

Head, Shoulders, Knees and . . . Peanut Butter

What Makes Young Children Laugh?

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When parents think of their preschool children, the first image that pops into their minds is often that of play, fun and laughter. Teachers of young children have always been aware of the crucial importance of play for learning, but humor also makes significant contributions to young children's development. 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 life stress throughout the adolescent and adult years.

Parents and care providers can help assure that a child receives these benefits by acquiring a good understanding of just how young children's humor changes as they get older. This makes it easier to provide humor that matches the child's current developmental level and appreciate children's own forays into the world of humor.

There are two basic principles to keep in mind. One is that children'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.

Further, humor is also the funniest during the months (maybe even a year or two) after the time it can first be understood. Riddles, for example, are most funny in 1st and 2nd grade, but become progressively less funny after that, because they are just too easy to understand. (This is also why adults groan at some puns.)

Developmental Changes in Preschool Children's Humor

For each of the stages described below, keep in mind that the ages are offered only as general guidelines to give you a flavor of how humor develops. They reflect the peak of humor associated with that stage. Some children enter a given stage much earlier than others, and most children continue to show the previous stage of humor long after the new form of humor first appears.

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” or, in older preschoolers, “impossible.”

Stage 1: Laughter at the Attachment Figure (6 to 12 or 15 months)

In my view, the earliest form of humor is reacted to, rather than created. The infant’s parents (or other primary attachment figures) are the most important part of her life. 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’s not surprising that the earliest form of humor experienced by infants involves things parents do.

By the age of six or seven months, you can find infants laughing at any unusual behavior of a parent. This might include something like: **waddling like a penguin, making silly faces, sticking half a banana out of the mouth, making exaggerated animal sounds (barking, mooing, etc.), sucking on a baby bottle, and so forth.** If you haven’t done these to amuse your infant, you might want to give it a try.

These things are funny because infants recognize them as something beyond parents’ usual behaviors. If the child’s parents had always walked like penguins or had bananas sticking out of their mouths for the first six months of the child’s life, these would be normal behaviors and would not be funny.

When my son was 7 months old, holding a (clean) diaper under my nose was always funny. At 9 months, doing an exaggerated “Aaaaachoo!” after his own sneeze made him laugh hard. After the second or third time, I only had to do the “Aaaaah” part to get a laugh.

One mother noticed that her baby seemed to be having trouble getting milk from her bottle. Guessing that the nipple was clogged, she just popped the bottle into her own mouth to check it out. The baby laughed as soon as she saw the bottle in her mother’s mouth.

Stage 2: Treating an Object as a Different Object (12 or 15 months to 3, 4 or 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.

Once the first birthday is passed, you may begin to see any of the following: **putting a bowl, diaper, washcloth, etc., on her (or your) head as a hat; using any small long object as a toothbrush; or holding a shoe (or spoon) to her ear saying, “Hello daddy.”** At 26 months, my son, who did not want to cooperate with an imminent diaper

change said, **“Don’t want new diaper. Give tape new diaper.”** He then put a videotape onto the new diaper and laughed. When he was 20 months, I put his pants on my head (like a hat) as I was getting him ready for bed. He laughed, and when I took them off, he quickly handed them back to me and said, “Again, again!” with a big grin on his face.

A classic example of Stage 2 humor occurred at 24 months, when he took his shoes and put them on his hands saying, “Look, shoes on.” While he did not laugh this time, he had a mischievous smile on his face that reflected obvious pride in his insight.

Stage 3: Misnaming Objects or Actions (2 to 3 or 4 years)

While humor based on using objects in “wrong” ways continues, budding language skills generate new opportunities for humor. After age two, parents increasingly hear, “What’s that? What’s that?” Two-year-olds are very excited by the realization that everything has a name, and they are thirsty sponges for every name you can give them. Since they have built into them a strong drive to play with all new skills, it’s just a matter of time before they begin playing with the names of things. So what do they do? They give you the wrong name!

Many parents first see this new form of humor in the “Show me your nose” game. Even if you’ve always played the game straight yourself, the day always arrives when you say, “Show me your nose,” and your child gets a mischievous grin on her face and points to her ear! She may or may not laugh, but there’s no doubt that this is pretty funny to her.

Once children achieve this insight—that it’s hilarious to call something a name you know is wrong—every object or person is fair game. **Cats will be called dogs, mommy will be called daddy, daddy will be called the child’s own name,** and so on. It’s all just too funny! Go along with your children on this and enjoy their enjoyment.

Stage 4a: Playing with Word Sounds (not meanings) (3 to 5 years)

Several new forms of humor emerge by the end of the third year. Simply calling things by the wrong name continues to be funny after age two, but a new way of playing with words appears around age three (as early as 2 ½ in some children). Children become very attuned to the way words sound, and begin playing with the sounds themselves. This often takes the form of repeating variations of a familiar word over and over, such as **“daddy, faddy, paddy,”** or **“silly, dilly, willy, squilly.”**

Sound play may also show up by altering the sound of a single word in an otherwise normal sentence, such as **“I want more tato-wato-chatos”** for potatoes. Complete nonsense words may also appear, as in **“Let’s all spooty-dotty-ditty-bip.”** In the second half of his third year, my son enjoyed nonsense words so much that we often had verbal jousting sessions in which we would take turns hurling nonsense sounds at each other. This was great fun off and on for several months and a wonderful chance for family bonding.

Stage 4b: Nonsense Real-Word Combinations (3 to 5 years)

In addition to playing with the sounds of words, most (but not all) three-year-olds also start putting real words together in nonsensical combinations known to be wrong. Their budding linguistic competence tells them that words are put together in certain combinations, but not others. So we would expect them to find great fun in simply putting words together in silly ways that they know are wrong. These combinations appear to simply be another way of distorting the known properties of objects. The following are typical of this kind of humor:

“I want more tree milk.”

“I have a mail box flower.”

“I want more potato (dirt, guitar, etc.) juice.”

My wife and I were especially delighted the day our son changed a familiar game we played. My wife or I would sing “peanut, peanut butter” and he would chime in “and jelly.” Sometimes he would start out and we would say “and jelly.” We would repeat this 5-10 times before he was ready to move on to something else. One day, at 28 months, instead of saying “and jelly,” he said “and refrigerator,” followed by “and light,” “and daddy,” etc. Anything that he happened to see at the moment was fair game.

Stage 4c: Distortion of Features of Objects, People or Animals (3 to 5 years)

By age three, children go beyond knowing that things have names to an understanding that these names apply to classes or categories of objects that share certain key features. Even though the child has been using the word “dog” correctly in referring to many different dogs, this is the first point at which “dog” is thought of as a category of animals with certain shared features. This includes barking (vs. meowing or mooing), a certain range of differences in size, color, hair length, etc., four feet, no hands, two ears, etc. A new form of humor, then, can be expected to involve a violation of any of these features that define “dog” in the child’s mind.

Stage 3 humor still occurs at this point, but children are now beginning to play with concepts. Most now find it funnier to distort some aspect of their new conceptual understanding of objects than to simply call them by the wrong name. The examples below illustrate the most common forms of humor at this stage, although they are not exhaustive.

- a) Adding features that don’t belong: a dog’s head on a man’s body, a tree with cakes growing on it, cats and dogs coming from clouds instead of rain.
- b) Removing features that do belong: a cat with no tail or legs, a car with no wheels, a person with no nose or ears.
- c) Changing the shape, size, location, color, length, etc. of familiar things—a person with a square head, polka dot ears, or eyes in the wrong place.

- d) Exaggerated features such as a long neck, big ears, enormous or very pointy nose—and misplaced features such as eyes and ears in reversed places. (Just for fun, try this with Mr. Potato Head and see what happens.)
- e) Incongruous or impossible behavior—a cow on roller skates or sitting in a tree whistling like a bird, a baby pushing a carriage containing an adult in diapers, sucking on a bottle, a dog playing a piano and singing. Adults can also find these images funny. *Far Side* cartoons are often based on these kinds of images.

Even though children laugh at these things, either created by themselves, seen on TV, or read in books, the firmness of their level of confidence in what is and is not possible is often seen in their questions to parents: “Daddy, pigs can’t really fly, can they?” “Lions don’t read books, do they?” “Cars can’t drive themselves, can they?”

Many children enjoy pretending to think that you may also be confused, so they tell you, “It’s just pretend, Daddy. Trains can’t jump.” Consider feigning confusion about just what animals, trains, etc. can and cannot do and appreciate your children’s helpful explanation.

Pre-Riddle Stage: Transition Period (5 to 6 or 7 years)

By age five (and sometimes earlier), most children become interested in the verbal humor of older children around them. They hear other kids ask puzzling questions and then give what appear to be very arbitrary answers that are followed by laughter. So they simply imitate what they hear other kids doing.

This can make parents think the riddles children tell are understood, because they are telling them correctly. But all parents have also heard their kindergartners tell such riddles or knock-knock jokes as: “What did the cat say to the mouse? I’m gonna eat you up!”

“Knock-knock. Who’s there? Nobody’s home!” “Knock-knock. Who’s there? Piece of bread. Piece of bread who? Piece of bread... Want another piece of bread?”

When five- and six-year-olds tell these not-quite riddles and jokes, they typically laugh as soon as they tell them. Parents can genuinely share this laughter—but for a very different reason. Children’s off-the-wall answers to their own riddles are very funny, because they make no sense at all. Kids don’t really understand the riddles at this age, so their answers seem just as good as those older kids give.

By the age of 6 or 7, children begin to understand the double meanings evolved in the puns and these “off-the-wall” answers gradually disappear.

When it comes to young children’s humor, there is no period more delightful than the preschool years. Take the time to enjoy and nurture your own child’s budding sense of humor.