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## Places of Laughter and Understanding

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What goes "ha-ha-thud?" A man laughing his head off. Get it? Ha-ha-thud. When I was about seven years old, I used to laugh my head off every time my sister told that joke. It still makes me laugh. Ha-ha-thud.

You, however, may find it perplexing that this joke is funny to me. And you may find it a bit worrisome that, with a sense of humor like that, I have been asked to write about humor.

But that's humor. Some things are funny. Sometimes. To some people. But we all love a good laugh. We love to tell jokes, repeat riddles, sneak in a pun or two, read the comics section before the rest of the newspaper, play practical jokes and just generally try to make others laugh. Even people who can't tell a joke to save their lives appreciate humor. And, as I am often told, they can be very funny when they not are trying to be.

As important as humor is, however, we tend to think of it in a narrow category, distant from learning. School is for learning. Humor is for after hours. Who does not remember a teacher's challenge, "Is that a joke you would like to share with the rest of us?" "Serious" books are spoken and written about in hushed, respectful tones, while comic books are dismissed, concealed, forbidden and enjoyed.

Informal learning settings such as museums—and children's museums especially—are wonderful exceptions to this dubious dichotomy. Museums are places where people construct their own meanings, where learning experiences are driven as much by the learner as by the museum itself. Along with the cognitive, intellectual part of experience, museums also try to tap into the affective, feeling part of experience. Affective goals increasingly crop up in exhibit and program plans. Exhibits and programs sometimes try to tap into the humor visitors bring with them to museums.

In fact, humor is gradually gaining credibility and visibility in visitor research as Steve Yalowitz's article in this issue indicates. It is also an actual field of academic study. At the International Society for Humor Studies, professors in linguistics, psychology, literature, biology, education, philosophy and sociology try to crack the humor code along with the latest jokes.

Children's museums are perfect places for humor. Because they invite learning at its broadest and most delightful, they are natural settings for the full range of children's emotional lives, their senses of humor, their laughter and the learning that accompanies them.

## Too Funny for Words

Humor and laughter are zesty tonics for living. They release built-up tensions, allow expression of ideas and thoughts otherwise difficult to express, facilitate coping with trying circumstances and bond people with a shared experience.

Like many of the rich, complex, interesting phenomena such as creativity or play, humor is hard to define. It includes puns, humorous comments, comic verse, riddles and physical comedy. While we are certain we recognize humor when we see it, humor is hard to define or even categorize. In fact, we frequently confuse it with or mistake it for other familiar, humorous situations such as play, a baby's laughter or an animal's antics.

For instance, humor is often part of the fun and the pleasure of play. In play, however, humor and laughter are secondary to the pursuit of the activity itself. A baby's face first blossoming into a smile around four to eight weeks is more than gas. But it's not humor. It's a milestone towards ensuring she will have the love and attention of her parent, but it's not about entertaining them.

Finally, though we find other animals' lolling, scratching, climbing and tail-chasing to be funny, we do not share a good laugh with them. Humor and jokes are pretty much the exclusive domain of humans, although it seems that language-using apes demonstrate a sense of humor remarkably similar to that of a preschooler. The laughing hyena notwithstanding, the purely physiological act of laughing is unique to humans.

Humor is human. It begins at home and it begins early in life. It is, in fact, a kind of "nervous laughter." The capacity for humor is built into the nervous systems of humans and is one of those mental activities that serves to maintain an optimal level of stimulation that keeps humans alert and active in the world. Too little stimulation and the world is bo-ring; too much and it's a mental meltdown.

A recent study in Britain determined that a shared environment rather than shared genes accounts for a similar sense of humor among family members. Not every family is funny, but family members are funny—or not funny—in similar ways. You've seen it before: a gaggle of look-alike siblings giggling together at the oddest things. And most likely they think the same about you and your siblings.

At the risk of defining the undefinable, reducing the rich variety of humor to one type and taking all the fun out of it, we can simplify humor a bit. In a theory proposed by Paul E. McGhee (1979), much of humor—and, in particular, humor for children—relies on a few critical conditions. First, humor comes from incongruity and from what is perceived as wrong or oddly juxtaposed. Something unexpected, inappropriate, unreasonable, illogical or exaggerated must be present for laughter to roll.

Second, an understanding of how things should be is a prerequisite for humor. There must be a clear enough expectation of how a situation should be or how things should work in order to recognize when an incongruous event has been substituted for the expected one. We know that from birth on, infants try to master the basics of what does and does not belong together in their world. This constant sorting out prepares them from the get-go for enjoying humor. Drawn to investigating the world and parsing the new until it becomes familiar, children are building knowledge. Repetition, whether looking at a mother's face, dropping handfuls of oatmeal on the floor or bouncing on the dog, helps children grasp basic understandings about events, objects and ideas.

A third condition for humor is a state of playfulness, a readiness for fun. The same joke told after a tire blows out rather than during happy hour at the bowling alley probably won't get any laughs. Finally, for children, at least, there must be an ability to engage in fantasy. In make-believe play the child explores what happens when inappropriate objects or events are inserted into different situations. The endless possibilities of creating odd combinations such as "putting your mother on the ceiling" produce a fascination with fantasy activity.

## Kidding Around

Just like the story of The Three Bears, the effort required to "get" the joke has to be "just right." Too much mental effort takes the fun out of funny. But, jokes that are too easy to figure out also aren't funny because we get the point immediately. While puns are not always funny to older

adolescents and adults because they are too simple, they are a hoot to five- and six-year-olds who have recently mastered language. Laughter and smiles are the rewards for the effort required to reconcile the double meaning of “hoppy birthday” on a birthday card.

The onset of humor in babies appears to be surprisingly young. A child’s earliest experiences with humor may be as early as ten months. These are typically private humorous moments because the child hasn’t yet developed the language facilities for sharing the experience. But like a silent movie, the film’s rolling. The baby conjures up a memory of an image of an object, as a baby about twelve months is able to do, and creates a discrepancy between what is usual and what is not. Simply bringing the “wrong” image to bear on a given object, like holding a shoe to the ear as if it were a telephone, a child suspends the usual rules. Escaping laughter and giggles attest to the fact that the child “gets” it.

In a baby’s first year, experiences with certain games such as peek-a-boo and chasing have many of the conditions of humor. Resolution of there/not there and running away provide the unexpectedness or incongruity that tickle little funny bones. The accompanying smiles and laughter indicate a likely appreciation for the humor of the situation.

Hardly has the child grasped with certainty which objects belong together and which don’t when he starts to mix them up, enjoying nonsense words, mismatched objects and events. Maybe you’ve noticed. Did you ever put your shoes on your hands or mittens on your feet to entertain a toddler? Even as young as two years old, children recognize—and laugh over—the inappropriateness of an action directed toward an object.

Young children not only have their own sense of humor, but they also actually produce humor at an astonishingly early age and rate. In a study by Lori Moglia (1981), children 15 to 45 months old produced a joke about every eight minutes. Looks, facial expressions and giggles accompanied all jokes making it clear to others that humor, not misunderstanding, was involved. For instance, a child might say, “The dog is saying ‘meow,’” and laugh or might say, “This is a poison cookie,” and giggle.

While there are widespread individual differences among children on the humor front, patterns through stages are pronounced. During the earliest stage, a toddler will treat a toy or object as if it were something else. For instance, at about two years old, one of Piaget’s children picked up a leaf and held it up to her ear and talked as if the leaf were a telephone. As a child’s language develops, incongruous labeling of objects and events becomes the source of humor. Word mastery allows the child to playfully change the names of objects, substitute the word cat for dog, repeat rhyming words or use nonsense words for the correct word.

When the child realizes that words actually refer to a class of objects and certain characteristics, they find humor in mixing-and-matching characteristics, often based on the incongruous appearance of things. A cat with elephant ears, barking and wearing a skirt is funny to a four-year-old. The first step towards adult humor occurs as a child becomes aware that something has two meanings, one based in normal circumstances and one based in a set of incongruous circumstances. Riddles such as “When is it time to go to the dentist? Tooth-hurty (2:30)” appeal to seven-year-olds who proudly choose the joking answer.

### **A Climate of Gentle Humor, A Climate for Learning**

Children’s museums almost effortlessly offer a climate for both humor and learning. They are places where children feel safe, take risks and combine the familiar and the novel. Sensory and object-rich settings invite exploration, imitation and fantasy play. And experiences within a wide developmental range allow children to practice and master emerging skills and concepts. While we readily know these as conditions that encourage learning, they also invite humor. The surprise and delight that humor brings keeps us awake for other possibilities, like learning something.

Humor requires a friendly setting, especially for the very young. Putting a flowerpot “hat” on your head in the costume area, quacking like a duck or playing Twister® with 100 other people isn’t as easy as it looks for all children. If a setting is too unfamiliar, a child may feel anxious rather than a sense of excitement at transforming objects, being confident of her ability to discern incongruity or possibly being the source of someone else’s humor. Allowing a child to watch, join when ready or participate from the sidelines can squeeze giggles out of caution.

Because children's exploration is so directed by their senses, their humor is often inspired by the appearance of things or sounds. This is a fine match with the exciting, multisensory and multidimensional settings of children's museums rich in sights, sounds and textures. More than silliness is at play as a child replays his voice as though he were singing opera in a canyon or a shower; looks at himself in a concave or convex mirror; or plays with a pig puppet that has wings.

Puppets, props and costumes, tools and giant toys fuel a child's imagination and humor. A child pretends a toy car is something absurd, like a bug-mobile. A child delights at the great visual humor of a mix-and-match animal with the tail of a fish, the torso of a zebra and the head of a bird. Children of all ages enjoy the situational humor of playing "air" guitar in front of the chroma key showing an underwater or hospital scene.

### The Funny That Makes Me THINK

As well suited as children's museums are for humor, actually transforming humor into a tool for learning is as hard as telling a joke really well. Museums must carefully hit the mark with humor, knowing when, how and how much humor to present, using it purposefully, but not too purposefully. Humor commanded is humor killed.

Children's museums can't make everything funny and they can't tell all the jokes. They can make room for humor in the building, exhibits, programs, performances, publications and greetings. But they must then step aside and allow visitors to construct their own meanings from experiences and engage in the give-and-take with families and other visitors to generate laughter and understanding.

Just as important as matching the intellectual effort for "getting" a joke, is finding the right tone for humor. Humor's value is canceled when it is over children's heads, is in poor taste, or is mean. Too raw, and parents may be put off; too sanitized, and it's babyish. Finally, humor can't be a substitute for being honest and straightforward with children about what's happening. It must hew the line between being a motivator for learning and a sugar-coated disguise for learning.

The trick in using humor as a tool for learning is for the riddle or cartoon to be purposeful. Humor must serve a larger goal and directly connect to the concept being presented. There is no lack of good jokes, cartoons, riddles or visual puns. But as with any activity in planning an exhibit, matching a joke to a concept is both essential and challenging.

Riddles in exhibit text can help make connections in funny ways. "What has a mouth but cannot talk?" could be a riddle in an exhibit on geography. "What has a tongue but can't speak?" might be in an exhibit on shoes. Not only can the content of jokes reinforce learning, but so can their forms. Jokes help preschoolers practice the question-answer format that is part of emerging literacy. Even if a three-year-old's attempt at a riddle isn't funny to his audience now, he is memorizing and practicing the structure for a joke that some day will win a laugh.

Especially for older children, jokes and cartoons invite problem-solving. By making their point through humor, jokes require attention to all of the available information, depend on logic and require seeing things in more than one way. "What is the difference between a dog and a marine biologist?" might teach a thing or two about a marine biologist as well as teach about attributes, differences and homonyms.

With so much humor based in incongruity and understanding things in more than one way, jokes and riddles provide children with tremendous opportunities to see something from different perspectives. Sometimes the shift in perspective is between real and make-believe; sometimes between probability and possibility; and sometimes between two meanings of the same word. "Humor, fundamentally, is a game of double perspective, and helping children take new perspectives is an important part of their intellectual development," George Forman, professor of education at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, has observed.

The laughter that accompanies humor might also be a tool for learning. When incongruity results from phenomenon behaving unpredictably, a gleeful tee-hee might be the "ah-ha" that the child, at least in some way, understands something is awry. Watching a ball roll up an incline might produce a guffaw that suggests the child "gets" the problem—but not the solution. Listening to the laughter is also a tool for staff, offering insights in how to extend the activity into a new understanding.

Humor walks in the door everyday with our visitors and it will continue as long as the

conditions are ripe for it. Rich settings with lots of props inspire a child to play and transform things from the way they should be to the way they could be. They inspire a new knock-knock joke, the toss of a hat on the Bernoulli Blower or a seven-year-old's creation of an "Apple Tower,"—that's the New York version of the Eiffel Tower with an apple on top.

### What's So Funny?

When we see humor in action in exhibits and programs, in text and on the faces of visitors and staff, we recognize the power and potential of humor to invite, delight and excite learning.

There was an exhibit on insects a few years back at Bay Area Discovery Museum. At one activity station, visitors could pick up a small set of bug boxes, hold them to their ears and listen to the sounds of different insects. One box invited visitors to hear the sound of beetles and played a recorded Beatles tune.

A mobile of giant fish swimming overhead in the glass-walled atrium at Minnesota Children's Museum makes visitors feel like they are in an aquarium. The fish are also dressed for the season and special exhibits. For the circus exhibit, they sport bright orange curly clown wigs; for Halloween, they are made a touch spooky and at Christmas, they wear Santa hats. If staff can figure out how to get the fish to wear sunglasses, summer Big Fun will kick off with a beach party.

The Far Side of Science, an exhibit created by the California Academy of Sciences, took on the popular cartoonist, Gary Larson. Visitors could be examined under a giant microscope. When they did, they saw a big hairy eyeball overhead, peering down at them.

At The Children's Museum, Boston, fake poop in the toilet gets a smile and a laugh. Independent of the popular theme of bodily fluids as a source of humor, discovering the unexpected in a public setting—and a museum, no less—jiggles a giggle from even the most adult visitors.

Also at The Children's Museum, the giant fish in the bathtub and a bird photographing a married couple in the doll house display raises giggles by juxtaposing the unexpected. Even for the very young child, this unlikely scene playfully disrupts a few of the operating instructions that even young children have mastered. Do you have a fish in your bathtub?

The Children's Museum of Maine in Portland took on the subject of laughter in an exhibit, Ha, Ha, Ha—Laughter Around the World. Visitors could deposit or withdraw jokes at the Laugh Bank, measure the frequency and range of a laugh at the Laugh-o-Meter, and create their own comedy at Le Petit Comedy Club, which featured a microphone, studio audience, canned laughter and a real comedian's script.

In the ZoomRoom® at the Creative Discovery Museum in Chattanooga and in other ZoomRoom®s, the ZoomVid® offers up kid-tested riddles that knock kids' funny-bones. "What does a pig put on his sunburn? Oinkment."

At the ice fishing hole in HABITOT at Minnesota Children's Museum, grumpy old men give into big guffaws as they see their cherubic grandchildren reel in a big fat walleye, bigger than the one that got away from them.

So, what's so funny at your museum? As you read the articles in this issue of Hand to Hand, think of the humor already eliciting giggles from your visitors, the humor that walks in the door with every one of them. Pick up a few new funny ideas to add to the mix. Visitors will love, laugh and learn from it.

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