

IN THE FAMILY

BY BRAD WILCOX

Early in their marriage, James learned that his new wife habitually read in bed before going to sleep. Occasionally, he would come into the bedroom and find Liz asleep with a book in her hands. He would carefully put the book on the nightstand, gently take off her glasses, and turn off the light—until the night she looked up, apparently wide awake, and said, “I wanted to finish that book, but I just kept falling apart.”

Now, more than 20 years later, “falling apart” is still used as a substitute for “falling asleep” in James and Liz’s family. This otherwise-articulate family derives a lot of humor from wordplay. The right twist on the English language, dropped into a moment of tension, can invite parents and children to crack up with laughter and be ready to resolve problems.

Just as humor can help ease tensions, it can improve a person’s medical condition. Positive humor (not sarcasm or put-downs) has positive influences on us socially, emotionally, and intellectually.¹ No wonder author J. Morreall claims that humor is valuable in all areas of life.² Families can use humor to gain perspective, strengthen relationships, and cope with struggles. By noticing and collecting humor at home, families demonstrate a sense of humor and enhance family life.

Foundations of Family Humor

Humor in the family isn't funny unless everyone is laughing. Mutual respect, love, and trust allow family members to share and create humor. Humor perceived as controlling ("Keep laughing and you'll be laughing all the way to your room instead of going to play with your friends!") or sarcastic ("Come on, let's help Rob review his spelling words—T-E-E-C-H-E-R; isn't that how you spelled it on the test, Rob?") can hurt relationships and create an atmosphere of defensiveness instead of closeness. Family members then may not trust the others to be gentle and to protect each other from harshness or unkindness. Moreover, parents who can't laugh at their own faults and are angry when their children notice parental imperfections may convince children that adulthood is humorless and grim and that parents and other authority figures have lost the ability to be compassionate.

Family members usually know each other's weakness and fears. When mutual respect is present, they don't treat those fears lightly or make a joke about another's weakness. The love in a family is diminished by "humor" that makes another want to withdraw from the family. Appropriate humor unifies the family with warmth, laughter, and a desire to be together.

Humor Can Improve Our Perspective

We can't always choose what we look at, but we can choose what we see—our perspective on the situation. Katie, 3, and Brian, 2, were at home with Dad while Mom worked. Dad noticed that they were playing "go to church," which apparently

made it necessary for Katie to wobble in Mom's high heels and Brian to shuffle along in Dad's gigantic shoes. Later, Dad noticed that both children had on Mom's shoes. "What are you playing now?" he asked.

"Go to work," Katie replied. Rather than being upset because he wasn't employed right then and his children thought working was just for "moms," Dad laughed and enjoyed telling Mom the story when she got home. Seeing the humor of the situation helped him keep a good perspective and made a family memory they enjoy laughing about together.

In another family, a little boy asked his mother to help him find his coat. Mom said, "It's right over there, on the hook."

"No, that's not mine," her son replied.

Mom then joined the boy in looking around the house and yard. Finally, they returned to the coat hooks and Mom asked, "Are you sure this isn't your coat?"

"I'm sure," the boy said. "Mine had snow on it!"

These examples of the value of humor in improving our perspective lead to the conclusion that "Healthy

humor used in a variety of ways can enhance the quality of the time we spend in our families together."³

Humor can reduce stress, help in times of family crisis, strengthen commitment, appreciation, affection, and relaxation, and even reduce quarreling.⁴

Humor Can Strengthen Relationships

Just as politicians and other public speakers often introduce a serious talk with humor (many people remember President Kennedy's statement that he was the man "who accompanied Jacqueline Kennedy to Paris" because she had attracted the most attention), we can use humor to introduce serious discussions between parents and children. One mother reminds her children of etiquette slip-ups by saying, "Miss Manners™ called to remind you to introduce your friends to your parents when they come over." Or she affects a Southern accent to remind a daughter, "Honeychile, a lady nevah entertains a gentleman in her bedroom."

A touch of humor now and again can allow us to communicate while maintaining a positive tone in our relationships. The key is to make sure everyone is laughing. Any sarcasm or veiled criticism or put-downs—the unfortunate staples of "humor" on so many TV sit-coms—can cause lasting wounds. Comments such as, "Nice suit—NOT!" "Is your face always so broken out? You look like you have

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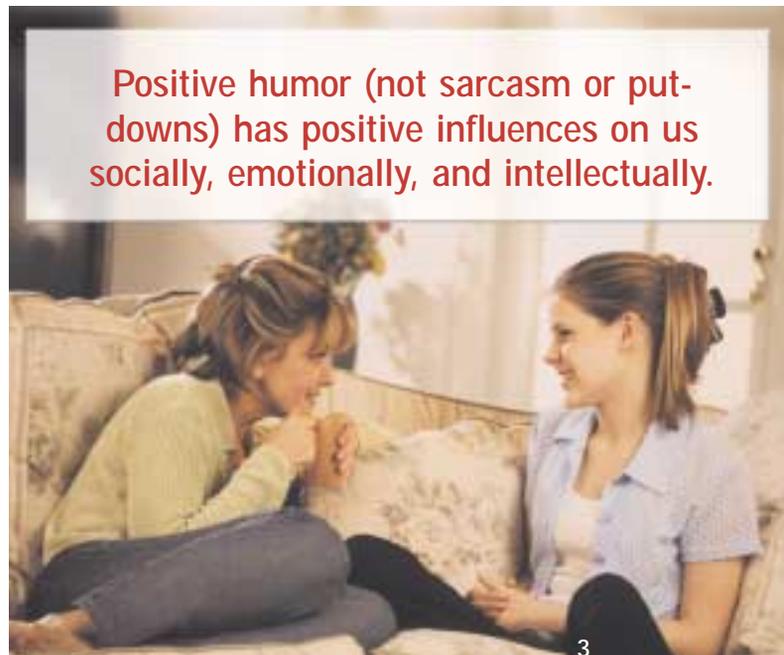


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chicken pox,” or “Rhonda will eat it—she’s obviously never missed a meal” will be long remembered, and not fondly. Teasing between siblings can quickly get out of hand, because we all know how others in the family are vulnerable. Family members (including parents) who tell embarrassing stories at the expense of other family members need to remember that some stories are not theirs to tell. If family members begin to accuse each other of lacking a sense of humor or have to explain that they were “just kidding,” chances are that constructive use of humor has fallen by the way.

Couples must be careful of the trap of contempt. Sarcasm, which often seems like witty wordplay, is a form of contempt that can lead to deterioration of the family. Other forms of contempt (name-calling, eye-rolling, sneering, mockery, and hostile humor) are equally destructive. Whether between husband and wife, parent and child, or siblings, contempt undermines relationships

and sometimes is disguised as humor. As marriage scholar John Gottman wrote, “contempt . . . is poisonous to a relationship because it conveys disgust. It’s . . . impossible to resolve a problem when your partner is getting the message you’re disgusted with him or her. Inevitably, contempt leads to more conflict rather than to reconciliation.”⁵

Humor, when it is an expression of kindness and not contempt, makes communication easier.⁶ It can also get a point across with love instead of being preachy or overbearing. One couple was worried that their son was getting home past curfew. After calmly reviewing with him the reasons for a curfew and being sure he knew of their love, the parents and son agreed that he needed an incentive to arrive home on time. Before his next date, the son found a clock and a note in the entry. The note read: “I am your new best friend. I love you and get worried when you’re out late, so I’m set for your curfew time. Please come home in time to turn off my alarm before I wake everyone up! P.S. And no fair turning me off and leaving again. Your conscience is your good friend, too.”

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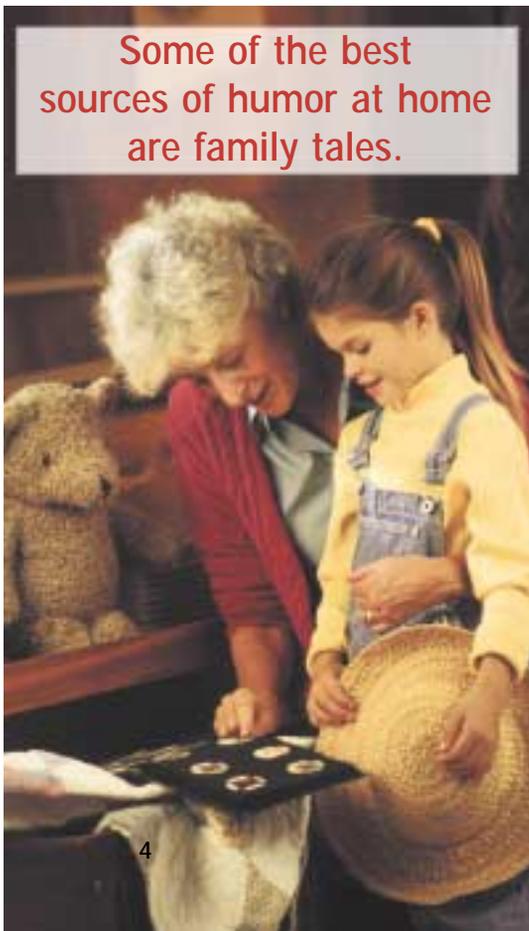


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Humor Can Help Us Cope

Susan and Joe had been vacationing in Mexico with their six young children. Joe’s work required him to return home a few days early and Susan, seven months pregnant, found herself shepherding her brood through customs and having to deal with mounting distractions and demands. “There I was,” she recalls, “out of money and out of diapers. I was trying to keep track

Humor at its loving best:

- Harmonizes relationships
- Brings people together
- Offers hope and good will
- Discloses the truth
- Shows that love can be a laughing matter
- Attracts others
- Shows appreciation
- Awakens positive feelings
- Improves relationships
- Allows informality
- Promotes fun
- Enhances enjoyment of life
- Makes forgiveness easier
- Leads to praise
- Improves flexibility
- Opens minds and hearts
- Permits more cooperation
- Makes love grow

From Bill Borchardt. “Differential humor and its not-so-funny strain on love.” *Journal of Rational-Emotional & Cognitive-Behavior Therapy* 18, 1, 59 (Spring 2000).

of the luggage and the children. I was so pregnant I could hardly walk.” The customs agent looked from Susan to her six noisy children and back to Susan. “Lady, go right through,” he invited. “If you have drugs in those bags, you need them.” A shared understanding and humorous comment made Susan’s journey more bearable.

We all encounter things that are inconvenient, terrible, or even unbearable, it seems. We change what we can, but sometimes we have to accept and cope with unpleasant or awful circumstances. Humor can be a helpful coping tool. Researchers have found that humor can significantly decrease anxiety.⁷ It can also reduce psychological problems and distress.⁸ When a daughter came in looking miserable after running an errand in the car, her father asked what was wrong. The daughter began, “Well, the good news is that I didn’t hit the tree, or any people.” She started to cry: “But the neighbors are going to be mad that I

“High-strength families reported a large amount of humor among family members.”



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ruined their fence.” Dad could have become angry but responded with humor instead. He said, “Who knows? They may like the new gate in their fence, once we get our car out of it.”

Two adult sisters were devastated when their mother, aged 53, died after a long illness and hospitalization. But their aunt (their mother’s sister), after an especially bleak day of traveling and making funeral arrangements, began to tell stories about their mother, and the sisters remembered funny and sweet stories of their own. Soon they were all laughing and crying at the same time and their loss became more endurable.

After Art E. Berg was thrown from a car during a rollover just five weeks before his wedding date, his neck was broken and he was left a quadriplegic at age 21. Although his body no longer serves him as it once did, Art is far from being helpless and depressed. His life is full of service and activity. Among the other things that got him through, Art says peace came from learning to laugh again, particularly with his family. He writes, “I am not sure I would have survived the emotional trauma of my injuries and the complications of my new life if it hadn’t

been for the wit, chuckles, laughs, and good-natured humor of my wife and family.”⁹

Humor At Home

As humorous situations occur in our homes, we need to take a moment to notice and enjoy and record them. Researchers who studied humor in families concluded:

We found that high-strength families reported a large amount of humor among family members, and low-strength families reported fewer incidences of humor in their families. This suggests to us that it is important to use humor in building family strengths.¹⁰

Keeping a family journal of humorous moments will keep us alert to the humor in our lives and may become an important family tradition. Parents and children can enjoy memories of a child’s inevitable laughable moments. For example, one mother made a note in the family humor journal when the daughter said, “I think we should all make get-well cards for McKenzie. She’s in the hospital because her independence burst.”

One family held meetings once a week where the parents and children could work out any scheduling

needs. Each one took a turn announcing play rehearsals, soccer games, special projects, plans with friends, and so on. Dad announced that he would have to leave town on business for a couple of days, for the second week in a row. The family was astonished when 3-year-old Paul threw himself to the floor and, waving his arms and legs, cried, “Oh, the horror! The HORROR!” Dad chuckled (and thought he might limit his business travel) as he made a record in the family humor journal later in the evening.

A family can enjoy reading humorous books, comic strips, and poetry aloud together. Children’s picture books, such as *Cloudy With a Chance of Meatballs*¹¹ and *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales*,¹² quickly become favorites, along with classic characters such as Mary Poppins,¹³ Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle,¹⁴ and Amelia Bedelia.¹⁵ Children’s librarians at the public library and elementary school can recommend additional stories as well as books of poetry. Many children (and adults) have enjoyed *Where the Sidewalk Ends*,¹⁶ as well as *No More Homework! No More Tests!*¹⁷ and *Never Take a Pig to Lunch*.¹⁸ Many families have favorite films, such as *The Emperor’s New Groove* (Disney, 2000), *It’s a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World* (United Artists, 1963), or *What About Bob?* (Touchstone Pictures, 1991), among many others. Sharing these resources can provide humor for the moment and become a source of family “in-jokes,” or “secrets,” the mention of which can set the whole family laughing and strengthen family ties.¹⁹

Families can share jokes and funny songs during long trips or an evening at home. Appropriate jokes may be found in *Highlights for Children*, *Reader’s Digest*, and *Boy’s Life* magazines. Children enjoy

creating their own riddles, original lyrics to well-known songs, and knock-knock jokes. There are, apparently, millions of reasons for the chicken to cross the road and millions of candidates for the honor of changing a light bulb. Funny tapes like the *Prairie Home Companion Pretty Good Joke Tape* (HighBridge/Minnesota Public Radio, 1996–1999), and suitable, humorous monologues by Bill Cosby and others are available at most libraries and stores.

Some of the best sources of humor at home are family tales. There are good laughs to be had as parents and grandparents remember stories from their childhoods. Children may see Grandpa and Grandma in a new light when they learn that Grandpa sneaked away from a nearby army base just before shipping out to fight in World War II to propose to Grandma. They'll also love the story of the summer day

when Grandmother was at work and Mom and Aunt Rose had a cookie-dough fight and a water fight (in the house) and all the trouble they were in when Grandmother came home.

When parents help children notice, read, write, collect, and share humor in their lives they are helping them keep a good perspective, relate with others, and cope with problems. Sherwood claims that, at first glance, laughter and the humor that inspires it may seem incompatible with the serious business of our lives. After all, helping people learn and improve is serious business. Still, as humor finds a place in our lives it can build bridges between family members and encourage the flexibility and creativity that enable us to do our best work.²⁰

So go ahead and develop that sense of humor. It's important for a healthy family and a happy home!



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A family can enjoy reading humorous books.

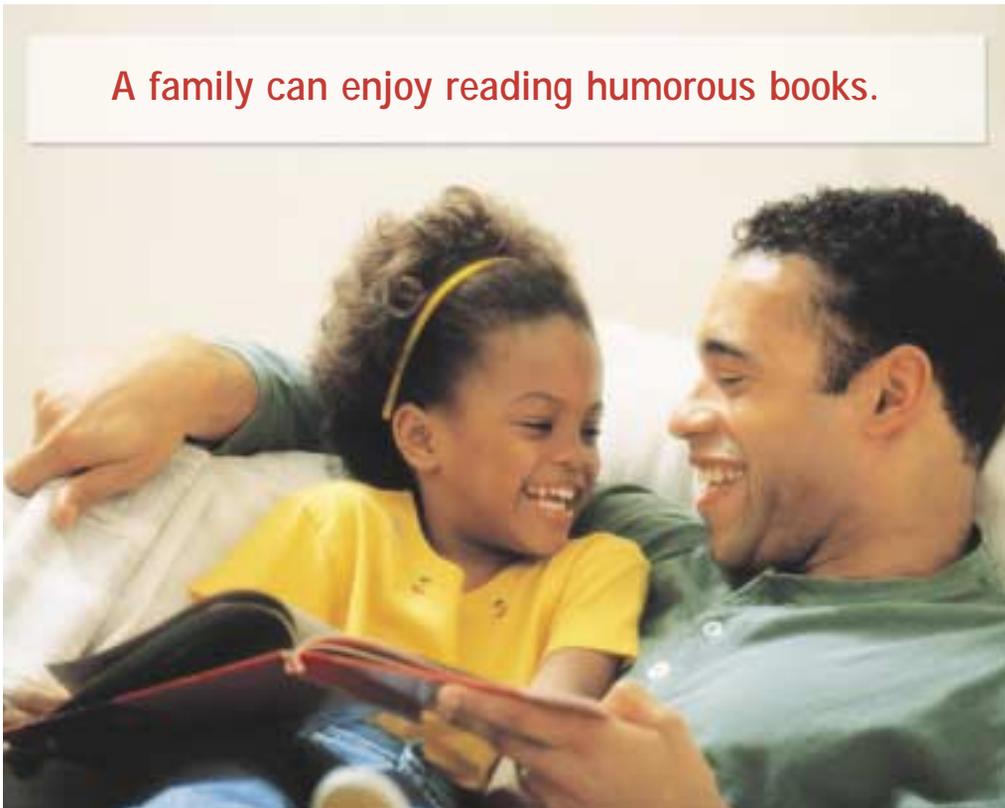


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