

Developmental Stages of Humor in Children

Subject: Ausschnitt vom Diplomarbeit: "Lachen, Improvisation & Death"
Autor Paul Kustermann. Copyright 2003

A Comic's Approach to Laughter

The question that really interest practitioners is: Are they laughing, or are they not? Are they cold, or are they hot? Clowns and Comedians are usually very instinct oriented pragmatic people when it comes to their work. They need results more than theories. How to tell a joke, how to make a balloon animal, how to make your assistant disappear. These are the kind of do-it, fix-it approaches that really appeal to people who have to get up on stage and perform. So someone tell me what's funny.....please!

Delton T. Horn says in his book Comedy Improvisation:

"Comedy grows out of an ambiguous entity we can call the 'comic spirit.' This isn't metaphysics, just a convenient label for whatever quality makes something funny. The comic spirit incorporates many things, including point of view and tone. Most theories of comedy focus on one or more of the following elements:

- *surprise,*
- *recognition,*
- *superiority and rebellion,*
- *aggression,*
- *playfulness."*

Gene Perret says in his book, Comedy Writing Step by Step (pg. 18):

"In general, a joke comprises of two distinct ideas that come together to form one... Sometimes these thoughts are strikingly similar, sometimes they are totally nonsensical and other times simply ironic. But 99% of all jokes are two ideas tied together in a funny way."

Patty Wooten, R.N. gives the following rules for finding and creating humor in her book, Compassionate Laughter:

- *exaggerate and overstate the problem*
- *look for the irony*
- *recognize the incongruity and nonsense of difficult situations*
- *learn to play with words*
- *learn to appreciate surprise.*

Paul McGhee goes a lot further in training people to develop their sense of humor and humor practicing skills. As a researcher he has some interesting insights as to just what makes people laugh, and how this develops from Day 1 on. McGhee tells us the reigning theory on humor identifies basically two sources: Incongruity (meaning absurdity, nonsense, irony) and the Tendentious (term coined by Freud). McGhee says:

"Humor is intellectual play. It is the experience of deriving pleasure from playfully..."

- *creating / appreciating distortions of the world as you understand it,*
- *expressing / reacting to taboo or emotionally sensitive ideas or actions.*

He goes on to explain how our sense of humor develops parallel to our emotional and intellectual development. It is an *"aid to mastery"* of the issues we are dealing with at any given time, and can-but must not necessarily-lead to laughter. It begins on day one when our mothers and fathers play with our toes and smile, when they tickle and *"threaten"* us while laughing. As our minds grow, so also our humor. It should be noted, however, that laughter is not always the result of humor. It can also follow vigorous play or simply be an expression of *"group glee"* as McGhee says.

Developmental Stages of Humor in Children

- *Toddler & early preschool (potty / toilet humor)*
- *Early elementary school (being stupid / clever, having the answer)*
- *Junior high & adolescence (sexuality)*
- *All ages (any of the above and relationship with parents)*

Differentiating even further, Mr. McGhee explains:

- *Stage 0 (0 - 6 months) smile of recognition, smallest deviance in presented objects, development of interests and interpretations.*
- *Stage 1 (6 - 12/ 15 mo.) laughing at the attachment figure*
- *Stage 2 (12/ 15mo - 3 to 5 yr.) object displacement - giving a known thing an untypical function such as pacifier being a rocket ship.*
- *Stage 3 (2 - 3 or 4 yr., the so-called "chimp-age") misnaming objects or actions*
- *Stage 4 (3 - 5 yr.) playing with word sounds-not meanings*
- *Stage 4b (same age) nonsense real-word combinations*
- *Stage 4c (same age) distortion of features of objects, people or animals*
- *Stage 4c (same age) gender reversal, new form of stage-3 humor.*
- *pre-Stage 5 (5 - 6 yr.) pre-riddle stage-transitional*

- *Stage 5 (6/7 - 10/11 yr.) riddles and jokes. In this stage the developmental research is still under development. There are interesting studies to see what degree of challenge effects the ultimate funniness.*

Here are some of the examples McGhee gives for humor at the various stages. Good section for clowns, parents and teachers to read if they aren't already doing this automatically.

Stage-1, Laughter at the attachment figure: this earliest stage is non-created, emotionally derived and learned. It includes: Peek-a-boo, mother sucking on bottle, father waddling like a penguin, unusual behavior of attachment person, vigorous physical play like throwing the baby in the air or tickling.

Stage-2, Treating an object as a different object: earliest self-created humor, but also funny if the attachment person does it. This includes using a bowl, diaper or wash-cloth as a hat; a finger as a toothbrush; a shoe as a telephone; any incongruous action with an object. McGhee notes: *The child's frame of mind determines whether it's humor or not.*

Stage-3, Misnaming objects or actions: "show me your nose" game; calling a cat a dog, a shoe a sock, etc.

Stage-4a, Playing with word sounds-not meanings. This includes silly rhyming; altering funny words (Dr. Seuss); creating nonsense words.

Stage-4b, Nonsense real-word combinations. McGhee notes there is still no focus on the meaning of the word, any word combination will do: "I want more potato juice." (bread juice, corn juice, chair soup, apple shoes, butter hats, etc).

Stage-4c, Distortion of features of objects, people and animals: such as adding or taking away features that don't belong (a potato with toothpick arms and raisin eyes); changing shape, size, location, color, length or familiar things (coloring a fire engine blue); incongruous or impossible behavior (as in Far Side cartoons).

Stage-4d, Gender reversal, reflecting struggle with gender identity and what it means to be a boy or girl. This includes kids calling each other the other sex, or identifying what behavioral qualities belong to boys and girls.

Pre-Riddle Stage, Transitional period. Most characteristics of stage 4 are still present, but there is a new interest in riddles. It is key to note, they don't understand the riddles and jokes they tell. Example: *Why does the chicken cross the road? There were ducks in his way. Why did the man tip-toe past the ambulance? He didn't want to wake the sleeping pills.*

Stage-5, Riddles & Jokes. Here concrete operational thinking is at hand, and the exciting discovery that one word can have different meanings. (Why do bottle openers eavesdrop?

Because they love to pry.) McGhee explains how kids love to trick up adults and practice knowing something others don't know. It is a joy in exercising a newly developed skill. There is such a premium placed on being right in school, by telling jokes they can turn the tables on authority by making their teachers, parents, peers look stupid. McGhee also notes that the degree of cognitive challenge is a question of proper matching experience with curiosity. Jokes and riddles are funniest to children when they're neither too easy or too difficult. At this stage children also learn about the 'joke facade' as an excuse when they have injured somebody verbally (I was only kidding) or as a social tactic for softening criticism by camouflaging it with humor (you're as slow as a two toned turtle in a tulip patch today), or as a method of mitigating a negative reaction (..what's the matter, can't you take a joke?)

In summarizing, McGhee reinforces that play is a major source of learning. Humor aids child-development in myriad ways, including:

- *sustaining joy and happiness*
- *strengthening bonds with parents, care givers, peers*
- *building interpersonal skills*
- *helping manage anger, anxiety and aggression*
- *building self-esteem*
- *promoting intellectual development*
- *stimulating creativity*
- *contributing to physical health*

One can nurture this development by:

- *respecting each child's unique humor style*
- *supporting play behavior*
- *reinforcing children's attempts at humor*
- *modeling positive humor yourself, including self-effacing humor*
- *providing humor at the child's cognitive level*
- *explaining the harm in destructive humor while understanding that children's aggressiveness is often an expression of their inability to understand other people's perspectives.*

That's Humor! Anybody Still Laughing?

Question: What does it mean if you find an attorney up to his waist in cement?

Answer: Somebody ran out of cement!