

## “I Don’t Know What My Mummy Does”

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Explaining to non-academics what being a doctoral student entails can be difficult. What is it that we do all day? What is “research” anyway? And, why does it take such a long time? Explaining this to one’s children is undoubtedly an even more difficult task. So, my approach was to ignore going over the details and simply gloss my disappearing upstairs and sitting at the computer as “Mummy doing some work.” Of course, such a lack of explanation has to be dealt with eventually.

During a preschool circle time discussion about parents’ jobs, my (then) three-year-old daughter, Poppy, started confidently talking about Daddy (he’s an assistant professor and she sometimes goes to his office on weekends), but she soon found herself floundering:

Excerpt 1<sup>1</sup>

01 Teacher: Poppy (.) what do your parents do?  
02 Poppy: My daddy works in an office at Temple (.) and my  
03 mummy (1.0) ((shrugs)) I don’t know what my mummy  
04 does.

When I heard about this (from her teacher), I realized that some coaching was in order.

Excerpt 2

01 Mummy: When someone asks you what mummy does, you can say  
02 (.) she is working on her dissertation.  
03 (2.0)  
04 Mummy: That’s when you have to do a LO::T of writing.

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<sup>1</sup> All data are reconstructed with a certain amount of artistic license. The transcription symbols used are as follows:

.	(period)	falling intonation
?	(question mark)	rising intonation
,	(comma)	continuing intonation
↑	(upward arrow)	marked rising intonational shift
::	(colon)	prolonging of sound
<u>no</u>	(underlining)	stressed syllable or word
WORD	(all caps)	loud speech
> word <	(inward chevrons)	quicker speech
\$word\$	(dollar signs around word)	smiley voice
(1.4)	(number in parentheses)	length of a time gap in seconds
(.)	(period in parentheses)	micro-pause (< 0.2 seconds)
((door slams))	(double parentheses)	description of non-speech sound or transcriber comments on contextual features

05 Poppy: Uh-huh,  
06 Mummy: Okay. Let's pretend someone asks you (.)↑what do  
07 your parents do. You say (.) daddy works at Temple  
08 and mummy is working on her dissertation.  
09 Poppy: ((looking confused)) Daddy (.) daddy lives in a  
10 temple (.) and mummy >lives in a station<.  
11 Mummy: O:::ka::y, >never mind<.

Months passed. The day arrived when that final chapter was finished and emailed to my advisor. Hurrah! Poppy came running in from an afternoon at the playground with her father and baby brother.

Excerpt 3

01 Poppy: CONGRATULATIONS mummy.  
02 Mummy: \$THA:NKS\$  
03 (0.4)  
04 For what?  
05 (1.0)  
06 Poppy: I: don't know,  
07 (1.0)  
08 Poppy: ((looking inspired)) O:H. Did you finish your  
09 ISsertation?  
10 Mummy: Uh: yes I di:d, isn't that great?  
11 (0.5)  
12 Poppy: Mummy can I watch TV:::

Another month passed. One evening, I found Poppy carefully writing letters in her Hello Kitty notebook.

Excerpt 4

01 Mummy: What are you ↑do↓ing.  
02 Poppy: I'm working on my dissertation.  
03 (1.0)  
04 Mummy: Oh.

Now all she has to do is explain it to her baby brother.

Santoi Wagner (overworked, underpaid, yet strangely happy mother of Poppy, 4, and Finley, 18 months) recently defended her dissertation in Applied Linguistics at Teachers College, Columbia University. Her primary research interest is in spoken discourse analysis, particularly the interactional practices of disputants in conflict talk.