

# Family Humor

by Bill Strader

It's 5 PM and Nikiesha's mother has just picked her up from the family child care program that she attends. Nikiesha is almost five years old. This was the actual conversation they had in the car.

"Mom! Mom! I learned a new song today! Want to hear it?"

"Sure, go ahead."

"Row, row, row your boat, gently down the stream!!!"

"Nikiesha, that's not a new song, we sing that one."

"No wait!" (She is smiling.)

"Row, row, row your boat,  
gently down the stream,  
merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily,  
Life is just a dream!"

"You sing it, mom, then I will; it's called a round."  
(Nikiesha is giggling.)

(Nikiesha's mother begins to sing . . .)

"Row, row, row your boat,  
gently down the stream  
merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily,  
Life is just a dream!"

Nikiesha sings,

"Row, row, row your boat,  
gently down the stream

merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily,  
Life is just a dream!"

Nikiesha's mother sings two lines and Nikiesha starts in . . .

"Row, row, row your boat,  
gently down the stream,  
Ha, ha, fooled ya,  
I'm a submarine!!!"

Both mom and Nikiesha start to laugh.

"Where did you learn that?"

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Over the past 14 years Bill has been involved in the early childhood community at the local, state, regional, and national levels of the Montachusett AEYC, Massachusetts AEYC, New England AEYC, and National AEYC! He has held the position as Professor of Early Childhood Education at Fitchburg State College and faculty advisor for the Fitchburg State College Early Childhood Club. Bill is now director of the



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“Brenda (taught it to us); it’s one of the “fool ‘em” songs.

“Well, you are right! It did fool me.”

Nikiesha’s mom turns the corner and they drive toward home. What just happened? Humor plays an important role in the lives of young children and their parents, their families, their child care programs. We know how impor-

tant it is as a parent to keep our sense of humor, our perspective, and to keep our roles as parents in check through that important gauge of humor. How important is humor in the family? How important is humor in the family child care program? How do we effectively connect what we do in our homes and families and what we do in the family child care setting to promote the healthy understanding of humor in young children and its impact on development? We will explore family humor in more detail!

### What’s So Funny?

Those of us in the field of early childhood education frequently get the opportunity to visit programs, see preschool settings, observe in the child care classroom or Head Start program, and look at the interesting activities that occur in the family child care home. I have discovered that one of the key indicators of a high quality program is the positive, warm, supportive, and humorous relationships in that setting. And here I mean all the relationships — teachers and children, children and children, parents and children, not to mention the parents and staff member, and all the wonderful variations and combinations of relationships. I enjoy coming into a program that is filled with the laughter of staff, the giggles of children, the chortles of babies, the playful tumbling of toddlers, and the jokes that four and five year olds are beginning to share with each other. We have the power, as role models for laughter, to create an enjoyable environment for young children through our attitudes and approaches to children and to other staff, and through our support and nurturing of parents as caring, warm, playful human beings.

Covey (1997), in his work *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Families*, speaks to humor and family in the importance of our self understanding and self awareness. We as parents and

caregivers need to keep a eye on imagination and fun, see what is truly important, and remember the joy of family, the sense of togetherness, unity, and the magnetic attraction of family humor and laughter. Telling jokes, having fun together, seeing the funny side of life, laughing with each other, and laughing at ourselves is important. We know that laughter heals, releases tension, gets us back on track, smoothes the rough edges, deflates the “stuffed shirt,” equalizes us all. Humor and laughter make us more human and more humane. Rolfe (1998) states that parenting is meant to be fun; aren’t we supposed to laugh? “Isn’t that exactly what parenting is all about?” (p. 248).

### Sharing Children’s Humor, Family Humor, and Family Child Care Humor

The family child care setting provides many opportunities for young children, parents, and the child care provider to give each other feedback and information as to what’s been funny, and what’s been fun, and what we have enjoyed doing in the program, at home, and over the weekend. Diane, a family child care provider for over 20 years, makes sure that she records and keeps the interesting and funny anecdotes of children. She has the “sticky pads” all over her house. When a child comes up with some “gem,” Diane puts the time, the date, and what the child said on the sticky pad. She then shares what the child has said or done with the parents at the end of each day. The sticky pad written comment is put into the child’s file. At the end of the year and when the child is ready to move on to kindergarten or leaves the program, Diane provides a wonderful summary of all the humorous things the child has been involved with.

Greg, age four, in the sandbox with David: “Let’s not make nutritious food anymore. Let’s make candy!”

Can you imagine all the wonderful comments and funny things that Greg has said over the two and a half years he has been in Diane’s family child care program? Diane has shared this with the parents. It has also been interesting to see that Greg’s parents have reciprocated and have given back to Diane some of the great things he has said and done at home and over the weekends.

It’s fun to laugh at yourself,  
It’s a tonic tried and true,  
It’s fun to look at yourself  
As other people do.

*Lyrics from Candid Camera, A. Funt*

**Here's a list of some people who have made us laugh over the past 100 years.**

- Woody Allen • Dobie Gillis • Paul Reiser • Will Rogers • Fanny Brice • Billy Crystal • Mark Twain • Jim Nabors
- Gilda Radner • Benny Hill • Don Knotts • Bob Denver • Pee Wee Herman • Johnny Carson • Carl Reiner
- Fran Drescher • Dean Martin • Danny Kaye • The Little Rascals • Jerry Lewis • Flip Wilson
- Steve Allen • Carrot Top • Judd Hirsch • "Bozo the Clown" • Gallagher • Danny DeVito • Emmett Kelly
- Adam Sandler • Tony Danza • George Burns • Chris Farley • Carroll O'Connor • Gracie Allen • Andrew Dice Clay
- Rob Reiner • Imogene Coco • Howie Mandel • Redd Foxx • Lily Tomlin • Chris Rock • Soupy Sales • Red Skelton
- Mike Myers • Milton Berle • Rosie O'Donnell • David Letterman • Mel Brooks • Tim Allen • Jay Leno
- George Carlin • Eddie Murphy • Conan O'Brien • Dana Carvey • Richard Pryor • Ellen DeGeneres • Rick Moranis
- Candice Bergen • Jimmy Durante • The Marx Brothers: Groucho, Harpo, Zeppo, Chico • Dick VanDyke • Bob Newhart
- Tom Hanks • Roseanne Barr • Bill Cosby • John Lovitz • Michael J. Fox • Harold Lloyd • John & Jim Belushi
- Rosemarie • Lucille Ball • Chevy Chase • Morrie Amsterdam • Abbott & Costello • Lorainne Newman
- Mary Tyler Moore • Laurel & Hardy • Rob Schneider • John Candy • Rodney Dangerfield • Brett Butler
- Julia Louise Dreyfuss • Kevin Kline • Carol Burnett • The Three Stooges (Moe, Larry, Curley) • Phyllis Diller
- Joe E. Brown • John Cleese • Paula Poundstone • Buster Keaton • Dennis Miller • Ruth Buzzi • Jack Benny
- Wayne Farrell • Martha Rae • Benny Hill • Norm McDonald • Toti Fields • W. C. Fields • Kevin Nealon
- Tom & Dick Smothers • Jim Carey • Gene Wilder • Audrey Meadows • Steve Martin • Ed Wynn • Jackie Gleason
- Jerry Seinfeld • Phil Silvers • Art Carney • Bill Murray • Tim Conway • "Hazel" (Shirley Booth) • Jane Curtin
- Harvey Korman • "Edith" • Robin Williams • Victor Borge • "Our Miss Brooks" (Eve Arden) • Whoopi Goldberg
- Edgar Bergen • Andy Kaufman • Fr. Guido Sarducci • Don Rickles

compiled by W. H. Strader for *Humor in Young Children: Laughing Matters!*

**Playfulness Revisited**

When asked to present at conferences on humor and young children, I like to go back to the research of Leiberman (1977) and her wonderful work on playfulness. I leave you with some of the important terms that she includes in her schematic structure and conceptual framework for playfulness in hopes that you can take these words into your heads and hearts in order to more fully model playfulness and bring a sense of humor to your program. Think of these words and how they relate to teaching young children: play, imagination, creativity, playfulness, sense of humor, spontaneity, manifest joy, affect, cognition, laughter, pleasure, joking, wit, and bubbling effervescence.

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