

Humor in the Home and in the Classroom: The Benefits of Laughing While We Learn

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Abstract

Research shows that social and intellectual development among preadolescent children can be enhanced and enriched when the children are exposed to the regular, structured, appropriate use of humor by parents and teachers. Authority figures such as parents and teachers can use wit and humor to edify familial and/or educational relationships and encourage academic excellence by helping lay foundations for effective learning connections with children before they enter adolescence. This article explores the value and benefits of humor as a teaching tool at home and in the classroom and addresses appropriate and inappropriate uses of humor in these environments. In doing so, the author focuses on the socially significant development of sense of humor from shortly after birth through early adulthood. The author discusses the latest research in this relatively new field of study, and presents examples and resources for the use of humor with children of this age group.

Introduction

Here in the first decade of the 21st century, parents of early adolescents are finding it increasingly challenging to encourage and facilitate their children's academic success while maintaining open, intimate, and trusting parent/child relationships. Similarly, teachers of middle school grades are constantly in search of creative and invigorating teaching strategies that can compete with the internet, media and other forms of home entertainment for the attention of their students (Cornett, 2001). Of course, parents hope to maintain close relationships with their children before, during and beyond this time of change and maturity (Berg & Van Brockem, 1995). Research also shows that in addition to having students learn curriculum, most teachers wish to have students enjoy time in their classes (Burgess, 2000). Parents and teachers have similar questions about the most effective ways to relate to children and ensure their academic success. For parents, answers lie in relationships based on love, trust, encouragement, openness and sharing (Faber & Mazlish, 2006). For teachers, success may predictably be found in approaches that make relevant connections and encourage higher-order thinking (Gurtler, 2002). Interestingly, one element of human development that has been proven to edify familial relationships and encourage academic excellence is often overlooked by parents and teachers in this endeavor. That element is humor. The benefits of using humor to lay foundations for great learning connections with children before they enter adolescence are great (Lundberg & Thurston, 2002). This article explores the development of humor and those many social, academic and even physiological benefits to laughter. The article also investigates the viability and versatility of humor as a means to enhance relationships and bolster high academic achievement, and encourages parents and teachers to initiate regular, focused communication with children in funny, witty ways.

As children enter their teens, they naturally become more independent. They begin making decisions of greater significance to the family as a whole. They assert themselves as individuals by affirming how they want to dress, how they want to speak and with whom they prefer to spend their time. They begin to vocalize their academic preferences and even contemplate future career interests (Faber & Mazlish, 2006). Many of them become interested in issues of political, societal or global significance. Adopting such causes enable them to develop and articulate their opinions or ideas.

During this time of social, physical and emotional maturity, both the family unit and the classroom environment face several challenges (Faber & Mazlish, 2006). Rebellious behavior at home and disruptive behavior in the classroom are oft-related signs of this communication breakdown, but research suggests that structured use of humor combats these disrespectful or off-task activities and even works to rebuild challenged relationships (Loomans & Kohlberg, 1993). According to Dr. Robert Provine, professor of psychology and neuroscience at the University of Maryland, answers for parents and teachers can be found in the same, simple approach: plenty of feel-good, hearty and infectious humor-induced laughter (2000).

The Case for Laughter

Research shows that laughter is an effective way for people of all ages to release pent-up tensions or energy, permit the expression of ideas or feelings that would otherwise be difficult to express and facilitate coping with trying circumstances (McGhee, 1979). The link between laughter and academic success is also well documented. Positive connections between parents' and teachers' use of humor and academic achievement even follow students into college and beyond (Hickman & Crossland, 2004-2005).

According to *Webster's New World Dictionary*, to laugh means to "make the explosive sounds of the voice and the characteristic movements of the features of the body, that express mirth, amusement, ridicule, etc." (Neufeldt, V. & Guralnik, D.B., 1988). This definition might do well to explain the physiological event of laughter, but to understand the effects it has on one's social or emotional wellbeing, more clinical definitions are necessary. Laughter is described by humor researchers as a response to pleasurable and/or amusing physical, emotional and/or intellectual stimuli that affect the brain in interesting and very complex ways. This understanding is based on data collection and clinical analysis causes and effects of laughter, which are said by many researchers to be so complex that it is quite difficult for them to settle on one basic definition of humor. Some even assert that humor patterns and what people find funny are not entirely traceable at present (Latta, 1998).

What is known is that when it is employed as a conversation starter, tension-breaker or therapeutic intervention, laughter is a highly effective way to stimulate communication. In this context, laughter says a lot more about social relationships than it does about responses to jokes (Provine, 2000). As public speakers have demonstrated for ages, beginning a speech with a humorous anecdote or situational comedy has the "dependably higher" positive reaction from audience members (Gruner, 1989). This positive humor impact is also traceable in the world of television advertising. Companies frequently use humor to introduce or market their products because studies show that people remember and respond more positively to humorous commercials better than other types of advertising (Phillips, 2002).

When humans laugh, they experience pleasure that usually culminates in a predictable physical response coupled with a sense of openness to discussion and/or interaction. Humor, in this regard can facilitate learning (Freud, 1905). Children whose interest is captured in such a way are primed for effective learning. From an academic standpoint, research findings are clear that there is a significantly positive relationship between age-appropriate and situation-appropriate humor and academic success. Humor, in and of itself, is a particular kind of cognitive event. As noted humor researcher Paul McGhee has determined, "Humor appreciation seems to involve two distinct mental activities; we must first identify the nature of the incongruous event, and then set out to resolve or make sense of it" (1979). All people, regardless of age, benefit from intellectual challenges, and humor, like many other approaches, enables learning and builds confidence. Furthermore, evidence suggests that humor not only enables learning, but demonstrates a correlations between the development of sense of humor and motivation to learn, mastery of cognitive some material and positive response to instructional stimuli (Klein, 1985).

Research also suggests that laughter has a positive effect on a person's physical and mental health. According to noted medical doctor and humor researcher Dr. Samuel Kahn, laughter

contributes positively and measurably to appetite and digestion, sleep patterns, heart problems, blood flow and several brain disorders. Dr. Kahn sums up his observations by stating: "...laughing, joy and happiness are very helpful to the chemistry of the body and to the general health of the person" (1975). It has even been estimated that twenty seconds of hearty laughter gives the heart a workout equivalent to three minutes of hard rowing (Fry & Savin, 1988), and boosts the immune system as well (Hook, 1997). In terms of mental development, the beneficial implications of humor are also measurable. Not only does humor incorporate great healing power when used as therapy for stress or coping (Seaward, 2006), but it has also been found to build up resilience and self-image among troubled youths particularly when they perceive conflict or stress (Berg & Van Brockern, 1995).

The Development of Laughter and Humor

In order to form an effective approach to the use of humor with 10-13 year-old children, it is necessary to explore how humor and laughter develop in the early years of life. Studying how and when infants, toddlers and pre-schoolers come to find things funny and enjoy laughing reveals understanding about various milestones of human mental and social maturity.

Laughter begins for most babies at around four months of age and develops quite rapidly over the next year or so. What begins with little more than an occasional, unsolicited pleasant smile and coo eventually progresses into vocal recognition of friendly faces, interesting sounds or entertaining games such as peek-a-boo. Over the next year, most infants demonstrate increasing levels of conscious pleasure by laughing more frequently, as in reacting to tickling or gibberish interaction. During this time they also display growing control of their laughter (Wolfenstein, 1954). Although some researchers do not consider this infant laughter evidence of a sense of humor, it is often assumed that such is in the developmental stages, even when it appears to be nothing more than the sounds coming out of the baby's mouth in reaction to various concentrated stimuli (McGhee, 1979). Natural maturity of a baby's laughter and ability to recognize pleasure is also traceable by research (Freud, 1905). Even if this reaction to pleasure is not scientifically defined as 'humor', it is crucial. In many medical and psychological circles, baby laughter is hailed as one of several indicators of the baby's normal mental and social development (Warren, 2001).

According to some humor researchers, sense of humor still has not begun to develop even as the infant becomes a toddler, however, her/his finding entertainment and pleasure in various situations that result in laughter is usually observable. At some point between the ages of two and four, the child will most likely begin to develop imaginatively and associate enjoyment and entertainment with fantasy and make-believe (Morreall, 1987). It is this imagination, coupled with an ever-evolving understanding of language and the real world, which then gives birth to the first detectible sense of humor (McGhee & Goldstein, 1983).

As the child's worldly observations increase and conceptual understandings become more complex, so too does her capacity for appreciation and laughter at incongruity or absurdity. This is a crucial time for the child. If her healthy cognitive development is disrupted, it is likely that her sense of humor and what she finds funny will be affected too (Freud, 1905). These two elements of human development (cognitive development and humor development) can have positive or adverse affects on each other.

By learning to laugh at the wrong things or in derogatory manners, a child's cognitive development may become delayed. Humor that embarrasses, ridicules, or degrades someone else not only forms poor interpersonal skills, but is wholly counter-productive in terms of social and academic growth (Nelson, 1989). By the age of seven or eight, a child's sense of humor first begins to resemble that of the adult. As a result of advances in language development, children of this age begin to understand that some words have double meanings, and that when used in a timely manner and particular situation, can actually be funny based on sheer unexpectedness,

(McGhee, 1979). Knock-knock jokes and puns are good examples of this level of humor. It is also at this time that differences in the senses of humor of boys and girls become noticeable.

The next developmental stage of humor recognition for children is marked by their abilities to move beyond simple incongruous humor, and focus more astutely on language complexity. A child might begin to demonstrate understanding of word plays and rhyming humor involving nonsense words at this time, but this is not the extent of the development. Before long, the child can also process situational mirth and qualify different types of humor. Humor of this sort and this level of development is identifiable by its reliance on a child's common tensions, conflicts and anxieties (McGhee, 1978). It is also at this time that jokes, primarily but not exclusively among boys, may begin to incorporate hostile and/or sexual themes.

This too is a pivotal time in a child's social development. Differences in laughter patterns for boys and girls become noticeable by around the age of seven. For boys, whose aggressive, assertive behavior is often positively reinforced by those around them, laughter typically is louder and more sustained. Girls, on the other hand, whose assertive behaviors are not always so positively reinforced, tend to reduce the conspicuousness of their laughter or displays of humor (McGhee & Chapman, 1980).

These differences continue throughout adolescence and into adulthood, but this is not to say that boys are more humorously creative than girls, or, as the case may be, that men are more humor-savvy than women. Several factors contribute to the development of the respective senses of humor in men and women. This illustrates the important point that fathers and mothers wanting to use humor as a means to connect to their preadolescent and/or adolescent sons and daughters should take this developmental difference into consideration when formulating their humor approach.

What This Means for Parents

So, what does all this mean to parents who wish to make or maintain healthy connections with their preadolescent or early adolescent children? How can parents use these research findings to invoke smiles, laughter, and even serious conversation once in a while?

Parents may employ laughter as a study strategy when assisting children with homework, and in doing so, positively affect the healthy maintenance of parent/child relationships. The use of humor in this situation not only benefits the studying child, but it may be good for the parent as well. After a long day at work, many parents are simply too tired to come home to a sixth grade history lesson. In this case, the use of humor can diffuse frustrations that might surface. Such one-on-one time is very fulfilling for children and often ends with smiles and a real sense of accomplishment (Nelson, 1989). Some of the most creative learning approaches can develop through impromptu activities during which the parent and child work in conjunction, allowing the subject matter, the situation and their creativity to direct how learning occurs and is made fun. Some parents may, for instance, enable their children to remember important facts or concepts by introducing silly but entertaining rhymes, puns, word plays and other approaches that incorporate learning material.

Say, for instance, a child is sitting at the kitchen table staring haplessly at page after page of her sixth grade social studies book. Her father is helping her study in preparation for a test on the origins of civilization in Southwest Asia and the Ancient Babylonian Empire. They are discussing the material and are reading about people of the region and places such as Sumer, Tigris, Euphrates, Mesopotamia, Hammurabi, and ziggurats, among other things. These are new words/concepts for the child, and Dad cannot remember when he last studied about them. This could easily be a recipe for frustration and could cause considerable exhaustion and impatience on both their parts. As they discuss the meaning of each term or concept, Dad decides to share with her a few silly statements and rhymes. Here are a couple of examples:

In order to reinforce an understanding of the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers and the location of Mesopotamia, he says:

"You afraid o' these tigers? They make a mess of potamia!"

In order to draw a mental picture of a ziggurat, he says:

*"If the top is flat and the bottom is fat,
there's a really good chance it's a ziggurat!"*

These silly statements and rhymes, in and of themselves, might seem senseless or distracting, but when combined with the basic knowledge derived from the textbook, they may introduce laughter and enjoyment, not to mention effectiveness to the learning process. Research supports the argument that adding a melody, rhythm, acronyms or mnemonics to memory-related learning approaches is effective (Dudley, 1973). Humor, certainly when combined with one or more of these tools, can prove even more effective. Parents and children who work together in this manner build subject matter comprehension skills and reinforce the positive aspects of their relationships.

Not all ideas, however, need be impromptu in nature. Today, parents have at their disposal, various books written on laughing, learning and communicating with children. Authors Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish have written several great books on strategies for parents to connect to their children. Their latest work, *How to Talk so Teens Will Listen and Listen so Teens Will Talk*, focuses on how to avoid those tense, emotional and anger-inducing moments between parents and their ever-maturing young teenager (2005). In this work, for instance, they suggest a variety of alternative punishments for misbehavior, cooperation-enhancing ideas, and keys to successful communication between parents and their children. As a means to maintain or mend parent/child relationships, particularly with regard to eliciting successful communication, Faber and Mazlish rely heavily on the use of humor. Learning to 'laugh now and ask questions later' is not always easy, but with such valuable strategies as these, it can lead to a renewed sense of trust and openness, not only as it is related to study skills, but the relationship in general.

In *The Roller Coaster Years: Raising Your Child through the Maddening yet Magical Middle School Years*, Charlene Giannetti and Margaret Sagarese focus on intense efforts by parents to develop understandings of their early adolescent children. Giannetti and Sagarese propose that in all parents do, they should effort to understand what they term the "middle developer's mind", and react constructively to children at all times (1997). As children are becoming more intellectually sophisticated, their sense of humor is naturally maturing as well. Parents need to realize this and celebrate it.

In *Why do they act that way? A Survival Guide to the Adolescent Brain for You and Your Teen*, by David Walsh, asserts that adolescence is that huge gray area between childhood and adulthood and that it is an especially confusing time for early teens (2004). He describes adolescence as a great "juggling act" and opines that gaps in parent/child relationships exist and grow, in part, because for the first time in their lives, children are enabled to make decisive choices about many things. Walsh suggests that a parent's sense of humor and capacity for listening, among other attributes, is key to maintaining that fruitful relationship and healthy communication with a child.

During middle school years, pre-adolescents and adolescents want and need greater respect and graduated personal autonomy (Lee, 2006). Naturally, children begin to question lots of things at this point in their lives. This propensity contributes to the explosion of learning many children experience during adolescence, but it may also have a down side (Hook, 1997). The tendency for a child to question or usurp authority is not limited to parents, but it can certainly make for difficult years for father and/or mother and child, especially when it relates to educational approaches within the home. Employing fun and creative learning strategies can reduce stress raised by confusing, ambiguous and even boring homework assignments. Confidence is the key, and humor is a wonderful confidence-builder. This is true not only in the home, but in the classroom as well.

What it Means for Teachers

Although many adults remember at least one or two teachers from their school days they considered “funny” or “humorously entertaining”, organized use of humor approaches in the classroom is a relatively new concept in the field. While there have long been witty/funny teachers whose personalities has made them a hit with students, research-tested, curriculum-based humor strategies have not been explored in great depth. As recently as the 1990s, structured use of humor in elementary school and middle school classrooms was elusive at best, and flat out dissuaded by administrators at worst. During those early days of ‘failing schools’ hysteria, public attention to standardized test results and teacher accountability increased. One result of that trend was a general streamlining of teaching strategies. A teacher who might be working to infuse and support her curriculum and teaching style with humor, for instance, might be questioned about the legitimacy and time-effectiveness of such an approach. Due in large part to lingering skepticism and traditional perceptions on laughter in the classroom, teachers who endeavor to invigorate their lessons with structured use of humor may still have to account for their actions. Teachers who are familiar with the work and strategies of humor-in-the-classroom pioneers can make a valid argument for its inclusion.

Ron Burgess is one such pioneer. In his recent book, *Laughing Lessons*, Burgess shares classroom management and teaching strategies that support the general theme that learning is more fun, more effective, and better connected when it involves humor (2000). His suggestions vary in complexity from simple, humorous conversation prompts and teacher responses to students’ questions to involved teaching activities that have significant implications on lesson design and presentation. Regarding classroom management, Burgess asserts that creating a humorous classroom actually works to reduce disciplinary issues before they arise. He says; “Laughter and humor will hold kids’ attention, thus helping them retain the information they’re learning. Humor also helps reduce tension... in the kids *and* you. Laughter is a great stress reliever. It can make a school day seem shorter and your load lighter. It can help you cope with crisis, break monotony, and live longer.” (Burgess, 2000). The point is to make the classroom a little more warm and inviting, which results in a class-wide attitude better suited to learning and more apt to be effective. (2000).

Elaine Lundberg and Cheryl Miller have also inspired teachers for years with ideas for classroom humor. Their work, *If They’re Laughing, They Just Might be Listening*, focuses on sharing practical, in-class strategies such as the administration of silly awards for desired work or behavior and using grand exaggerations during a lesson (2002). A teacher, giving an exaggerated demonstration, for instance, on how *not* to organize a notebook, might toss all sorts of papers, pencils, even a banana peel into a folder and hold it up for all to see. None of the children think for a second that anyone actually keeps their folder in that shape, but they get the idea, not to mention a nice laugh at the teacher’s demonstration. “Students can’t learn anything,” they write “if they aren’t paying attention. Humor relieves monotony and boredom and helps students stay tuned in, keeping their attention so that they can learn. If they know something funny might happen at any moment, they listen.” (Lundberg & Miller, 2002).

In *The Laughing Classroom*, Diana Loomans and Karen Kolberg key on what it takes to “become a laughing teacher” by illustrating how to transform the classroom into a place that is part studio, part comedy club, part bus station and part museum (1993). “In short,” they write, “learning and laughter go hand in hand, and always have. Every young child can readily demonstrate the capacity to thoroughly enjoy learning even the most mundane skills, such as washing windows or memorizing math tables. The explanation for this natural phenomenon is that kids bring unlimited playfulness and creativity to any task, transforming what might be a boring activity into one that is filled with quips, songs, goofiness, wonder, delight, and even awe.” (Loomans and Kolberg, 1993).

More resources for constructing a humor-friendly classroom can be found in *Humor as an Instructional Defibrillator* by Ronald Berk. Berk encourages teachers to explore the various forms

of humor that are conducive to the classroom, and points out that humor can come in many forms, not just in the form of a teacher standing at the front of the room telling dry knock-knock jokes. "Humor... opens up communication that's not based on fear or intimidation. Instead, the communication is positive, constructive, and relaxed; it continuously ebbs and flows all over the classroom... A bonding rapport develops between you and your students that is founded on respect, trust, and fun." (Berk, 2002). He advocates the transformation of the classroom into an exciting, engaging environment for learning.

Teachers who plan instruction with these and similar humor strategies reap the benefits of unique connectivity and transform their classrooms into warm and inviting learning environments. Steve Allen, the noted comedian and host of *The Tonight Show* once wrote:

"As I look back at the years of my formal education, sketchy as it was, I find that three teachers stand out in my recollection. What they all had in common was a good sense of humor. Whether they taught their subjects any better than their relatively humorless equivalents I don't really know, but their geniality and their general good nature simply set a social context within which I felt comfortable. By way of contrast, I remember one instructor who, because she was a critical, sarcastic, and cold person, was able to teach me very little."

To Laugh: Different Types of Constructive Humor

Laughter is instinctive behavior programmed by our genes, not by the vocal community in which we grow up (Provine, 2000). It has been established that laughter enhances one's mental and physical state. It is an effective way for people of all ages to release tensions and deal with difficult situations, and has also been seen as a conversation icebreaker that permits the expression of ideas or feelings that might otherwise be difficult to express. Research shows that laughter is an effective way to encourage relaxation, calm those stressed by work or school, or even help those grieving the loss of a loved one. Laughter is a versatile, constructive way to address those incongruities of life, and it may be used as a therapeutic outlet (Brooks, Guthrie & Gaylord, 1999). It should also be pointed out that humor can promote positive gains in social and cognitive skills, elicit cognitive arousal and serve to reinforce subject matter (McGhee & Chapman, 1980). As a parent applies this understanding to the relationships he/she forms with his/her children, laughter may enable teaching life lessons, encouraging interaction and reinforcing good behavior, and parents can associate laughter with the forming of alliances, communicating of attitudes and establishment of productive rapports (McGhee & Goldstein, 1983). The examples that follow discuss the induction of laughter and include humor as a means to boost creativity, correct behavior without using harsh criticism, teach patience and kindness, build trust, cultivate confidence, and enhance coping skills during times of trauma or grief.

Many children enjoy their parents' creative use of word plays and puns, even in regular conversation. Research shows that this sort of activity is more than just fun. It is an effective way to boost creativity, and creative humor, according to Arthur Koestler, is as indicative of and beneficial to cognitive development as other forms of creativity. "The type of thinking involved in creating humor is identical with that required for scientific, literary, artistic, or other forms of creative activities" (1964).

Humor may also be used by parents and teachers to correct a child's behavior, but the manner in which parents or teachers make their expectations known is often based on fear. According to Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish, co-authors of the bestselling *How to Talk so Kids will Listen and Listen so Kids will Talk*, humor is a great way to replace harsh criticism and demanding or demeaning tones: "Teenagers usually react to criticism by defending their behavior. When parents state their expectations clearly and respectfully, teenagers are more likely to listen and try to live up to those expectations. Teenagers can be very sensitive to their parents' disapproval. By substituting humor for criticism, we change the mood and encourage everyone's playful spirit." (2006).

Such a process can lead to a better sense of trust between parent and child. Research suggests that fostering such a relationship has a positive impact on familial interaction, which in turn positively reinforces trust (Stearns, 1972). Parents who speak openly and supportively with their children on various topics reinforce a relationship based on an earnest sense of trust. If children are encouraged to voice their questions with the assurance that parents will answer them, if at all possible, in straightforward, honest manners, their sense of trust is emboldened (Lefranquois, 2000).

In addition to building a trusting relationship, parents and teachers may also use humor and laughter to build confidence. Self-confidence and sensitivity, as is demonstrated by Shain Elcha in *The Handbook of Humor: Clinical Applications in Psychotherapy*, is a necessary prerequisite for anyone who intends to use humor in this capacity (1994), and that level of self-confidence can influence everyone involved in a positive way. This is especially true when a child is undergoing a particularly difficult time. Careful use of humor in these sensitive situations is also an effective way to promote coping skills when dealing with every emotion from sadness to trauma and disappointment to grief. Research in this area is clear that humor, when used to counter emotional stress, can ease tensions by promoting rapport, relaxation, and shared insight (Hook, 1997).

The timely use of humor may enhance a parent's relationship with his/her child as well as a teacher's classroom effectiveness, and a strong rapport of this nature can be seen to strengthen ties in virtually all of these other capacities. Positive effects of humor, however, can be undermined by its inappropriate use, and it is important that parents and teachers know when and where to draw the line.

Or Not to Laugh: Types of Humor to Avoid

There are times and situations when laughter or use of humor should be avoided. Most researchers agree that just as there are effective and positive ways to employ humor as a communication, there are ineffective, and even destructive ways to implement it as well (Nelson, 1989). Similarly, there are types of laughter and humor that are best avoided when trying to establish or promote a healthy relationship with a child. These inopportune situations include humor that is hurtful or demeaning, cynical, sarcastic or sardonic in nature. Other examples of poor humor include the type that reinforces stereotypes, biases or sexual or cultural misconceptions, and humor that is directed at someone who does not wish to participate (Forsyth, Alterman & Forsyth, 1997).

Humor that is based on hurtful or demeaning themes is not effective in reinforcing good citizenship or patience and kindness skills. It is advisable not to even allow such uses of humor in the home or the classroom (Gruner, 1989). Permission of such demeaning, disrespectful and off-color humor is confusing and sends mixed messages to children who look to parents and teachers for moral guidance (Greig, 1969). Rules about appropriate humor are increasingly more difficult to enforce considering that virtually all forms of contemporary entertainment incorporate vitriolic and sadistic attempts at humor. Examples of this sort of humor include Sacha Baron Cohen's "Borat" character and Comedy Central's Stephen Colbert. While both of these comedians is quite successful, one cannot discount the emphasis on embarrassment and/or ridicule of people who are not aware that they are targets of such humor. This sort of humor might actually have an effect that is destructive, hurtful, and even vengeful. Parents would do well to address issues of hurtful, uninvited or inappropriate humor constantly and with a sense of immediacy (Faber & Mazlish, 2006).

Cynical sarcastic or sardonic humor is not to be promoted at home or in the classroom (Gruner, 1989). Humor can open doors of communication and foster compelling relationships between parents and children, or, if used improperly, it can undo connections by reinforcing poor interpersonal skills, bad habits and stereotypes. Humor that hurts, lacks empathy or devaluates any person's dignity also contributes to aggressive or violent behavior, and can drive a

destructive wedge between a parent and her child at a crucial time in the child's life (Forsyth, Alterman & Forsyth, 1997). Parents and teachers should not permit the use of humor that is disparaging to any group of people or individual. Humor should never be personal or offensive, and it is important for everyone involved to recognize when one or more of participants is/are not in the mood for joking around (Faber & Mazlish, 2006). When those instances arise, it is important that parent, teacher and child have the capacity to recognize the situation and react with that person's feelings in mind.

When parental focus remains where it should, that is, on sharing, caring, trusting, confiding and in all other manners communicating in a way that is supportive and edifying, humor is of great value to us and our children. Similarly, teachers who rely on humor that is constructive, witty and non-personal or hurtful can enhance their rapport with students and make curricular connections that might otherwise have evaded them despite their most earnest efforts. This is evident in the child's social and cognitive development and it is important to remember that there is a distinction between humor that edifies and humor that hurts. Being mindful of this distinction whenever humor is used to make those connections keeps that focus attuned to the constructive rather than the destructive (Gruner, 1989).

Conclusion

"When we hear laughter," remarks Robert Provine, "we tend to laugh in turn, producing a behavioral chain reaction that sweeps through a group, creating a crescendo of jocularity or ridicule" (2000). Everyone laughs, and since time immemorial, humans have told stories, shared experiences, passed the time and learned from each other by way of laughter. Research shows that humor promotes learning and when used appropriately, it can strengthen relationships of all shapes and sizes.

Parents who are dedicated to the best interests, social development and academic success of their children can accomplish great things by using a wide variety of creatively humorous approaches, including rhymes, chants, riddles, nonsensical speech, jokes, banter, anecdotes, games and even self-effacing commentary, to make valuable connections and enhance learning. Teachers also have it within their power to employ techniques that make their classes fun places to be, for everyone involved.

By using this natural approach to communication and interaction, parents and teachers can boost creativity and critical thinking skills, promote values, teach good moral behavior and civic responsibility, instill trust and confidence and provide children with a means of coping with sadness, disappointment and grief. In terms of maintaining effectively open and highly-communicative relationships with children during preadolescence, adolescence and long after; humor works. Parents hope to maintain close relationships they have worked so hard to build with their sons or daughters. Teachers long for that spark of magic that makes the subject matter click for each student. With ample attention to the constructive use of humor, parents and teachers alike may be successful in these endeavors for years to come.

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