

# What Makes Young Children Laugh?

by David Elkind

We laugh, according to Freud, because of a failure of expectation. What is funny about a joke, to illustrate, is the unexpectedness of the punch line. Consider a typical child riddle. Question: "Why did the tomato blush?" Answer: "Because she saw the salad dressing." What is funny about this riddle is the unexpected personification of the terms "salad" and "dressing."

Young children, however, do not laugh at this riddle because their expectations depend, in part at least, on their level of intellectual development. Preschoolers do not yet have the intellectual facility to recognize that one and the same word can have different meanings. And it is the introduction of unexpected meanings that make riddles amusing to those who are able to appreciate them.

To understand what makes young children laugh, we have to understand their expectations regarding their physical and social worlds. That is to say, we have to have some idea of their concepts of space, time, and causality as well as of their developing sensory and motor abilities. We also have to be aware of their naive belief that adults are all-wise, all-knowing creatures. Awareness of the young child's conceptions of the world can inform us as to what they do, and don't, expect and therefore, of what will make them laugh. We need to recall, then, some aspects of the young child's reality from the perspective of the sorts of events and behaviors that will challenge their expectations and make them laugh, or at least smile.

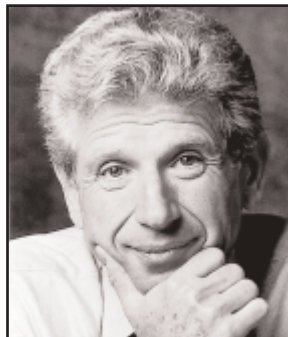
## Ideas of Space

Young children's conception of space is limited to their immediate environment. They are beginning to get a

sense of about how many glasses of milk you can get from a single milk carton, or about how much candy you can fit into a small bag. Likewise, young children have a general idea about the spatial organization of their homes and classrooms and can navigate successfully in these domains. It is because young children have this practical sense of space that they find some classic circus antics funny. Young children will laugh, for example, when they see a long line of clowns climb out of a tiny Volkswagen. They are amused because the parade of clowns defies their intuitive expectation of how many people can fit into such a small space.

## Ideas of Time

By the age of three or four, most children have also acquired an elementary sense of time. They have learned about how long it takes to do familiar and routine tasks such as eating, dressing, brushing your teeth, and driving to the child care center or to the mall. When they see someone engage in these activities at an exceedingly



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slow or fast pace, they find this funny. That is to say, you can make young children laugh by taking an excruciating long time, say, in lifting a spoonful of soup and putting it into your mouth. Contrariwise, performing a familiar action much more swiftly than usual can also be amusing to children. In both cases the fun comes from the unexpected pace of the action. Speaking more quickly or more slowly than usual can have the same effect. Many of the games we play with young children, such as Simon Says, involve speeding up and slowing down the activity. It is the speeding up or slowing down the unexpected pace of habitual actions that is amusing to young children.

### **Ideas of Causality**

The preschool years are also a time when young children are acquiring a very practical and concrete sense of causality. They know, for example, that things fall when they are dropped or knocked over. That is why young children find balloons so fascinating. Everything else falls down, but balloons fall up! Young children find it particularly amusing when a tape is run backwards and the broken toy ends up being in one piece again. It is because the Saturday morning cartoons defy young children's intuitive sense of causality that they find them so fascinating. In these films the characters are squashed, flattened, or stretched to the breaking point, only to return to their normal shape in the next segment. Magicians pulling rabbits out of hats are funny to young children because it is contrary to their causal expectations. Rabbits don't ordinarily come out of hats.

### **Incorporating Humor Every Day**

Reading stories to children is an important activity that can be made amusing. Before the age of six or seven

most children have trouble understanding that things can be, at once, both the same and different. The characters in fairy tales are all one-dimensional; the Wicked Witch and the kind Fairy Godmother, the mean Ogre and brave Prince Charming. Preschoolers are often surprised if they happen to meet their teacher in a store; they have trouble understanding that you can be both a teacher and a person at the same time. So when we read a story to young children and we use different pitches, to match those of the characters, children find this funny. They don't expect us to speak differently than we ordinarily do, and when we talk in unusually high or low pitches, they chuckle.

Another set of events that young children find funny derives from their expectations that adults are wise, all-knowing, and adept at all things. When we do something silly, like put on a funny hat or false nose, young children are highly amused. Their laughter is more at our failure to behave in an expected adult manner than it is from the way we look in the hat or with the nose. If we behave in a strange way, such as try to imitate the way a bear walks or a bunny hops, young children laugh because we are behaving out of character and not just because the actions, in and of themselves, are funny. A child imitating a bear or bunny is not amusing because children are expected to imitate animals much more than are adults.

There are a great many ways that we can incorporate humor into our everyday activities with young children. This not only makes the activities more fun for both us and the children, it also makes the activity itself more interesting and meaningful. Humor is healthy for young children. Just as the playground provides release for the body, humor provides a release for the mind. Humor is the playground of the mind.