

How can I support my families more effectively in their roles as parents?

Jenn Schooley

“An atmosphere of trust, love and humour can nourish tremendous human capacity. One key is authenticity: parents acting as people, not as roles.”

Marilyn Ferguson, novelist and social philosopher

Biography



Jenn is a long-time Norfolk County resident and lives in Simcoe with her husband and two young children. She is currently the Mobile Outreach Consultant for the Ontario Early Years Centre – Haldimand & Norfolk. She is the lucky one who drives the Mobile van to various communities across Haldimand and Norfolk including: Dunnville, Cayuga, Hagersville, Port Rowan, Langton and Houghton. Each mobile site is located either in a Public or Separate School, in which she sets up a drop-in program for children ages 0 – 6 and their parents to come play, learn

and grow.

Values and Philosophy

Humour and parenting must go hand in hand. Humour and working with children must also go hand in hand. Humour is essential to survival in a world full of responsibilities, bills, deadlines, decisions and just plain getting by. Laughing at ourselves, and the world around us, is important. It is an invaluable tool when supporting and maintaining our relationships with our families, other professionals and ourselves. Without humour, facing the stark realities of the everyday would be unbearable and relationships would be strained.

Something we most often look past, is the fact that humour is not just a reaction, but an action. It is something that we must do intentionally and with deliberation, not just letting it happen unconsciously. It is something that we must model for each other, the parents and the children, giving them the tools to use at home and at other Centres.

Humour is important – no, essential – to my being. I have a sense of humour that I use in my personal and professional life. According to Tamara Pedley, Early Years Coordinator, “there’s never a dull moment working with Jenn”. To me, humour is a skill that has helped me through difficult situations and times in my life. It is the butter-cream icing to my existence.

Background

Originally, my first question was ‘How can I support my families more effectively in their roles as parents?’ In my travels though, I see different faces every day. I meet new people and make new connections everywhere I travel. Thusly, the constant moving has impacted my research and forced

me to refocus my question towards a tool I use in these new situations (though I also use it as a sustaining tool in my relationships with parents, children and professionals as well).

Humour as a Tool in the Parenting Role

As a parent myself, I can relate to the parents on many levels. I can understand how a parent, who has been up all night with a sick newborn, feels when having to deal with the toddler's temper tantrum. Though I can place myself in that parent's shoes, I can also see the 'other side of things' and help the parent by providing the tools they need to cope. One of the most effective tools for coping with the stresses of parenting is humour.

As part of my research, I posed a question to the parents and their response was overwhelming.

Question: "How do you find humour important in your parenting role?"

Some parents responded by linking humour with the development of the child:

"Very important – I believe that humour helps in a way to develop some kind of happiness and disposition in a child"

"Having humour in your role makes learning and development much more interesting and educational for both parent and child"

Other parents responded by stressing the importance of using humour to cope with stressful times:

"We try to use humour quite often to relieve tension in various situations ie: temper tantrum is broken by tickling, then we discuss problems and solutions. We like to laugh and do fun and silly thing to keep our day running smoothly"

"I notice when I take the time to laugh with my kids, they really enjoy it! They often loosen up a lot! It makes us all feel better!"

"It takes away the stress in different situations. It helps the child to realize and understand that mistakes are o.k.. It gives the child room to learn and grow and makes all situations a better learning experience for both. Having fun with humour makes us all a better person."

"It helps to break the tension and teaches the kids how to deal with stressful situations."

However, not all parents had an easy time responding to this question. One parent felt stressed that she may not have been using humour at all and then became worried she was impairing the development of the children. As a professional, that was a perfect opportunity to help educate the parent about using humour with children. That parent has since learned to relax more in her parenting style and to really play with her children.

Humour has become an invaluable tool of the trade, both in my professional role as well as my

parenting one. Though it is understood that using humour will help any situation. Research has proven that using humour provides the following “biochemical and physiological changes in our body;” (McGhee, 1996, p.17)

it lowers levels of the stress hormones cortisol, adrenaline and noradrenalin, it lowers blood pressure, induces muscles to relax, improves respiration, massages internal organs like the heart and lungs, it boosts the immune system, makes us more resistant to stress, reduces pain, calms the nervous system, improves digestion, boosts mood relieving and pain relieving internal morphine-like chemicals called endorphins, it speeds the healing process, improves circulation, helps to relieve stress, anxiety and depression, increases blood oxygenation, helps the body release the pleasure chemical dopamine, lowers heart rate. It has also been found to reduce work related sickness by 50% by improving our psychological and physiological health. (McGhee, 1996, p. 17-18)

Also, according to Regina Barreca, author of ‘They Used to Call Me Snow White . . . But I Drifted: Women’s Strategic Use of Humor’, “approaching life’s aggravations with humor has fewer harmful side effects, for humor can release feelings of hostility and at the same time provide an acceptable means of expressing and decompressing these feelings in an appropriate way.” (Barreca, 1991, p.128)

After posing the question to the parents, I became curious as to what my co-workers had to say. I sent the question out to all staff at Haldimand-Norfolk R.E.A.C.H. (professionals who deal with youth and/or parents) and again, the response was overwhelming. Not surprisingly, 99% of the responses dealt with the use of humour to cope with the trials and tribulations of being a parent:

“It is a coping strategy for us as parents to assist ourselves in managing the stress of parenting and each other, as well as modeling to our child the benefit of humour as a coping strategy. It helps with perspective – if we can laugh and find humour in the situation it brings it down to a human level, takes pressure off, and reminds us that if we can laugh at the situation it probably is not something to get too anxious about. From this calmer place, we can strategize a solution for the problem, if need be.”

“Parenting can be an extremely emotional job at times. As parents, we respond with our emotions,” . . . “I appreciate humour more than any other intervention. It assists to ground the emotional reaction and puts the event into perspective. It also helps create more positive thinking and problem solving. In the end, I can laugh or at least feel that I did my very best.”

”As a father, I find humour important in connecting with my children . . . it allows us to have fun and detach from power struggles. As a parent it helps me to not always take myself or issues that arise so seriously and put them into a better perspective . . . for all of us at times, but in particular for me. It can really help open up space for alternate ways of responding to my children. If anything, it’s something I’d like to use more.”

“Humour that generates “feel good” responses can be most effective for reducing stress and tension in the family. Humour can allow us all to maintain a balanced perspective in the process of problem solving. Humour can cross the generation gap and unify family members.

A timely dose of humour can strengthen everyone's skills of persuasion. Important that we monitor and model for our kids that good humour messages are "laughing with" not "laughing at" others"

One of my most favourite quotes that sums up the entire idea of using humour as a coping mechanism was from a co-worker that deals with crisis situations on a regular basis:

"If you don't laugh, you won't survive it!"

Not only has humour found a place in the world of parenting, it has found a following of believers from all walks of life. The medical world has discovered it's unique healing properties and the American Cancer Society condones the use of 'Laugh Therapy', which is used "for the relief of physical or emotional pain and stress. It is used as a complementary method to promote health and cope with illness." (American Cancer Society). In Australia, the medical community has recognized the power within humour and the Humour Foundation (a by-product of the recognition that humour is essential in healing) created the 'Clown Doctor's' project that "touches the lives of over 60 000 people every year" (Humour Foundation) and where "the focus is children's hospitals, and Clown Doctors are now part of hospital life in all major children's hospitals around Australia." (Humour Foundation)

Humour as a Tool in Creating and Sustaining Supportive Relationships with Children

I have been working with children since I was fifteen years old, starting off with summer camps through Norfolk's Community Services Department. I have met hundreds, perhaps thousands of children and parents through my working experiences and have encountered just as many humorous incidents. Through the years, I have learned to use humour in my working relationships with the children. Whether it is used to diffuse a situation (alleviate the stress of a child's separation anxiety their first day of day care) or strengthen a bond with a child (through playful antics), it has become an essential tool in both my parenting and professional role.

A recent example of the use of humour in my personal life would be the article in the Ontario Early Years Centre – Haldimand & Norfolk newsletter, Issue #3 entitled "Humour Helps". The article describes a disastrous cooking experience that led to a valuable learning experience with my children (I taught them to have a sense of humour and not to take life seriously, even when you almost blow up your kitchen!). Paul McGhee, PhD.,

"suggests that when an embarrassing moment happens to you, choose to see it as a humorous incident. This will prevent the negative physiological effects that will occur if you view the event as a life threat ("I was so embarrassed I wish I were dead"). Take the risk of sharing the incident with others and nine out of ten times they will see the humor and thank you for sharing it. (McGhee, 1996, p.96)

Not only did I "prevent the negative physiological effects" (McGhee, 1996, p.96), I was able to teach my children to cope effectively with stress. I was also equipping my children with a life tool, because, according to Louis Franzini, author of 'Kids Who Laugh: How to Develop Your Child's Sense of Humour', "humor maintains those stories in a joyful place in the child's memory, thereby allowing those stories

to TEACH LIFE LESSONS throughout that person's life." (Franzini, 2001, p.53)

I use humour throughout my professional life. I use humour to draw the children and families into the circle time. For example, during the Itsy Bitsy Spider song, I pretend to forget the song and end up singing the 'wrong' lyrics. The children will catch the wrong words and will stop me in the middle of my song to correct me in which I slap my forehead and start giggling, saying "Oh yeah, that's right, I knew that! Phew, let's start again!" The actual reason behind me using that technique is to encourage repetition (which is the best way to learn a song) and to strengthen memory skills (their memory is tested when I forget the right words and they need to remind me!). However, it has turned out that the most effective part of that song is the humour – forgetting, then laughing, then forgetting and so on. The humour aspect has been the drawing card for the children and the parents. It has made that particular song the most requested song of all.

Another professional use of humour is to use the humour for my own piece of mind. Working with children and parents in a fast paced environment can be a stressful experience, particularly if you don't see the brighter side of life. I was having an especially bad time during circle and was starting to get frustrated when, after the umpteenth time I adjusted my descending bra strap, a little boy stood up and said "What do you have in there!". I started laughing, releasing those endorphins, and ended up having a great time the rest of circle.

It's as simple as that. No magical pill, no miracle cure, no expensive training involved. An open mind and a good belly laugh and you're on your way to creating and sustaining wonderful relationships with your parents and children.

Humor STIMULATES and impacts virtually EVERY HUMAN SYSTEM. It should be used to teach children to be LIKABLE, INTELLIGENT HUMAN BEINGS! (Franzini, 2001, p.198)

References

American Cancer Society; <http://www.cancer.org/docroot/ETO/content/ETO-5-3X-Humor-Therapy.asp?sitearea=ETO>, Making Treatment Decisions.

Barreca, Regina (1991) They Used to Call Me Snow White . . . But I Drifted: Women's Strategic Use of Humor. NYNY: Viking-Penguin Publishing.

Franzini, Louis (2001) Kids Who Laugh: How to Develop Your Child's Sense of Humour. NYNY: Square 1 Publishing

Humour Foundation; <http://www.humourfoundation.com.au/index.php?page=1>, What we do

McGhee, Ph.D., Paul (1996) Health, Healing, and the Amuse System. NYNY: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company.

McGhee, Ph.D., Paul (2002) Understanding and Promoting the Development of Children's Humour: A Guide for Parents. NYNY: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company.

Schooley, Jennifer (2005) Humour Helps. Ontario Early Years Centre – Haldimand & Norfolk Newsletter, Issue #3, p. 2.