

# How to Use Riddles to Build Your Child's Verbal Humor Skills

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[Adapted from P. McGhee, *Stumble Bees and Pelephones: How to Develop a Powerful Verbal Sense of Humor*, Kendall/Hunt, 2002. To order, call 302-478-7500.]

The previous article noted that children become intellectually capable of understanding the double meanings that form the basis for most riddles at six or seven years of age. Since this new form of verbal humor automatically occurs when children achieve the prerequisite level of cognitive (intellectual) development, your child will get hooked on riddles for a few years regardless of whether you make an effort to nurture this skill or not. The reason for making the effort to play with your child the kind of game represented in this article is that most kids simply memorize riddles and tell them over and over—without building their own skills at playing with language!

This is the best time to get them started creating their own double meanings—while the whole idea is so exciting to them. Without this kind of practice, children become adolescents with limited spontaneous verbal humor skills. And if the language-play habit is not well-established by mid-adolescence, it is very unlikely to be present during the adult years.

Some kids will get so turned on to humor that they will on their own be motivated to create their own word-play humor. But these kids are the exception. The children who are most likely to build their verbal humor skills through childhood and adolescence are those who have parents or other family members who consistently model verbal humor—day after day, month after month. These kids generally have this skill as part of their personality—part of their way of interacting with others—even if they occasionally use it during the preadolescent years. The constant early exposure to verbal humor supports the capacity to actively use humor when the interest in doing so emerges later on. Even for these lucky kids, however, practice at creating humor in the manner shown below will boost their humor skills.

In all of the examples shown here, a key part of the punch line is missing. The answers are given at the end of the article. Be sure to ask your child to use the clues to try to create a funny answer before looking at the answers; otherwise the exercise does not help build humor skills. Please note that adults will also benefit from these exercises. Even though adults will not need all the clues, you will probably find it difficult to come up with a word play answer using no clues at all. The more examples like this that your child goes through, the greater the extent to which this form of verbal humor (quickly

seeing double meanings as a basis for humor) will become a permanent skill within his/her developing sense of humor.

The book *Stumble Bees and Pelephones* includes 250 riddles like those included here. By the time children complete the entire book, spontaneous puns and other forms of play with words start to become automatic—popping into mind without the mental effort required to complete the punch lines offered here. Building a strong set of verbal humor skills at this point in life assures that this particular coping tool will probably remain with the child throughout his/her life.

[Adolescents and adults may find the riddles included here boring, even though they are hard to figure out without the clues. My book *Small Medium at Large* uses this same principle of leaving out a key part of the punch line for adult jokes and stories. A few examples are offered at the end of this article in order for you to determine whether your child is old enough to benefit from this exercise with more adult forms of humor. This book is **equally powerful in building the verbal humor skills of adolescents and adults.**]

1. How do skunks say grace before their meals? “Let us \_\_\_\_\_.”

*1<sup>st</sup> clue:* What do many families do just before their meals?

*2<sup>nd</sup> clue:* Another word for a fine mist.

*3<sup>rd</sup> clue:* You can paint things using this fine mist.

2. What do you call a bee that is clumsy and trips a lot? A(n) \_\_\_\_\_ bee.

*1<sup>st</sup> clue:* Find a word that means to trip and fall.

*2<sup>nd</sup> clue:* It starts with an “s.”

*3<sup>rd</sup> clue:* It rhymes with “humble.”

3. What is a cow’s favorite part of a salad? \_\_\_\_\_.

*1<sup>st</sup> clue:* It’s long and green.

*2<sup>nd</sup> clue:* It starts with a “c.”

*3<sup>rd</sup> clue:* Substitute “cow” for the beginning of this word.

4. Teacher to unruly students: “If I don’t get some order in this classroom, you’ll all be expelled from school.

Student: “I’ll \_\_\_\_\_.”

*1<sup>st</sup> clue:* This is not what the teacher meant.

*2<sup>nd</sup> clue:* Where else does someone ask for your order.

*3<sup>rd</sup> clue:* Restaurant.

5. What cat never plays fair in games? A(n) \_\_\_\_\_.

*1<sup>st</sup> clue:* It starts with a “c.”

*2<sup>nd</sup> clue:* What word means to not play fair?

*3<sup>rd</sup> clue:* This cat runs faster than any other animal.

6. What’s the only hot dog vampires eat? \_\_\_\_\_.

*1<sup>st</sup> clue:* What do vampires use to bite your neck?

*2<sup>nd</sup> clue:* The first part rhymes with “hang.”

*3<sup>rd</sup> clue:* It starts with an “f.”

7. What cookie can bite you back? A \_\_\_\_\_.

*1<sup>st</sup> clue:* To bite very quickly. You can also do this with your fingers.

*2<sup>nd</sup> clue:* The first word is a spice.

*3<sup>rd</sup> clue:* The first letters of the two words are “g” and “s.”

8. When do astronauts eat pizza? At \_\_\_\_\_ time.

*1<sup>st</sup> clue:* Play with the name of one of the three meals of the day.

*2<sup>nd</sup> clue:* You use this word when you start a new project.

*3<sup>rd</sup> clue:* What do you call it when they send off a rocket?

### **Answers to Children’s Riddles:**

[Be sure to cover the answer following the one you’re checking to be sure you don’t accidentally notice the answer to the next riddle.]

1. spray
2. stumble (vs. bumble)
3. Cowcumber (cucumber)
4. have a hamburger and fries (or any other food order)
5. cheetah (cheater)
6. Fangfurters (frankfurters)
7. ginger snap
8. launch (lunch)

### **Adolescent and Adult Jokes**

(from *Small Medium at Large: How to Develop a Powerful Verbal Sense of Humor*.  
Bloomington, IN: Author House, 2004.)

1. A handsome young man invited his beautiful Chinese date up to his apartment to see his stamp collection. He told her he found her very attractive, intelligent and talented. The girl smiled, shook her head “no,” and said, “\_\_\_\_\_ will get you nowhere.”

*Clue:* Think of the familiar phrase women use when reacting to a compliment. Also, what is the name given to stamp collecting? The fact that she’s Chinese adds a little something extra.

2. Sign in front of a Body and Fender Repair Shop: “May we have the next \_\_\_\_\_?”

*Clue:* Play with the formerly familiar phrase from ballrooms.

3. A well-known singer was tired of singing alone all the time, but he could never get a partner to agree to join him. Finally, he solved the problem by going out and buying a(n) \_\_\_\_\_.”

*Clue:* What do we generally buy when we don't want to pay someone else to do something? Use the term for two people singing together.

*Extra Clue:* It's a kind of kit.

4. A father looked outside and saw his own children and their playmates pressing their hands into the cement of his newly laid sidewalk. He ran to the door and angrily gave the kids a real tongue-lashing and paddled their behinds. His shocked wife asked, “How can you do that? Don't you love your children?”

He answered: “In the abstract, yes; but not in \_\_\_\_\_.”

*Clue:* You may not need a clue for this one. But just in case, find another word for what sidewalks are made of.

**Answers to Adolescent/Adult Jokes:**

1. Philately (flattery)
2. dents (dance)
3. duet (do it) yourself kit
4. the concrete