S9E7- Dads Club with Rob Garner

Ashley: What does it really mean to be a dad in 2026? We talk a lot about parenting. We talk about regulation, resilience, raising emotionally healthy children, but what we don't always talk about is fathers. We don't talk about the pressure to hold it all together or the quiet loneliness that some dads carry. And yet, regulated adults raise regulated children.

Confident dads help grow confident kids. And resilience isn't built in isolation; it's built in community. Today I'm joined by Rob from Davenham and Macclesfield Dad's Club, a space where men come together not to compete, not to fix, but simply to connect. So whether you're a dad, a mum, or raising boys who need strong, emotionally healthy male role models, this conversation is for you.

Let's dive in.

So hello, welcome back to The Resilient Kid Podcast. I'm here today with a special guest, Rob from Davenham and Macclesfield Dad's Club. We're very excited to get a male on the show. Hello Rob, how are you?

Rob: I'm alright, thank you.

Ashley: Very good. First of all, I've met you a couple of times actually. One time I met you at Soup on the Go.

Rob: Yep.

Ashley: If listeners don't know, it's an organisation where you come and pitch your thing—whatever your thing is, your organisation, your club—with the hope that the crowd, who are all sat round eating soup, vote for you.

And actually, you did really well there. What people won't know, unless they've met you, is that you are very humble. You stood up there saying all the good things that your club does, but also saying, actually, there are other people here—give it to them. And that was just so lovely.

Rob: Yeah, it was such a weird experience. I've got no problems talking in front of crowds. I do it with work. I've done it in past roles where you start talking to three or four hundred people — not an issue. And for some reason that night, I wasn't nervous, but I didn't know what to say.

I think because I went last as well. All the different charities were around older people or children, and I was like, no, don't give me any money for this. We get funding through different streams, but give that money to kids that can't afford birthday cakes. Give it to them. Anyway, we came second.

Ashley: And you did. You did.

Rob: Yeah.

Ashley: It's an absolute testament to you though — an absolute testament — and the work that you're doing.

Rob: Yeah, I think it's more the work that we're doing, more so than myself. I think I am the facilitator behind it. I have a footprint within Northwich, being born and bred here, which allowed the club to advertise more than anything.

But on the actual nights, I have a volunteer team around me — two other blokes, Dave and Matt — and without them I wouldn't be able to run the safe space to talk, because I'd be busy doing other things. I wouldn't be able to sit and really dig down to help people, which is the reason behind it. Full stop.

So yeah, when people talk about it, I like to say I'm merely a facilitator of what we do.

Ashley: You are, but you are an absolute foundation of that. And we also met at a community awards event where people had nominated you and wanted that recognition for the club, which was really lovely.

So tell us a little bit about what inspired you to start a dad's club.

Rob: I went to the pub one December evening. I had not long had my second child — Billy was only a matter of weeks old — and I got a text message saying, "We're all down the pub. Do you want to come for a drink?"

I was sat in, and my wife said, "Get yourself off for a couple of hours. Take Billy out for a walk, get him settled, come back, and get yourself down there."

I thought, right, yeah, fine. Absolutely. I went down and met a load of old mates, as you do over Christmas, and pretty much 90% of us sat at the table were dads.

We were laughing and joking, sharing stories, having a giggle. And one of the lads, who wasn't part of the group, was in the pub. He was a recent dad, and you could see that he was struggling.

I said, "Do you want to chat?" and he said no. Fair enough. I got in contact with a few people I knew who knew him and just said, reach out and offer a little bit of support.

He wasn't interested, and I thought, you know what, I'll set a group up. I set a club up at the pub, got the word around to a few other people, and if I remember rightly, 38 people turned up.

I was like, right, okay — this is staying.

Rob: At that point, it started going on Northwich Radio and being in touch with the Guardian, doing a little bit more promotion. It just kept growing and growing.

We started off with a kind of format where we all came in, and I set a minute at the start where you had to go and speak to people, share stories, and chat. Then the remaining 59 minutes — or an hour and 59 minutes — was free time. It was just that chance to relax and chill out.

It worked, but not as well as we thought at the start. What we were finding was that people weren't talking, and I thought, we need to bring it back to what I started it for.

There was a lot of talk about kids. There was a lot of talk about worries, sharing stories, sharing tips and things. Then I came up with the idea of a safe space to talk, knowing that we're blokes and we don't like to talk. We keep everything bottled up and just go, "Yeah, I'm alright."

Actually, there's a place in the pub that no one can see if someone's sat there. If you want to have a chat, you just sneak out. You walk past the bar, you walk past the toilets, because anyone will just think you're going for a pint or going to the loo. There are one to three people sat there.

That set the foundations of the club and what we do. Everything else just fits around that. We have the safe space to talk tucked away, and you can guarantee roughly between two and three dads use it every week.

Ashley: Amazing.

Rob: Sometimes you find it's in the car park when everyone's gone. It's a, "Can we just have a quick chat?" and you think, yeah, that's fine.

Sometimes it's early on in the night. But yeah, two to three people every time. That's allowed us to build up who we work with and what we work with.

We've got discount codes for counselling and therapy that we work closely with within the community. We are on the hunt for a male therapist at the moment because the two that we do use are female.

Sometimes it's really needed to speak to a female. Sometimes, with it being a men's club essentially, I feel that having a bloke say, "Look at it in this way," helps a bit better. So we are on the lookout at the moment.

Ashley: I'll give you a shout out for him here. He's local and he's good.

Rob: Perfect.

Then we've got Cheshire Wild Venison that we work with really closely. It's locally sourced venison, and he offers discount codes across both sides.

What we tend to do with him is put an order in, and he rocks up with his van and his gear and drops it off at the event. So it's nice to see him. That's Steve. He's a cracking bloke. Again, he's a dad, and he understands it.

Vincent Van do the pizza — absolute amazing pizza, top guy. I phoned him up when I was setting up the fun day we've got in March, and I said, "Derek, I want to give you a little bit back for what you've done for us. We're doing this — get yourself down and pitch up."

He said no. I thought, oh no — that was my selling point, rugby game and pizza. And he said, "I'm coming down for free. I'll give everyone two slices of pizza."

I was like, thank you. Thank you very much. He said, “I love what you do, and it gets pizza in people’s mouths. I’m getting people booking me through the bits that we’ve done.”

So yeah, it’s amazing.

We’ve also got a life coach that works with us. He just happens to be one of the volunteers as well. We’ve got a meditation trainer — I call him a meditation guru, but I don’t know whether that’s right.

What we’re growing into is just that — growing and growing. If you look at our information table that we have out at each event, it’s gone from half a table to being two full tables at the moment of business cards and things.

We see it throughout the club as well. We’ve got dog walkers, trades, different services within the club that are starting to really be used by members of the club.

So yeah, we just keep growing.

Ashley: Brilliant. What do you think stops dads from opening up?

Rob: Male stigma. The stigma not to talk.

We are a breed. I see the generation of men coming now — my age group, so kind of 30 to 40, maybe a little bit younger, a little bit older — that we are the generation whose dads went to work, came home on a Friday night, and went to the pub.

My dad worked three jobs. He’d come home, work, come home, work. I can’t remember him not being around. I can’t remember not doing things with him. I look back and think he must have just never slept.

But that generation above us had dad’s club — and it was every Friday night at a pub.

I worked behind the bar at Hartford Legion for years, on a Wednesday and a Friday, and I was basically doing what I do now back then. They’d all come in, sit down, have a few pints, moan about everything, have a talk, and then go home.

That’s not the way the world is now. Every household needs two people working. Every household has kids coming through. Dads are more involved.

As much as wives and mums don’t get a break, dads don’t get a break either. But we’re still locked into that element of “suck it up, carry on, man up.”

We all know it’s okay not to be okay. We all know the male suicide rates are horrific. We all know that. But we still bottle it up. We nod our heads. We carry on.

That’s the element of what we’re trying to break down. We are literally trying to break down the stigma of men not talking — one conversation at a time.

My two go-to slogans are: two hours, once a month — that's it — and breaking down the stigma of not talking, one conversation at a time.

Rob: I just think our generation coming through now is really understanding that it's okay to talk. But who do we talk to? If we have problems at home, are we going to talk to our wife? Are we going to talk to our parents?

The amount of people I've spoken to who say, "Well, my old man was my best mate, and we've always done so much together." I was brought up in a household where honesty was everything. If you're honest, we can solve it. I've always known I could talk to him. Whether he understands what I'm talking about is a different story, but a problem shared is a problem halved.

Everybody deserves that person to talk to. Everybody deserves a support network. Everybody deserves someone on the end of the phone.

We're not all in a situation where we're in a family with a wife. We're not all in a situation where you tuck your kids into bed every night.

We see people who come to the club who aren't dads but have lost their dad.

Ashley: Mm-hmm.

Rob: They've come and said, "Thank you very much for doing what you're doing. If my dad had had this, we might still have him."

We're seeing people who've experienced early loss. We're seeing people who've had miscarriages — and they're still a dad. Just because they don't have a child doesn't mean they're not a dad. But who do they talk to?

It's horrific to go through that. Unless you've gone through it, you don't understand it. At that time, the hospital is so focused on the lady — rightly so — but men just get left behind a little bit.

I'll never forget going back to work. We'd had a miscarriage between our two lads. About a month into being back at work, one of the guys came up to me and said, "You alright?" I said, "Yeah, fine."

I was sat having my lunch and thought, you know what, no one's asked me if I'm alright. That was the first person.

Everyone asks, "Is your wife okay?" and rightly so. But I thought, men need someone to talk to as well.

You need that relatable person. You need someone in a similar situation. Someone who's going to be open, clear, and able to provide support — or just listen.

Probably 60% of the people who come through the safe space to talk just need someone to listen to them, nod their head, maybe agree, or say, "Have you tried this?"

So yeah, that's the reason behind it and what we're seeing.

In the same breath, the oldest bloke who comes is 68. The youngest is 22 or 23. So if you walk through the door, you can pretty much guarantee there'll be someone similar in age, similar age kids, similar work, similar background.

Ashley: Do you know what I was thinking, Rob, as you were speaking? I was thinking about my dad. He's a widower. He has two grown-up kids and grandkids, but actually there isn't anything for him to go to as such.

The other thing I thought about is capacity. You've worked all day, you pick the kids up, you run them to swimming or wherever. You get in and think, "I'm knackered."

Often, the guys I see feel like they can't say that to their female partner because it's like, "You think you're tired? I've done the washing, the tea, the blah blah blah."

So just having that safe space where you can go and vent, offload, and feel better for it is brilliant. I love the community aspect. It's one of the reasons I wanted you on the podcast, because we're all about the village.

We don't live in extended families anymore. I know you said you live six minutes between the in-laws and your folks, which is brilliant. But we don't have that like we used to.

When I was growing up, everyone lived in the same village. Everyone knew you. If you had a problem, you had 15 aunties, two cousins, and a neighbour you could go to.

We just don't have that now, and I think we're lacking it as human beings — that connection, that support network.

What surprises you the most about what gets shared? Obviously without going into particular details.

Rob: I think there are two ends to that question. Possibly three.

We have a WhatsApp group. We have Northwich and we have Macclesfield. Macclesfield's growing — Northwich is still growing — we're at 86 members at the moment.

The thing that surprised me most, which I didn't think about, was the WhatsApp group.

There's a lot of, "Does anyone want this badge? Does anyone need these clothes? Does anyone need these nappies?"

All of a sudden, it's gone from mums sharing in mum groups to dads doing exactly the same thing.

Or someone saying, "Has anybody got this?"

It never even crossed my mind that those sorts of things would be shared.

We've had someone help fix a washing machine. We've had someone help fix lights — all through the WhatsApp group.

Obviously, we set ground rules at the start that it wouldn't just be peppered with nonsense. It's dad club related activity. But we're there as a support network.

Rob: The other side of things is that I fully expected home life to be shared, but I didn't expect the extent to which people would share once they felt safe.

I can't say I wasn't ready for it, but I did go and do further training to be able to support it properly. We got some funding through Northwich Rotary to train in information and guidance, which also ties in with what I do for work.

It's about being able to support properly, dig down where appropriate, signpost correctly, and know where the barriers are. Knowing when to say, actually, that's not something I can help with, but here's the information you need.

Without sharing any confidential information, a lot of what comes through is early loss, marriage or relationship problems, parenting problems, health problems, health problems with partners, support needed through authorities, or court systems.

That's probably as far as I can go without sharing conversations, because it is fully confidential. It doesn't go any further than myself or the volunteers.

Sometimes we'll sit and case conference internally if needed. We've got a life coach, a GP, and a couple of others within that small circle who can offer professional input if necessary.

But loads gets shared. Absolute loads. Loads of tips, loads of stories, loads of laughs, loads of lows and highs.

Lots of pregnancies. Lots of babies. Lots of achievements through kids. Lots of sporting achievements.

The most recent one we had was a bloke who'd not long moved to the area. He came to his first dad's club in February, got added to the group, and said, "Guys, I need help. I want to start playing football again. Where's the best place? What's the right thing to do?"

Within about 30 minutes, there were six or seven different messages. A few community evening games, three or four different telephone numbers for managers of different teams.

He messaged the next afternoon saying, "I'm sorted. I'm on an 11-a-side team and start next week."

And you think, actually, this is what it's about.

A lot of sharing of friendships as well. We've seen people bring others into their friendship groups. We've seen new friendship groups formed. A lot of school information shared.

Literally anything you can think of gets shared.

Some conversations are nothing about kids at all. Now that people are getting to know each other, they'll talk about all sorts. But it always comes back to being a dad.

Ashley: That's so cool.

Thinking about dads and kids, how do you think dads build confidence in kids that's different to mums?

Rob: I'm in the early planning stages of creating a new reel for Instagram — getting into all the influencer content creator stuff.

The premise is: what makes my dad cool?

I was driving the boys to nursery the other day and I asked, "What makes me cool, George?"

He said, "Motorbikes." Fair enough.

I don't ride bikes on the road. I have a motocross bike that I ride on a field. He can ride a motorbike at four. I taught him very early. I ride a quad bike and he can ride that.

He can't tie his shoelaces yet. He can't spell his name properly. But he can ride a bike and he can ride a motorbike.

I think Katie is very good at letting them be free spirits and balancing all three of us, because if it was up to me, we'd just be out in the wild all the time.

Katie does a lot of the spelling, a lot of the structured stuff, which allows me then to be dad.

I'll pick them up, dust them off, and send them back out. So does Katie — she's very good at it. But I'm very much a, if you've fallen off your bike and you need to get over there, get back on and ride over there.

Dust you off. Off you go.

Ashley: Mm-hmm.

Rob: I think dads open doors to different activities.

Men seem to have hobbies they pick at six years old and stick with until the day they die — same with friendship groups.

I think we open doors for our kids to try different things. Whether they realise they like it at the time, I don't know. But it's exposure.

Building confidence as a dad is about letting them express themselves. Letting them be feral. Letting them be outside.

I'll take them fishing. I'll take them motorbike riding. I'll take them cycling.

I'm lucky my dad has land where we can have fires, toast marshmallows, do all of that. It allows them to experience it.

If I asked George what he wanted to do on a Tuesday afternoon when I pick him up from nursery, it would be dig holes, ride his bike, play in the field, or go fishing.

Ashley: As it should be.

Rob: Yeah. I think it should be.

Rob: Even when you look at blokes who are into gaming, I've heard people say, "I can't wait to introduce them to certain games," or "I can't wait to teach them about internet safety." And you think, again, it's very similar to what I do — it's just in a different area.

I think men have that freedom to do that. I think if a mum is seen to be not as free-willed or not as caring, it's frowned upon. Whereas I think dads are expected to be outside.

I think that should change across the board. I think everyone should be able to be the fun parent, be the parent who takes them out, be the parent who picks them up, dusts them off, and sends them off again.

This is what I want to instil in everyone who comes through dad's club — you can still do that and then cook dinner. You can still do that and then clean the living room.

In the world we live in, it is 50/50. Don't expect your partner to be at home cleaning so you can go and do that. Do it together.

Or if you're in a situation where you only have the kids at the weekend, make that time count. Go and do it. But still show them you have to cook. You have to clean. Don't let them grow up thinking mum does all that and dad just takes them out to have fun.

It's as much about dads as it is about reminding dads that it's 50/50 and that we're all in it together.

Ashley: Whatever that looks like.

Rob: Whatever that looks like. It looks different in every house.

Ashley: It does. And I'm massive on this, especially with youngsters — boys and girls — about roughhousing. We used to call it a bundle. Everyone on the carpet, bundle on top of each other.

In extended families with big cousins, that's where you learn boundaries. That's where you learn if you hurt somebody or when to go harder or softer.

I think dads play a real role in the physicality of parenting that sometimes mums don't, for various reasons.

I've had to remind dads: "Right, just get on the carpet for a bundle." And they'll say, "What if I hurt him?"

You won't hurt them that much. And they'll learn how much they can hurt you. Bottom dollar, you'll get hurt before they do.

It's important for brain development, physical development, and playground awareness. Sometimes dads just need permission to go for it — to be feral for a bit.

I remember when we lived abroad and suddenly didn't have our support network. It was really hard work. Dave worked long hours, so during the week I'd get the kids ready for bed and he'd put them to bed.

But at the weekend, I would be fun mum, and he'd have to do the "get down from there" stuff. It worked really well because it gave me permission to be fun too.

I've got two questions I really wanted to ask you.

First one: what do you think boys need from dads right now?

Rob: Love.

Ashley: I'm so glad you said that.

Rob: Love, care, honesty — and the absolute most important thing is a role model.

Ashley: In our work, we often see kids and teens one-to-one. Then we have a family check-in. Sometimes I've got dads in front of me and they're vulnerable.

Nine times out of ten, they'll say, "I just want to be a good dad."

I'll say, "What does that look like?"

They don't know. They think it's providing money or fixing bikes.

And I'll say, "If I asked your kid what a good dad looks like, what would they say?"

Rob: Time.

Ashley: Exactly.

Rob: There is absolutely no way I'd be the way I am today if it wasn't for my old man and the time we spent together.

We're very close. We are best friends. But he's the dad first. There's always been that line.

Yes, I needed someone to fix my bike. Would I know how to fix a bike without him? No.

But I was never not involved in jobs. I was never not involved in what he was doing.

I've just built a planting bed in the garden. It took me so much longer because George was painting it with me, and I'm about to go over it again.

But he won't remember the planting bed. He'll remember making it. He'll remember putting overalls on. He'll remember flicking paint at me on purpose.

That's the point. It's time. It's creating memories.

You've got to show them love, or they won't feel it. You've got to give them time, because they deserve all the time in the world.

Unfortunately, the way the world works doesn't always allow it.

Having that role model — that honest role model — is remembering everything they do is because of what they see.

They copy you because they love you.

You've got to take what you think being a good dad looks like and roll with it.

They see how I am with Katie. They see how I am with my mum and dad.

Sometimes I'll catch myself slipping into teenage Rob with my parents and think, they're watching this. And I'll rein it back.

Ashley: Last question.

Rob: Yeah.

Ashley: When your boys are adults, what do you hope they'll say about you as a dad? You've said some beautiful things about your dad. What do you hope they'll say about you?

Rob: I got a Valentine's card off my lad this year. He decided to give it to me instead of Katie — I don't know how that went down.

All it said in there was, "I want my dad to be happy because I love him."

I just hope they look back on their childhood and think that me and Katie have done everything we can to make it happy.

That's it. I just want them to look back and say it was fun.

Ashley: And have those memories of painting in overalls.

Rob: Yeah. We obviously keep them safe, but there's keeping them safe and then there's wrapping them in bubble wrap.

I just want them to look back and say, "Yeah, that was a childhood."

It wasn't sat in front of a computer. It wasn't sat in front of a TV. It was out creating memories, getting dirty, rolling around in mud.

Ashley: Absolutely.

Rob: So yeah, that's it. Just that they've had fun.

Ashley: I love it.

So Rob, tell me — where can we find the dad's clubs? Tell us about Davenham and Macclesfield. When do you meet? What time? Where is it?

Rob: Davenham is primarily at The Bulls Head in Davenham. We do occasionally meet at the rugby club at Northwich, at Moss Farm, but that's very occasional, and the information goes out beforehand.

It's 8:00pm till 10:00pm on the first Monday of every month.

If you are neurodivergent or you have a child who is neurodivergent, we have a subgroup that meets at 7:30pm till 8:00pm. They share tips and tricks and have a smaller group discussion.

We find parents with different barriers and needs share what they needed as a child growing up that they didn't have, or things that really work for them now. So that's 7:30pm till 8:00pm at The Bulls Head on the first Monday of every month.

This coming one is March the 2nd, I believe, and it's a birthday party because it's our one-year celebration of the dad's club birthday.

Ashley: Amazing.

Rob: So if you want free birthday cake, get yourself down.

Macclesfield is on our second meeting now. That's the first Tuesday of every month at Macclesfield Rugby Club, 8:00pm till 10:00pm.

Ashley: Brilliant. And where can we find you on the socials?

Rob: On Facebook, it's Davenham Dad's Club and Macclesfield Dad's Club. On Instagram, it's Davenham_Dads_Club.

Ashley: Excellent. Thank you very much.

I hope the listeners have enjoyed this conversation as much as I have. I'll absolutely put all the socials, details of the meetings, and how to get hold of Rob in the show notes.

Rob, thank you very much. Keep up the good work. I absolutely love the community you're building. This is so much more than dads. This is a real community.

We're so lucky to have people like you and your team offering this locally for dads in need.

Thank you.

Rob: Thank you very much, and thank you for having me.

Ashley: You're very welcome.