

extra fingers

Newsletter number 5 • May 24, 2011

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I don't like how it's so busy now

ISABELLA, on being a grownup: "It wouldn't be cool to be a grownup because then you would have to look after babies, you'd have to get food, you'd have to get drinks, you'd have to take the kids somewhere, you'd have to get exercise, you'd have to take your dog up to the park if you had a dog, you'd have to help your kids with their homework, you'd have to do so much stuff and it'd be so annoying."

DAD: "Well, what's the alternative?"

ISABELLA: "Pardon."

DAD: "What's the alternative?"

ISABELLA: "What does that mean?"

DAD: "Well, what else can you do?"

ISABELLA: "I don't know. I just listed a few things."

DAD: "Well, what are you going to do then?"

ISABELLA: "I don't know. I'm just going to let my 'future' me decide. Not me."

DAD: "Hmm. Fair enough. But do you want to grow up rather fast, or are you quite happy to be a kid?"

ISABELLA: "I'm quite happy to be a kid. Because it's fun. You like toys, you get to go on all sorts of camps, you see your friends more often than grownups do, and you don't have to put up with a smelly husband. Or wife. But really, husbands are the smelly ones. And they [husbands] don't usually do much of the

work. Like, Grandma said Pa hadn't ironed a single shirt in his life. So then I'd have to be left with the ironing. And I don't want to cook either because I'm really bad at that."

DAD: "Yeah, but Pa did a job. He owned a newsagency and delivered newspapers."

ISABELLA: "I'd rather do that any day than cooking or ironing or washing."

DAD: "You reckon?"

ISABELLA: "Do you want to do cooking, ironing and washing instead of just delivering papers?"

DAD: "Well, you can cross off ironing because I wouldn't do that anyway."

ISABELLA, emphatically: "Yeah! Because ironing's pretty boring!"

DAD: "It's very boring! And unnecessary."

ISABELLA: "It's always left to the wives (sic) to do. Never the man."

DAD: "Well, you don't have to do it though, do you?"

ISABELLA, in a tone of voice that pleaded for common sense to prevail: "Um, have you seen how crinkly my clothes would be if they weren't ironed? Sometimes blouses get really wrinkly. And, if you don't iron them you look really silly."

DAD: "Yeah, well, we should buy clothes that don't need ironing."

ISABELLA: "Well, all I know is my school blouse and my school dress need ironing all the time."

DAD: "That's how you see things when you're a kid. When I was a little boy I used to think the adult world looked so complicated. There seemed like there was so much work to do. That's why I also used to think I'd like to stay as a kid."

ISABELLA: "Well, I don't like how you have to know where all the roads are. You have to work out street directives [directions], money, payments, interest, everything. It's really annoying."

DAD: "But, someone's got to do it, haven't they?"

ISABELLA, not listening: "Houses, cars, property, everything, and it's so annoying!"

DAD: "Well, what else can we do? What's the alternative?"

ISABELLA: "I don't know why you guys have to . . . it's so complicated and who ever thought up how everything would work must have been pretty smart. Because how could they do that without anything?"

DAD: "Well, do you just think it was one person, do you?"

ISABELLA: "I don't know."

DAD: "Who would the person be? What would their job be?"

ISABELLA: "I don't know. But something . . . not something . . . something happened to make this world how it is today."

DAD: "Yeah. And you don't know what it is? You don't think it was a good thing?"

ISABELLA: "What?"

DAD: "The way the world is. You don't think it's a good thing?"

ISABELLA, somewhat forlornly: "I don't like how it's so busy."

The walking tissue

I'd overheard Isabella talking to Holly and Amelie, after she'd apparently surreptitiously wiped her sticky hands on my jumper earlier that day.

ISABELLA: "Dad doesn't care what you wipe on him. He's like a flannel."

AMELIE: "Yeah, I know. On the plane back from Sydney I wiped my nose on him twice and he didn't care. I mean, know."

HOLLY: "No, he's not like a flannel. He's more like a walking tissue, if you ask me. If you know where you can find him you can forget all about a tissue."

Quick on the draw in the face of war

Returning to an earlier conversation I'd had with Amelie one day.

DAD: "You were asking about my grandfather, weren't you, Amelie? You wanted to know what happened to him."

AMELIE: "He died."

DAD: "Yes, he did die, but he didn't die in the war, did he? [Amelie had thought my grandfather died in World War One]. He died afterwards."

AMELIE: "I know what happened."

DAD: "Do you? What?"

AMELIE: "A bullet went into his lungs."

DAD: "Well, shrapnel. Which are parts of the bullet. Ams, do you know what war is?"

AMELIE: "Yes. It's when people are fighting for something. But I never know what it is about."

DAD: "You don't know what they fight about?"

AMELIE: "No."

DAD: "Hmm. What do you think people do in war?"

AMELIE: "Kill each other."

DAD: "How?"

AMELIE: "They have guns."

DAD: "Yep."

AMELIE: "And they push people over and they have swords."

DAD: "They push people over?"

AMELIE: "Yeah."

DAD: "How do you know they do that?"

AMELIE: "Well . . . they would."

DAD: "They would?"

AMELIE: "Yep."

DAD: "But that wouldn't hurt that much, would it?"

AMELIE: "No. But if there was a pavement then that [pushing people over] would very hurt."

DAD: "Oh. Do you think there's much pavement in war?"

AMELIE: "No."

DAD: "Oh. What do you normally get in war?"
AMELIE: "Well, they do it in sand."

DAD: "What's that?"

AMELIE: "They do it in sand."

DAD: "Sand?"

AMELIE: "Yeah."

DAD: "Well, it [pushing people over] wouldn't hurt so much then, would it?"

AMELIE: "No."

DAD: "What makes people die then? . . . Oh, the guns would, wouldn't they?"

AMELIE: "Yep."

DAD: "What else?"

AMELIE: "Swords."

DAD: "Swords?"

AMELIE: "Yeah."

DAD: "Do you think they have swords now?"

AMELIE: "No."

DAD: "Well, what have they got now?"

AMELIE: "Guns."

DAD: "Just guns?"

AMELIE: "Yes."

DAD, almost inaudibly: "Oh. I see."

AMELIE: "Dad, you're annoying me right now."

DAD: "What's that?"

AMELIE: "I'm in the middle of a drawing. Can't you see?"

I'd want to go home

Amelie was listening to Holly and me talking about education once you've left school.

AMELIE: "What's university?"

DAD: "Oh, it's just where you can go after you've finished Year 12. So that you can learn more if you want to. Do you think you might want to go to university one day?"

AMELIE: "No."

DAD: "No? Oh, why? What do you want to do instead?"

AMELIE: "Go home."

Hail to the bus driver, bus driver, bus driver

One Wednesday morning the 7.30am bus to school didn't stop for Isabella. So I went up to the bus stop to help Isabella signal the bus driver that she wanted the bus to stop so she could catch it.

DAD: "See what it says here, Issy? It says 'Hail'. 'Hail' means to signal strongly to the driver, or even to yell out enthusiastically if you need to."

ISABELLA: "Oh, no way! I'm not going to do that. How embarrassing!"

DAD: "Well, you really have to get the driver's attention, Issy. Look what happened to you. The driver missed you."

ISABELLA: "Yeah, but what if you were hailing a real lot with your hand, Dad, and the bus came along and whacked your hand off? That wouldn't be very good, would it? That'd probably be too much hailing."

DAD: "Yes, way too much hailing."

ISABELLA: "See, Dad? 'Hailing' isn't very smart sometimes, is it? Better to miss the bus I think than get killed or run over by its big wheels."

Think nothing of it

AMELIE, cycling to school : "Dad, I think I just rode over money. (*Pointing behind*) It's back there somewhere."

DAD: "Yes, but we're a bit late for school, Amelie, so I think we should keep going."

AMELIE: "But, Dad. It's money!"

DAD, realising it was easier not to argue the point: "Oh, okay. I'll go back and have a look then. How can you be sure, though, that it was money you rode over?"

AMELIE: "It was, Dad. I know it was. I heard it being money when I bumped over it. It went tinkle tinkle."

DAD: "Bumped over it? It went tinkle tinkle?"

AMELIE, excitedly: "Yeah."

DAD: "But you don't bump over money!"

ISABELLA, joining in and becoming excited as well at the prospect of finding a small fortune on the footpath: "That could have been money, Dad. Or a bottle top or something like money. You'd better go and have a look."

DAD, after scouring the footpath for a few minutes without any luck: "Nope. No money back there, Ams. It must have been something else."

AMELIE: "Oh! Now I remember. I think it was just 'tink'."

DAD: "'Tink'? So it wasn't tinkle tinkle?"

AMELIE: "No. Just 'tink' I think. Or there might have been a rattley kind of sound as well so it could have been a little bell."

DAD: "No, I didn't see a little bell either."

AMELIE: "Well, I don't know, Dad. Maybe it was just nothing and for once 'nothing' made a little sound that was a bit like 'tinkle'."

I love your place

HOLLY, describing what a friend of hers said about our house and backyard: "She said she loved it, Dad. She said, 'I love your place. It's all mad and wonderful. Everyone else gets out their choppers [mowers and whipper-snippers, presumably] and chops everything up until everything's all square, but no one in your house does. It's a mess."

From bunkers to bunk beds

DAD, showing Isabella a photograph of some trenches from a book about World War One that Holly needed for her picture book assignment: "These are the trenches that they fought in."

ISABELLA: "How are they trenches?"

DAD: "Well, trenches are—"

ISABELLA, interrupting, and referring to two dead soldiers in a photograph on the next page: "Are they dead people?"

DAD: "Yes."

ISABELLA: "Who finds them?"

DAD: "What's that?"

ISABELLA: "Who went and finded (sic) them?"

DAD: "Well, people with cameras went and found them. (*Elaborating further as to how war works, but struggling to explain it in such a way that a ten-year-old could understand*) One team . . . well, they're not a team. One country or one nation has guns and bombs and they try and blow up the other country they're fighting against. They're both trying to blow each other up."

AMELIE: "Have they stopped wars now?"

DAD: "No, they haven't stopped wars yet."

AMELIE: "They're still going?"

DAD: "Yes. They're still going. Yeah."

AMELIE: "Oooh!"

HOLLY: "Hey guys. We saw this war thing [in class at school]-"

DAD: "A 'war thing'?"

HOLLY: "Yeah, it was a video. About World War Two. In it there was this scene where all you saw was just a face with no eyes or anything."

DAD: "Yeah, I know. War is terrible! But it's difficult because, with these men you saw, their country said they had to join up otherwise they'd be called a coward."

ISABELLA: "Well, I'd be a coward."

HOLLY: "Evelyn said she'd just go and get her

dad — because he's a doctor — to write that she had some medical condition. Even if it was fake."

DAD: "Yeah, a lot of people try that. But they look for that. Someone trying to trick their way out."

HOLLY: "I'd go and break my leg."

DAD: "Yeah, that would probably do it."

ISABELLA: "Do some people get out of war?"

DAD: "Yeah."

ISABELLA: "That'd be like, 'Oh, thank God! I'm glad I'm not there [where war is].'"

DAD: "The ones who got out of war were people like priests. You could get out of it if you said you were a priest because you could say you didn't want to fight for religious reasons."

ISABELLA, trying to sound like a priest, which was difficult for her to do because priests sound quite normal: "What if you said, '[in a deep, imperious tone of voice] I am a priest.'"

DAD: "Yeah, well, you don't have to put the funny voice on. You do a course to become a priest. You study to be a priest."

ISABELLA: "The police?"

DAD: "No, not the police. A priest."

ISABELLA: "Oh! . . . What if you were Hitler? Did he get out of war?"

DAD: "No! He wanted to be in the war. He liked killing."

ISABELLA: "No, no, no. Did he actually fight?"

DAD: "Yeah. In World War One he did."

ISABELLA, incredulously: "Oh my god! He actually wanted to get out there and play fighting!"

DAD: "Yeah, he was keen on fighting."

ISABELLA: "I hate fighting. I'd be like, 'Stop! No fighting!'"

DAD: "But if your country was telling you, Is, that you had to go and fight - and they wouldn't take any excuses - what would you do?"

ISABELLA: "Children didn't have to fight."

DAD: "Well, actually, that's not true. At the end of World War Two, in Germany, boys as young as seven were fighting."

HOLLY: "Yeah, they handed out badges for it."

DAD: "Yeah, that's right."

ISABELLA: "What about girls?"

DAD: "No, not so much girls."

ISABELLA: "What about mums?"

DAD: "Well, in Germany back then, if you were keen to fight they would have given you a gun to fight with."

HOLLY: "I saw a movie called 'Der under something'. It was a Hitler thing. It was German."

DAD: "A 'Hitler thing'?"

HOLLY: "It was a Hitler movie. And it had subtitles and they were all in German."

DAD: "Was the movie called 'Downfall'?"

HOLLY: "It was something like 'Der under something'."

ISABELLA, with a very wild guess even by her standards: "Dirk Hartog*?"

DAD: "It might have had something to do with Hitler's bunker. Was it about him being underground?"

HOLLY: "No."

DAD: "What was he doing then?"

ISABELLA: "Daddy, was the bunker a bunk bed?"

DAD: "No. The bunker was not about a bunk bed. It's a place underground -"

ISABELLA, interrupting, because Holly was laughing at her: "Holly, what's so funny? You say what it is then?"

DAD: "A bunker is a place underground where you are safe from bombs hitting you."

ISABELLA: "Were there bunk beds down there?"

DAD: "Yeah, there were bunk beds."

ISABELLA, mellifluously: "Cool! No wonder it's called a bunker then."

DAD: "No, that's not the reason it's called a bunker. Even though there are some bunk beds in it. But that's not the reason, Is. Okay?"

ISABELLA: "Sounds like it."

DAD: "Well, it might sound like it, but not everything in the world is associated with bunk beds. Okay? There were bunk beds, but that was a coincidence."

ISABELLA: "I would have liked to have jumped on those bunk beds."

DAD: "Yeah, alright, but above your bunk bed there would have been bombs going off all over the place. You might have had a bunk bed, but you'd also have bombs hitting the ground above you. And sometimes that would shake your bunk beds."

ISABELLA: "It'd be like, whooah, surfing." Once a ten-year-old has redirected a conversation about war so that you end up discussing the merits of owning a bunk bed, there's really no point continuing, for an adult that is.

*The Dutch explorer who navigated his way to Australia in 1616. In other words, Isabella's guess, influenced I'm sure by what she'd been studying at school, involved a fellow who had no chance of playing a part in either World Wars due to no fault of his own, having been born a good three hundred years too early.

Isabella and the budget

DAD: "Did you know there's a big federal government budget every year, Is?"

ISABELLA: "No."

DAD: "The government has to deliver a budget every year for how it's going to spend all the money that's been given to it. And so, the government's a bit like mum and dad. For the nation. But it gets its money from all the people working. They pay taxes and it goes to the government and the government says, 'Okay, we're going to spend your money this way.' And then the people either get all grumpy about it and upset, or happy depending on whether they're getting something usually."

ISABELLA: "What if it was a school? Wouldn't they be happy if people were getting educated?"

DAD: "You mean, would they be happy to pay their taxes for education?"

ISABELLA: "Yeah."

DAD: "A lot of people are actually pretty keen not to pay any tax if they can."

ISABELLA: "What's tax?"

DAD: "Tax is where . . . okay, if I go out, like I went to work today, and I earned some money but out of that pay packet I have to give some of it to the government, then that is what you call 'being taxed.'"

ISABELLA, timidly: "Why? You work hard just for the government and what if you don't want to [pay tax]?"

DAD: "Well, what happens is, if you don't pay the tax then there'll be no money for schools and roads because how else are they going to be made?"

ISABELLA: "But couldn't the government just have money? Instead of just getting it from other people. And what if people want their taxes spent on a specific thing? They don't get what they want because they might want it spent on a certain thing."

DAD: "They might want their taxes spent on something that they want themselves?"

ISABELLA: "No, like a school for their children."

DAD: "Oh. Rather than education in general?"

ISABELLA: "Yeah."

DAD: "Um—"

ISABELLA: "Or a road that they like."

DAD: "Yeah, but you can't just have it spent on a road that runs out the front of your place."

ISABELLA: "No, not one that runs out the front of your place; a road that they need to have."

DAD: "Okay. Well, what I'm getting at is, it is very important that people pay taxes because if they didn't pay taxes then things like roads and hospitals wouldn't be made. Now, I know some people would like their money to be spent on specific things, but if that was the case, like there are millions of people in Australia who work, then all of them would have their little opinions. There'd be all these millions of opinions and you'd never get anything done. How could you get anything done if you have everyone saying, 'oh, I'd rather it be spent on this . . . oh, I want it spent on that.' In the end you'd get nothing done. Do you see what I mean?"

ISABELLA: "Yeah, but, like, we have a vote."

DAD: "Yeah, that's right. So we vote for a particular political party. There are two major parties – Liberal and Labor – and we vote for one of them based on the idea that they will spend the money the way we'd like them to spend it. So, if you were to vote for Labor, and they're the government at the moment, you'd be saying, 'Good! They're in power.' Because I wanted them to spend more money on something like roads."

ISABELLA: "What are they spending the money on now?"

DAD: "Right now?"

ISABELLA: "Hmm."

DAD: "Well, right now they're trying to save as much money as possible. That's what they're trying to do."

ISABELLA: "What for?"

DAD: "Well, because at the moment the government, the nation, is in debt. It owes money."

ISABELLA, tremulously: "Oh dear!"

DAD: "Yep. We're fifty billion dollars in debt."

ISABELLA: "Oh no!"

DAD: "But the government has a plan that, after next year, they'll only be twenty-two billion dollars in debt. And then the year after that we'll be 3.8 billion dollars in credit."

ISABELLA: "Oh this is so complicated. I just wish they could have a fun day with fireworks and stuff and if you wanted to come you had to pay six hundred million dollars. Why can't they do that?"