



Ellen Notbohm's Newsletter

Award-winning author and columnist

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“If the English language made any sense, lackadaisical would have something to do with a shortage of flowers.”

~ Doug Larson

The Cat's Pajamas: Demystifying idioms for concrete thinkers

One fine day I sat in the boardroom listening to a firebrand project manager describe the timeline and strategy for the next customer acquisition campaign. Only days earlier she had told me she was sick to death of enduring meetings with men who couldn't string together two sentences without spouting sports idioms. “The ball's in their court,” she mimicked, “and they need to get behind the eight-ball, either go wide or punt! It had better be a grand slam, or we're on the ropes!”

And while she ran a tight, serious meeting, I had trouble stifling chuckles. True to form, she did not use one sports idiom. But she did say that a certain coworker was in the doghouse. The campaign was supposed to have an element of surprise timing, but this coworker had carelessly let the cat out of the bag to a competitor. Ms Manager got the information straight from the horse's mouth and was madder than a wet hen. The coworker had used up one of his nine lives, because just this once she was going to let the sleeping dogs lie. But she would be watching him like a hawk from now on.

She really had a bee in her bonnet.

Did you notice that the previous six sentences contained eight animal idioms or metaphors? Idioms and metaphors are so ubiquitous in our language that we rarely pause to wonder how on earth we ever came up with something as bizarre as “looking a gift horse in the mouth.” We toss around animal idioms in our everyday language like bulls in a china shop, without ever pausing to consider that they have the power to terrify our concrete-thinking children with autism. Ever tell your child that he has ants in his pants, or that you have butterflies in your stomach or a frog in your throat? You didn't really put a bug in Aunt Kate's ear, did you? Or open up a can of worms? Nor did you hit a bull's eye (or take said bull by the

horns), grab a tiger by the tail, beat a dead horse, bark up the wrong tree, or have a cow.

Idioms are never far from my consciousness. Bryce was quite young when it became obvious to me how endemic idioms are in our conversation, and how baffling he found them. Even today, I catch myself babbling idioms and stop to check if the one I just used is one he knows. At 20, he has learned to recognize many idioms, and when he doesn't know the particular idiom, he can at least identify it as one, given the context of the sentence.

I'm always looking for inroads to teach our kids language skills, and we all know that teaching is easier if we can go into it through a child's area of interest. In recent years, we've seen an uptick in stories about children with autism and their interactions with animals—service dogs, horse therapy, even elephant and dolphin therapies. Not all children with autism are fascinated with or comforted by animals, but if your child is, it can be a natural opening for ongoing teaching of idioms, metaphors and similes. Knowing the origins of the idiom can help the child “picture” the meaning. Here's how some common idioms were coined:

“Letting the cat out of the bag” (spilling a secret) and “buying a pig in a poke” (purchasing a fraudulent or defective item) are actually two idioms for the price of one. Centuries ago, farmers would sell their piglets in the open-air markets, holding them in large bags called pokes. Crooked sellers would sometimes substitute a cat for the piglet. If the buyer was prudent, he would open the bag before buying, thereby “letting the cat out of the bag.” If the was buyer neglected to check, the trickery came to be known as “a pig in a poke.”

“Sick as a dog” did not describe Wilhelmina, a delightful weimaraner who lived across the street from us when I was a kid. Her favorite thing was vanilla ice cream with green beans on top. To me, a revolting combination, but nevertheless safe to eat. Many dogs are infamous for eating just about anything whether edible or not, and they often pay the price. The “sick as a dog” idiom goes back at least 500 years.

It doesn't really “rain cats and dogs,” not even here in my verdant hometown of Portland, Oregon. This idiom goes back to the English floods of the 17th and 18th centuries. Torrential downpours left the streets littered with the bodies of cats and dogs that had drowned in the storm. It looked as if they had rained from the skies. Uttering this idiom in the company of a child with autism may get you responses such as, “I don't see anything except falling-down water!” or “They must all be on the ground by now.”

You might be living “high off the hog” whether or not you realize it. This old African-American idiom refers to those who can afford the better cuts of pork, such as ribs and chops, which are from the upper portion of the hog, as opposed to pig's feet, chitlins and other less delectable parts of the lower portion.

“You've really cooked your own goose!” We use this idiom to mean that someone has somehow brought trouble on oneself. It goes back to medieval story about a town under siege. To taunt the enemy, the townspeople slung up a goose,

symbolizing foolishness. This enraged the attacking army into burning down the whole town, in effect “cooking the goose” and everything else with it.

When I speak at autism conferences, I jot a list of every idiom I hear in the day or so before. I’m always startled at the number. I share these with my audiences and ask them to become aware of their usage of idioms, metaphors, similes, homophones, phrasal verbs, puns. Try this at home: keep a list for a day or two. Consider the imagery those idioms conjure for the child with autism. Rephrase in concrete language so you can begin teaching that though it may seem strange, sometimes phrases may say one thing but mean something very different. Some kids like to keep a reference log of idioms they hear and learn. Somewhere out there, I’ll bet there’s a youngster whose circumscribed interest is idioms.

And every dog has her day, right? Back in the boardroom, Ms Project Manager wanted to know what she had said during her presentation that made me smile so. I told she sure did have her ducks in a row, except for the fact that hens standing around in the rain don’t seem to care if they’re wet, so that one is a pure nonsense idiom. When I showed her my notes—she had used an idiom about every fourth sentence—she was speechless. She had to think about it. She hadn’t realized . . .

What’s the matter? I asked.

Cat got your tongue?

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This month’s reads



Autism Asperger’s Digest

[What Tiggers Do Best](#)

"You can't bounce the bounce if you can't pronounce the bounce," says Tigger. Recognizing our kids' strengths—things our Tiggers do best—can lull us into assuming that they are automatically able to extend their skills to a larger context. They cannot, until they are taught. Tigger tells us how.

Children's Voice

[Raising a Quitter](#)

No parent sets out to raise a quitter. But when your child



can't seem to stick with activities, it's time to get to the root of why.

How to know if your young person with autism is ready to live on his/her own? This and other transition-to-adulthood issues discussed in my interview with [**Special Needs Book Review**](#).

Ten Things Every Child with Autism Wishes You Knew is a finalist for the 2013 Readers' Choice Awards at About.com. [**Please help vote it into the top spot – vote daily through March 19!**](#)

Meet me in Baltimore. I'll be keynoting the Autism Society of Baltimore-Chesapeake's annual [**Honestly Autism Day**](#) on April 20 at Towson University. See you there!

Did you miss my [**last newsletter**](#)? *Why Johnny Can't Be Good* challenges us to take a look at the role our own behavior plays when our children don't meet our expectations.

Writing a book in 2013? Contact me about affordable rates for developmental editing and writer coaching at [**emailme@ellennotbohm.com**](mailto:emailme@ellennotbohm.com)

Excerpts from all my books are on [**my website**](#), including full chapters from *Ten Things Every Child with Autism Wishes You Knew* and *Ten Things Your Student with Autism Wishes You Knew*. [**www.ellennotbohm.com**](http://www.ellennotbohm.com)