

Taking Silliness Seriously

**The importance of humor
in every day life** BY Damon Korb, M.D.

Life in the 21st century seems faster, industries more productive, and families busier than ever – but is it more fun? Consider making 2010 the year that you give your children the gift of laughter. Certainly, there are times for being serious, but every day you can find opportunities to use humor and bring smiles to the faces of your family.

LAUGHTER MAY BE THE BEST MEDICINE

Research has shown numerous health benefits of laughter, ranging from strengthening the immune system to increasing one's threshold for pain. Humor offers several important stress-relieving benefits by reducing the level of stress hormones like cortisol, epinephrine (adrenaline), and dopamine. Humor also increases the level of health-enhancing hormones such as endorphins. Laughter increases the number of antibody-producing cells and enhances the effectiveness of T-cells (disease killing cells). A good laugh can actually lower a person's blood pressure and increase vascular blood flow, relieving physical tension. It also can provide a bit of a workout to the diaphragm, abdominal, respiratory, facial, leg, and back muscles. Best of all, this priceless medicine is fun, free, and easy to use.

TEACH YOUR CHILDREN TO BE STAND-UP COMEDIANS

Learning to use and to appreciate humor is good for a child's brain development. Whether it is applying problem solving skills to determine the answer to a riddle or being able to understand the cleverness of a pun, comedy challenges the brain in creative ways. Some children have an innate sense of humor and terrific comedic timing; others need to practice these skills. One way to improve their comedy competence is by encouraging everyone in your family to be able to tell a few good jokes. The material could be original creations or repeats of tried-and-true classics; either way the practice will develop their memory, language skills, and increase their confidence and ability to speak in front of a group. When your family is all together, like around the dinner table, use that time to share favorite "knock-knock" jokes or comical stories. Parents should encourage their children to be funny no matter their ages.

HUMOR IS AN IMPORTANT SOCIAL SKILL

Now, while there are some funny things that are fairly universal—like when someone unsuspectingly falls prey to a "whoopee cushion"—there are other times when you will need to crack the "comedic code" specific to each member of your family. Toddlers' and preschoolers' humor will, of course, be much less sophisticated than that of the teens in your brood. In fact, young children may get pleasure out of their parents just making silly faces or saying a funny-sounding word, and they will easily laugh every time it happens. Encouraging your children to notice what makes other family members "crack up" is a valuable lesson; it teaches the important social-skill of being able to understand another person's perspective.

Along these lines, be sure to be goofy with your own peers and extended family members too. Children are very observant beings and they learn a lot from watching how their parents behave with friends, siblings, and parents. Reminisce about funny times in the past and create new silly moments with your bud-



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dies. Send a friend something unexpected in the mail that will remind them of a particularly amusing happenstance from years ago. Your children will appreciate being “in” on the joke and it will encourage them to be clever and creative in their silliness with friends as well.

USE COMIC RELIEF IN YOUR PARENTING REPERTOIRE

By using humor periodically with your children throughout the day, you automatically keep the overall tone of your parenting much less threatening. Humor can give us a more lighthearted perspective and can help us view events as challenges thereby, making them less intimidating and more positive. Certainly, it is not always easy to take the humor route when faced with a parenting issue. When your daughter has just spilled her glass of milk all over the table for the third morning in a row, your first instinct may not be to make a joke

about the mess. But instead of yelling, a well-timed laugh completely changes the dynamics of the situation. After the clean-up, you can still remind your child about the importance of paying more attention and being more careful. Responding with anger every time a child makes a mistake is stressful for everyone and, chances are, they’ll hear your message just as well with a comedic approach. In fact, a study at Johns Hopkins University Medical School revealed that when humor was used during class instruction, it led to increased test scores from the students.

MAKE FUN A PART OF YOUR EVERYDAY ROUTINE

Another way to laugh more with your family is to get activ. Playful wrestling and tickling are great family activities that allow for nice physical bonding with your children. Play charades and do karaoke together because,

inevitably, someone is going to do something side-splitting during the activity. Share classic television and film comedies with your children such as the Muppet Show, appropriate Saturday Night Live sketches, Monty Python movies, or the more recent Pixar short films. Be spontaneous around your kids and do silly things like dancing in your underwear, singing a crazy song in a falsetto voice, or surprising them one night with an absolutely ridiculous amount of whipped cream on their sundaes. The memories of times like these will live on and be fondly remembered, bringing smiles to your faces. Figuring out what particular activity or saying makes your child laugh out loud is pure joy. •

If you and your family have silly things you like to do together, please share them on the discussion page: www.facebook.com/CenterforDevelopingMinds.

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