

# **How Humor Facilitates Children's Intellectual, Social and Emotional Development**

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**A six-year-old boy in a drug store with his mom puts a box of Tampax on the counter. The person behind the counter says, "Are you sure this is what you want?" The boy says, "Yeah, I'm sure. It says right on the box that with these you can swim, ride a bicycle and play tennis . . . and I can't do any of those things."**

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

A good sense of humor provides a broad range of important benefits to children, just as it does to adults. You can help assure that your own children receive these benefits by actively supporting the development of their humor skills. The last article on children's humor shows how you can use riddles to help children boost their ability to play with language starting about first grade. It is important, however, to support and nurture your child's budding sense of humor from infancy on. The previous article helps you understand basic developmental changes in young children's humor, so that you can more easily provide humor at the child's level.

You can support your children's sense of humor by simply spending some time playing with them every day. This sustains the frame of mind in which they will automatically engage in mental play at their present developmental level. Also make a special effort to at least occasionally laugh or otherwise respond to their attempts to make you laugh (you don't have to do this all the time; you'll run out of steam before they do). The more you support children's sense of humor at this early stage, the more likely they are to emerge into adolescence and adulthood with a well-developed set of humor skills that support good mental and physical health, while contributing to the following set of developmental benefits along the way. Of course, it is important to be a positive model of humor in your own life, as well.

## **Intellectual benefits**

Since humor (in my view) is really a form of intellectual play, and language is our main vehicle for thought, it comes as no surprise that children love to play with words. As discussed in the first children's humor article, they first play with the sounds of words, and then with meanings. The discovery that the same word can have two meanings is an exciting one, and spurs them on to find even more words to play with. This is why you'll want to use the humor exercise provided in the last of the children's humor articles to

help your six- to 10-year-old strengthen the basic ability to create puns and other forms of verbal humor. (You'll also benefit from this yourself!) The excitement of playing with meanings is at its peak at this point and is responsible for your child's great interest in riddle books during this period.

One direct result of this excitement about double meanings of words is an enriched vocabulary. Riddles expose children to new words and meanings, and the repeated telling of the riddles consolidates the memory of those words and makes them more accessible in everyday life.

Reading skills also receive a boost as a result of the keen interest in riddle books and other funny books. The best way to build reading skills is to find a way to make reading exciting for kids, and nothing beats humor when it comes to generating excitement. Some kids read the same books over and over again when they can't find new riddle books. The reading skills acquired from reading riddles generalize, of course, to all forms of reading.

In the process of reading riddles and other funny books, children acquire new information about their world in a general sense. This learning is sometimes direct via the humor, and sometimes very indirect. All riddles contain background information about the world in addition to the basic play on words. This information is assimilated and stored as part of the child's general knowledge base.

Humor also boosts children's creative thinking capacity. Research showed decades ago that there is a close relationship between the kind of thinking involved in humor and other forms of creative thinking. Children who spend more time finding new and incongruous ways of making sense out of words develop a generalized skill of thinking in innovative ways in connection with other questions or problems. This skill is increasingly valued in all areas of the workplace at present, so this is one way of boosting your child's eventual success in the work world.

## **Social Benefits**

Among both children and adults, humor is now understood to be one basic component of interpersonal competence. It is a key social skill that will serve your child well in the work world and in interpersonal relationships generally from this point on. Children who initiate humor more often than their peers have been found to show more social participation in activities; they also tend to be judged by their peers as being more sociable. This is true from the preschool years on through high school and into adulthood. Children who know how to use humor in social interaction are also better at putting others at ease. This creates an environment in which all communication is easier—an enormous benefit at all stages of life.

Kids who initiate humor more often have also been found to be seen as more likeable by other children. Thus, these kids tend to be more popular and have more friends.

Finally, humor provides children with a socially acceptable means of expressing anger. This will facilitate the handling of conflicts in social situations throughout the developmental years.

## **Emotional Benefits**

A great deal of attention has been given in the past decade or so to emotional intelligence—a form of intelligence which has long been neglected. The ability to manage one's own emotional state (as well as the emotions of others) is considered by virtually all of the major researchers/experts on this topic to be a key component of emotional intelligence. There is ample research showing that humor is a very effective means of managing one's emotions—of sustaining a more positive, upbeat mood and attitude on the tough days as well as on the good days.

When you see young children playing, you generally see them laughing. This laughter is a reflection of the joy and happiness that humor and play provide, but we now know that laughter can also help generate a joyous and happy state where there was none before. So nurturing children's sense of humor helps them gain a measure of control of their daily mood. (And you know that when they're in a good mood, it's easier for you to sustain a good mood.)

Good humor skills during childhood help build a solid sense of self-esteem. Since humor and shared laughter help the child receive a lot of positive feedback from other kids (and adults), this gradually builds a strong sense of good feeling about oneself.

Perhaps the most important long-range emotional benefit of humor resulting from the development of good humor skills during childhood is the coping skill known to be associated with humor. There is a large body of research documenting humor's power in helping adults and adolescents cope with life stress. Kids who build this skill early on are able to benefit from this coping advantage throughout their life.