

Humor and Laughter

Value of Humor and Laughter

Humor comes from the Latin word “umor” which means fluid or liquid. That is exactly how humor works: It loosens up people and gets them “flowing” together.

Laughter has many positive effects:

- raises heart and breathing rates during laughter and then lowers them after
- enhances immunity, offering protection from infection
- decreases stress hormones
- boosts metabolism
- promotes relaxation
- stimulates abstract and creative thinking
- relieves anxiety and tension
- increases joy and optimism
- fosters closeness between people

Research suggests that we need to laugh 15 or more times a day for health maintenance. Tense muscles relax when we laugh, reducing stress. Laughter may not be a cure-all, but it can make some tough things easier to take. Humor is a valuable tool to nurture the growth of our children. It’s an essential part of parenting in the preschool years – and beyond.



Encouraging a Sense of Humor

Our appreciation of humor starts in childhood. As we age, our understanding and appreciation of humor changes. Smiling and laughter start in infancy and many changes occur as children go through the developmental process.

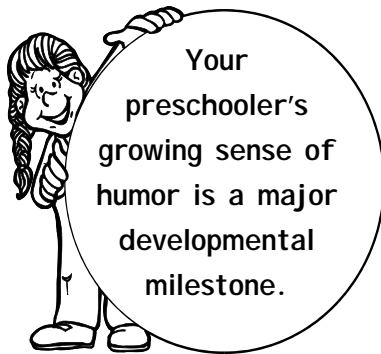
What makes children laugh? Young children prefer surprises, absurdities, silly words, pictures, and motions more than a joke with a punch line.

Things that preschoolers find funny are usually those that are implausible or incongruous—a cartoon of a fish wearing glasses or the sight of the family dog licking the dinner plates. Anything that goes against what children consider normal can tickle their sense of humor.

Take a favorite song and mix up the words. “The horn on the car goes bump, bump, bump,” or “The doors of the car go beep, beep, beep.” Not only do you get laughter, you have prompted your child to actively think about what car part does what. Your preschooler might respond with laughter and a correction (and an understanding that adults do not know everything after all).

When you pretend you are confused or have a memory lapse, your child will delight in the fun. Pretend to say names backwards or give the wrong directions. Your child will be flabbergasted and experience the good nature of setting you straight. Say good-bye as you greet your child. Or start reading your child’s favorite book starting from the back of the book.

But be prepared. Children catch on quickly and will start returning your joking behavior as they try to fool you. For children to recognize that something is “wrong” or “funny,” they have to first know what is right and real. It’s a higher order of thinking.



“This is my right hand. And this is my wrong hand?” Can prompt not only laughter, but give a chance to talk about right and left, plus promote an awareness of the multiple levels of word meaning.

When your preschooler wonders where someone has gone, try an unexpected response. “Maybe under the rug...in the garbage can...to the moon?” Your child’s response will warm your heart.

Preschoolers find a great deal of amusement in stringing together rhyming words or nonsense syllables. Since language is supposed to be logical and orderly and sentences don’t usually rhyme, it’s funny when they do.

A puppet peeking out of a bag or book stimulates excitement, curiosity, and participation. That same surprise puppet can introduce a silly riddle, speak in a funny voice, or even do everything wrong so that your child has a chance to correct him.

Coyote, that wily old trickster. Native American teaching stories are filled with stories of coyote, the trickster. The understood message is, “Don’t act like Coyote, whose behavior is silly, selfish, mischievous, and breaks all the rules.” When the Coyote puppet impulsively exclaims, “I want all the cupcakes for myself!” the children laugh, on one level because that impulse reminds them of their own inclinations. Coyote hides toys and mom’s car keys, eats the play dough, and pulls you down when you fall. The Cat-in-the-Hat and Tigger are trickster

figures in children’s books you read. Children love and laugh at the ridiculous antics, because they are trying so hard not to act like that themselves—and yet they are not so far away (are any of us?).

That's not funny! When an activity is too out of the ordinary, it can stop being fun to a child and become frightening instead. That's why many little children don't enjoy the circus. A clown, wearing an orange fright wig and exaggerated face paint, may prompt fear rather than amusement. Your child may not be sure if the clown is real and playful or a monster.

For preschoolers the line between what is funny and what is frightening may be fine indeed. This is clearly shown when a child's parent behaves in a way that's out of the ordinary. If Daddy pretends to walk like an old man, your child might initially find it quite hilarious. But if the playacting goes on too long, you preschooler may not know that Dad is pretending, and may become anxious and start to cry.

Read humorous stories. Read humorous stories to approach humor in upbeat, preschooler-friendly way with books such as *If You Give a Pig a Pancake* by Laura Numeroff, *Pete's a Pizza* by William Steig, and *Stanley and Rhoda* by Rosemary Wells.

Humor expands creativity, attention span, language acquisition, and evaluative skills. Good humor has been found to build self-confidence, deal with daily stress, and create successful social interactions.

Smiles and laughter, chuckles and joy belong in a preschooler’s life. Unlock your own sense of humor and integrate humor into your family life.

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