

extra fingers

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Work meetings

AMELIE, riding to school today: “Oh, no! I’ve got Assembly. I have Assembly today. I really hate Assembly, Dad. It’s the worst thing in the world. All they ever do there is talk and sing. The principal talks, then we have to sing, then teachers talk, then we have to sing again, then some kids end up talking – usually big kids, then we have to sing again, then there’s more talking and then, finally, we get to go. It’s so long, Dad. It goes on forever until everyone’s really tired and sick.”

DAD: “You mean sick and tired, don’t you?”

AMELIE, ignoring the question: “Dad, why do I have to go?”

DAD: “Well, it’s probably so you can hear about all the things that have been happening at your school. Don’t worry, adults have to go to assemblies too.”

AMELIE: “Do they?”

DAD: “Yeah. They’re called work meetings.”

AMELIE: “Work meetings?”

DAD: “Yeah. And there are other kinds of meetings as well. Some people, even after they’ve gone to work meetings, go and have more meetings because they join committees.”

AMELIE: “What’s ‘committees’?”

DAD: “Oh, they’re usually just groups of people who get together so they can talk about something they want to get done.”

AMELIE: “Do they have to sing at committees?”

DAD: “No. No singing happens when you join a committee. But there’s lots of talking. The talking can go on for hours.”

AMELIE: “Oh, hours!”

DAD: “Hmm-hmm. Most people hate going to any kind of meeting but the worst ones are the ones they are made to go to. That’s what a work meeting is. You have no choice. You have to go.”

AMELIE: “That’s like assemblies. I don’t like assemblies but my teacher makes me go. She says, ‘Pack up. C’mom. Pack up, everyone. We have to go to Assembly now.’ It’s really bad, Dad. Why do ‘meeting people’ have to go to meetings?”

DAD: “Well, it’s because if they don’t they won’t get any money. They’ll end up losing their job.”

AMELIE: “Just for not going?”

DAD: “Yeah. It would mean that they weren’t interested in the meeting and that would make people who were interested in meetings – they’re called bosses – think that they didn’t care. It’s just one of the ways you get your money each week. You go to meetings.”

AMELIE: “Will there be meetings when I have to get money?”

DAD: “More than likely. Unless someone

comes up with a way where you don't have to go. That's your only hope."

AMELIE: "Dad, I hate it when it's talk, talk, talk all the time. The words just end up turning into these big swirly sounds."

DAD: "Do they?"

AMELIE: "Yes. They turn into sounds that stop at my ears. I hear all this sound but not any words. The words don't go in because they've turned into really big sounds."

DAD: "Oh. And so they're too big to fit in, are they?"

AMELIE: "No. They're too boring."

She should ask him

HOLLY: Dad, did you know, there's actually a kid in my class who doesn't know what her dad does?"

DAD: "Really?"

HOLLY: "Yeah. She thinks she might know, but she's not quite sure because he comes home from work at two o'clock in the morning and then goes out again at five."

ISABELLA, as though the girl's father was a complete stranger to the girl, which of course is almost certainly the case: "Well, ask him. She should ask him."

HOLLY: "She can't. She doesn't see him, Issy."

Isabella: "She could leave a note then. I know. She could email him."

Inventing people

AMELIE, on Sunday, as we were walking together over the Narrows Bridge: "Dad, are any of the people from the 'olden days' still alive?"

DAD: "What do you mean? When do you think the 'olden days' were? Am I from the 'olden days'?"

AMELIE: "I don't know. Did you used to write with a feather or have a horse for a car?"

DAD: "No. I used to write with a pen."

AMELIE: "You didn't have any of those, you know, little circles on your desk?"

DAD: "You mean, ink wells?"

AMELIE: "Yeah."

DAD: "No. Well, they were on the desks I used to write on at school because the desks we had were very old ones. But we didn't *use* ink wells. We just used to put rubbers and sharpeners in them."

She looked at me silently for a moment while she thought about my reply.

AMELIE: "Right. Well, then, you're not from the 'olden days'."

DAD: "Oh. Alright."

AMELIE: "Dad, I think there's just 'nowdays', 'olden days', and '*real* olden days'."

DAD: "Isabella used to call '*real* olden days' 'olden, olden days'."

AMELIE: "Did she?"

DAD: "Yeah."

AMELIE: "Alright. I'll make it that, too. So, do you think there are any people living now who used to be in the 'olden days'?"

DAD: "Wouldn't you rather talk about the 'olden, olden days' first?"

AMELIE: "No. Why? They'd all be *definitely* dead."

DAD: "Would they?"

AMELIE, already so used to change being a constant in her life: "Yeah. Probably. Dad, what was before feathers?"

DAD: “No, it wasn’t different for each new lot of people. Sometimes the same thing was used for generations. That just means for lots and lots and lots of years.”

AMELIE: “Oh. Wasn’t it?”

DAD: “No. Feathers were around for ages.”

AMELIE: “Oh! But they’d still be all dead the ‘olden, olden days’ people. No one from the ‘olden, olden days’ would still be alive now, would they, Dad?”

DAD: “No, you’re probably right.”

AMELIE: “Dad, who are the people who invent?”

DAD: “Oh, they’re just like anyone else, Ams. Like you or me, really.”

AMELIE: “Not like me, Dad. I don’t invent things.”

DAD: “Don’t you?”

AMELIE: “No. I just get things and use things like everyone else. The ‘inventing people’ probably live in a shop. I’ve never seen them. They’re very good at not getting themselves seen, aren’t they, Dad?”

DAD: “Yes, that’s usually the case.”

AMELIE: “We should try and see one one day.”

DAD: “What? By going to a shop?”

AMELIE: “No. By going on an excursion in a bus. I like excursions.”

There’s a Salvador Dali inside us all

Amelie, on the sort of dreams she’s been having lately: “Dad, there’s always bare bums in my dreams. I don’t want there to be bare bums in my dreams, but there always are. Holly gets Harry Potter dreams and Issy gets what she wants (sometimes), but I get bare bums all the time. There were four in a

car once. Waving. That’s what I mean about some of my dreams. They’re *really* weird.”

You’re not going anywhere

AMELIE, as Dad was saying good-bye to her this morning: “The teacher said you can only give your mum and dad a quick kiss now. You have to do a quick kiss and then say goodbye to them. And you’re not allowed to cry anymore, Dad. That’s being a cry-baby.”

DAD: “Is it? But you’ve never cried, have you?”

AMELIE: “What?”

DAD: “You’ve never cried whenever I’ve dropped you off at school in the morning and kissed you goodbye.”

AMELIE: “Yeah, I know. Why would I want to do that for?”

DAD: “Oh, I don’t know. Some kids get really sad when their parents leave them so it’s not as though it’s something that never happens in Year One.”

AMELIE, dismissing me with a quick push: “Oh, Dad! That’s so silly. You’re always someone I’ll just end up seeing when I get home after I’ve finished playing at school. I know you’re never going anywhere.”

Reading, writing and riling Dad

A ‘reader’ is a little book that always seems to have a woeful storyline full of rhymes and the repetition of very simple words.

Irrespective of that, though, and the fact that such books typically drive parents to despair because they’re so insipid, at the end of a very long day, I must admit they’re pretty good at getting children of Amelie’s age to read. For some reason that’s beyond me, most six-year-olds actually seem to find the stories quite riveting. If only there were a way parents didn’t have to be riveted by them as well.

AMELIE, 9.20pm last night, after everything else including her cello practice, Holly's violin and piano practice, Isabella's singing practice, and all the other types of homework such as solving maths problems and English comprehension had finally been completed: "C'mon, Dad! I've got a new book for us to read."

DAD: "Yes, I know you do, sweetheart. And what's it about today?"

AMELIE: "Um, a cat I think."

DAD, swallowing a sigh without Amelie noticing: "Oh, okay. Well, we'd better read it then, hadn't we?"

It was another hot night, like many over this incredibly long summer and it was hard to show enthusiasm for a boring bedtime story. But I didn't want that to deflate her exuberance. Unfortunately, though, by the end of the book, my capacity to endure the miserable storyline was at its end. After Amelie had already attempted to change a number of the words, I felt her saying "on a rug" instead of "on a mat" was all too much.

DAD: "Oh, Amelie! 'Rug?' What are you talking about?"

AMELIE: "I thought it looked like a rug."

DAD: "No. Oh, well, I suppose it does a bit, but . . . Look, the book is all about 'at' sounds. You've been doing 'at' sounds all week. You know, 'at the park' or 'at the beach'. That sort of thing. Or, in my case, 'at the end of one's tether'. 'At', Amelie. It has to be an 'at' sound."

Of course she then said 'mat'. And I suppose it can seem like such a trivial thing for me to get annoyed about in the big scheme of things – whatever the 'big scheme of things' is when you're parenting. I suppose I should have let it go, but it was hot and I'd just dealt with Isabella's English homework, wherein Isabella had mistaken the name 'Brian' for 'brain'. It had taken me some time trying to explain to her that 'brian' was

actually spelt correctly – it only needed a capital. Here's the assignment:

***From: Editing Skills - Direct Speech
Assignment 7 Term 1***

1. this meat loaf looks so chumpy you could carve it said brian
2. its the finest we have ever eaten said gregory

Before I could ask Isabella to show me the corrections she'd made to the above assignment, she'd already put her workbook in her schoolbag and zipped it up. For her, it was finished. Her corrections were correct and there was no need for me to ask to see them. After opening her bag, though, my suspicions were well founded.

The sentence after Isabella had corrected it: 'This meat loaf looks so chumpy you could carve it said brain'. For some reason, she was very content with that.

ISABELLA: "Dad! Stop worrying all the time. I only had one thing that I didn't understand and you helped me with that, okay? You know, 'brain' doesn't have a capital or something because it's only a common noun. There. See? (*Pointing to the change she'd made*) Fixed. Now you can put the book back in my bag thank you very much. It's finished!"

DAD: "Yes I know I told you that. 'Brain' doesn't need a capital because it's not a proper noun I said. But that's beside the point."

ISABELLA: "Huh! What's 'beside the point' mean?"

DAD: "It means that the thing you were talking about isn't important anymore. And so, in this case, because the word needed to be 'Brian' instead of 'brain', 'brain' isn't important anymore."

ISABELLA: "Da-ad! Just leave it to the teacher to find my mistakes."

DAD: “No. I had a meeting with your teacher and she said that I should help you. That’s what a parent is for.”

ISABELLA: “I bet it’s not what you’re for.”

DAD: “She said it is, Is.”

ISABELLA: “Well, I still think it isn’t your job.”

DAD: “Well, look, Issy. I don’t have a definition on me of what a parent should do when it comes to school work, but your teacher, who is also a parent, agreed that I should help you with your homework and so I think that speaks for itself. Anyway. I won’t take a second. (*Pointing to the word ‘brian’*) Have another look at this word. What does it say?”

ISABELLA: “‘Brain.’”

DAD: “Nope. Have another look. One more time.”

ISABELLA, after looking closer: “Oh, ‘brian’ [pron. b-ry-an].”

DAD: “Yeah. See? And that’s the name of a person, isn’t it? So that word needs a capital.”

ISABELLA: “Hmm.”

DAD: “Right. Now we’re getting somewhere because that changes things quite a bit. And as for the word ‘chumpy’, I think the writer means ‘chunky’, as in solid. Let’s put speech marks around the sentence and fix those things up, alright?”

ISABELLA: “Okay, Dad. Because I was wondering so much about ‘gregory’ as well. Whether ‘gregory’ needed a capital. I was trying to think of what part of the body ‘gregory’ was.”

DAD: “Yes. You’ve probably never come across ‘Gregory’ as in a name, have you?”

ISABELLA: “Is that a person’s name?”

DAD: “Hmm-mm.”

ISABELLA: “Is it? Gee! Is it a boy’s name or a girl’s name?”

DAD: “A boy’s name.”

ISABELLA: “Pretty strange name for a boy, Dad.”

DAD: “‘Gregory’ is usually shortened to ‘Greg’ these days.”

ISABELLA: “Is it? Why? Because ‘gory’ is really bad or something?”

DAD, wishing to move on: “Yeah, something like that.”