

The Playful Brain

Development of Young Children's Humor

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General Rule: Age-related changes in children's humor reflect underlying changes in the development of basic cognitive skills. This accounts for the ways in which children of different ages are similar in their sense of humor. But each child also develops a personal style of humor as a result of early temperamental factors, parent influences and other early experiences. For a discussion of these stages, see Dr. McGhee's book, *Understanding and Promoting the Development of Children's Humor: A Guide for Parents and Teachers*. [NOTE: Order from www.LaughterRemedy.com. *Not in bookstores.*]

Stage 0: Laughter without humor (0-6 mo.)

Stage 1: Laughter at the attachment figure (6-12/15 mo.)

Stage 2: Treating an object as a different object (12/15 mo.-3/5 yrs)

Stage 3: Misnaming objects or actions (2-3/4 yrs)

- a. Misnaming objects and events (calling a cat a dog, calling a spoon a fork or telephone, etc.).
- b. Continued humor in acting toward an object as if it's another object (e.g., wearing a bowl as a hat).
- c. Other distorted behaviors.

Stage 4a: Playing with word sounds—not meanings (3-5 yrs)

Stage 4b: Nonsense real-word combinations (3-5 yrs)

Stage 4c: Distortion of features of objects, people or animals (3-5 yrs)

Pre-Riddle Stage: Transition period (5-6/7 yrs)

Most of the characteristics of stage 3 are still present, but kids begin to tell riddles without understanding them. They give any kind of answer to riddle questions ("Knock-knock." "Who's there?" "Nobody's home!" This leads to hysterical laughter by teller.).

Stage 5: Riddles & jokes (6/7-10/11 yrs)

1. Puns. Child is now intellectually capable of keeping two meanings of word in mind at same time. (Due to onset of concrete operational thinking, according to Jean Piaget.) "Why did the dog lay in the sun all day? Because he wanted to be a hot dog." "What kind of ears does a train have? Engineers (ears)."
2. Gradual loss of a "cruel" sense of humor (laughing at physical/behavioral oddities in the person's presence).
3. Appearance of the "joke façade." Child learns you can say hurtful things and still have an "out."

How Humor Benefits Children's Development

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1. Sustains Joy & Happiness

Children love to play and laugh, and are happiest when they have plenty of opportunities to do so.

2. Builds Strong Bonds with Parents, Other Children, & Caregivers

3. Strengthens Interpersonal Skills

Children who have better humor skills have an advantage in communicating, cultivating friendships, and popularity. It's hard to not like someone who makes you laugh.

4. Helps Manage Anger & Anxiety

Humor and laughter provide a cathartic release of anger, frustration & anxiety. This is especially important for children, who may be unable to verbalize their feelings. Learning to use humor in the midst of these feelings provides the child with a powerful coping tool that will be useful throughout life.

5. Builds Self-Esteem

Humor provides a feeling of intellectual and emotional mastery over the thing laughed at. While having fun, the child also feels pride ("I know that. I'm really smart." "I'm not afraid of that."). This feeling is strengthened as s/he learns the distinction between laughing with and laughing at.

6. Boosts Reading and Intellectual skills

Kids who get turned on to humor love to read riddle books and other funny books. This reinforces the joy of reading and stimulates interest in other books as well. Since humor generally involves some kind of distortion of one's knowledge of the world, frequent exposure to visual and verbal humor helps clarify what one knows at the same time it encourages the child to think about other possible realities.

7. Promotes Creativity

There is ample evidence among children and adults of a close link between humor and creativity. Since humor provides original and unusual ways of thinking about the world, this cultivates a general capacity to think in innovative ways. This is a highly valued skill in a work-world characterized by rapid change.

8. Better Physical Health

Humor and laughter lower the level of damaging stress hormones in the blood, strengthen numerous components of the immune system, and more.

How to Nurture Children's Humor Skill Development

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1. Support Play Behavior

Humor emerges out of a child's general predisposition to play. As long as play behavior is not consistently punished, children have a built-in drive to play because it's intrinsically enjoyable. Since humor is simply an intellectual form of play, supporting the value of play in general also nurtures humor. (You can still establish time and place limits on play.)

2. Reinforce Early Attempts at Humor

Even though it's not funny to you, entering into the fun by laughing at the child's efforts (saying how funny it is, etc.) and introducing similar humor of your own--at the child's level, of course. This does not mean you do this until the child gets tired of the game. It's up to you to set limits on your participation.

3. Model Humor in Your Own Daily Life

Parental modeling is one of the most influential sources of what is learned during the childhood years. If the children you teach/care for see you finding a funny side of everyday things, or creating your own jokes or witty remarks, they will naturally be inclined to do the same. This is one of the most important things you can do to cultivate a child's sense of humor. Modeling of humor is especially powerful when you do it under stress.

4. Laugh at Yourself

Children make mistakes and are often embarrassed while growing up. A special form of modeling shows that you can laugh at your own blunders or flaws. However, this should not be the only way you show your own sense of humor. Overdoing this can communicate a poor self-image or lack of confidence.

5. Provide Humor at the Child's Cognitive Level

Make the effort to inform yourself of developmental changes in children's humor, and provide opportunities for humor that match the current level. Humor that is either too difficult to understand or too simple may weaken the child's interest in humor.

6. Respect Each Child's Unique Humor Style

Remember that while all children go through the same general developmental stages, their overall sense of humor is unique—as is the case with adults.