

# Vincent's Vignettes

by Vincent Duffy

I'm looking at my teeth as I brush them in the morning. I'm thinking, "I'm overdue for a dental cleaning; my teeth ARE kind of yellow." But I'm busy so I put it off. That morning at preschool, I'm sitting on the floor. A smiling four-year-old girl comes up to me, looking right into my face. She says, "Vinnie, I love your beautiful golden teeth!" I made a dentist appointment that afternoon.

It was my fiftieth birthday. Another five-year-old girl asks, "How old ARE you now?" I answer, "Fifty." She looks up at me, smiles sincerely, and says, "Oh, you're going to die soon."

I'm pulling my sweatshirt off over my head. My tee shirt rides up a bit to expose my midsection. A four-year-old boy looks at me and says matter-of-factly and without judgment, "Vinnie, I never knew you were fat before."

We had a three-year-old who was pretty mean at times. We had a four-year-old who was big, strong, and gentle. The four-year-old felt sick. He threw up. I gave HIM a little bucket to use if he needed it while I called his parents. He threw up in the bucket and held onto it. Just about that time the three-year-old spied the bucket and laid claim to it. She pulled on it while he held on. She yelled until he let go. Her own force caused the bucket of puke to splatter all over herself. She shrieked; she was horrified, she was disgusted.

We had a four-year-old boy who was forever putting things in his mouth. It was summertime and we had a big tub of soapy water and toys in the yard. He was playing with it.

A teacher asked, "Did you put those toys in your mouth?" As he said "No" a big bubble floated up right out of his mouth.

One crisp fall Monday morning, I noticed about a dozen four- and five-year-old boys playing outside. They would gather in two groups, shout out numbers, then rush into each other and fall down. I watched them repeat this pattern about six times. "What are you guys doing?" "We're playing football."

We had a big cherry tree in the play yard. Disregarding

our rules, an energetic five year old climbed up about 20 feet and out onto a sturdy branch. The teacher ordered him down. She pleaded; she reasoned. He stayed put. She said, "If you don't come down, I'll come up and get you down." He was thrilled. She had to follow through. She tried to be angry, but she enjoyed the climb too much.

The monthly bill for child care is expensive. We can refer parents to agencies that can help or sometimes make arrangements to reduce the bill for parents with temporary cash problems. Two parents who asked for some aid did get turned down. The first one needed help because their new boat payments were so high; the second was having trouble because it cost so much to have a housekeeper.

One young teacher came upstairs to get me as she was changing diapers. "Is there something different about boys?" she asked with a worried look. "Come downstairs." There on the diaper table was a two-and-a-half-year-old boy. Sticking out of his bottom was a 12 inch long, wiggling, and swaying strand of what looked like spaghetti. I got a glove and pulled it out. It was an 18 inch long ascaris worm. His mom had forgotten to mention this problem to us.

An inspector from one of the various government agencies came to visit. She must have felt it part of her job to be aloof. She poked around for a good half-hour without a word or a smile. At last she announced "I'm going to leave now." She opened the door to leave and walked right into the furnace room.



Vincent Duffy is a preschool teacher with 21 years' experience. He directs the Learning Tree Montessori Child Care in Seattle. He has four children of his own.

Children are sitting around the table eating lunches they have brought from home. A three-year-old girl has a little yogurt container with a beaver picture on it. She gets excited. "It's a monkey! It's a monkey!" she repeats. Her neighbor, a four year old who knows everything but can't slow down to enunciate, lets everyone know: "It's a beazer! It's a beazer!" And across the table, another four year old, a polite one, knowledgeably whispers to her neighbor, "It's really a dog." Happily oblivious to all corrections, the three year old continues gleefully: "It's a monkey! It's a monkey!"

I sat down with some children making Valentines. I began to make one for my wife. My neighbor, a three-year-old girl, was making one with mountains and pools of glue and glitter. She was very pleased with her creation. She picked it up to admire. As the glue ran off, she exclaimed, "My Valentine is beautiful. Yours is different." "Do you mean different in a good way?" I asked. "No."

The same three year old sat down in my lap and began to stroke my face. I pulled back a little because her hands were wet. Noticing my discomfort, she reassured me, "I washed the peepee off my hands." I wasn't reassured.

We made dog biscuits for afternoon project time. The idea was that the children with dogs could take some home to feed to their own dogs. The project was lots of fun and pretty messy. The biscuits came out well and we set them to cool in the kitchen as parents arrived to pick up their children. In a few minutes, I spied one of the moms, happily munching away on what was left of a biscuit: her two children were well into theirs, too. She said, "These cookies are really good!" I said, "Those aren't cookies. They are dog biscuits for dogs." She said, "Well, they are really good dog biscuits." And she took another bite.

One fiery five year old went to punch his cousin. Before I could get there his cousin ducked and the first boy's fist struck the fence. He came running, crying to me; blaming his cousin for ducking.

Two children are standing upon a tall pile of freshly delivered woodchips on a bright fall day. There are wood chips as far as the eye can see. They are fighting over one particular wood chip.

We were outside the other morning. I mentioned to one of the boys that I didn't want his slobber to get all over me. After some preliminary jokes and giggling, he went right for the ultimate punch line: "Slobber comes out your

butt." Any joke fest with preschoolers ends up as bathroom talk. And nothing is funnier than diarrhea, except maybe diarrhea coming out some other taboo body part.

We were beginning group time one morning. I noticed that one three and a half year old looked angry. "What's wrong?" He answered very seriously, "My mom back-talked me this morning!"

We were playing three little pigs outside on a wet day. I was the big bad wolf. I climbed onto the top of the playhouse, as I've done hundreds of times before, to pretend that I was coming down the chimney. I lost my footing. I took a long time to fall as my feet desperately danced to remain on that wet roof. It was a terrible fall. My head hit the wooden fence hard. My body hit the ground hard. I struggled to clear my head. Did the children come to help me? No! Immediately they squealed in unison: "Do that again, Vinnie!"

Did you ever watch preschoolers try to be sneaky? A four year old with some contraband is coming through the kitchen. She has an enormous hump on her back. She is walking sideways with her back to us, her hands behind her back. She alternates between looking right at us and looking down at the floor. We don't say a word. Before she gets to the door she just has to say, "I'm not taking my Barbie outside."

I throw a ball high in the air and catch it a few times. A small audience gathers. Next time, I pretend to try to catch it but it bounces off my head. I stagger and hold my head. They roar with laughter. "Do it again!"

Three year olds. Every afternoon, they dance in a little circle; they laugh and call out "Mary Poppins doodle" and fall down, laughing even more. Every afternoon. Try it.

Aside from bathroom talk, what makes for preschool humor? They like silly things, things that they know don't make sense. Things that they have recently mastered are subjects for humor. The slapstick humor of an adult hurting himself, crying, misunderstanding, falling, making mistakes, making a fool of himself. They laugh at these things in an adult, but not in a child. They don't laugh when another child cries, or hurts himself, or misunderstands, or falls down. But they laugh with a loving adult who enjoys being with them.

### Humor and Babies

See Karen Miller's *Caring for the Little Ones* article on "Laughter in the Baby Room" *Child Care Information Exchange*, March/April 1999