

Tips for Parents by Susie Kohl

Humor: Strengthening Our Connections with Others

“I am thankful for laughter except when milk runs out of my nose.”

~ Woody Allen

WE SHOULD ALL BE GRATEFUL for the ability to laugh! How could we manage life (with children) without humor? Recently, Roosevelt, my pet rabbit, escaped from his cage and darted like a furry rocket around the area where I was putting my grandson to sleep. Jumping up to catch him would wake the baby. Luckily, I could laugh. When adults giggle about hard situations, they release tension. More importantly, they offer children, even infants, a role model for handling life lightly.

One of the first things babies learn in life is responding to others with a smile. Supporting the development of their sense of humor is one of the best investments we can make in children’s resilience and social abilities, not to mention their happiness.

Adults sometimes have difficulty understanding or even tolerating the jokes that captivate children. Actually, the images children find funny reveal their levels of development. Preschoolers love to laugh about words like “pee-pee,” “poo-poo,” and “butts” because the struggle to master using the potty isn’t far from their minds. Try rhyming bathroom words to create a silly distraction.

Children don’t really start to understand jokes until they are about five or six and discover the hilarity of an elephant painting her toenails red to hide in the strawberry patch. What a sense of mastery a child feels since she knows the elephant’s ploy won’t work! Gather jokes, read funny books, laugh at slapstick comedy. Older children may start to make jokes about sexuality—a subject they are trying to understand. Humor helps children and adults to stretch their understanding and develop new perspectives.

The goal is to find things that you can laugh about together to defuse tension or boost a sense of camaraderie. Here are some ideas:

Make fun of your mistakes. Pretend you are looking for an item right in front of you. Run around looking under chairs and tables. Write a note with crazy misspellings and ask your child to correct it for you.

Do the unexpected. Sing a request. Talk in a funny voice. Walk like a clown. Pretend to fall down. When children are fighting over a toy, remove it and put it on your head.

Make rules about humor. Making fun of others and calling names is out of bounds. However, rather than getting mad, get funny. If your young child calls you “butt head,” say, “It’s against the rules to call names. Besides, my secret name is Muffin.”

Slip out of a power struggle. If your young child doesn’t want to wear a jacket, try to put it on yourself. Tape a note on your child’s bedroom door saying “Please clean me,” or place one on an unmade bed stating “I’m cold, please pull up the covers.”

Humor allows us to strengthen our connections with others. Laughing also builds physical and mental health. We have to step out of stressful energy to open ourselves to the unifying light of humor.

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