

The Serious Side of Silly

June 2002

What your child learns from all that giggling.

by Margaret Broulette

Preschoolers have a special propensity toward silliness that, according to experts, has important developmental benefits.

Laughter: Laughter creates bonds between people. As a child grows and her social world expands, she will use the link of silliness and laughter to solidify other friendships. On top of that, laughter has health benefits. Dr. Lee Berk, researcher, says, "Laughter activates the immune system and decreases stress hormones." As Solomon said, "A cheerful heart is good medicine" (Prov. 17:22).

Creativity: Stretching the imagination, thinking outside the box, and learning to look at a situation from different angles are other long-term benefits of nonsense. Child psychologist Niki Saros observes that children who are creative thinkers have a certain mental flexibility that allows them to escape from the pressure of a hyper-structured view of the world. That skill translates to creative problem solving down the road.

Social skills: According to kindergarten teacher Lauri Barrette, "There is purpose in silliness. The child is asserting his personality and trying to entertain those around him. He is learning through the responses what is socially appropriate and what is not."

But parents know that silliness can quickly degenerate into inappropriate humor and behavior. The trick is to balance the fun with healthy boundaries based on the following:

Politeness and respect: Saros says parents need to draw the line when fun turns into vulgarity or insulting, hurtful behavior. Paul exhorts the Ephesians to avoid obscenity, foolish talk, and coarse joking (Eph. 5:4). By putting limits on silliness, you teach

your child to respect his own bodily functions and sexuality as well as to consider the feelings of others.

Social sensitivity: Families may allow jokes or gestures among their members that are not appropriate in public, or even in front of Grandma. Your personal tolerance level may permit burping contests between siblings in the playroom, but you'll need to be clear about appropriate behavior when they're out in public or they have guests. This teaches your children to consider the context for their actions.

Self-control: Because children easily step over the limits when they interact with other kids, close parental supervision is essential. When you notice inappropriate silliness, turn your child's attention to a quieter game or story. Saros recommends telling your children why you are stopping the behavior so they begin to understand the reasons for appropriate behavior. As they grow, children will eventually integrate these signals and withdraw from situations or alter their behavior themselves.

A sense of the holy: Defining boundaries for silliness can also teach your child respect for God. Gently discourage your children from horsing around during church or family prayer. Teach them that a worship setting is not an appropriate time to draw undue attention to themselves. Then, let them blow off some steam after church with a rollicking version of "Father Abraham."

God created humor and he made children the experts. It is up to us as parents to show them that "for everything there is a season."

—Margaret Brouillette

Copyright © 2002 by the author or Christianity Today International/Christian Parenting Today magazine.

This article first appeared in Summer 2002, Vol. 14, No. 3, Page 20 issue of Christian Parenting Today. Used by permission of Christianity Today International, Carol Stream, IL 60188.