

extra fingers

Newsletter number 9 • August 13, 2011

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Silly and sillier (As told by Holly)

ISABELLA: "Holly, when you were my age, were you sillier than me?"

HOLLY: "What do you mean?"

ISABELLA: "Well, because I have an older sister to tell me the difference between stupid and not stupid, I thought that maybe you might have been sillier than me when you were ten."

The explorers Isabella knows

DAD: "Who is the earliest explorer you know of?"

ISABELLA: "Marco Polo."

DAD: "When was he? What century?"

ISABELLA: "I can't remember. He was just a bit before Christopher Columbus."

DAD: "I think he was either around in the . . . fourteenth or . . . fifteenth* century."

ISABELLA: "Yep. Something around that time."

DAD: "What do you find fascinating about Marco?"

ISABELLA: "I don't know anything about him."

DAD: "Okay. Have you ever wanted to know anything about him?"

ISABELLA: "N-o-pe."

DAD: "Okay. Moving on from Marco. Who's the most exciting explorer in your mind? Who makes you think, 'Oh, this is really exciting to learn this.'"

ISABELLA: "Well, only the one I've learnt about, which is Christopher Columbus."

DAD: "You only know about one explorer?"

ISABELLA: "No, no, no! I know loads more. But, some people say that Jessica Watson's an explorer."

DAD: "What? Who? Jessica Watson!"

ISABELLA, ignoring my disapproving tone: "And there's Flinland someone."

DAD: "Jessica Watson's not an explorer."

ISABELLA: "But, Dad. Flinland. Is that someone?"

DAD: "Flinland? Matthew Flinders was an explorer."

ISABELLA: "Yeah, yeah, yeah. Matthew Flinders. And there was someone who climbed Mount Everest."

DAD: "Yes. Sir Edmund Hillary."

ISABELLA: "And, um, Michael Flinders. Or whatever he was called."

DAD: "No."

ISABELLA: "Whatever his name was. Why do we have to remember names? It's so annoying."

DAD: "Well, it would be hard otherwise."

ISABELLA: “Why can’t we just say, ‘Oh, yeah, the man who did the ice pole thing whatever.’”

DAD: “Icy pole? Ice pole thing?”

ISABELLA: “Ice pol . . . ice . . . if . . . oh, now I can’t say it. Ice b . . .”

DAD: “Well, what happens if there were two people who—”

ISABELLA: “What’s the pole? What is it called? The . . .?”

DAD: “There’s Antarctica and the Arctic Circle.”

ISABELLA: “No, there’s something pole.”

DAD: “North and South Poles.”

ISABELLA: “Yeah. You could say the person who discovered the North and South Poles and the person who made the first Australian map, like properly. Stuff like that.”

DAD: “Yeah, but, what if you had two people who went to the North Pole?”

ISABELLA, having made her point, decided to move on: “Dad, are we talking about explorers from all over the world?”

DAD: “Yeah.”

ISABELLA: “Good. Just wondering.”

DAD: “So, Issy, you don’t know any explorers except Christopher Columbus?”

ISABELLA: “Well, I do. I know Matthew Flinders.”

DAD: “Yeah, but what did he do?”

ISABELLA: “Didn’t he make the Australian map thing?”

DAD: “Well, he certainly helped.”

ISABELLA: “He did quite a lot of it.”

DAD: “Yeah.”

ISABELLA: “Because he was, like, I was just wondering, did he commit suicide?”

DAD: “Oh, I don’t know.”

ISABELLA: “Well, he died somehow.”

DAD: “Well, of course he did. Everyone died somehow who’s dead. He sailed with Bass. There was Bass and Flinders and they went through what’s now called Bass Strait. And they realised that Van Diemen’s Land, which was what Tasmania was called at the time, was separate from the mainland.”

ISABELLA: “Oh, they didn’t know that, did they?”

DAD: “No.”

ISABELLA: “So they thought it was joined?”

DAD: “Yeah.”

ISABELLA: “That’s pretty silly.”

DAD: “Well, they didn’t have an opportunity to go into space and have a look.”

ISABELLA: “But, Dad. How did they know there was a land out there?”

DAD: “Well, they didn’t. They surmised it. Because they thought, well, if there is so much land in the northern hemisphere there should be so much in the southern hemisphere to balance it. That’s what they used to think.”

ISABELLA: “But there was just a bight there. Which was a big, like, gap.”

DAD: “Bight?”

ISABELLA: “The Australian Bight.”

DAD: “Yeah, I know, but that’s just a—”

ISABELLA: “But, Dad, if you jumped off the Bight, would you die?”

DAD: "No."

ISABELLA: "Why? Because there's sharks in there, isn't there?"

DAD: "Well, there's always . . . no, no, we're not going to get on to sharks again. Look, getting back to the topic of explorers and what they did. What you need to understand, Issy, is that explorers had a very important job. And you only know about one. Christopher Columbus. Can you tell me what Christopher Columbus did?"

ISABELLA: "He found the first route to America."

DAD: "R-r-right. Did he realise he had set foot on America?"

ISABELLA: "I don't know."

DAD: "You don't know?"

ISABELLA: "I don't know every single bit of detail about him."

DAD: "Well, he really thought he was creating a pathway to the Far East."

ISABELLA: "Well, Dad, I once made up an acrostic poem about Christopher Columbus and after sailing for thirty-three days he arrived at a small island called Bahamas."

DAD: "That's right. Now, what he caught were winds called the trade winds. A lot of people thought, 'you can't go out there because there won't be any wind for you to catch and you'll sail out but you'll be stuck.' And he said, 'No, no, I'm pretty confident I can catch the trade winds.'"

ISABELLA: "So, he's pretty smart?"

DAD: "Yes, well, he staked his life on it."

ISABELLA: "Wow!"

DAD: "And then he sailed up further north and that took him up into America and then he caught the westerly winds back to Spain."

ISABELLA: "Right. How do you, like, catch a wind?"

DAD: "Catch? Well, you get in the way of where the wind is blowing. You just get in the way of it and you have a sail up and the sail captures the wind and the wind pushes the boat along."

ISABELLA: "Oh, right. Weird, but anyway."

DAD: "Well, only as weird as wind is. And wind's not that weird, is it?"

ISABELLA: "Yes."

DAD: "It's weird? Why's it weird?"

ISABELLA: "Because you can't see it. And then you just get in front of it and it just blows you off your feet."

DAD: "And you find that weird?"

ISABELLA: "Yeah."

DAD: "You would have liked it if you could see it?"

ISABELLA: "Hmm-hmm."

* In truth it was the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

That's a house!

AMELIE, observing a 'luxury home' she didn't even realise was a home: "That's a house! I thought it was a rocket."

No spoiler

Overhearing a conversation between Isabella and Amelie. It was raining quite heavily at the time.

ISABELLA: "Hear that, Amelie? That's thunder."

AMELIE: "Yes, I know it's thunder. But I didn't want to spoil it by saying it was."



The man who was silenced

ISABELLA, as I was trying to watch a Lateline segment online regarding sluggish retail sales: “Who’s that, Dad?”

DAD: “It’s Philip Weickhardt.”

ISABELLA: “Right. And what does he do?”

DAD: “He’s the Productivity Commission’s Commissioner.”

ISABELLA: “Is he?”

DAD: “Hmm-hmm.”

ISABELLA, a few seconds later: “Dad, Amie and I are trying to play a game with our toys. Can you just watch the man from wherever he’s from without his voice coming out?”

DAD: “No. Of course I can’t.”

ISABELLA: “Oh, Dad! You always have to say ‘of course’ when it’s not ‘of course’. I don’t know why you do that.”

DAD: “Issy, how am I supposed to watch something to do with what’s happening to the retail sector when I can’t hear what the person on the screen is talking about? I need to hear his voice otherwise I have no idea what he’s trying to say.”

ISABELLA, in a paternal voice, reaching over and hitting the mute button: “Dad, just try it for a second. The man will still be there.”

So Isabella and I found ourselves silently watching Mr Weickhardt for what seemed like an eternity. Finally, Isabella broke the silence.

ISABELLA: “See?”

DAD: “See what?”

ISABELLA: “It wasn’t as bad as you imagined it would be.”

DAD: “Yes it was. It was exactly how I imagined it would be. All I could do was watch his lips and eyebrows move. How was

that supposed to help me understand the retail sector?”

ISABELLA: “But, Dad. Now you can try and guess what he’s saying. Go on. He’s still going.”

DAD: “I know he’s still going. But I’d rather hear him as he ‘goes’.”

ISABELLA: “Why?”

DAD: “Because I want to know what he’s talking about. Not take wild stabs at it.”

ISABELLA: “Wild stabs! You don’t have to do any stabbing, Dad. Err! C’mon, what do you think he’s trying to say?”

DAD, in disbelief but nonetheless playing along: “He’s probably saying that retail figures are sluggish but there is improvement on the way if blah blah blah is to happen. That’s only a wild guess, though, of course.”

ISABELLA: “There. See?”

DAD: “See what?”

ISABELLA: “Now you’re doing it. Now you’re playing the game. We get to play a game and now so do you.”

At last. Now he can be happy

DAD, yesterday, enquiring as to how Holly’s violin practice had gone: “How did Handel’s Sonata No.3 go? Was Catherine [Holly’s teacher] happy with it?”

HOLLY: “Yes, thank you very much. She said she was very happy with it. In fact, she was happy with everything I played. She said I played each piece perfectly. She said she wished I could have played those pieces all day she liked them so much.”

At that point Isabella reached over and pushed the sides of my mouth up so as to effect a smile.

ISABELLA: “At last! Now he can be happy.”

At that point, Amelie spilt a bowl of muesli and yoghurt all over the kitchen floor.

ISABELLA, removing the smile: “But in this family it can never last very long.”

Not her best fast

AMELIE, yesterday, after she’d finished third in a run around the block with her sisters: “That wasn’t my best ‘fast’, Dad.”

Leave them alone

AMELIE, yelling while holding her nose as she passed a man using a leaf blower to dislodge leaves that had accumulated near some bike racks: (Yelling) “Dad, it’s so stinky!”

DAD, yelling back: “Yes, I know it is.”

AMELIE: “Why is he doing that?”

DAD: “To blow away the leaves.”

AMELIE: “Oh.”

DAD, still in a raised voice: “He gets paid to do it.”

AMELIE: “Oh! . . . But why? Leaves just stay where they are and don’t do anything.”

DAD: “Yes, I know.”

AMELIE: “And they’re really nice and crunchy when you step on them.”

DAD: “That’s right.”

AMELIE: “Except for the green ones. They’re really smooth.”

DAD: “Well, they’re all being blown away now – the crunchy ones and the smooth ones – so you won’t be able to walk on them anymore.”

AMELIE, disappointedly: “I know.”

Not what they're cracked up to be

AMELIE, as Karin bent her knees to pick something up: "I heard that crack again in your pants, Mum."

Dad and the camera

DAD, as we were riding home from school this afternoon: "Look at that cloud! Isn't it beautiful? The colours I mean. Look at the way they're mixing together and there's a wonderful gap where the blue sky is pouring through."

HOLLY: "Oh great. I bet he'll have his camera out now."

ISABELLA: "I hope he hasn't brought it. Dad, have you got your camera with you?"

DAD: "Yes. I almost always have it with me, Issy. You know that."

ISABELLA: "Oh great. Dad, it's just an everyday cloud, alright? It's nothing special. I mean, clouds come out every day. (Turning to Holly) He takes his camera everywhere. He'd take it into a toilet I think if he thought there was an interesting toilet roll in there, or a leaf or something."

The truth, the whole truth, and nothing like the truth

The lights were out and Isabella and I were about to commence a snuggle-cuddle chat. All we needed to do was decide on what topic we were going to talk about – mine or hers.

ISABELLA: "Okay, what about paper, scissors, rock?"

DAD: "But I can't see. It's all dark."

ISABELLA: "No, no. I'll say which one I did first because . . . I know you'll be honest."

DAD: "Are you sure?"

ISABELLA: "Fine. I'll put the light in the iPod on. To see."

So much for trusting me.

ISABELLA: "Ready . . . Paper, scissors, rock [We both choose paper]. Paper, scissors, rock [same again]. Oh, this isn't working."

ISABELLA turns the light off.

ISABELLA: "Eeny-meeny-miny-moe, catch a tiger by the toe—"

DAD: "Oh, not the tiger by the toe."

ISABELLA: "Fine. We'll talk about your topic. Dad, you know if it wasn't for eeny-meeny-miny-moe you wouldn't have gotten your way."

DAD: "Why?"

ISABELLA: "Because I landed on you."

DAD: "Oh, I didn't know you did that."

ISABELLA: "Well, I did. And you got it. So hurry up with your question."

DAD: "Okay, you're at school and it's the school dance. You know, like in Year Six where you have an end-of-year school dance. It's the graduation dance and it's really special. Now, you know as your friend is walking towards you that they would have chosen the dress or outfit they have on because it's very important to them to look nice. And it's very common this. They come up to you and they say, 'Hi, Issy. What do you think of my outfit?' Now, let's say it's got poker dots and really zig-zaggy lines and it's like the colour of a really bad vomit. All over the front of the dress. Do you tell her the truth, or do you lie?"

ISABELLA: "You'd be polite."

DAD: "Oh, hang on. Hang on."

ISABELLA: "And you say, 'oh, it's . . . amazing!' And 'amazing' doesn't mean it's

nice. 'Amazing' means, like, whoah! That is way out of fashion. It could be amazing in any way. Amazingly horrible or amazingly nice."

DAD: "Okay, good. Good response. What happens if the person says, 'oh, you think it's amazing. In what way? Do you mean 'amazing' as in fantastic, or 'amazing' as in 'hmm, yes, not very nice?'"

ISABELLA: "I'd say amazing as in 'wow'!"

DAD: "Yeah, but, then the person presses you further and says, 'what do you mean by 'wow'?"

ISABELLA: "Dad, they wouldn't actually do that. I'm seriously telling you this. I wouldn't be in that situation. I'd say it's, well, really really cool."

DAD: "So you'd lie?"

ISABELLA: "Yep. Basically. But they wouldn't go that far. That would be going further into the conversation than they would go. Trying to make me say, 'oh, it's horrible'. I mean, you wouldn't just go up to someone and say it's horrible because that would be hurting someone's feelings. Because if I said that at school — 'you look disgusting and you actually did look disgusting' — a teacher would tell me off. So you have to be polite."

DAD: "What happens if there was no teacher there to tell you off? What would you do then?"

ISABELLA: "But she could go home and tell her parents, her aunty or anyone."

DAD: "What happens if it's just you and her and there are no parents and no grownups?"

ISABELLA: "No, she would go home and I'd eventually get into trouble."

DAD: "Is that the only reason why you wouldn't do it? That you'd get in trouble?"

ISABELLA: "Well . . . and also she might say, 'oh, you look disgusting too'."

DAD: "So you'd feel her revenge against you?"

ISABELLA: "Hmm-hmm. And then she wouldn't be my friend. Because even though I don't like some things Caitlin does. Like, she might do a drawing that's really disgusting but I always say, 'oh, that's really good, Caitlin!' Because she had a go and she drew it. Just so she feels like I'm not saying 'disgusting'."

DAD: "Yeah."

ISABELLA: "Because you never say, 'oh, you look disgusting' to a best friend."

DAD: "You don't think you should ever do that?"

ISABELLA: "Never."

DAD: "What about somebody who's not your best friend?"

ISABELLA: "You still don't do it."

DAD: "You can't do it ever?"

ISABELLA: "I just wouldn't do it."

DAD: "Hmm. Okay. That's what most people do so . . . hmm-hmm. No. I agree with you. I wouldn't do it."

ISABELLA: "Good. Because I was thinking you'd do the opposite."

Dad: "No, no. I would lie. Because I can't see the point in hurting someone's feelings unnecessarily. A person's choice as to what they're going to wear is their choice. And, it's not affecting anything for me to just simply say it's lovely even if I don't think it is, and therefore tell a lie. It's not really causing any harm that I can see."

ISABELLA: "If they went and asked you which one you thought looked nicer—"

DAD: "Between two outfits?"

ISABELLA: "Yeah. Between a beautiful rose one that looked really nice and the vomit one with zig-zags and swirls and everything and the dots, I'd just say, 'well, I think this one [the vomit one] really suits you. Because, even if that was their favourite dress they would still understand that they were my feelings and that was their feelings. See? I like the vomit one. I'd just say that it suits them. Because it might.'"

DAD: "Hmm. What about where . . . if you don't understand what a teacher is saying out the front, and you put your hand up, you would have done that, wouldn't you?"

ISABELLA: "What?"

DAD: "Like, the teacher is saying something and they say, 'does everybody understand this? Hands up who don't understand.' Have you ever done that?"

ISABELLA: "Hmm."

DAD: "Okay. And then they'll say, 'Isabella, what's the problem?' And then you'll go and say, 'well, I just don't understand how you got from that line to that line'. And then the

teacher goes, 'well, what you've got to do is you've got to multiply this by three and then take away six and divide by . . .' You know, it's something rather complicated. Right? And then they say, 'okay, so have you got it now, Issy?' And let's say you don't have it."

ISABELLA: "I say 'yes' and then I go and ask a friend because they'll say a simple answer and I know the teacher isn't going to get to that. Because a friend is at your level and therefore they know what you understand and what you don't. So, I always go to them and ask them if they can explain it in a simpler way."

DAD: "But, do you go to any friend, or do you pick one that you know is smarter than you?"

ISABELLA: "Oh, well, I'd go to Caitlin. Because I always sit with her in Maths usually."

DAD: "Is Caitlin good at Maths?"

ISABELLA: "Yep. Well, we're about the same so if I don't understand something she explains it and if she doesn't understand I explain it."

Like a lot of kids, she had it all worked out.