Purple Orange Podcast, Episode 3:

Rethinking the ideal parent

**SPEAKERS**

Belle Owen (host), Carey Scheer (narrator), Mikaila Crotty (guest), Ivy Crotty (guest), Mike Taggart (guest), Lucilla Chiro (guest)

**Belle Owen** 00:01

Hello, and welcome to the Purple Orange podcast where we shine a light on the stories of people with disability in our community. I'm your host, Belle Owen. This podcast is recorded on Kaurna land. And in today's episode, the third of our series, we hear from two parents with disability and their children. Just as there's many misconceptions about people with disability more broadly, there are so many misconceptions about the value, love, care that disabled parents can bring. Too often, friends of mine, colleagues, and people in my circles who are disabled parents are met with comments on social media saying, you know, that they feel sorry for those kids or, you know, how could for example, a blind mum, you know, effectively raise a child. And these people don't have an understanding of what it's like to live with disability, and then also the strengths that people with disability bring to parenting. So it's really important that we reconsider the idea of who is the ideal parent? What does being a great parent look like? And why would we not consider people with disability as part of that?

**Carey Scheer** 01:08

One of my colleagues at Purple Orange, Mikaila Crotty, lives with rheumatoid arthritis. She's had this since she was a child. And now as an adult, it impacts her mobility every day. Before she had her daughter, Ivy, she worried this would greatly impact her ability to parent. Of course, some things have been difficult. But it turned out that the most challenging parts have had nothing to do with parenting, and more to do with interactions with the outside world.

**Mikaila Crotty** 01:41

I think one of the hardest things is you can't see my joint damage so I present very much like just about any other mum. So, I would attend mother's group catch ups, but it would be hard for me to then explain, I can't go for that walk with you where you're going to go and get a coffee. I can't join the picnic where you are going to just sit on the ground. I can't be in the water, I would have to get my husband to be with me to safely have Ivy do swimming lessons at this age. I'm not going to stop them from doing that activity, but sometimes, it was hard to still make it clear if there's a social aspect at the end, once you finish the activity, I'd still love to join. And I think that's the harder part is they're accepting that I can't do kindergym or I can't do the swimming lesson, but then that means I'm just out altogether.

**Ivy Crotty** 02:34

My name is Ivy, and I am age eight. And my mum is called Mikaila.

**Carey Scheer** 02:41

And do you know why I'm talking to you today?

**Ivy Crotty** 02:44

About my mum, because she has disability. Arthritis.

**Carey Scheer** 02:48

What's it like to have a mum who's got arthritis?

**Ivy Crotty** 02:52

It's not really different, because like, you're still the same person. Everyone's the same really, but different personalities.

**Carey Scheer** 03:01

When Ivy was just an infant, one of my Mikaila's biggest worries was, how on earth was she going to be able to keep a rambunctious toddler safe? But as Ivy grew, she seemed to naturally understand and adapt to Mikaila's physical limitations. And things just worked.

**Mikaila Crotty** 03:21

From the age of about 18 months, I couldn't lift Ivy. I certainly couldn't run and I certainly couldn't quickly intervene if she was running near a street, or if she had climbed to a piece of equipment that she then needed rescuing from. Ivy just seemed to intuitively know that I had these limitations, and that she had to make decisions accordingly. And I was amazed at how well this worked, which when I look back now is just mind blowing because there are just not too many toddlers that I would think I would be able to negotiate this with.

**Carey Scheer** 04:03

But again, the hard part came from outside the family.

**Mikaila Crotty** 04:08

I would often be at a playground and I'd be standing watching a very small Ivy, negotiating something where usually a parent would be right up there holding their back or be a lot closer than I could physically get. And so there were times where other parents would approach me and say, you really shouldn't be letting her do that or, can't you see that she has gone all the way over there? And I guess that comes from a place of good intention, but it can actually be quite hurtful to be questioned over how you're doing something with your child. Because this is just what had to happen for our family.

**Carey Scheer** 04:50

Do you think your mum's a good mum?

**Ivy Crotty** 04:52

Yeah, she's nice. We go to really good places. And sometimes we get an ice cream and we can have an adventure. She buys me toys and, we just have lots of fun.

**Mikaila Crotty** 05:13

I really worried that, what if my kid missed out because I can't do a lot of the things that you see lots of mums doing. But I think one of the things I realised early on is that babies and kids don't care. They just want you. It's so easy, I think, to assume that you need to be doing something that the day has to have a plan. What I've learned from Ivy is that the two of us together could just constantly make our own fun. And it wouldn't matter if we'd never done any kind of extracurricular activity. Before being a mum, I didn't realise that.

**Ivy Crotty** 05:56

Sometimes when she has issues and pain and we can't always do stuff, we make our own fun. And when I was sick, we used all my animals and like toys, and we made our own fun, we made a zoo.

**Mikaila Crotty** 06:12

She's so good at making her own fun. And this is something that people comment on. It's something her teachers have commented on. She's very happy within herself. So, I do see that, that perhaps is a byproduct of having a mum that can't always just do an activity outside or do the activity she is requesting. That we've just, she's grown up with her having to understand my limitations and I don't know that that's a bad thing for her

**Carey Scheer** 06:42

Is there anything else that you think is really important that I haven't asked that you want to express or say?

**Ivy Crotty** 06:49

Oh, yeah, the best thing about having a mum with a disability, I get to go in a giant pool, hydrotherapy. Well, it's a hot pool. So good.

**Carey Scheer** 07:01

I also spoke with Mike Taggart. He has a son and a daughter, both of whom are now grown, each with a daughter of their own.

**Mike Taggart** 07:10

I've loved being a parent more than anything else other than love being a husband to Kathy, in my life.

**Carey Scheer** 07:18

When Mike's son was born, Mike had what he called useful, low vision. By the time his daughter was born, just three years later, Mike was totally blind.

**Mike Taggart** 07:28

Thinking back on the period from when I first saw my son to when I couldn't see him, I can't really pinpoint when I last saw him. But somewhere around the age of one and a half or two, I guess, I stopped actually seeing what he looked like, but to me that didn't matter. Your mind fills in what your eyes aren’t picking up, like when you listen to the radio. Though I still find it a bit hard to believe I haven't actually seen our daughter, because my image of her is as strong as the image of my son. That's just the way it is when you blind, I think, when you've had vision, you make up the images and they live with you just as really as the real images would be for a sighted person.

**Carey Scheer** 08:17

How did you come to teach your children about blindness and communicate about that blindness to children?

**Mike Taggart** 08:27

Always our son is the first who's had to go through this because he was the first child. And I think that very young children, like weeks and months old, children have an immense capacity for learning that most of us simply don't realise or pay attention to. And I think he just picked, as our daughter did, just picked up that I wasn't reacting to some things like when they smiled and said nothing compared to when they said something or touch me. And I think that has become an intuitive part of how they communicate with me. They didn't just do non-verbals.

**Carey Scheer** 09:12

I spoke to his daughter, Lucilla, and I asked her the same question. How did your parents teach you about blindness?

**Lucilla Chiro** 09:19

That is a very interesting question, and to be honest, not something I've even thought about before. Yeah, it was just never a thing. Like it was never a conversation because it was just a part of our life. Like you know, I have strong memories of being quite little and walking with my dad, and sighted guiding my dad and we often talk about you know, from the age of two or three, like I could go places just me and my dad and so that was just sort of life. It wasn't anything unusual, it wasn't anything different. And I've thought it was just like this is part of my relationship with my dad. And I think having my own child now has really made me reflect on how amazing it is because she will, in her play, will get a doll and a stick and make the doll walk with a cane or like she'll get a stick herself and pretend to walk with a cane. And I was probably similar as a kid, that it was just like, this is just part of, for her it’s grandpa, for me, it was Dad.

**Carey Scheer** 10:17

Thinking back to how Mikaila said Ivy is so happy in herself and making her own fun and how Mikaila attributes this as a positive side effect of growing up with a mum with a disability. I wondered if Mike also perceived any positives for his children?

**Mike Taggart** 10:35

I think if the adult who is blind can develop a sense of confidence in the ability of very young children to learn early and comprehensively, then those children can be given the opportunity to take a degree of responsibility that most children don't get a chance to do till much later in life. Example with our daughter Lucilla, we enrolled Lucilla in what was called “two-year-old to four-year-old music”, which was at the opposite side of the city from where we lived.

**Carey Scheer** 11:15

Using the map and Mike's mind, and his daughter's three-year-old eyes, they would journey together across town, just the two of them, catching multiple buses, crossing streets and making turns.

**Mike Taggart** 11:30

Now, I can't imagine what that might have done for her in her growing up. But her sense of competence, I think, would have increased way beyond most other just three-year-olds, knowing that not only could she go to two-to-four music like her peers, but she actually essentially drove most of the way there.

**Carey Scheer** 11:54

Lucilla remembers this time, and also thinks it left a lasting impact.

**Lucilla Chiro** 11:59

You know, a big part of my life has been around trusting myself and my judgement and having that trust in me from an early age is something that really helped to, you know, help me to learn to make decisions and make risky decisions around like changing career or going away, or, you know, basically all the decisions I've made in my life, I've felt confident knowing that I can trust in myself.

**Mike Taggart** 12:30

Parenting opened up this entire world of growth for me. And I think it's made me a much better person. I would argue that the experience of our children, and blindness is part of this, has been a great thing for them and for those whom they interact with, too. The world we currently live in, we are separated into little categories, it's very hard to see the full humanness of people who are in a different category from what we think we are in. The categories, they say, because this person has different cultural, this person has a different set of abilities to you, they're different. And it's gonna be hard work making any sort of acquaintanceship with them. Would you really want to? Isn't that going to be really uncomfortable? And reality is, that evaporates once you have the interaction. And you find, oh, well, some of those people I don't get along with because they're not interested in sport like I am. Or they're too extrovert, they like parties too much, and that’s not like me. But there are some of them that are just like me, and I really like them, you know, they have same interests. That's where human connection is made, not across categories, not because of categories, but in spite of. We can connect and if you learn that when you're very young, I suspect you don't even notice.

**Carey Scheer** 14:07

Lucilla shared a story that I think perfectly illustrates this.

**Lucilla Chiro** 14:11

When I was in my 20s and I had a friend who met my dad, and he went to go shake his hand and my dad didn't respond. And then my friend came up to me after and was like, oh, does your dad have a vision impairment or something? And I was like, yeah, he's blind. But it just never occurred to me to mention it or say anything. I think that was probably the first time I really realised that it is different for other people and that other people see it as a different thing. Disability, ability, it's just one part of who a person is. So, my dad is blind, he's kind and he's loving and he always wanted to be, well, he enjoys being a parent as far as I'm aware, and that made him an amazing parent, so that is my overwhelming memory of my childhood is feeling loved and cared for, so yeah.

**Mike Taggart** 15:01

If people living with disability deny themselves the opportunity of parenting, then our world is weaker for that, because that's one less connection more people have with people living with disability.

**Belle Owen** 15:20

What might the world be missing, if Mikaila and Mike weren't part of the parenting community? When people make assumptions about us as disabled people and our capacity for parenting, are our choices to parent or not really our own? We need to continue this conversation. If you would like to share your story of parenting with disability or if you have feedback on this episode, we would like to hear from you. You can get in touch with us on Facebook by emailing stories@purpleorange.org.au or by calling 08 8373 8388, or visit our website purpleorange.org.au. Join us next time where we introduce you to Esther, who shared her story of standing up to cultural stigma and shame across continents.