Developing a “Sense” of Humor
The Development of Humor in Children
Sandy Queen
sjqueen@verizon.net
443 812 6853

We know the joy of listening to small children laugh. From the earliest coaxing of smiles from our newborn infants, to those first endearing chuckles, to the silly jokes of young children, the development of a ‘sense’ of humor in children is an important part of their growth and development.

The Reasons we should Promote Children’s Humor
Intellectual benefits
Social Benefits
Emotional Benefits
Physical Benefits

Humor and Child Development
1. Sustains joy and happiness
2. Strengthens interpersonal skills
3. Builds strong bonds with parents, other children and caregivers.

Children who have better humor skills have an advantage in communicating, cultivating friendships and popularity.
4. Helps manage anger and anxiety.
5. Builds self esteem...intellectual and emotional mastery over the thing laughed at. This feeling is strengthened as she learns the distinction between laughing WITH and laughing AT.
6. Boosts Reading an Intellectual skills
7. Promotes Creativity

Nurturing a Child’s Sense of Humor
When we think of our preschool children, we often first think of play, fun and laughter. We as educators have always been aware of the importance of play for learning, but humor plays a big role in the development of a child.

It builds vocabulary and both pre reading and reading skills, helps solidify the child’s knowledge of the world, supports creative thinking, builds social interaction skills, boosts popularity and self esteem and provides the foundation for a skill that will help cope with stress.
When we understand how a child’s humor changes as they get older, we can make sure that their sense of humor is nurtured by providing opportunities for humor that matches the child’s current developmental level and appreciate the child’s attempts at humor. Humor is a very important component of emotional health, maintaining relationships, developing cognitive functioning and perhaps even the maintenance of overall health. It is an important component of positive emotions and a strong sense of humor may help children to be more resilient and to better navigate the difficult adolescent years.

Points to remember:

1. A child’s sense of humor reflects their new intellectual achievements. Humor is basically a form of intellectual play – play with ideas. Children have a built in tendency to have fun with newly developed skills both physical and mental.

2. A given kind of humor is also the funniest during the months maybe a year or so after it can first be understood. Riddles, for example, are most funny in first and second grade, but become progressively less funny after that, because they are just too easy to understand.

3. A ‘sense of humor’ is learned, not inherited, although research shows that children model their father’s sense of humor more than their mother’s.

Developmental Changes in children’s Humor.
Humor first appears when children acquire a solid enough understanding of basic features of their world to know that distortions or incongruous presentations of those features are ‘wrong’.

**Stage 1. Laughter at the Attachment Figure (6 – 12/15 months)**

By the age of six or seven months you can find infants laughing at any unusual behavior of the caregiver. The earliest form of humor is reacted to, rather than created. The infant’s primary adults are the most important part of their lives. And since parents are generally around, their faces and behavior are the best learned features of the infant’s new world. Parents are also emotionally important to the infant, and are associated with satisfying basic needs. So it is not surprising that the earliest form of humor experienced by infants involves things parents do.... By ..silly faces, sticking half a banana out of the mouth, making exaggerated animal sounds, etc.

An exaggerated “Aachoouo! After their sneeze can make them laugh. Soon, all you have to do is the “Aaahh” and they giggle.

**Stage 2. Treating an Object as a Different Object (12/15 months to 3, 4, 5 years)**
By the beginning of the second year, infants begin to show a new and exciting behavior – pretend, for the first time, they start treating objects as if the objects were something else. Not all pretend play at this or any other age is humor, but it is this capacity for pretend that paves the way for the earliest humor created by the child.

After the first birthday, you begin to see - putting bowl, or washcloth, on her or your head as a hat; using any small object as a toothbrush, holding spoon o ear and saying “hello daddy.”

Again again!

Stage 3: Misnaming Objects or Actions (2-4 years)
While humor based on using objects in the ‘wrong’ way continues, budding language skills generate new opportunities for humor. After age two parents are used to hearing ‘what’s that? What’s that?” Two year olds are very excited that everything has a name, and they are sponges for every name you can give them. Since they have built into them a strong drive to play with all new skills it is just a matter of time before they begin playing with the names of things. So they give the wrong name!

Many of us have observed this form of humor in the “Show me your nose” game. Even if you’ve always played the game straight yourself, the ay always arrives when you say, “Show me your nose,” and your child gets a mischievous grin on her face and points to her ear! No doubt this is really funny to her!

Babies
Babies don’t really understand humor, but they do know when you are smiling and happy. When you make funny noises or faces and then laugh or smile, they sense your joy and begin to imitate you. Babies are highly responsive to physical stimuli, like tickling and raspberries to the belly.

At about 9-15 months, babies know enough about the world to understand that when you put a diaper on your head or quack like a duck, you are doing something unexpected and that is funny to an infant.

Toddlers
Toddlers appreciate physical humor, especially the kind with an element of surprise, like an unexpected tickle. As little ones develop language skills, they find rhymes and nonsense words particularly funny and this will continue into preschool years.

It is about this time that they begin to try and make you laugh, i.e. pointing to wrong facial features, wearing your shoes around the room.

While toddlers are often amused by things that are out of the ordinary, some intense experiences like parades, circus and Halloween can be too much for them.
By toddler years, little ones understand more about how the world should work, so if they experience the unexpected, like you wearing socks on your ears, they laugh. Anything that disrupts the expected is funny to a toddler.

*You might already have books on your shelf that use this device ones that focus on something surprising or obviously out of place like hippos wearing purple boots or frogs who go ice skating.*

Visual humor is also very funny to toddlers. You can make faces, put on a funny hat or knock yourself on the head with a pillow --- any kind of broad slapstick will delight toddlers.

As they begin to understand language, verbal humor is a great source of amusement. Rhymes and silly names, even nonsense words that just sound funny are favorites.

“My name is Yon Yonsin..I come from Wisconsin”

Kids this age can anticipate humor. If you repeat jokes regularly you will find your child giggling before the punch line.

Toddlers are very physical about everything. There are few better ways to make a child laugh than to chase and catch him, play ring around the rosey, etc.

Here’s the fun part. One day the toddler will start playing jokes on you, hiding under the covers when you come to get him, or pointing to wrong body parts when asked, i.e. ‘where is your nose?’

Repetition is a big deal with little ones, so expect to hear the same jokes over and over again and you will need to laugh and laugh again!

**PRESCHOOLERS**

Preschoolers are more likely to find humor in a picture with something out of whack... a car with square wheels, a pig wearing sunglasses – than a joke or pun. Incongruity between pictures and sounds... a horse that says moo...Is always funny for this group..

By preschool years, kids are humor veterans – a host of tricks and jokes will crack them up. Expect preschoolers to continue to enjoy using objects in silly ways – putting mittens on feet, etc.

Because a sense of humor is essentially an intellectual and emotional skill, it grows as your preschooler does. Kids are always finding new things funny while developing a better and more sophisticated understanding of the world. And they are eager to show off in new ways to be playful.

As they become more aware of bodily functions and of what gets a parent’s goat, preschoolers often start delighting in bathroom humor.
A big activity for preschoolers is labeling things. They become aware that everything has a name and they love using their new vocabulary. The preschooler is probably using improved language skills to play with words like calling objects or people by the wrong names. They will mispronounce or make up words.

“Twinkle twinkle little...cat“... They may experiment with the same song for days of weeks by using new words.

Kids this age will also start to tell little tales in a humorous way. I ate my spoon.... These stories may or may not be accompanied by a smile...some preschoolers are very deadpan.

Changing characteristic appearances, like putting wings on a cat, are funny to this group. Removing things: take wheels off the car or nose off a face Changing shapes...making wheels on a car square or a house round Exaggeration: a man with legs like stilts or woman with glasses bigger than her head Books that have people or animals engaging in unexpected behaviors – a llama eating with a fork

They like it because they get the joke...They are beginning to understand how the world works.

**SCHOOL AGED CHILD**

“How about that pig with the rash.....he needed a little ointment”

“Did you hear the one about the colt with a cold....he was a little hoarse”

If you hear these jokes, you have a school aged child in your classroom.

Around 6-7 kids start to understand language well enough to know that words can have two or more meanings; And as the child develops this cognitive ability to grasp different meanings, riddles, jokes and puns start making sense and will be a top source of enjoyment for the next few years.

Kids this age have an insatiable appetite for jokes of all kinds. What they are really doing is enjoying the ability to make connections and finally be an insider...the one with answers. They also begin enjoying slapstick, and sometimes violent, humor, like Wile E. Coyote. This is where we need to make sure they understand that these situations are not real and should not be copied. Teach the difference between good natured practical jokes and ones that hurt someone or cause hurt feelings.

A friend tripping or falling down may cause laughter. As kids get older they may deal with anxiety by laughing or making inappropriate jokes. A friend tripping or falling down may cause laughter. Some kids can’t help laughing when they are in trouble with parent or teacher. In both cases it is a way of relieving fear or anxiety.

It is never too early to start developing a child’s sense of humor. Babies’ smiles and laughs are so delightful that we often do this intuitively...just to hear them laugh. It is important to kep
up this encouragement as they grow. When you are playful and humorous with your child, delighting in silliness and laughter, you help them develop a playful and humorous attitude toward life.

- Be a humor model
- Take kids’ humor seriously and encourage them
- Make it a part of day to day interactions
- Create a humor rich environment

Where to Draw the Line
You don’t want to discourage them, but there need to be boundaries to humor, just as there are in other areas. If hurtful or inappropriate humor is used, don’t laugh. Take time to explain why that is not funny and help the child redirect his behavior.

Above all, humor is social. That is why you laugh harder at a funny movie in a room full of other people than you when you are alone. Children laugh more when they are with others, and particularly with others who are paying attention to them.

Take time to have fun.