

extra fingers

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Left to their own devices

The problem with leaving kids to their own devices is they'll do exactly that – to the exclusion of almost everything else. Whereas once upon a time a family might have huddled around the radio and more recently plonked themselves in front of the TV, now the shared space – or what's left of it – has been replaced by very personal spaces. As devices have shrunk, so has the space required to view them in. And that includes borrowing an hour or two from what would be a good night's sleep to duck beneath doona covers to watch on their iPods whatever they can get away with.

Whereupon once, kids used to roam their neighbourhoods wherever their curiosity

would take them, now a child's world only seems to expand through a series of downloads and clicks. There is now an interior world kids explore that appears to be more interesting to them. And safer, according to their parents who often fear the outside world more than their kids. As backyards shrink or disappear altogether, many children, still possessed with the same curiosity children have always possessed, are seeking an ever-expanding interior world at the expense of ever learning something simple such as how to ride a bike or build a cubby house.

And placing limits on how much screen time your kids are allowed doesn't make it any

easier. You try telling them time's up – as I found out recently when I suggested a 'No Technology Day'.

DAD to Isabella: "If I took away your iPod Touch, what would happen?"

ISABELLA: "Well, I wouldn't notice."

DAD: "Yeah, but if I said, 'I'm going to take it away from you for one week, how would you feel?'"

ISABELLA: "Um, not that quite bothered. I could last without it."

DAD: "Really?"

ISABELLA: "But I would miss it."

DAD: "Perhaps I should take it away for one week."

ISABELLA: "Daddy!"

DAD: "What?"

ISABELLA: "Don't take it!"

DAD: "Yeah, but you said you would be okay."

ISABELLA: "I would be okay if you had to take it away. I wouldn't just want you to take it away casually."

DAD: "Well, how else can I take it away?"

ISABELLA: "Daddy! I mean as in an everyday thing."

DAD: "We could experiment."

ISABELLA: "Nuh! No experiments. I'm having my iPod, too bad."

DAD: "Well, I thought you said you could handle it."

ISABELLA: "Too bad, so sad!"

DAD: "It sounds like you can't handle it."

ISABELLA: "If you had to take it away from me, as in you'd be killed if you didn't, fine. Do it."

DAD: "So, it has to come down to me dying?"

ISABELLA: "No, me!"

DAD: "Oh, right. You die?"

ISABELLA: "Yeah. I could live with it then."

DAD: "Well, you wouldn't live otherwise."

ISABELLA: "Oh, yes, yes, I know!"

And this the next morning . . .

DAD to Holly, Isabella and Amelie: "Hey, I was going to have an experiment where we give up technology for a week. It'll include iPod Touches . . ."

HOLLY and **ISABELLA**, in unison: "No!"

DAD: "But that's technology."

HOLLY, the shock wave of her dad's proposition just reaching her: "Ahh! But I can't live without mine!"

DAD: "What do you mean you can't live without it?"

HOLLY: "I go to sleep with it every night. I have to have it!"

DAD: "What do you mean you have to have it?"

HOLLY: "I can't sleep without it."

DAD: "No, no. You can read a book. Issy?"

ISABELLA: "I've got to look after one of my Sims on my iPod."

DAD: "No, you don't have to look after one of your Sims on your iPod. They're not real!"

ISABELLA: "I have to look after one otherwise it'll die."

DAD: “Yeah, but they’re not real!”

ISABELLA: “I don’t care.”

DAD, offering a concession to break through the intransigence: “What about if we did it for just a day? A whole day?”

ISABELLA: “Until the end of the day, but at night time we have it back.”

DAD: “No, no, no. That’s just day time. That’s just nothing. No, a whole twenty-four hour period. So, from seven in the morning to seven at night no one’s allowed to touch technology.”

There was a violent scream. It was Holly again.

DAD: “What do you think, Issy?”

HOLLY, interrupting: “Amy gave up technology for the 40 Hour Famine but she didn’t last.”

DAD: “Didn’t last? She didn’t last!”

HOLLY: “She goes, ‘Oh, stuff it. I’ve got to have it.’”

DAD: “What about you, Issy? Could you make it?”

HOLLY, interrupting again: “She can’t. She can’t survive without it. Like me, she listens to Harry Potter each night to fall asleep.”

DAD, trying again: “Issy. What about you? Seriously. Just one twenty-four hour period. Last chance, Issy.”

ISABELLA, bargaining: “You can hug it.”

DAD, unsuccessfully reining in a laugh: “If you want to hug it, yes, you can hug it.”

HOLLY: “I’ve done it before. This year at school camp. As soon as I got home, though, ‘iPod!’ I did it for three days solid. And, do you know what? Some people, they were so lucky, their parents wrote a note so they

could have their iPods because they can’t go to sleep without them.”

As I was saying, left to their own devices . . .

When smiles go bottom up

AMELIE, describing what happened to her friend Jordan at school: “Miss Cox said, ‘Jordan, you always seem to be in the arguments. I think you should go out of the game.’”

DAD: “Did she?”

AMELIE: “Yeah. And so she got in trouble. And then her, um, smile turned upside down and then she was crying.”

You always know where to go

ISABELLA: “When you’re a kid life is easy.”

DAD: “You think so?”

ISABELLA: “Of course it is! Parents buy everything. They have to buy the food, they have to pay the bills, they have to pay the taxes, they have to pay for you to get your lunch and then they have to make everything. All I do is just sit back and relax. I go on a bus or a bike to school (but then I have to work hard – that’s the thing I don’t like – and do tests and maths and everything). But then all I do is come home. And then I eat afternoon tea so my tummy doesn’t rumble and I don’t kill myself. Then I drink some water. Then I go and do my homework and then get some dinner. Well, I get it off the table because Mum sets it out. And then I go to bed. That’s all I have to do for the day.”

DAD: “And you think that’s a pretty easy life?”

ISABELLA: “Hmm-hmm. Compared to you it is. It’s very easy.”

DAD: “What do you see me doing that you’re

so glad you don't have to do?"

ISABELLA: "You take me to parties because I'd just get lost."

DAD: "Yeah. What else?"

ISABELLA: "You use a street director (sic) to go to someone's house. You always know where to go. You know how to go to Garden City [a shopping centre]. You know which way to go to get there. I know the way to go to get to school because I always ride my bike. But if you're in a car you're always looking down at a book or something."

They're having all the fun

AMELIE, regarding someone walking straight past us and being served immediately while we waited in line at a shop: "Why can't we do that? They're having all the fun of not having to wait."

Everything goes ka-boom

DAD: "Issy, who do you think needs money the most in this world?"

ISABELLA: "Me. I'm poor."

DAD: "Are you?"

ISABELLA: "Seriously, I don't have that much money. I only have eight hundred dollars and I've got to buy a house when I'm older. And everything. And food."

DAD: "Yeah, but you'll have a job, won't you?"

ISABELLA: "That's if I find one. But first, before I get a job, I need to have some money to buy a house."

DAD: "It doesn't work like that, darl. You don't get the house first. You work . . . well, some people get the house before they've actually earned the money. That's called a big mortgage."

ISABELLA: "Some people don't do a job."

DAD: "That's right."

ISABELLA: "The Queen doesn't."

DAD: "No, that's right. One of the biggest problems we had very recently was people being lent money so they could have a house even though they didn't earn much money or, in some cases, even have a job. This was mostly happening in America. So, these people had very little chance of paying back the money."

There was no response from Isabella so I decided to change tack.

DAD: "What do you think of money?"

ISABELLA: "It's cool because you can do anything with it."

DAD: "You can do anything with it?"

ISABELLA: "Basically. Like, you can pay people to let you be on television*. And you could take yourself to Adventure World."

DAD: "Can you make somebody like you?"

ISABELLA: "It depends. You can give them, like, millions of dollars and then they might like you."

DAD: "But would they be really liking you, or would they be just liking you because they know you have a lot of money and therefore it's not really liking you? It's only liking what you can give them. There is a difference, isn't there?"

ISABELLA: "I remember when Olivia only liked me because I used to give her food."

DAD: "Really?"

Isabella: "She didn't used to hang around me much and then, all of a sudden, at lunchtime she was sitting next to me being my best buddy. And then, she always asked for food."

DAD: “Really? And you gave her food?”

ISABELLA: “No. But she kept asking for it because she knew I had yummy stuff. That was in Year Four.”

DAD: “Oh. Do you think you’ll still have the friends you have at school now when you’re a grownup?”

ISABELLA: “Probably not.”

DAD: “Probably not?”

ISABELLA: “I would hope so. But . . .”

DAD: “What would stop that from happening? Like, what would stop the friendships you have now from continuing?”

ISABELLA: “Getting more friends, life being tough, jobs, houses, family . . .”

DAD: “You think all those things would stop you being able to continue being friends with the friends you have now at school?”

ISABELLA: “Yeah.”

DAD: “How do those things get in the road?”

ISABELLA: “Well, if you have children you have to stay with them most of the time.”

DAD: “Yeah.”

ISABELLA: “Also, jobs are hard, you have to work for a long time, you wouldn’t see each other much because you don’t have school . . .”

DAD: “Yeah.”

ISABELLA, the lament she was feeling now palpably evident in her tone: “Everything goes ka-boom!”

DAD: “Does it? And you think that’s a bit sad?”

ISABELLA: “Yeah.”

DAD, moving on: “Do you like lots of different people without one person being special? How does friendship work inside your mind?”

ISABELLA: “I have special friends . . . and bad friends.”

DAD: “How can you have a bad friend? That doesn’t make sense. Because if they’re bad then how can they be your friend?”

ISABELLA: “Like a badder (sic) friend. They think they’re good but they’re not.”

DAD: “Well, what are they then?”

ISABELLA: “A bad person. Inside.”

DAD: “What? Well, how are they then – a friend?”

ISABELLA: “They’re not a friend.”

DAD: “Now you’re contradicting yourself.”

ISABELLA: “I said, ‘bad friend’. They’re bad at being a friend.”

DAD: “So then they’re not a friend then. That makes them not a friend.”

ISABELLA: “Yeah.”

DAD: “Well, why didn’t you say that? Why didn’t you just say that you have people you don’t like?”

ISABELLA: “I don’t know.”

DAD: “Why use the word ‘friend’? Because a friend is someone you like.”

ISABELLA: “No, but they’re a bad friend.”

DAD: “But I don’t get what a ‘bad friend’ could be! I don’t have a ‘bad friend’.”

ISABELLA: “A ‘bad friend’ is someone that’s not being your friend properly. They’re bad at being your friend.”

DAD: “They’re not good at it? They don’t know how to be—”

ISABELLA: “They’re not being a good friend, okay? Got it?”

DAD: “Is that because they don’t know how to be a good friend?”

ISABELLA: “I have no idea! To some people they’re nice, but to other people they’re not.”

DAD: “Right. Are you a ‘bad friend’ to somebody?”

ISABELLA: “Probably. I don’t know. I’m not listening to everyone’s conversations.”

*clearly a highpoint in life for Isabella.

No open and shut case

AMELIE, trying to get out of her bed this morning: “But I’m trying to do it, Dad. I really am!”

DAD: “Well, you’ll need to try harder because you’re going to be late for school if you don’t.”

AMELIE, from under her doona cover: “I’ve just got to open this cover and then I’ll be up.”

DAD: “Okay. Well, open it.”

AMELIE, yelling back: “I’m trying to! But it’s just not opening!”

LAST WORD

Finding the impossible

ISABELLA, right out of the blue: “Dad, I just found something that’s impossible.”

DAD: “What?”

ISABELLA: “You can’t fit the Earth into a normal-sized plane.”

DAD: “Yep. That’s impossible.”

ISABELLA: “Well, apparently it’s unusual to find something that’s impossible and I just have. *(A big smile comes over her face.)* That’s why I’m happy.”