

Laughter in the Family

Children laugh easily and often, some say more than ten times as often as adults do. Children's laughter is a precious gift that can lighten our hearts and, studies show, even improve our health when we laugh with them. At the same time, our laughter tells them what is funny and helps develop their sense of humour, for their benefit and our own.

Benefits of laughter

It's fun to laugh, which is reason enough to make space for humour in our lives, but if you need convincing, here are some of the benefits.

For **children**, a good sense of humour supports healthy development in several ways.

- **Cognitively**, humour develops the ability to see two sides of the same picture and think creatively.
- Exploring and playing with words improves **language skills**.
- Humour is also a **social skill** that helps children make friends and feel part of a group.
- **Self-esteem** and confidence grow when children see they can make others laugh and feel good.
- A sense of humour helps children take a step back from fears and disappointments to see the funny side. This builds the capacity for **resilience** in the face of difficult emotions.

It doesn't hurt **adults** to laugh either.

- Many health benefits are claimed for daily laughter: lower blood pressure, better digestion, greater resistance to illness.
- At the end of a hard day at work, laughing with your children can be the best stress reduction program around.

Finally, shared humour strengthens the **family**.

- Laughing together builds **family bonds** that will help carry you through other, more difficult times.
- Sharing jokes can take the edge off some of the normal tensions **between siblings**.
- Made-up jokes that come out of shared family experiences build **feelings of belonging**.
- Humour is a gentle way to **guide children's behaviour** and have fun while you're doing it.

Instead of getting angry, try getting funny. Make a joke about where a sock goes. (On your nose? On your ear?) Your antics could turn an uncooperative toddler into one who's giggling and eager to correct your mistake... and get dressed in the process!

Developing a sense of humour

Like every other aspect of development, a child's sense of humour goes through a number of stages. In the beginning, babies laugh in imitation of our laughter. They also respond spontaneously to **tickle games and bouncing rhymes**. (But be careful to watch their expression and stop at the first sign they've had enough.) Later, once children have learned a bit about how the world *normally* works, they laugh at the **unexpected** (like the sock on the nose). They also enjoy games that play on the **edge of anxieties**. Peek-a-boo and hide-and-go-seek awaken the fear of losing the parent... and then everyone laughs when the parent is found again.

Later still, children like to **play with words**. They enjoy silly songs, with lots of repetition. They like the surprise of substituting nonsense words in familiar rhymes. **Visual surprises** in picture books make them laugh too: a horse up in a tree, a duck on someone's head. **Slapstick** humour appeals to them as well.

Around age six, children start to turn their word play into **jokes and riddles**. At first, their delivery may fall a bit flat, but they'll be pleased if you laugh at their efforts. They discover that words that have two meanings can be a source of fun. (What's the best month for a parade? – March, of course!) Let them give you the punch line, even if you know it. This is a time when it's easy to allow them to feel they're in control of the situation.

Setting limits

Occasionally, you will need to set limits on children's sense of humour. Four year olds often like to play with **bathroom words**. You probably want them to know that these jokes are inappropriate in polite company. Also, fun is **only fun if everyone's laughing**. Tickling your brother isn't funny when it starts to hurt. Saying mean things about someone else is *never* funny. Help children make the difference between laughing *with* someone else and laughing *at* them. Preteens in particular are often so self-conscious that they easily think they're the target of other people's attempts at humour. They'll be able to get some distance on their experience when they're older, but during this phase, it's better to let them do the joking.

A gift for life

Family life can be rushed and stressful, but it can also be full of moments for fun and laughter if you can step back and open yourself up to the funny side. These will be treasured memories for you and your children.

by Betsy Mann