

## **"What's for Dinner'!" "Duck Under the Table": Traditional Verbal Sayings Addressed to Children by Adults**

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Children's folklore is one of the most authentic, widespread and ancient of folkloric traditions. It is a tradition which has received considerable research attention in Australia, and in 1979 June Factor and I established the Australian Children's Folklore Collection, now housed at the University of Melbourne. The Collection includes more than 10,000 card files listing children's games, rhymes, riddles, jokes, superstitions and other kinds of childhood folklore, together with photographs, audio and video tapes, play artefacts, and a number of specialist collections of children's lore.

Children's folklore can be discussed along a number of dimensions, of which the major categories are folklore *of* children and folklore *for* children, depending on whether the main transmitters of the lore are children or adults. Only the first dimension of children's folklore, their own playground lore (or the folklore *of* children), has been well documented in Australia, most recently and notably in June Factor's study *Captain Cook Chased a Chook: Children's Folklore in Australia* (1988). This book received the 1989 Opie Prize from the American Folklore Society for the best publication in children's folklore in the preceding year. The first major book describing Australian children's traditional play lore was however *Cinderella Dressed in Yella* (1969) produced by the late Ian Turner, Associate Professor of Australian History at Monash University in Melbourne.

The second major dimension of children's folklore is folklore which adults address to children, namely folklore *for* children. Apart from nursery rhymes and folk tales, this category of children's folklore has been little studied. Children's folklore can also be categorised as folklore *about* children, which includes folk beliefs about children. One example of this type is what are sometimes called "old wives' tales," for example the belief that "if you tickle a baby's feet you'll make it stutter." A final, less clear-cut dimension of children's folklore considers the notion of *children as apprentices* in the learning of adult folkways. These folkways may range from table manners to participation in religious or secular rituals and ceremonies. Folklore *for* children includes numerous types, some of which overlap, and I am certain that the following list is not exhaustive:

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Lullabies (e.g. Rockabye Baby on the Tree Top)  
Nursery Rhymes (e.g. Humpty Dumpty)  
Rhymes and Chants (e.g. Pat a Cake)  
Tickling games (e.g. Round and Round the Garden)  
Finger plays and other body games (e.g. Here's the Church and Here's the Steeple)  
Bouncing (dandling) rhymes (e.g. Ride a Cock Horse)  
Pencil and paper games (e.g. Boxes or Dots)  
Proverbs (e.g. Too many Cooks)  
Reprimands or evasions (e.g. A Wig-Warn for a Goose's Bridle)  
Warnings (e.g. If the wind changes...)  
Toys (e.g. peg dolls)  
Tales or "modern legends" (told to older children e.g. concerning public toilets or cinemas and white slavery)  
Superstitions (e.g. don't walk on the cracks in the footpath)  
Fairy tales (e.g. Goldilocks and the Three Bears)  
Home-made stories or reminiscences (e.g. When I was a boy...)  
Rituals (e.g. Father Christmas or the Tooth Fairy)  
Jokes (e.g. riddles or knock-knocks)  
Teases (e.g. Which hand will you have?)  
Songs (e.g. What shall we do with the drunken sailor?)  
Parodies (e.g. Oh X has got a bunion, a face like a pickled onion)  
Prayers (e.g. Now I lay me down to sleep)  
Games (e.g. How many buttons etc. in my hand?)  
Misinformation (e.g. Where babies come from)  
Drawings (e.g. stick figures)  
Paper dolls (made with scissors)

All of these forms of folklore for children are practised by adults for children's amusement or edification. Like children's own playground games, much of this type of folklore is of great antiquity and is one of the most interesting examples of the continuity of folk traditions within modern society.

A common type of folklore for children involves idioms used in everyday speech, such as threats, retorts, reprimands and other formulaic statements. With the notable exception of Widdowson's 1977 study from Newfoundland, *If You Don't be Good: Verbal Social Control in Newfoundland*, there has been little scholarly attention to this interesting type of children's folklore which might be described as "family sayings." Some of my own collection of family sayings have been published in *Snug as a Bug* (1990) and *Duck Under the Table* (1991). My collecting has all been in Australia, from informants representing three generations, and it includes some items similar to those quoted by Widdowson from Newfoundland, for example:

*If the wind changes [while you're pulling that face, etc.] you 'll stay that way.*

*If you don't be good, Santa won't come.  
Do you want the back of my hand?*

Such similarities are interesting indications of the international spread of verbal folklore in Anglophone communities. As well as threats such as the above, verbal folklore used by adults with children includes homilies such as:

*Don't care was made to care,  
Don't care was hung;  
Don't care was put in a pot,  
And made to hold his tongue.*

It also includes warnings such as *"If you cry on your birthday, You'll cry all the year,"* reprimands such as *"Little pigs have big ears"* or *"Your eyes are too big for your belly,"* exhortations to *"Eat your crusts or your hair won't curl,"* pacifiers such as *"Don't get off your bike"* or *"Don't get your knickers in a knot"* and tricks and jokes such as:

*I'll tell you a story  
About Jack a Nory.  
Shall I begin it?  
That's all that's in it.*

My collecting has not only been within Anglophone communities. Australia is today one of the world's great immigrant and multicultural societies, with more than one hundred languages regularly spoken, and I have collected family sayings in a number of different languages. There is a surprising similarity between different language groups, in the jocular and sometimes sharp parental retorts to children's persistent questions such as *"What's for dinner, Mum?"*. A Greek mother might say *"My liver and kidneys!"* and a Croatian mother *"Cakes with honey,"* whereas some English-language answers to *"What's for dinner?"* are *"Duck under the table"* or *"Bread and scrape."* I have also collected in Australia traditional replies to children's requests to know how old an adult is; *"as old as my tongue and as young as my teeth"* is Anglo-Australian and *"twenty-five years per leg"* is Italo-Australian.

How might these family sayings be understood? Widdowson's study has only concerned itself with verbal social control, usually expressed in the form of threats. He describes some of the characteristics of the threats thus:

The threats warn of three principal retributive consequences, either singly or in combination.

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1. The intervention of some real or imaginary external figures, to which responsibility for punishment is delegated and which will take the child or harm him in some way.
2. Alienation of parental affection and revocation of familial security.
3. Physical punishment by the parent or other adult. (27)

I think however that the whole genre of traditional family sayings for children has much wider ramifications than simple social control, and much may indeed be considered as verbal art. While preparing the manuscript of *Duck Under the Table*, I roughly classified its two hundred items under headings which are listed below, with one example for each:

Advice, Exhortations etc. (e.g. *Good better best, never let it rest etc.*) Arguments (e.g. *I've got a bone to pick with you*)  
Bed Time (e.g. *Come on, hit the sack!*)  
Body Noises and Functions (e.g. Child: *My hand's itchy! That means you're coming into money*)  
Busy (e.g. *I'm flat out like a lizard drinking*)  
Compliments (e.g. *Your blood's worth bottling*)  
Descriptions (e.g. *You look like something the cat dragged in*)  
Don't (e.g. *Don't bust your boiler*)  
Exasperation (e.g. *What did your last slave die of?*)  
Exclamations (e.g. *Bob's your uncle!*)  
Fatalism, Philosophising (e.g. *What won't fatten will fill*)  
Food, Meals (e.g. *You must have hollow legs*)  
Feelings, Health etc. (e.g. *You've got the collywobbles*)  
How (e.g. Child: *How far is it? Twice as far as from here to there*)  
Insults (e.g. *You can stew in your own juice*)  
Just for Fun (e.g. *I forgive you, thousands wouldn't*)  
Manners (e.g. *All joints on the table will be carved*)  
Proverbs, Moral sayings etc. (e.g. *Rooster today, feather duster tomorrow*)  
Sarcasm, Sharp retorts etc. (e.g. *I wasn't born yesterday*)  
Secrets (e.g. *Don't let the cat out of the bag*)  
Teases (e.g. *I can see your poppy show*)  
Threats (e.g. *I'll come down on you like a ton of bricks*)  
What (e.g. Child: *What's that? A silver new nothing*)  
What's for Dinner (e.g. *Bread and pullet*)  
What's the Time (e.g. *Time you got a watch*)  
Where (e.g. Child: *Where's Mum? Up the river shooting oysters*)  
Why (e.g. *Because Y's a crooked letter and Z's no better*)

A few of these sayings should probably be eliminated from a discussion of folklore for children, since they can also be used between adults. Thus an appreciative adult might tell another adult that "your blood's worth bottling."

Nevertheless, most of them, and particularly the responses to persistent questioning such as "What's for dinner?" are only used in adult-to-child interaction. It is true that some of these sayings are used for purposes of social control, as Widdowson has asserted. However, I can identify eight functional categories, and believe this type of traditional family verbal lore can involve the following characteristics:

Direct control  
Evasion or obscurantism  
Comment or reflection  
Bonding or affection  
Enjoyment of verbal display, performance  
Adult mystique  
Tension reduction  
Education, training

Examples of each are as follows:

Direct control (*If you don't be good I'll drop ya - like a mozzie on Mt. Kozziel*)<sup>1</sup>  
Evasion (*A wigwam for a goose's bridle*)  
Comment (*Money doesn't grow on trees*)  
Bonding (*You're a sight for sore eyes*)  
Performance (*Two heads are better than one, even if they are only sheep's*)  
Adult mystique (*Little pigs have big ears*)  
Tension reduction (*What do you think this is, bush week?*)  
Education (*Put your best foot forward*)

I acknowledge that there is overlap between the categories. I have no belief in infallible systems of classification, but have devised the above as an indication of the possibilities for going beyond Widdowson's emphasis on "social control," and for extending discussion of the meaning of this traditional verbal folklore which adults use with children. It is of course possible that the functional analysis should not be taken too seriously, and that all types of traditional family sayings should rather be regarded—and admired—as yet another form of adult verbal art.<sup>2</sup>

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## NOTES

1. "Mozzie" = mosquito. "Kozzie" is a common abbreviation for Australia's highest mountain, Mt. Kosciusko.
2. This paper was originally presented to the 1995 American Folklore Society Annual Meeting at Lafayette, Louisiana.

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