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Oh. My. Word.

My very young children *couldn't* be dropping the F-bomb already. Or could they? *by* JENNIFER GRAHAM KIZER

Just on the other side of bedtime, my sleepyheads, 6 and 4, lie sprawled across pink beds, little mouths gaping. I switch off the flower lamp and begin the long exhale between their "lights-out" and mine.

I check my e-mail, where I discover some unwelcome news from my neighbor, Melanie. Her three young boys and my girls are backyard cohorts, intrepid explorers together of the 4,000-square-foot parcel of grass and trees behind our houses.

Melanie's found a piece of paper outside her door, and across it a bad word (starting with an F), followed by the word "you," has been scrawled in a child's hand. It's on the back of a scavenger-hunt list (written by me) that our children have recently completed.

Another parent might respond to this news with a casually dropped obscenity of her own. Not me. Of my many vices, a foul mouth isn't among them. One of our kids wrote a bad word, and on *my* scavenger-hunt list?! At the risk of

sounding defensive, my children couldn't possibly know that word. When they tattle on each other for using the S-word, they mean *stupid*. Melanie's tenderfooted boys, ages 6, 5, and 4, are homeschooled. Where would they hear that word?

Almost daily, I'm called to solve mysteries, like missing footwear in child sizes 10 or 12. But this one has me stumped. Is it possible that my older daughter wrote the F-word? Each day, she boards a school bus teeming with unruly kids up to and including (gulp) 5th-graders. Did she learn it there?

The next morning, Melanie confronts her boys. "Who wrote this terrible word that hurts people's feelings?" Halfway through her interrogation, she realizes her mistake. This is the first time they've heard the word, straight from their mother's lips.

We regroup. We reassure each other that bad words are naturally intriguing to children. They'll test them out, the same way they try monkey-bar flips.

But it's also true that this one expletive, dropped into our children's playspace, is a dispatch from a wider world of flipped middle fingers and hissed obscenities. What a hostile place we're preparing them to enter! Who wants to explain that to tiny children? Not me. Not yet.

The day after the discovery of the note, my girls are riding Big Wheels and scooters with Melanie's boys. They're sharing details about their "wigglers" (loose teeth) and the loot they'll get for them. There is one carefree existence. How much longer will it last?

Melanie hands me the naughty document. Just then, my 6-year-old cries, "You got my fank-you note for the scavenger hunt!" I focus, read... and laugh. With her kindergarten spelling, she's sounded out her gratitude by writing what looks like "F*ck you!"

At some future point, I will probably have to enlighten my girls about the F-word. But not today. ☺