



Episode 8: Supporting Dads with Ash G

Supporting Dads

Tiffany: Hi everyone. I'd like to welcome my guest today, Ash Classic. Ash has recently become a father to Harper, along with his husband Ben, through IVF and surrogacy. In this week's episode, we'll be discussing how dads can support other dads, and the importance of getting dads chatting about how they're going on their parenthood journey. I'm so thrilled to have you on today, Ash.

Ash: Thanks so much, Tiffany. Very happy to be here, speaking to you.

Tiffany: Great. Well, thanks so much again. It's going to be a fantastic topic I think, and I'm really looking forward to chatting with a dad. I think it's so lovely to be able to cover off all the different aspects of being a dad. So, I'm looking forward to our chat.

Ash: Same.

Tiffany: Before we start chatting more about supporting dads and how that's been for you, if you could start by telling us a bit about your journey into parenthood.

Ash: Yeah, sure. Tiffany, our journey started several years ago now, with my husband Ben and I. We went through surrogacy here in Victoria. At the time, we didn't really know how to navigate it, and it was more so through speaking to friends and family that we had two really incredible women come forward. One who offered their eggs to be an egg donor, and then another one to be our surrogate. At the time we found an IVF clinic, and we formed a relationship with them, and they were able to guide us through the entire process of surrogacy. Which, here in Victoria for I know a same-sex male couple, it is very complex and challenging, and expensive, with no government rebates at all. So we went through a couple of rounds of IVF at the time.

And unfortunately for us, we only had two embryos at around 30 eggs. And, none of those two embryos ended up taking. So after that, the one thing that sort of really shocked me at the time was that when your transfers don't work, the IVF clinic essentially stop calling you. And it really dawned on me then that it was a business, and because at the time they make you feel that they are a friend, and they're taking you on a journey.



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Ash: (cont...) And then when it doesn't work, the phone stops ringing. So, I found that really quite difficult to sort of get over at the time, when everyone had sort of hyped us up that it was going to work. So for a couple of years we just parked the idea of having kids, and didn't really speak about it until probably around 18 months ago, we picked up the conversation again.

We weren't really prepared to spend the same amount of money again without some sort of guarantee that we were going to be able to have a baby. So, Ben's sister actually came forward, who was our surrogate the first time. And came forward and said that she would be happy to be our egg donor and surrogate, and essentially what we ended up doing in late 2019 was we had to go through counseling and lawyers again, which is part of the process to make it all above board. But we essentially sort of just did it at home, turkey baster-style, so to speak. And lo and behold, after three months it actually worked, and we fell pregnant. And the pregnancy worked, and then in December of last year, nine weeks ago, we welcomed our baby girl, Harper, into the world.

Tiffany: Oh, how exciting, what a beautiful story.

Ash: Yeah. It was definitely a long journey with a great reward, and I'm glad I didn't give up. Because I think that surrogacy or IVF is so, so emotionally draining, and really takes a toll on you that for quite a few years I just really thought, "I can't do this." But, I'm very glad that we did. But, I have to say it's quite interesting now being on the other side of it, and Ben and I have this beautiful baby girl that when we go out in public, it's something that we never really thought of before. But we definitely noticed that in the first couple of weeks of having Harper and being out in public, that it felt like all eyes were on us. And what I mean by that is, if we went to a restaurant... Because we've taken Harper everywhere from the day we got home.

If we're at a restaurant, you could really tell that people were staring at you. Not in a negative way, but just trying to piece it all together and think, "Are they two friends? Does one of them have the baby and they're having a day away from their partner?"

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Ash: (cont...) Or, are they husbands and they have a baby?" And we've had people come up to us at a restaurant before to compliment us, because it became very clear that she was our baby, and we were both sort of handling her, and the people are really interested. And we had another lady one time come up to us and just started off by saying, "Do you mind if I just ask you a question? Is she both of yours, is she your baby?" And we said, "Yes, yes, yeah, she's our baby." And she said, "Oh, do you mind if I ask you another question?"

And she said, "Tell me to stop at any time." And I said, "No, go for it. Ask as many questions as you like." And anyway, long story short, we ended up telling her our whole story, because she just wanted to hear all of it. So I think that it's been quite interesting in how people respond in a really positive light, and everyone wants to know how it works. People say, "Do both of you work full-time? Who looks after the baby?" Or, "Who's doing the night feeds, and how do you manage it?" Because it's not a typical sort of male/female, female stays at work and male... Sorry, female stays at home and male goes to work-type scenario. So, it has been a really positive response.

Tiffany: Oh, that's so wonderful. And it is really interesting, and unless you've been through it before or you know someone who's been through that sort of situation, you just don't know. So, I guess it is really interesting too for people to find out, and it's so lovely that you're happy to share that.

Ash: Yeah, yeah, definitely. Yeah, love telling the story. But sometimes I keep thinking just, "Does everyone still really want to know?" I think because we've lived it and we've gone through it, it's so normal to us. But in a lot of ways, it's actually still really new.

Tiffany: Yeah, absolutely, absolutely. So in your experience Ash, how do dads support other dads in today's ever-changing environment? Because it is ever-changing, and it's quite bizarre the way things are now, particularly with COVID, and the way that everything has changed with working from home, et cetera. How important has it been for you to chat to other dads about how you're going on your parenthood journey?

Ash: Yeah. For me personally, Instagram has actually been a really great tool in connecting with other dads, and in particular gay dads.

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Ash: (cont...) I've shared quite a lot of our journey so far with Harper and put it on social media, whether it's through posts or through stories. And what I've actually really loved is the amount of people who have responded, in particular other dads. And just to form this online banter with other dads who have babies at a similar age, and you... For me, I found it somewhat therapeutic that you're able to inject some humor into the constant fatigue that you're feeling and support each other. And also just ask questions, I actually don't know any of these people that I speak to on social media and we don't even get personal into so much what is happening with each other.

But more so about being a new dad, and how we are navigating our way around having a new baby in the house. I also know that for me personally, I've been open and honest on social media. Like, I've put a picture up with having all the washing in the kitchen and a sleeping baby on my chest just thinking like, "Wow, this is as good as the day's going to get today." And watching people react to it, that then strikes up a conversation to normalise it. Because I think sometimes we have this perception, or I feel like with dads anyway, like we have this perception that everything has got to be great when the reality is it's just not all the time. So, to be able to have this banter for me has really been a great outlet.

Tiffany: Yeah. That's fabulous, it's so good that you've had that way to connect, particularly when there's been so much isolation, and so much in the way of lockdowns and not being able to see people. So of course, being able to create those ways of connecting is so great to hear, that you've had that opportunity.

Ash: Yes, yeah, it's excellent. And I just think it's made a really big difference as well in helping me adjust to be a stay-at-home dad too.

Tiffany: Yeah. So you're stay-at-home, and Ben goes off to work. And have you been the stay-at-home dad from day one?

Ash: Yeah. I finished work in December last year, so I finished two weeks prior to Harper being born. And at this stage, I'll remain off work at least until September. And Ben took a few weeks off over that sort of Christmas, New Year break to be around for her birth. And yeah, now he's gone back to work. And he also travels weekly, so Harper and I have adjusted from quite early on to sort of having a few days a week on our own.

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Tiffaney: Yeah. That must be a challenge though, being at home on your own, not having anyone come home at night and be there to support you.

Ash: Yeah. I remember the first week, Ben had three and a half weeks off. And in that three and a half weeks it was beautiful, and I loved every minute. I was also very aware that it was a false sense of reality, and it was just really nice to have your partner around all the time and sort of be able to split up the workload. And I remember the first night, it was the night before he was going away on his first trip. And he just said to me... I wasn't myself, and he always picks up on it. He just kept sort of asking, "What's wrong, what's wrong? Is there anything I can help you with?" And I literally just actually had to have a breakdown and have a good cry. And I was like, "You're leaving us tomorrow, you are leaving Harper and I."

And I actually did not realise sort of how anxious I was about it, thinking, "Can I do this? Can I actually look after this baby on my own when you're not here?" But you know, we did end up going through it. He's getting through it rather, but his first trip away, I had a lot of struggles with Harper. Because I think that I am a male, I didn't carry this baby, I didn't feel the kick and I didn't necessarily have a connection. Because in our circumstance, it was essentially that we got handed this baby, because that's what surrogacy is. And I guess I didn't have any sort of natural maternal, or paternal instinct as to sort of what to do. And when I didn't have someone in the house to say, "Should we get her?" I think what I just did was made all the problems worse by trying to self-soothe and not let her cry, and yeah. In the end there were just many tears from Harper and I over the two days.

Tiffaney: Mm-hmm, yeah. I can imagine. It's really tricky for any first time parent, particularly if like you said, you haven't carried the baby, you haven't had that build up in the same way as you would if you've carried the baby.

Ash: Yeah, yeah, definitely. And one thing I've realised now also about being a stay-at-home dad, or rather stay-at-home parent, is just like how... I guess how much we need emotional support. A newborn baby doesn't thank you for doing six feeds a day, and changing multiple nappies, and doing naps, and making sure that the house is maintained. And I think that what I've learned to discover over this past week in particular when I get really tired at the end of the week, I just think it's so reassuring for your partner just to spot sort of one thing that you've done really well that week.

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Ash: (cont...) Or maybe you just did them a favour during the day to help them out, but for your partner just to turn around and say thank you for doing such and such makes such a difference.

Because then you think, “Okay, thank you for that reassurance. I feel like I am on track, and I’ve got this under control.” But when you don’t receive it or you don’t hear it, I think you start to wonder, “Am I doing a good enough job?” Because there’s no performance management, so to speak. So, to have that positive reinforcement from your partner, it really means a lot.

Tiffany: Yeah, absolutely. Have you or Ben experienced any mental health distress, like depression, anxiety? You’ve mentioned a few things. But have there been specific things that you’ve found has affected you as a first-time dad, and how did that look? Or, how did that play out for you?

Ash: Yeah. Ben has not, he has just really adapted to being a dad quite great. I’d say for myself, I had a lot of uncertainty around finishing up work last year. I really love my job and I’m very passionate about it, and to have... It felt like I was giving up my career, so to speak. And so when I became a stay-at-home dad, I did have a couple of down days. I experienced some down days when Ben was going back to work, where I felt really anxious. And then also a couple of weeks later, when Harper was starting to develop and change, because babies change so quickly. I just woke up one morning, and I just thought, “Oh my gosh, today is going to be the same day as yesterday, which is going to be the same day as tomorrow.” And I knew that that train of thought wasn’t great.

For me personally, and what I’ve experienced before, I know that as soon as my mental thoughts start to change that I need to do something about it. And so I actually sort of raise now, if I’m really tired or if I’m not sort of starting to think straight, I need to raise it with Ben. Because I can identify that it is the fatigue that is making me feel like that, because some days are beyond exhausting. And if you then have a broken sleep and you get up the next day, that’s what I have noticed can be a trigger point for me around sort of anxiety and depression. So, communication I find has been key since having Harper.

Tiffany: Yeah, absolutely. And have you found chatting with other dads, or other people, or other parents has been helpful as well?

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Ash: Yeah, definitely. All of our friends, we have... Pretty much all of our friends are straight, married couples, and everyone has kids. And I'm very open and honest about my feelings, and I don't try to be the perfect parent, saying that all our days are fabulous. I do always call out that we've got a great-sleeping baby, which is amazing. But I express my feelings to other parents, and just yesterday I was having breakfast with a great friend of mine, and through speaking with her just normalised parenting. Just saying, "Some days don't feel like they're ever going to end." Or, "Am I ever going to get to sleep through the night again and feel like a normal human the next day?" Or just talking about little bits and pieces that were sort of on my mind.

And then to hear them say, "Yes, I remember that." Or, "I'm going through that still now, and that's exactly how I feel." I think, "Oh wow, that is so reassuring, to know that other people think the same way."

Tiffany: Yeah, absolutely. And I think that's one thing that I really found useful, joining parents' groups or mothers' groups or playgroups and things like that, really helpful just to discuss things with other parents who are going through the same sorts of things. Have you joined any groups yourself, or have you found a group of people in particular to be very supportive and helpful through understanding those things?

Ash: Yeah. I have the local parents group that's been arranged through the council, so actually ours is starting on Friday.

Tiffany: Oh, great.

Ash: I know that I am the only male in it, which I was kind of a little bit devastated about. I was really hoping there'd be another stay-at-home dad in it, but I will be the only male amongst the group of females. Unfortunately for gay dads in particular, there doesn't really seem to be a lot of support groups out there, unless you perhaps make friends with them, or do what I have done and perhaps connect with other gay dads. For me, which has been on Instagram, or just dads in that nature, connecting with them on Instagram. There do seem to be a couple of pages on Facebook for dads, but you know you really need to do some research and make sure that you're probably not just joining any group. It's got to be something that is going to benefit you.

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Ash: (cont...) So, I know for me personally, I'd really love to be around some other stay-at-home dads. And I know that there must be some in the area that I live in, and I would be super keen to connect with them in real life. And there's actually a couple of people who have reached out on Instagram, who we would like to actually meet up and go for coffee, and just talk about babies from a male perspective. Because all the people who I do speak about it to, they're all our female friends who are the stay-at-home mums. And I'm actually really craving some sort of male interaction, who is at home with a baby all day. Because I think we at times think about it and process it differently, and I know with me I inject a lot of humour into what happens with my day. And so, that's just a coping mechanism for me. So, yeah.

Tiffany: Yeah, definitely. I think that's really important. It'd be good to find out what types of groups, like you said you have found some. But it'd be good to know sort of what other groups are out there, and what kind of support there is for dads in your situation as a gay couple, but also dads in general. Have you spoken to any other dads in those groups that you have, or friendship groups that have found anything that's been helpful for them?

Ash: Not in the online space, like in terms of the groups that are already established. I had been speaking to an individual on Instagram who was another stay-at-home gay dad, and they had just said that they also live in Victoria, that they had been online. But they hadn't connected with their couple of groups that were available there. They kind of felt that they were more targeted to straight dads who perhaps necessarily weren't stay-at-home dads. So, more of just a broader dads group Facebook page that you could join. And I know for me that that wouldn't be something that I would be after. I guess in an ideal world, what I, or someone else probably needs to do is to actually create a really great interactive group on Facebook, whether it be for any stay-at-home dad to join and to start actually arranging some regular catch-ups.

Whether it's broken down into suburbs, or sort of just kept in a centralised location given how unsure of how many stay-at-home dads there actually are within the Melbourne area. So, that has been one thing that is on my mind. Because, people always say if you can't find it, you've got to create it. And it doesn't seem that there is necessarily like a sort of stay-at-home dads group that do regular catch ups, so it's a space that I think needs to be created.

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Tiffany: Yeah, absolutely. Well, I hope... Best of luck with that, and I hope you can find a group, or create one yourself. That's a great idea, to create something like that if it doesn't exist. Because like you said, it is really important that those demographics and the different types of families are catered for, and that you can reach out and have that support that you need.

Ash: Yeah, definitely. Yep.

Tiffany: Yep. So, what would be your top tips and advice for new dads out there, Ash?

Ash: My number one thing I would say for a new dad is that it's okay not to be okay. And what I mean by that is when you have a newborn baby at home and your life is turned upside down from day one, if you're not really quite feeling yourself, or you're feeling tired, and you're just going through a whole range of different emotions, that's okay. No-one is telling us that we actually need to be perfect, and to portray that we've got this under control. Because let's be honest, in the first couple of weeks we don't. And another thing that I learned after a couple of weeks with having Harper is that babies are actually quite strong, that they're small but they're strong. And they will actually let you know if there's something wrong with them.

And that's kind of where I made a little bit of a mistake in the beginning, by always grabbing Harper, thinking like, "I've got to keep her quiet." But you know, for me it's about building confidence, and knowing that if you put your baby down at the end of the day for example, and you know that they've been fed, and they've got a clean nappy, and they're not too hot, and they're not too cold, and they feel nice and secure. If you've gone through your checklist and they're still just a little bit grizzly or crying, that is okay. There is nothing wrong with them, and just like an adult, we will have days where we're a little bit grizzly or unsettled. So, just let them be, and in our instance I let Harper be grizzly or unsettled for 20 minutes before I go in and I will pick her up, or just put my hand on her chest to let her know that I'm there.

And also, another thing would be to speak about how you're feeling. I think that our partners cannot support us if we don't communicate how we are feeling.



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Ash: (cont...) And some days we will have great days where we don't really have that much to say, because everything has just been really good that day. But there'll be other days where the fatigue is real, and you might be thinking, "How am I going to get through today?" Or, "I'm just finding something really difficult." You need to communicate it, it is the only way that I feel that our partners can really help us and support us during this time, is if we express our feelings in order to be able to receive the emotional support that we need, and also like asking for help.

I feel like when you have a newborn baby, if you're fortunate enough to have a great network of friends and family around you, people will offer you help. And accept it, it's something that I sometimes still struggle with because I'm trying to... I want to be like, "I can do this, I can do this, I've got this under control." But at the end of the day, if people are willing to help you just accept the help. Because if it means that you can go to the gym, or you can do something for yourself, even just for a couple of hours, internally it will make you feel so much more satisfied, and it will make you I feel like to be calmer, a better parent who's able to think clearly, just knowing that you are able to do something for yourself.

And then I'd also say for us, our call out is for Ben and I, don't stop living. From the minute we got Harper home from the hospital, we were home for about 30 minutes before we put her in the pram and we went on a huge 10K walk. We have taken her to multiple wineries. She was on a plane at six weeks going to Adelaide for 10 days, we take her everywhere. So, don't stop living, to any dads out there, just because you think you've got a newborn baby and you've got to be home all the time.

Tiffany: They're great pieces of advice, and I think that all those pieces of advice actually are relevant to any first-time parent, really. And I think they're all things in my experience, that I've experienced too. So, I think that they're all great pieces of advice. Did you find that you had that family there to offer that support, and have you got better at accepting that, do you feel, in the last few weeks potentially?

Ash: Yeah. We have great family support. We've got both of our parents based here in Melbourne, and they've been helping out a lot since Harper was born. In particular with meals, because that witching hour that parents speak about, my gosh, it's so real.

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Ash: (cont...) At the end of the day when they start crying, you think, "Oh my gosh, I've got to feed you, bath you, put you to bed, and then try to cook dinner." To have our parents cooking our meals for us now at the moment is such a relief, just mentally to know at the end of the day it's going to be okay. When we put Harper down, our food is already there in the fridge, we just have to heat it. And the food we were happy to accept, and I think one of the other areas that I've sort of just now really started to also accept is taking Harper.

Our parents have said from day dot, "If you need some time, please let us know and we can take her for a few hours, or even a night. So, you can have a night to yourself, and go out, and speak together as a couple and connect, or go shopping." But for the first few weeks I said, "No, no, no, no, no, I've got this, I've got this." But now I'm starting to accept it, and it's actually a really, really nice feeling, to accept it. And I also just want to call out, I think it's really important that if our parents are offering to have our babies for... Whether it's a night or a few hours, it actually does them the world of good. Because they are asking because they want to be around, and it's really beautiful to watch your baby and your parents to be able to form a connection. And on the other side of that, it's a really great feeling to be able to sit down for an adult dinner and enjoy two hot meals with your partner uninterrupted.

Tiffany: Yeah, absolutely. And like you said, it isn't just because they're offering you the help and support. They're actually wanting to spend that time with their grandchild, or their niece, or whoever it might be in relation to the baby. But, they're wanting to spend time with them legitimately, and it gives you that time. So, why not take it up?

Ash: Yeah, yep, definitely. I know that my mum now sees her weekly, and I'm happy to leave her now because I can see the joy that Harper brings to her. And the way my mum speaks about her, I think, "Oh wow, this actually does you the world of good to have her, and you really look forward to it. So sure, you can take her more often."

Tiffany: Yeah, perfect. And it gives you the time, like you said, to have some me time, or some time with your partner, or husband. And I think that that is just... It's so priceless, you can't put a dollar on that. And I think it's very underestimated, just the amount of joy that can bring to your life, and the balance it can bring too. Finding balance can be really tricky.



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Ash: Yes, very tricky indeed. And I think that when you have a newborn, the one thing that goes out the door straight away, I feel in my case, is just the connection with your partner. Because all of a sudden, your focus is solely on the baby. And so, your conversations change. So to be able to make a real effort to have that one-on-one time in whatever capacity that looks like is really important, in order just to have some real conversations, and to feel connected as a partnership again as well. So, yeah.

Tiffany: Yeah, absolutely. Well, thank you so much for sharing your experience in becoming a first-time dad today Ash, it's been so interesting to hear about your journey into parenthood. The challenges you've had to face as well as a couple, and obviously as an individual and a stay-at-home dad, and how you've overcome some of those challenges too. It's been really interesting, thank you so much.

Ash: No worries. Thanks so much Tiffany, I really enjoyed speaking with you today.

Tiffany: Wonderful. I hope you've enjoyed listening today, and learned something new. If you'd like to learn more about Ash and Ben's story, you can follow them on Insta [@melbournedads](#).