

Chickens, roads, and kindergartners

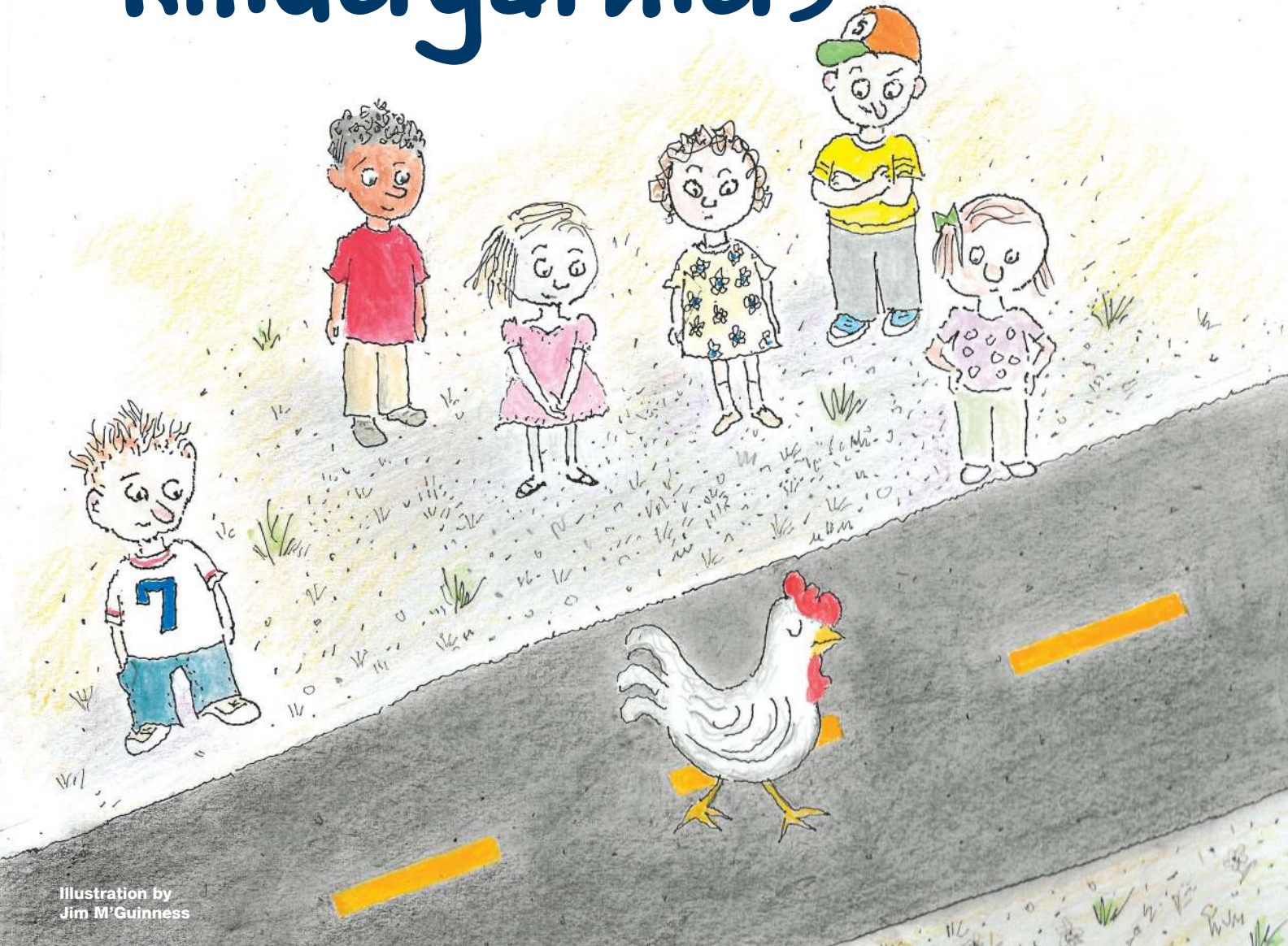


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“Why did the chicken cross the road?” Silence. I try again, this time more deliberate and a little slower so as not to spook the nervous five-year-old:

“Why did the chicken cross the road?” I usually hear back, in a very serious but timid voice: “Why?” Once in

awhile, the skinny knock-kneed child will offer, “There weren’t any cars coming?” “To get to the other side!” I cheerfully reply. This usually precipitates a nervous glance back to their parent, as they inch farther away from me.

Next, I move onto memory and deduction, “Why did the cow cross the road?”

The answers become more varied. The still-hesitant child, shifting from foot to foot, responds, “I don’t know. Why?” The slightly more confident five-year-old asks

quizzically, “To get to the chicken?” While the most assured announces, “To get to the other side!”

“This cow crossed the road to get to the moo-vies!” I belt out in my Wisconsin State Fair cow calling voice. Usually I get a chuckle from the parent just before a slow smile spreads across the young child’s face.

The 15 minutes a year I get to spend with up and coming kindergartners serves a vital purpose, but I have only a few minutes to get to the heart of the matter. Besides growth, vital signs, physical exam, immunizations, and parent concerns, this check-up is an opportunity to evaluate whether a child is ready for school, including how he/she interacts with an unrelated adult.

At age five, a child who tries to climb into my lap is as concerning as a child who refuses to separate from their parent. While most parents consider knock-knock jokes a widely-used form of parental torture, they are unaware of what the emerging skill of riddling tells me about their child’s development.

Oranges, bananas and interrupting cows aside, the child who belts out a knock-knock joke has just shown me a full house of skills including attention, comprehension, memory, vocabulary, and appropriate social interaction. And, it’s way more fun for all of us to share a joke than a lecture. It’s not just about shots!

Occasionally one of the older siblings wants to play, lobbing another joke at me. It doesn’t actually matter whether I know the answer to their riddle—they’re usually happier if I don’t—the important thing is that I’m ready to play the game.

If a child has been really interested in farm animals crossing roads, perhaps even scooting around the protection of the exam table to stand right beside me, I try more, “Why did the chicken cross the playground?”

“To get to the other slide!”

And if it’s Halloween, “Why didn’t the skeleton cross the road?”

“He didn’t have the guts!”

During the years I’ve been interviewing pre- to kindergartners, I’ve experimented with other jokes. But I need something simple that I can easily remember and consistently deliver. On the rare occasion I forget to ask, an older brother or sister usually reminds me to do my job correctly, commenting “You have to ask them about the chicken, you know, the joke!”

The human desire to laugh cuts across cultural differences, social inequalities, and many faiths. It’s still present when families are fragmented due to military deployment, when grandparents are called out of retirement as guardians of grandchildren due to the ravages of drug addiction or mental illness; and/or when children are living with

their own significant health issues.

The most heartwarming visit is when my young patient comes prepared with a joke they’ve practiced for me.

“What kind of horse has three legs?” quizzes an earnest four-year-old standing tall with hands on her hips.

“I don’t know, what kind of horse?”

“They all do, silly!”

Or, sometimes they bring a riddle to expand my limited repertoire. “Why did the chicken cross the road...ummmh jump in the mud puddle, and...run back to the other side?” asks the serious, five-year-old, making regular eye contact with mom to ensure he gets the sequence exactly right.

“I don’t know, why did he?” I query, truly puzzled.

“Because he was a dirty double crosser!” he proclaims as he brings both of his hands to his mouth to catch an infectious giggle before it escapes.

Laughing is an elemental connection that demonstrates how much more similar we are than our demographic differences. Telling riddles is a glimpse into the window of a child’s life, a developmental checkpoint, and a touch point. It’s an opportunity to be one of their cheerleaders, celebrating the transition to school, or, if necessary, sounding the alarm and gathering support to help prepare them for their educational journey.

Only once in 20 years have I been caught totally off guard. It was when I asked, “Why did the chicken cross the road?”

My almost six-year-old patient looked up and in a deadpan voice replied, “What chicken?”

I tried again, this time more deliberate and a little slower to clear up any confusion, “There is a chicken. He’s standing by the side of the road, waiting to cross...”

“What road?” she calmly interrupted, scrutinizing me carefully.

I was a little worried because six-year-olds shouldn’t be so serious or cynical. But I reminded myself that different isn’t always bad, and as her pediatrician I can keep close tabs on her development. Her answer may have signaled a totally outside-the-box-thinker who goes on to launch the next Google, or at the very least, some interesting teenage years for her parents.

Performing a kindergarten check-up is the highlight of my day because despite knowing the visit ends with shots, children are able to set their fears aside, stare unflinchingly at an adult, and share a joke. In the process, a little of their fairy dust rubs off on me.

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