

# extra fingers

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## No guns

**AMELIE**, as we drove past a flashing ‘Don’t turn right’ sign at a set of traffic lights on the way to the beach the other day: “Dad, why does it say ‘no guns’ for?”

# How school should be

**ISABELLA:** "I don't like sitting in school."

**DAD:** "Don't you? Why not?"

**ISABELLA:** "I don't like sitting at desks. And being made to do stuff. I feel like a servant. I like to have a bit of freedom. Like at recess and lunch they make it so short. I just like being able to sit around and do my own stuff. And just talk with friends for a bit. But then they say, 'You've had enough lunchtime to talk.' But you haven't because you don't even really see them."

**DAD:** "Well, how would you like school to be?"

**ISABELLA:** "They should have, like, different groups of people. People that like different stuff can go to different schools. Some schools can have desks and hard work and tests all the time. Because some people get really restless in tests. Like me. I always have to get up and pretend I'm getting a tissue but actually I'm trying to walk for a bit because I feel so restless. So annoying! And then my hands get really sore from writing. And I don't like typing at computers. Because sometimes they take forever to load. And I don't like it. I would like to be out with the trees instead of in a boring classroom. Classrooms are so boring because they're really stuffy. Or they're too cold from air-conditioning. I just like to be outside. I'd like to do work out there and not in a stuffy classroom."

**DAD:** "Yeah, but how would you design it?"

**ISABELLA:** "I'd design a classroom that was outside."

**DAD:** "Hmm-hmm."

**ISABELLA:** "Like a greenhouse."

**DAD:** "Oh!"

**ISABELLA:** "And then you'd have all these little trees and then you'd just have, like, a

tent sort of thing. And then you'd sit in there with, like, tables. Or you can sit on the grass. I'd like that."

**DAD:** "It'd be very arboreal."

**ISABELLA:** "What does that mean?"

**DAD:** "Of the trees. You'd be amongst the trees."

**ISABELLA:** "I'd like to have all these different trees and then you study about trees and all that. I like thinking about how a tree's roots started to grow and all that stuff."

**DAD:** "Hmm."

**ISABELLA:** "And how old they are. I want to be one of those people."

**DAD:** "Someone who studies trees?"

**ISABELLA:** "Yeah. And I also want to do a school where there's just no desks and I want to have just trees. Because all our ovals, they are just grass and there's just, like, play equipment on them, which gets really hot. There's hardly any trees. When you do sit under a tree they're really small because they cut down all the big ones."

**DAD:** "Yes. I understand what you're trying to say."

**ISABELLA:** "And they always never get, like, different trees. They're always the same just to look pretty. They should get different trees so that you can have different trees. Because then you get to look at different ones. Instead of the same ones every single day."

**DAD:** "Yeah. Just like how nature is."

**ISABELLA:** "This is what I'd like in my school. I'd like everyone to be able to choose what they want to do. And I'd have, like, different classrooms. One could be full of science, one could be full of english, one could be full of nature, all that. And then I'd have no shoes. Because I hate shoes. They make you wear

shoes and it's really bad for your feet. Your toes are stuffed up all day."

**DAD:** "I agree."

**ISABELLA:** "I love the feeling of grass after school. You just take off your shoes; it feels really nice. Because your feet are so sweaty after all this time. And then you have to wear different dresses. And you have to buy, like, jumpers and blazers; it's so annoying! Can't they just have normal free dress where you don't have to wear shoes? That's what I'd like."

**DAD:** "But, Issy, no school's going to give you everything you want. But I do agree with you though. I think you've got to try and get as many opportunities as possible to get into nature with your shoes off and bare feet. We've got to try our best to not just go along with things but rather change things as much as possible. But sometimes, and unfortunately with school it's really difficult to find a school that's got everything you want, sometimes you've got to say, 'well, they haven't got that but at least they've got that.' You know what I mean? You won't get it perfect, Issy."

**ISABELLA:** "I don't know why. We should be able to just take off our shoes at lunchtime."

**DAD:** "I agree."

**ISABELLA:** "Like, they say we have to keep them on because there might be glass or dangerous things."

**DAD:** "Oh, very unlikely."

**ISABELLA:** "I know. It's a school!"

**DAD:** "And even if there was glass in your school it's not the end of the world."

**ISABELLA:** "They always mow the lawns, they always sweep them, what's the point of that if we're not going to enjoy it?"

**DAD:** "I agree. I agree. I'm with you."

**ISABELLA:** "It's just stupid."

**DAD:** "You should be able to run with bare feet and if there's a tiny bit of . . . if someone dropped a bottle once and there's a speck of glass and it gets caught in someone's foot, it's not the end of the world. The benefit of having bare feet far outweighs the small potential for a tiny little thorn or a bit of glass once in a blue moon getting stuck in someone's foot. Wouldn't you agree?"

**ISABELLA,** sighing: "Yes."

**DAD:** "But I can't change that, Issy."

**ISABELLA:** "And they make us wear hats on rainy days; they make us wear hats inside; they make us wear hats all the time. We should have more trees that will keep shade and then we don't need to have hats."

## Speeding to the wrong conclusion

**HOLLY,** as a hotted-up car next to us quickly sped off: "Dad, you know how cars can go really fast but they're not allowed to go really fast because we have speed limits that stop them from doing that?"

**DAD:** "Hmm-hmm."

**HOLLY:** "Well, I don't get it. Why then are cars built so they can go that fast if they're not allowed to? What's the point?"

**DAD:** "Well, that's a very good point you're making, Hols. There are simply far too many cars on the road that are too powerful and shouldn't be allowed on the road. Occasionally, though, a car might need to be able to go over the speed limit for a very short amount of time. If it means the people in the car will be kept safe, then sometimes it's generally thought to be okay for a car to exceed the speed limit. Are you on to when that might be?"

I could see her thinking but struggling to come up with the answer.

**DAD:** “Just think about it for a minute, Hols. What situation do you think might require a driver to accelerate quickly to make sure the people in a car stay safe?”

**HOLLY:** “Um . . .” Then excitedly, “Oh, I know! I’ve got it!”

**DAD:** “You’ve got it, have you?”

**HOLLY:** “Yeah. If a tsunami was coming.”

## Great-grandma Isabella

I’m sure we’ve all seen an old sepia photo of a great-grandmother surrounded by a myriad of her descendants. It was quite popular towards the end of the Victorian period. The matriarch would be seated in the centre and her descendants would fan out either seated in front or standing behind her or to her left or right. At ten years of age, Isabella wants her picture taken amongst all her toys so that all future generations of toys will have a memento of her seated with their ancestors. Quite adorably, she admitted, she was trying to make certain no descendent of any of her toys will ever forget her.

## Goal-setting

**ISABELLA**, during a discussion with Amy and Holly about goal-setting\*: “Oh, I just know we’re going to have to do them all over again when we get back to school. We’re always doing them.”

**AMY:** “What?”

**ISABELLA:** “Goals.”

**AMY:** “Oh yeah. I used to hate doing goals.”

**HOLLY:** “Why do they bother making us do them? Everyone hates them.”

**AMY:** “I just used to say the same thing all the time.”

**ISABELLA:** “Did you? What? Every time?”

**AMY:** “Yeah. I just used to say something like ‘to be more organised’. That was my favourite. I said that so often.”

**HOLLY:** “Yeah. Same here.”

**AMY:** “They always loved that.”

**ISABELLA:** “I just say what I know I’ll never be able to do.”

**AMY:** “Like what?”

**ISABELLA:** “I don’t know. There are so many things I know I’ll never be able to do that it’s always really easy to come up with something.”

\*an exercise where school children are asked to set goals for themselves for the coming year.

## Too busy to miss you

I was speaking with Isabella on Skype one night while I was in Sydney in February.

**DAD:** “So, have you been missing me, Issy?”

**ISABELLA:** “No, Dad. I haven’t had time to miss you. My schedule is too full for me to be doing that. If I didn’t have school then I could miss you.”

## The great leveller

**ISABELLA**, as soon as I walked through the front door of our house after returning from two weeks in Sydney and before I could even utter a single word: “Dad, can you measure me? I’m *really* tall.”

## Serial socialisers

**ISABELLA** to Holly, as she walked in on Karin and me embracing for a second time: “Oh no! They’re socialising again.”

## Not if you’re starving

About ten minutes after arriving home from Sydney

**ISABELLA:** “Dad, did you know? The longest

handshake ever was between two people who did it for nine and a half hours?"

**DAD:** "Nine and a half hours! Is that right? No, I didn't know that."

**ISABELLA:** "Well, it was. They shook hands for that long without stopping once! That's so long. And . . . and . . . did you also know your teeth can bite through your finger just as easily as they can bite through a carrot but your brain won't let them?"

**DAD,** finding that very hard to believe but going along with it anyway: "Well, that's lucky, isn't it?"

**ISABELLA,** deep in thought: "Well, not really, Dad. Not if you're starving."

## No one will come to a black and white party

I'd printed out a pile of birthday invites at the library and handed them to almost birthday girl Isabella.

**ISABELLA:** "Dad, I can't have black and white invitations."

**DAD:** "Can't you? Why not?"

**ISABELLA:** "Because what if someone's having a birthday on the same day and theirs are in colour? No one would want to go to a black and white party."

## Right on the money

**HOLLY,** looking for a twenty-cent piece down the back of her car seat today as the car was idling: "Don't go, Dad! I don't have my seatbelt on yet and I want to get this coin."

**DAD:** "What! But I'll waste twenty cents in petrol just sitting here idling while you look for it."

**HOLLY:** "Well then I'll be able to pay you back, won't I?"

### LAST WORD

## Nowhere near it

**HOLLY:** "Dad, we had to go on a depression website today. To see if we had depression."

**DAD:** "Oh, did you?"

**HOLLY:** "Yeah. And all I can tell you is I am nowhere near depression."