Parenting Exchange
Humor #1 Library

by Karen Stephens

Humor: No Joke, It's A Learning Tool for Kids

If humor were a science, every child would enter the world with an honorary degree, Ph.D. of Hilarity. They are lord and masters of Chuckleland. And bless their little souls for savoring it. A colleague's office door displays a tiny bit of research trivia that's packed with a BIG message: "Adults average 15 laughs a day. Children laugh 400 times a day." Hmmm, guess that spells out the big gulf between childhood and adulthood: 385 laughs a day….

Humans' unique talent for laughter reaches its zenith in childhood, and then tapers off dramatically. I've wondered why. Perhaps because the world is so new and amazing to kids, or because childhood is removed from realities of putting bread on the table, socking away money for college tuition, and cutting corners to chisel down Mt. Visa!

For whatever reason, the lighter side of life delights kids to no end. And from their short-angled view of the world, just about everything in life is the lighter side! When kids are well loved and well raised, they are never, and I mean, NEVER too busy for a laugh, a prank, a practical joke. (How do we adults let such a precious gift go by the wayside?)

> "Kids' humor is the perfect salve for doldrums."

Inquisitive, energetic kids aren't complacent, bored, or jaded with life's little incongruities. When something is eschew, it takes barely a nudge for kids to topple uncontrollably over a ledge of giggles. Slips of the tongue create a landslide! Slapstick, funny faces, and the mere mention of a private body part sends them tittering onto the floor. And if something really gets them going, like an "authority figure" messing up — or worse, the sound of a fundamental body function (even a lousy armpit imitation of one!) -— well, their laughter is made visible with a whale's breath of milk spouting from their noses! (Can you reach back to remember the joy of it — the complete abandon of it — the nasal STING of it?!)

Oh, yes, I know kids cracking up at the table can exasperate adults. And it's frustrating when kids get tickled during worship service. Their spontaneous, barely stuffed snorts of glee don't add to the spiritual message . . . . Or do they? Perhaps succumbing to joy is the purest way to show gratitude for our precious, unpredictable gift of life.

Many adults view kids' capacity for laughter as unruly. At the slightest infraction the party-poopers bridle kids' enthusiasm, always vigilant to keep youngsters' effervescence stifled and "under control." (Sounds ominous to me, how about you?) Don't get me wrong. I'm well aware there's a time and place for laughter. It's just a shame many adults imagine that place as a cramped condominium rather than a spacious field of wildflowers. Kids need some leeway to be kids!

I envy children's ability to surrender to happiness. Laughter is a great way to maintain perspective and "lighten up." Kids' humor is the perfect salve for doldrums. By following kids to whimsical giggles, I enjoy life refreshed. Let me give you just one example:

When Jimmy Carter was president, I never had to watch Saturday Night Live for political impersonations. I had my four-year-old student, Brian W. to keep me in stitches. In pre-school circles, he had the best presidential spoof going. He'd start by donning a clip-on bow tie. Then with teeth clenched in a broad, cheek-busting smile, Brian slipped into character. With an uncanny ear for southern drawl, Brian parodied a classic campaign routine. Bright-eyed, pumping arms to beat the band, he'd announce to anyone and

everyone: "Hey, y'all, Ah'm Jimmeeeee Cartah! Howyadoin'?" Over and over he'd say it, and over and over the kids would laugh, and I would, too.

Even all these years later, I can't help smiling when I recall his imposter play. For variety he'd ask if we'd met his wife "Rahhhzuluuunnnn" or his "brotha Billah." His chums found it dazzling, especially when he'd interrupt (okay, enliven!) show and tell with his act. They lived vicariously through Brian, wishing just once they could brazenly venture onto the adult side of humor.

That's just one of the many times children have cracked me up with their ingenuity, with their penchant for silliness. Brian brightened my day by reminding me how fun life could be. But more importantly, Brian's antics caused me — for the first time — to seriously pay attention to the significant role humor plays in children's development. Through humor kids reveal their ability to observe, analyze, and think abstractly. When they entertain us (endlessly!) with "knock-knock" jokes, we watch as they gradually grasp the subtle nuances of double meanings. At face value, the jokes appear simple, even frivolous, yet they help kids master language.

When creating jokes, kids are essentially practicing mental gymnastics. By telling them, they hone valuable communication skills. Those skills help them become socially adept. Laughter is a great bonding tool for making friendships. Those friendships in turn support emotional stability and enhance kids' self esteem. Yes, kids' silliness deserves more respect and tolerance than it gets. From within that world of silliness, well-rounded, competent and enjoyable adults emerge.

Accepting and appreciating kids' comedy is easier said than done. It requires teaching when humor is appropriate and when it's counter-productive. Therein lies the conundrum: When to encourage humor and when to put a damper on it. Let's say you have a child with a well-developed sense of humor. Why, you might have a budding Bill Cosby or Rosie O'Donnell on your hands! You don't want to squelch that creative talent. No, you want your bud to bloom! So you pour on the encouragement.

But what if you give so much encouragement that your little comedian thinks that it's the only way to get attention? Well, in that case, you've got some relationship building to do. Being funny alone doesn't make for a full life. Even Bill and Rosie took a break from joking to learn how to read and write!

Deciding how to respond to children's humor isn't easy. It takes a delicate touch to keep humor positive and enjoyable. Children must recognize the fine line between having fun WITH someone versus poking fun AT them.

I leave you three "rules of thumb" that will help children learn the time and place for kind-spirited humor. (1) If you don't want children using belittling humor, don't use it yourself. (2) Don't let kids drink in or mimic the heavy doses of mean-spirited humor that is served up in television, movies, radio talk shows and the internet. (3) Bring home a good, funny joke often and share it with the kids. How often? Well, I'm convinced a good belly laugh a day helps keep the doctor away. The kids taught me that.

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