

Mat Rogers shares touching insight into life with son Max eight years after he was diagnosed with Autism

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MAT Rogers is pleased to tell you Max is doing great.

Diagnosed with autism at three, the footy legend's son is now 11 and "absolutely flying" in Year 5 at Miami State School. His speech is "pretty good", he's taking in more than ever and, in the words of his old man, is "just the most phenomenal kid".

That said, Rogers is honest enough to admit he has no idea what comes next.

"I do wonder about the future," the dual international says of the unique path walked by children with autism and the families who love them.

"What will he be like when he's 15? Will he go to high school in a year and a half? Where? You're constantly thinking 'what's the next step'. It's not as easy as life is normally.



Mat Rogers hangs with then three-year-old son Max, the age he was diagnosed with autism.

“Then you wonder if he’s going to be with us forever. I’d love for my child to always live with me but God willing he’s going to live longer than me and then what happens?”

“At the moment I’m just enjoying how he’s developing. He’s just a really fun, quirky child and that’s what makes him special ... but you just can’t put a finger on where it’ll end up.”

Eight years ago, Rogers and wife Chloe Maxwell opened a public window to their private heartache when they revealed their son had been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder.

They enrolled him in an intensive and life-changing program, started a charity to help other families access it and even wrote a book about their experiences, fittingly called *Living with Max*.

Now, in a candid and revealing interview, Rogers has opened up about what happened next for their little man, the impact he’s had on his siblings’ lives and why his marriage is one of the lucky ones when it comes to autism.

“Many marriages fail these days and they fail a lot more when there is a special-needs child involved ... but I really believe we fell more in love and our relationship gained strength through this process.”



Mat Rogers with son Max as a toddler.

PAIN GAME

Rogers was living the dream in early 2009.

Having returned to rugby league after five years as a Wallaby, he was playing for the Titans, living in a city he loves and raising four healthy children, the youngest pair a blessing from his union with model and media personality Maxwell.

Then came that diagnosis.

“The world just went silent,” he recalls of finally learning why his three-year-old was non-verbal, prone to aggressive outbursts and “didn’t even look at you when you spoke”.

“Max was pretty brutal, just relentless, and would particularly attack Chloe ... we were in this place thinking ‘what do we do’. Then you find out there is a spectrum and you wonder where he’s going to land.”

Salvation came in the form of Arundel’s Little Souls Taking Big Steps, a nation-leading early intervention centre for children with autism.

“A lot of people don’t understand how hard Max worked,” he says.

“For four hours a day, five days a week for three years he sat eyeball to eyeball with a therapist. He got worked really hard and even after three months it was chalk and cheese.

“The improvements gave us hope but we could afford it ... the flip side is you don’t have the money and your son is going backwards.



“Max actually got a place (at Little Souls) because the family on the list before us couldn’t afford it. After three months we were in tears thinking about those parents. That was really the catalyst for 4 ASD Kids.”Daddy’s boy ... Mat Rogers gets a kiss from son Max after a Titans match at Skilled Park.

PASSION PROJECT

In their darkest hour, Rogers and Maxwell founded a charity to help other families afford the treatment they could see was changing their son’s life.

Eight years on he says it’s time to take 4 ASD Kids to the next level.

“In the early days we didn’t really know what we were doing,” he says. “We just knew people needed money to help their children but it’s probably nothing on what we could do if we really our minds to it.

“We’ve been able to help individual families but we now want to make a huge difference in the autistic space.

“This year we’re looking to develop things to be long-term and have even greater reach.”

Having walked in their shoes, Rogers’s heart aches when he considers the pressures felt by families touched by autism.

“I think all my kids (aged 10 to 20) have suffered a little in Max’s shadow,” he says. “We’ve been able to bring them on the journey with us and they absolutely love him ... but we know the pressures.

“With autism, it’s not a case of that’s just where they’re at. Without help they regress and because we had hope, we could move forward with a plan rather than feeling hopeless and fighting and arguing.

“Chloe and I are a normal couple — don’t get me wrong — but I think we fell in love more going through this and seeing our son develop than any other time in our relationship. Nothing else could have brought us closer.”



Mat Rogers with son Max at Burleigh Heads State School's Special Education Unit. Photo: Brendan Radke.

FAMILY TIES

Befitting a man never scared of a challenge during his footy career, Rogers continues to step out of his comfort zone.

He runs marathons and tackles ironman triathlons, many with his Rat Pack training crew. He has embraced the first “real job” he’s ever had — volunteer engagement manager for the Commonwealth Games.

However, as he speaks with pride about his youngest son’s eclectic passions, it’s obvious the most exciting thing in his life continues to be his family.

“Max is loving robotics and knows everything about gemstones,” Rogers says. “He loves bees and wants a hive, as well as an ant farm.

“I can see him moving into one of those quirky areas one day. He’s always thinking of what he can do. I said to Chloe the other night ‘He might actually invent something’.

“You never know what the future holds but I’m confident he’ll be able to function in society and be of value to his community.”