

# Humour is a buffer zone

Conversation with Christophe Erbes\*

**Y**ou don't have to be a children's programme maker to know: childhood is an enjoyable time, but also a challenging one. Young people have little responsibility, but they have to learn a lot of rules and understand the overall scheme of things. If such social rules are broken on television, if they are turned upside down or at least questioned, it's my view that children find that especially enjoyable. Amidst all the rules, humour offers children a kind of buffer zone: it gives them a chance for a bit of chaos, laughter and relaxation. Laughter serves as an outlet and helps them to assimilate what they don't yet understand and what they therefore find strange. Children need these buffer zones more than adults do. But that is not the only way in which they differ from adults – they also differ in their sense of humour itself.

At JETIX, the kids TV channel, humour is an important part of our line up with comedy appealing to both girls and boys. JETIX's new Korean action-comedy series *PUCCA* delivers comedy with a universal appeal and thanks to a feisty female lead character has a strong girl following.

## How does children's sense of humour differ from that of adults?

For me, the answer to this question is closely tied up with the term "children's culture." In Scandinavia, for

example, children are recognised as individuals with their own needs and are seen less as adults-to-be. I, too, believe that children possess their own culture. They differ from us not only in their size and their level of knowledge but also in other ways. In a nutshell: children's culture is not just that of an untidy room. Children have a different view of the world and have different priorities to adults.

### *Children's culture is not just an untidy room*

There are several reasons why children's and adults' humour are not identical. Indirect humour in the form of irony or cynicism, for example, is typical of adults. Sometimes adults might use this kind of humour as a weapon against someone. In business, for instance, jokes are made that are supposed to be funny. On closer examination these jokes can be derisive. Young children don't know how to handle this indirect, sardonic manner. They express humour directly

and mean what they say quite literally even if it is not pleasant.

Despite these differences, there are examples of humour that work for everyone. When someone falls down or gets bashed on the head, both children and adults find that equally amusing, since adults also need to laugh sometimes, simply as an outlet. One of JETIX Germany's most popular series, *The Simpsons*, is a great example of a show that works on many levels. Although young kids do not understand the cynical humour that appeals to adults, they love the bright characters and can laugh about the "physical and slapstick humour."

### *Not clichés but tendencies*

In addition, there are differences in the sense of humour not only between children and adults but also between nations. I do not believe that it is a matter of clichés, but that there really are national tendencies. Of course, there are also exceptions. British humour, for example, I would describe as sophisticated.



Christophe Erbes and the JETIX child reporters

### What cultural differences have you experienced in work so far?

In my past role as a programme-maker I became especially aware of a cultural difference between England, France and Spain on the one hand and Germany on the other: the pun. This phenomenon doesn't exist in German. The pun comes about because words are written differently but pronounced in the same way. This gives the words several meanings. Most children cannot make head or tail of them, because this kind of humour is theoretical and unrelated to anything. I believe children have a more practical sense of humour. The exception being England. There children already learn at school how to articulate themselves, quickly understanding that language is an important aspect of the impression they make as individuals. This enables them to begin at an early age to think in more abstract terms. Even 5-year-olds begin to play with irony. In England children understand very early on that their ability to express themselves reflects something that they themselves control. Seen in this way, I consider England to be a real "language nation". The children can handle language better and earlier than, for example, those in Germany or France. That is why in these countries children, in my opinion, prefer to make full use of physical humour. France is generally characterised by, apart from the pun, a certain preponderance of words. In successful programmes there is a lot of talking. In addition, there are many humorous programmes which originate from comics. *Titeuf*, for example, is one of the most successful French animated cartoons at the moment. It is all about a young boy who makes jokes at school.

I always consider Germany to be a very "adult" nation, which consciously sticks to rules and has a strong belief in authority. Everything is very matter-of-fact, sensible, correct and well considered. Humour arises when authority is questioned or the rules are broken. It is quite different in Scandinavia, where children are not seen as adults-to-be who should learn rules as quickly as possible. A sense of humour like that in Scandinavia, which doesn't require children to be sensi-



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JETIX-Series *PUCCA* – Funny Love Stories – The Kiss

ble and allows some anarchy and chaos, tends to be unusual in Germany – or it is understood differently. In Scandinavia, for example, Pippi Longstocking is allowed to be stronger than an adult, because children according to this kind of conceptualisation, are simply different.

#### Global children's humour

These examples show that there are various tendencies. But is there also a global sense of humour for children? I think that basically there is. Pranks that play with hierarchies work everywhere. If a generally predominant logic is questioned, all children find that funny. Humour performs a cathartic function, as I mentioned at the beginning: "I don't really understand that. I'm still a child. That's why I want to be able to laugh about it." In my opinion that is the aim and purpose of children's humour – throughout the world.

### The upshot: So what is good humour for children on television?

It is something children can and want to laugh at. It is a kind of humour that goes back to their culture, boosts their self-esteem, connects with their culture and helps them to understand things better. Good humour shows that there can be several points of view and helps people to have a better understanding of certain situations.

On the other hand, nostalgic humour doesn't work well with children as they don't have a well developed concept of the past.

It is also equally bad to laugh at children themselves, as, for example, in the German programme *Kinderquatsch mit Michael*. In it children have to explain difficult terms. Adults can laugh out loud at this. But it is precisely this that secretly annoys children, especially

when they laugh at children of the same age when they give a wrong explanation for something.

In summary, it is difficult to produce good humour for children. The secret is to keep it simple. Anyone who wants to work for children has to take them seriously and above all not forget one thing: you make the humour for children and not for yourself. ■

Translated by Geoffrey P. Burwell

\*A résumé of a conversation with Christophe Erbes, MA, the managing director of the JETIX Europe GmbH (formerly FOX KIDS Germany GmbH), responsible for the areas TV, Online and JCP JETIX Consumer Products.