

Catherine Lyon

# Humour and the young child

## A review of the research literature

**What exactly is a sense of humour? On the basis of relevant research results on children and adults, many favourable aspects of humour are presented. We learn that humour is a skill that can be trained, and this is where the use of media in the development of children's humour comes into play.**

### 1. What the research tells us about humour and its development

The most challenging aspect to humour research is in defining exactly what it means to "have a sense of humour". Does it mean an ability to create or respond to jokes and other overtly funny events or stories? Or is it something larger and less specific – perhaps an ability to tolerate difficulties with good grace and strength (Vejeskov, 2001)? Is a "sense of humour" a single trait or one with several aspects such as the ability to tell a joke, to appreciate a joke, or to use humour to mock or to tease in a hostile manner?

Once defined, how do we measure a "sense of humour"? How funny must anyone find something in order to have a sense of humour? And do people of different ages or genders or socio-economic status or cultural backgrounds laugh at different things? What about blind people or deaf people or people with mental or emotional handicaps? Are any jokes funny to everybody?

Finally, does having a sense of humour matter? Do children with a sense of humour have more friends, do better in school, or enjoy better emotional and physical health or not? Is a sense of humour inborn or something we can encourage? If we can teach a sense of humour, how do we do that?

Unlike other psychological constructs (e. g., intelligence or extraversion) there is no standard conception of sense of humour upon which researchers generally agree (Martin, 1998). With the caveat that this field is currently made up of multiple approaches, conceptions, measurements and often conflicting findings, the following is a summary of relevant study results.

#### *Humour promotes a healthy and optimistic outlook on life*

Humour has been investigated as a "social lubricant" (Morreall, 1991) that reduces anxiety, enhances the effectiveness of psychotherapy (MacHovec, 1991 – cit. by Manke, 1998), softens hostility (McGhee, 1988), and strengthens coping skills (Lefcourt and Martin, 1986). Relatively little, however, is known about children's use of humour in ongoing social relationships, or about the origins of individual differences in interpersonal humour (Manke, 1998).

Paul McGhee suggests that humour be viewed as a component of social competence, and maintains that it plays a strong role in the facilitation of social interaction, the development of friendships and popularity, pro-

vision of a socially acceptable means of expressing hostility and softening of an assertive/dominating style of interaction (McGhee, 1988). He states rather unequivocally, "It is concluded that development of heightened early humor helps to optimize children's social development."

Humour is frequently used to dispel anxiety; by secondary reinforcement, humour becomes a learned motive to experience mastery in the face of anxiety – the "whistling in the dark" phenomenon. In studies investigating stress and a sense of humour, e. g. Martin and Lefcourt (1983 – cit. by Martin, 1998), researchers found a significant interaction between tests of sense of humour (i. e. The Coping Humor Scale (CHS) and The Situational Humor Response Questionnaire (SHRQ)) and a measure of stressful life events in predicting levels of mood disturbance, such as depression anxiety, and tension. An analysis of the data showed that as stressful life events increased, individuals with higher scores on the humour measures showed less of an increase in disturbed moods. Martin (1988) further cites reviews by Vaillant and Vaillant (1992) that indicate mature defenses, including sense of humour, were found to be predictive of greater levels of mental and physical health, life satisfaction, job success, and marital stability.

#### *Humour is a social phenomenon*

Several writers identify three main aspects to the sense of humour: responsive (laughter, smiling, and the mirth

response); productive (initiating humour, telling jokes, physical clowning); and mixed humour. Some add hostile humour. Although several factors can contribute to an expression of one or more humorous aspects, Groch (1974) has found that the specific nature of the ongoing activities contributed significantly to the pattern of humour exhibited.

Most smiling and laughing occurs in response to stimuli when others are present (Bainum et al., 1984) and children's sensitivity to humour increases according to (a) presence of others, (b) frequency of laughter by stooges, (c) overcoming the psychological borders of boundary space, and (d) other social factors (Chapman, 1979). This corresponds to Bergen's findings: "Because humor, like play, flourishes best in 'safe' settings, variables such as the formality or informality of the environment and the child's familiarity with the people in that environment are likely to have an influence on the amount of humor that is expressed and on the nature of that humor" (Bergen, 1998). In a study of children between 1 and 6 years Bergen (1989 – cit. by Bergen, 1998) found that the most often recorded humour types were: performance of incongruous or fantasy actions; discovery and expression of humorous reactions to incongruous or fantasy actions, objects, and events; and expression of joy in mastery or movement play. Humour was most often expressed in the evening and in the home's kitchen – followed closely in percentage by the living room. Humour was least often expressed in the afternoon and in the family car.

One study suggests that this effect of the social context upon the mirth and humour response is developmental. In a study by Kosslyn and Henker (1970), when 4- and 6-year-olds were shown comic videotapes, the 4-year-olds smiled more and laughed more without the group around them, but the 6-year-olds laughed more when

in the group than alone. It is important to note, too, that in a study by Chapman (1973) with adults, although canned laughter generated more mirth (smiling and laughter) to the same material, it did not significantly affect humour ratings or "intellectual appreciation" ratings. This disparity no doubt has to do with the "social lubricant" function of humour, as noted above. Laughing when others laugh is expected and welcomed; refraining from laughing when others are laughing causes discomfort and is generally at odds with the social norm.

#### *Humour is a personality phenomenon and age- and gender-related*

The seeds of a person's sense of humour are sown in a baby's earliest smiling and laughter – the developmental changes in which reflect just how important these emotional responses become in the interactions between the infant and his/her first experience with the social environment (Levine, 1972).

According to one of the most influential developmental psychologists in the field of humour, Dr. Paul McGhee, humour is a function of the child's level of cognitive development – specifically their ability to deal with symbols. McGhee proposed four stages of humour development, based upon Piagetian theory of development. According to McGhee's theory, humour begins in the child when the capacity for fantasy and make-believe develops, sometime late in the second year.

- In stage 1 (approx. 18 to 24 months) children substitute one object for another. If, for example, in dressing a child, you were to put a sock on his or her nose or hand, this might cause some laughter – if the child were familiar enough with a sock to know that it generally is worn on the foot.
- Stage 2 (approx. 2 to 3 years) is when verbal jokes first emerge. Though they may seem very simple they represent a higher level of

cognitive function – requiring a bit more abstract thought or memory. Children at this stage will be wildly amused to call a dog a "kitty" or a mommy "daddy". Unlike stage 1 in which the object of humour must be present, the child no longer needs physical props in order to make jokes.

- At stage 3 (3 to 5 years), the child requires a bit more distortion for a humorous effect because of the child's increased knowledge of the world. It isn't enough now to simply call a dog a kitty, it may be necessary for that doggy called kitty to meow, for example. Or, because a stage-3 child is often amused by an absurd visual, adding a long tail and small, pointed upright ears to the picture of a dog would enhance the humour to an age-appropriate level. Not, however, because it is illogical, but because it *looks* funny. The incongruity that causes humour at this stage is visual, not logical.

This last point is very important in the creation of humorous media for children. If the picture looks different from what the child expects or that with which she/he is familiar, there is humour. However, preschool children, aged 2 to 5, do not understand humour based upon logical or conceptual incongruity yet.

It will not be until the child is 6 or 7 years of age that the sense of humour will resemble the humour of adults. According to McGhee, this stage 4 is characterised by the child's ability to understand the double meanings that words and sentences can have sometimes. Most 7-year-olds can comprehend two meanings of a single word or phrase simultaneously, which is why the following joke works at this stage, but generally not at the stage 3: "Why did the lady send three socks to her son at college? Because he'd written to her that since he'd been gone, he'd grown another foot." It is important to understand that it is possible for a child at an older stage

of development to appreciate humour enjoyed by a child at a younger stage. For example, 6- to 8-year-olds can still find some simple visual incongruity (generally a stage-1 type of humour) very funny. A sense of humour does not operate within a narrowly specified range, but increases and expands to appreciate a broader field of types of humour (see McGhee, 1979; Bergen, 1998; Bergen, 2003). Regarding hostile humour development, in a study by Socha and Kelly (1994), children in pre-kindergarten to grade 3 were found to produce mostly prosocial humorous messages. However, starting in grade 4, children produced proportionately more antisocial than prosocial humorous messages.

Comprehension of irony emerges between 5 and 6 years of age. Ratings of humour increase with age; ratings of meanness did not (Dews et al., 1996). The comprehension of sarcasm also emerges at the age of 8 or 9. Adults depend upon either of two cues to recognise ironic sarcasm: the context in which the statement is made and the speaker's intonation. However, Capelli et al. (1990) found that young children appeared largely oblivious to contextually implied sarcasm and appeared to depend more upon intonation in recognising sarcasm. Irony and sarcasm are simply not understood by children younger than 5 years.

Humour research on the contribution of personality traits to a "sense of humour" has been conducted primarily with adults, but may have some useful application for children as well (Bergen, 1998). Studies undertaken by Willibald Ruch focus on how traits such as cheerfulness, seriousness, and bad mood may form the basis of the sense of humour (Ruch, 1994a – cit. by Bergen, 1998; Ruch and Kohler, 2003). One of the primary questions in personality study is whether and to what extent personality traits identified in children remain stable throughout the lifespan.

Bergen (1998) notes that the types of humour outlined by research seem to show a developmental progression from cognitively simple to cognitively complex, less hostile and sexually-focussed to more hostile and sexually-focussed, and more encased in the "pragmatics" of what is socially appropriate for children to express.



In a study of three age levels, Bergen (2003) found significant differences in boys' and girls' humour based upon both child and teacher interviews. At age 5 to 6 years, boys and girls received approximately equal scores for having "a sense of humour". The reasons children gave for why something was funny centred on incongruity of action, appearance, or verbalisation or on impossible events/conceptual incongruity. Hostility was expressed in about 30 % of the responses – and was usually of the slapstick variety. At age 8 to 9 years old, teacher ratings of sense of humour showed a significant difference in ratings for girls and boys. Bergen notes that though teacher ratings for the highest two age levels indicated a significant difference in the amount of humour demonstrated by boys and girls, those observations were not corroborated by the other measures used in the study – which seemed to show that both boys and girls possess fairly equally strong senses of humour. It is interesting to note that approximately 25 % of the children in the study could cite no examples of humour from home; all came from TV, books or school. Most humour examples came from school situations. Perhaps, Bergen suggests, girls are not exhi-

biting their sense of humour in school as frequently (or perhaps as noticeably) as the boys are. There are other studies of humour in children of roughly the same age groups as those in Bergen's study that support Bergen's finding of no major sex differences (Prentice and Fathman, 1972). In another study of slightly older children, Bergen found that although parents' and teachers' perception of the children's sense of humour matched, both were at odds with the children's descriptions of themselves. Also, although parents and teachers rated boys more highly than they did girls in sense of humour across all the age categories, these ratings were *not* reflected in the children's ratings of themselves. Bergen suggests that perhaps parent and teacher expectations or perceptions of sense of humour may be different for boys and girls (higher expectations for boys and lower expectations for girls). McGhee's research some years earlier had indicated that boys are more likely than girls to initiate and respond to humour in non-home settings (McGhee, 1976; Canzler, 1980). Perhaps boys are more comfortable with an audience, which leads parents and teachers to expect more humour from them than from the girls.

Other studies have found that between boys and girls, girls tend to show more responsive humour (perceiving and responding) while boys scored a higher frequency of hostile joking (Groch, 1974; Socha and Kelly, 1994). It may be that because of the large amount of hostile humour displayed by boys, and the disinclination of girls to use such humour there really is less overall humour displayed by girls for parents and teachers to perceive (Warnars-Kleverlaan et al., 1996).

It is possible, too, that this tendency of boys to use and enjoy hostile humour is one reason for a finding by Sherman (1988) that children of the same gender rate each other both as more socially acceptable and as more

humorous than do children of the opposite gender. Research indicates that generally boys use a more aggressive style of communication (MacCoby, 1990) with each other and with girls, which makes it logical that their humorous style would also necessarily show more aggression. It may be that there is some confusion between overtly hostile and aggressive humour, depending upon who is doing the observing. What sounds hostile to a girl may, conceivably, sound quite reasonable and expected to another boy.

The nature of hostile humour – its definition, purpose and use – is important to investigate further for two reasons. First, because of its potential, like violence on television, to support and encourage antisocial behaviour. Second, because the definition of hostile humour for boys and for girls may differ and have implications for content that succeeds in making children laugh and enjoy themselves.

### *Humour can facilitate mastery and learning*

It is very important to bear in mind that a critical ingredient in the humour response is the degree to which the humour stimulus makes a cognitive demand on the individual (Zigler et al., 1967). In other words, humour provides something like an entertaining “test” to a child. If the child gets the joke she/he enjoys the satisfaction of the incongruity, the resolution of the incongruity and the mastery it took to recognise the incongruity and the resolution.

Television researchers have discovered that in order for TV to teach, it must hold the child’s attention for a long enough period of time to get the lesson across. Miron et al. (2001) wrote, “In addition to formal features promising enjoyment (e. g. lively music, cheerful voices), the content itself may enhance vigilance through semantically entertaining features such as humor.” Further, work with pre-schoolers and first graders has shown

that humour prevented vigilance decrement and produced superior information acquisition (Zillmann et al., 1980). Children pay attention to what makes them laugh. A funny lesson holds their attention to the material being taught and improves the chances they will learn.

Humour facilitates learning because it is entertaining and light-hearted. Care must be taken, however, as some forms of humour such as irony, which contains distortions and contradictions that are not readily recognisable, can be counterproductive for learning (Cantor and Reilly, 1979 – cit. by Miron et al., 2001; McGhee, 1979). Humour in educational messages that distorts information has been found to give children faulty impressions of novel phenomena (Weaver et al., 1988). If humour is to facilitate learning, it must be age-appropriate for the children who are trying to learn.

### *Humour is a skill that can be developed, taught and learned*

Humour appreciation does not appear to have a genetic basis (Martin, 1998) but because the humour response does seem to be an in-born social phenomenon (Chapman, 1973, and 1979) there is evidence that humour can be encouraged and taught. Carson et al. (1986) discuss humour as a function of learned communicative abilities and temperamental predispositions that influence humour in both a direct and indirect manner. Positive reinforcement of humour increases its use (Ziv, 1981b – cit. by Nevo et al., 1998). In a review of the relevant literature, Honig (1988) looks at ways in which adults can support children’s understanding, appreciation, and creation of humour in play and verbal and social interactions. Further guidance for parents and caregivers in the support and nurturance of a child’s sense of humour are explored by Martin (1989).

There is some indication, too, that a sense of humour is one way that a child can learn to cope in a difficult

or challenging environment (i. e. the home). Specifically, a lack of maternal babying was found to be associated with increased humour during the first three years of life (McGhee, 1976). In a study by Fisher and Fisher (1981 – cit. by Martin, 1998) investigating the personality characteristics of professional comedians and circus clowns, mothers of these comics were less kind, less sympathetic, less intimately involved with their children, and more selfish and controlling. Martin concludes by suggesting “individuals with a greater tendency to produce humor for the amusement of others may be doing so as a means of compensating for earlier losses and difficulties.” (Martin, 1998).

If our natural inclination as human beings is to reach for a sense of humour as a way of coping with adversity, it seems logical for loving parents and caregivers to want to step in with some support for this apparently healthy, natural instinct in our children. Klein (2003), Nevo et al. (1998), Martin (1988) and others have explored components for courses that teach the art of humour and how to improve and strengthen it.

## **2. Implications for the use of media in the development of children’s humour**

Although there remains much to learn about children and their developing sense of humour, there are some suggestions that we can offer to media professionals regarding programming created for young children:

### *Opportunities to support developing self-identification*

In studies by McGhee and Duffey (1983) and McGhee and Kach (1981) children were asked to evaluate jokes where the target was a person of their own or another gender and ethnicity. They found that although boys clearly preferred jokes with a female target, girls showed no parallel preference

for jokes with a male target. In a similar study with Black, Mexican and White children, White children showed a clear preference for jokes with Non-White targets while the Black and Mexican children showed no such preference for joke targets of ethnicities other than their own. McGhee suggests that these results may indicate less well-formed self-identity on the part of Black and Mexican children than Whites and less well-formed identity on the part of girls. The specific implications of these studies for media content are not clear from this limited information, however in a culture where children of traditionally disenfranchised groups fail to demonstrate an equivalent identity definition as those traditionally having higher status, we must, as media professionals, continue to be mindful of the need to provide powerful and interesting role models to encourage positive self-identity formation on the part of every child using the media.

#### *Opportunities to encourage and support child/adult co-viewing*

Humour can be a unifying factor between parents and children. Humour development builds with age, and the range of humour appreciated and enjoyed grows wider as our experience broadens. This means that an adult can still find a simple surprising incongruity funny, depending upon the content of the joke. The media can encourage and support a child's healthy humour development by striving to create humour at several levels so as to encourage co-viewing. Because humour is a social phenomenon, having a parent sharing a viewing experience increases a child's pleasure. And as a child sees a parent enjoying laughter and humour, it is a clear signal to the child that such emotions are acceptable.

#### *Provide positive reinforcement for both children and parents*

Often adults rely upon a certain level of seriousness, worry and anxiety or

tension in order to achieve goals. Often our goals involve our children's success in school both academically and socially, and we find reassurance when our children take on similar goals and objectives. There is a tendency to equate seriousness of purpose and determination with maturity and success and to regard a lighthearted and humorous mood with some suspicion.

Yet research shows that humour does not compromise our successes but can, in some cases, actually bring us closer to our goals and objectives. What media can do is offer a fun and humour-filled break from the anxiety and stress of other activities in a child's and family's life. Humour is frequently built upon incongruities and incongruities can be the basis for divergent, creative and inventive thinking (Mosher, 2003). If a well-produced children's TV programme presents age-appropriate incongruities which delight a child by tapping into newly mastered cognitive skills, such an experience can offer a welcome and restorative emotional break which frees a child to just be a child, to mentally play in a different way with newly-mastered concepts, and to explore new directions for thought and ideas.

### **3. What questions remain to investigate?**

#### *What is the relevance of the data on humour to children?*

Many studies indicate the positive effect of an adult sense of humour. Do young children with a sense of humour demonstrate similar resilience to difficult and stressful events in their lives? There is some anecdotal information about the value of humour in medical situations – and some specifically having to do with humour in psychotherapy with adolescents. Also, there is much more to be learned about the ways different kinds of adult people respond to different

kinds of humour. Is this true of children? There is much more to learn of the developmental trajectory of humour development from childhood to adulthood.

#### *How do cross-cultural and other group-comparative studies results compare to current results?*

The literature includes studies of humour among Jews, Native Americans, Blacks and African-Americans, and Mexicans, but there is little cross-cultural comparison of humour response, humour production or the use of hostile humour. There are also few studies that investigate cross-cultural benefits of humour.

Several studies have examined the use and appreciation of humour in blind/visually impaired (Tait and Ward, 1982), deaf/hard-of-hearing (Sanders, 1986), and mentally retarded (Short, 1993) children. More research on the role humour plays in their lives as well as examination of where any cross over occurs with children having no such handicaps could inform the development of television programming that nurtures a developing sense of humour and play for a wider and more diverse audience.

#### *How does the use of hostile humour differ from the use and appreciation of benign humour?*

Martin (1998) writes "... very little research has been done to clarify the distinction between humour that is conducive to psychological health and humour that is less healthy." A particularly intriguing study on whether the use of pro- and antisocial themes increases with age showed that children in pre-kindergarten to grade 3 produced mostly prosocial humorous messages. However, starting in grade 4, children produced proportionately more antisocial than prosocial humorous messages. Boys produced more antisocial humorous messages than girls and produced more antisocial messages for a best friend than a teacher. If we can understand the

need or inclination to such hostile humour, perhaps there is a less antisocial way to fulfill those needs and interests for both boys and girls.

### How can we teach humour to children?

How can we better encourage our children's healthy sense of humour? What effect can and does the TV or the web have upon a young child's sense of humour? Is there any carry-over for a child who spends 30 minutes watching and laughing at silly Teletubbies fall down and roll around good-naturedly in Teletubbyland? Does the chance to encourage a child's sense of humour improve if a parent or sibling or caregiver watches and laughs with the child? How do we best use the various media to reach children and/or caring adults and effectively encourage laughter, lightness and joy? ■

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