

Children's Riddles: The First Sign of an Adult Sense of Humor

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What cake can you drink coffee from? A cup cake. (Sorry, coffee cake is too easy).

What boats can you always buy at a reduced price? Sale (sail) boats.

A banana and an apple got married, but they argued all the time. So the banana split.

**How many bees are there in a hive? None, the letter "b" is not in the word "hive."
(This works better orally.)**

[Adapted from P. McGhee, *Understanding and Promoting the Development of Children's Humor*, Kendall/Hunt, 2002. To order, call 302-478-7500.]

A general shift in children's humor begins to occur in the early elementary school years. This shift is more striking than any shown at any other age. By six or seven, kids make the exciting discovery that the same word can have two (or more) different meanings. This means you can now use these extra meanings to trick people. It is only at this point that children really understand the very riddles they've already been telling for the past year or more.

This is usually an exhilarating insight, and produces what I call the riddle disease. Kids become consumed with riddles and tell them endlessly—driving their parents nuts in the process! Children all over the world show the same enjoyment of riddles at this age for the same underlying reason. A series of new intellectual abilities (referred to by the famous Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget as concrete operational thinking) begin to appear around the age of seven. These new abilities enable children for the first time to mentally move back and forth between different meanings of words—an essential skill for getting the punch line based on a pun. Even if the child previously knew both meanings of the word, this new intellectual skill is required to quickly move back and forth between meanings in one's mind.

The biggest reason for the exhilaration shown in hearing and telling riddles is the sheer intellectual pleasure derived from making a meaningful link between two pieces of information that seem to be initially unrelated (which is the way it always appears when you don't get the joke). When this is done in the spirit of fun and play, it's a great source of joy.

Another source of enjoyment in riddles comes from the fact that for the first time in a child's life, she gets to be the one who has the answer—who possesses a bit of knowledge that parents, teachers or other kids do not have. From the first grade on, the child sees that there is a premium placed on having the right answer. And it always seems to be the case that teachers and parents have the answer, while the child must learn it. With riddles, the child gets to turn the tables. She gets to be the one who knows the answer while adults or other children who can't answer the riddle are shown not to be very knowledgeable.

Different forms of word play comprehension occur at different ages. Some are more intellectually demanding than others. But the simplest ones are finally understood by six or seven. For the first time, children can genuinely share a laugh with parents, and their sense of humor begins to share some features in common with an adult sense of humor. (Adults will, however, generally not find riddles as funny as children—even though they can't guess the answer without a clue. Adult content of jokes, however, will often be at the same level as children's riddles. It is the adult content that allows adults to laugh at them.)

It is especially important to support your child's sense of humor at this stage. Take advantage of the great excitement about double meanings to share riddles or other forms of verbal humor you know your elementary school-age child can understand. Kids who get turned on to humor during the elementary school years are most likely to have access to humor as a healthy coping tool throughout the difficult adolescent years.

The examples of leaving out a key word in the punch line of riddles provided in the next children's humor article offer a model of things you can do with your child while driving in the car, killing time waiting in a doctor's office or bus stop, or otherwise trying to generate interest in a boring day. This exercise is especially valuable on long vacation trips. You can use my book, *Stumble Bees and Pelephones* to play the game or make up your own examples as you go.