

extra fingers

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Sometimes it's all just 'yep, yep, yep'

DAD: "Do you think a person should be proud of their country?"

ISABELLA: "I don't really care."

DAD: "Hmm."

ISABELLA: "I don't really think about it."

DAD: "Hmm."

ISABELLA: "I just think, 'I'm living. That's good'."

DAD: "So you just think about your own self being alive?"

ISABELLA: "Well, I just think I'm lucky to be

War, part-time

DAD: "What is it about wars that fascinates you?"

ISABELLA: "Well, what happened and, like, how long they went for. Because I didn't know they went for years."

DAD: "Oh yeah."

AMELIE, interrupting: "How long do wars go for?"

DAD: "Well, the First World War went from 1914 to 1918."

ISABELLA: "That's four years."

AMELIE: "No, like, how much time? Like an hour each day?"

alive. Because, you know, some people are dead. And some people aren't even born."

DAD: "So it never comes into your mind whether this country is going well or not?"

ISABELLA: "Um . . . nah! I have no interest in that and don't even care."

DAD: "Hmm-hmm."

ISABELLA: "I just rely on the people who want to do that."

DAD: "What do you mean 'rely on them'?"

ISABELLA: "Well, you know, I rely on them to do their job and keep the country wealthy."

DAD: "Oh, that's different to you being proud of your country. You're now moving on to, 'do you think about the people who keep this country going'? In an economic sense. You know what I mean?"

ISABELLA: "Nuh."

DAD: "Right."

ISABELLA: "Sometimes I'm, like, 'yeah, Dad!' But this time I'm just going to tell you the truth. Nuh!"

DAD: "Okay." How many times do you just give me a 'yes' response?"

ISABELLA: "Oh, heaps of times. Sometimes I'm not even listening and I'm, like, 'yep, yep, yep'."

DAD: "Oh, gosh! Can you remember an example where you've just gone 'yeah' and you didn't have the foggiest?"

ISABELLA: "Um . . . I can't even remember because I wasn't even listening."

DAD: "So it's more a case of you not even listening?"

ISABELLA: "I just hear mumbling . . . well, mumbling because I kind of drain your voice out."

DAD: "What do you do?"

ISABELLA: "I kind of switch it off. And then it's muffled. And then I just stare at something—"

DAD: "How do you switch my voice off?"

ISABELLA: "I don't know. My ears can do it."

DAD: "Yeah?"

ISABELLA: “When I’m looking at something and I’m not really interested my ears just kind of switch off.”

DAD: “Hmm. So how many times do you find me not that interesting?”

ISABELLA: “When you say ‘music practice’, like you always do that’s not interesting.”

DAD: “But do you find me generally pretty interesting?”

ISABELLA: “Nuh.”

DAD: “Okay.”

ISABELLA: “You hardly ever talk to me that much so . . . You’re always on your computer.”

DAD: “What! I talk to you all the time.”

ISABELLA, laughing: “No, it’s only in snuggle-cuddle chats that you really talk to me.”

DAD: “Yeah, but, how am I supposed to—”

ISABELLA: “Most of the time you’re, like, ‘hey’ and stuff like that.”

DAD: “What!”

ISABELLA: “We just cross each other in the house and you say nothing.”

DAD: “What am I supposed to say in those situations though?”

ISABELLA: “You’re meant to have a long conversation. About [global] hunger, how my singing’s going — is it going really well? — and how my school work’s going and stuff.”

DAD, incredulously: “I do! I ask you that all the time!”

ISABELLA: “You should say, ‘how are you going, Issy?’”

DAD: “I’m doing that all the time. Gosh it’s unfair! Poor Dad.”

ISABELLA: “Ah, no! You’re just, like, ‘hey’ and then you walk past me. That is your opportunity to say, ‘Hi Issy! You’re so good at singing!’”

DAD: “I can’t say that every day!”

ISABELLA: “Yeah, you can.”

DAD: “Yeah but, Issy. A lot of times when I say, ‘how’s school; anything happen today?’—”

ISABELLA: “Oh, ‘how’s school’ is boring. That is, like, the classic comment.”

DAD: “Well, what should I do?”

ISABELLA: “Well, you just say, ‘Oh, you’re going really well in school. All the teachers are saying you’re doing well’.”

DAD: “But, what if you’re not doing well? What if you’re doing terribly?”

ISABELLA: “Well then you tell me that I’m doing terribly.”

DAD: “I’ve done that*. And then you tell me to shut up about being in the class you’re in.”

ISABELLA: “Well, don’t talk about the classes. Just say, ‘Issy, I think you need to work a bit.’ Okay?”

DAD: “Yeah.”

ISABELLA: “Just don’t talk about the classes and don’t use examples. [That is, don’t compare her with anyone else.] They’re the two key points to my happiness.”

DAD: “Hmm.”

ISABELLA: “Now that you understand that, that subject’s finished with.”

*Mostly I tell Isabella she’s going well. Only occasionally do I ever say to her that she could do better by putting more effort in.

Just give me your other word

DAD, trying to help Isabella with some of her homework: “Would you like another word to use rather than the one you’ve got here? After all, ‘happy’ is a pretty simple and overused word, isn’t it?”

ISABELLA: “Um, nuh.”

DAD, displeased: “Oh come on, Issy. I’m trying to improve your language.”

ISABELLA: “Well, you asked me if I would like to use another word and I said no. You shouldn’t be unhappy with me because you asked a question. What you should do is just tell me your other word. Because if you ask a question, then I’ve either got to say ‘yes’ or there’s going to be a big complaint from you. Isn’t there?”

DAD: “Yeah but look, Issy. If you use the same word all the time or a very simple one like ‘happy’, your writing will become dull and people will start to lose interest in what you’re saying. We, as readers, need variety. Variety in the words people use helps the brain, other people’s brains if they’re listening to you, to think and consider. If you use the same words all the time and the words are very simple then you run the risk of becoming very uninspiring. All the people I like listening to or reading are very interesting in the way they use language. Sometimes I can even end up walking around the backyard for a while just thinking about something someone’s said if they’ve managed to express something in an interesting way. That’s what I think authors should do. They have a responsibility to not be boring. Sometimes through, the words authors use they are able to elicit from me a better understanding of something very complex that was in their head. That’s a profound achievement if they can do that. They’ve managed to untangle something difficult and then transfer that meaning or, in some cases, complex imagery to me just through the use of language. Unfortunately what you tend to

get today is the opposite of that. Especially from our media.”

ISABELLA: “Dad, you really weren’t listening, were you? I said, just give me your other word! Is that so difficult?”

I just see this house

DAD: trying to explain why scientists think dark matter has to exist: “If I’ve got this right, Issy, the planets that go around the Sun – and the Sun obviously together with the planets that goes around our galaxy and all the other stars as well that go around our galaxy – they’re spinning too fast, they’re going around too quickly, and so they should be flung out into space. Unless there’s something called dark matter. Now dark matter apparently makes up eighty percent of the universe. There’s more dark matter than all the matter we can see.”

ISABELLA: “Yeah, that’s pretty obvious.”

DAD: “What do you mean it’s ‘pretty obvious’? It’s not obvious at all.”

ISABELLA: “Well, we don’t see too much. I just see this house every day.”

THE LAST WORD

They forget about it

AMELIE, regarding friendships: “If you get angry with a friend you just get back together the next day.”

DAD: “Do you?”

AMELIE: “This is an example. Say, um, Elizabeth was my best friend and she got really angry with me and I got really angry with her and that made us not friends anymore, then, if you say things a bit nice and you say ‘sorry’ . . . it’s so easy! All you have to say is ‘sorry’. And you’ll be back together again. It’s so simple! Even if they don’t forgive you then, by tomorrow they’ll be fine, obviously. Because they forget about it.”