe and confidential space for any new or expecting parent struggling with the challenges of becoming a new parent.

MENSLINE.org.au 1300 78 99 78

A telephone and online support, information and referral service, for men with family and relationship concerns.

SMS4dads.com sends weekly text messages to dads synched to their bub's development. It's a FREE service designed especially for dads. You can join up via SMS4dads.com

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