One Sunday in a church meeting, my 4-year-old son was making a major disturbance. He had a bad case of the wiggles.

After several minutes of trying to calm him down, I abruptly picked him up, tucked him under my arm like a sack of potatoes, and marched down the aisle to the nearest exit. With his head bobbing, my son looked up at me and said, “Hey Dad, where we goin’?” He had no idea he was in trouble. My anger was defused instantly. Through the years, I have learned that one’s ability to laugh at everyday family calamities keeps life in perspective.

If we learn to laugh and play more with our families, we will not only feel better but so will they. Studies show that humor and laughter help people live longer, happier lives, be more creative and productive, and have more energy with less physical discomfort.\(^1\) Laughter reduces stress, fear, intimidation, embarrassment, and anger.\(^2\) Laughter has extraordinary healing power.\(^3\) When a person laughs, blood pressure decreases, heart rate and respiration increase, the body releases endorphins, and depression declines.\(^4\) After the laughter subsides, that good feeling has a lasting effect, even until the next day.\(^5\) There aren’t many medicines that will do that. It’s like “a spoon full of sugar helps the medicine go down.”\(^6\)

Children laugh four hundred times a day, while adults laugh fifteen.\(^7\) Why the gap? Did we lose something? Have we forgotten the way we used to be? Why is it that children seem to cope with life’s oddities better than adults? Perhaps it’s simply because they laugh. As we grow older, we get way too serious. Watch children play. They don’t need things. Everything is fun to them. They’re spontaneous. It’s only when we become adults that we start to get boring. Humor is the way we see things; it’s the way we think; it’s an attitude, not an event. Perhaps the key lies in becoming more childlike.

When I return home from work each day, I conscientiously think about what I’m going to say the moment I enter the door. I usually shout some outlandish remark to get my family’s attention. A typical loud entrance for me is “Hello, all you lucky people; I’m home!” Visitors to our home may have a few questions, but for the rest of the family, they know that it’s just Dad. I find that it helps set the tone for a fun home and instantly puts everyone at ease. I’m sure that it occasionally embarrasses my children, but the good outweighs the bad. It also helps me to make the change mentally from work to...
home. I do not want to come home tired, ornery, or dull. Most of us can make ourselves be our best at work. Doesn’t our family deserve at least that? “A little craziness once in a while perpetuates sanity.”

I think laughter is more important than a family vacation, because it’s always available, it can happen every day, and it’s free. Happy families are those living together every day and making the most of it. Laughter is like getting away without going away. It gives you a break. “A merry heart doeth good like a medicine” (Proverbs 17:22).

Play and laughter are closely related. Does this mean we should play with our kids? Absolutely. Laugh more, play more, swing out of familiar places. Play puts everyone on an equal footing, first by the nature of play itself and second because you can change the rules to fit the situation. Play brings families together. It is a subtle tool for interaction and talk. It builds confidence. Inhibitions are minimized while our real personalities emerge.

Years ago, I saw through my kitchen window a man playing with his children in a park sand pile. He was right down there on his hands and knees in the sand, building a small imaginary town with streets, cars, trucks, trees, houses, stores, and schools with his children. I watched him push a wooden block like a bulldozer, pretending to build a road and including the sound effects. I remember thinking, now there is an example of a great dad who knows how to play with his children. He was seen by every passing car. Was he embarrassed or ruffled? Not at all. Such enthusiasm for play encourages growth in children, relieves stress, and builds friendships among family members. Laughter and play become a calming influence in the home environment.

Laughter also improves communication and builds relationships because everyone laughs in the same language. Your children will remember your humor much longer than they will the things you buy them. Children are more receptive when they are having fun. Laughter helps us remember. Humor creates an unforgettable learning experience because it makes us laugh and feel good. And we remember what we feel.

Early in our marriage, my wife said, “Let’s make our home more fun for our kids than any other place our children could be.” Laughter and play are the best ingredients for that. We cannot duplicate Disneyland, nor should we. A family firmly rooted in love and wholesome recreation is far better than any commercial entertainment. In other words, home should be a fun place to hang out with family and friends.

Laughter builds friendships. Families that laugh together are inseparable. Laughter makes us approachable. It removes barriers. If you want to talk to your children about a serious matter, try a lighter approach. Family meetings and interviews would be far more effective if play, laughter, and refreshments were added.

Humor, used with sensitivity, can unite spouses. While I was serving as a bishop of a singles ward, one engaged couple asked me if they could have their wedding reception at our house. I quickly replied, “Of course you can.” I forgot to tell my wife. When my wife received the wedding invitation a few days before the big event, she happened to notice that the reception location was the same address as our house. When I got
home from work, she asked me if I had forgotten to tell her something important. After considerable thought, I said, “Not that I can think of.” “Are we having a wedding reception at our house?” she asked. I knew I was in trouble. “Oooooh, you mean ‘that’ reception,” I replied. I quickly volunteered to prepare our home for the reception—under her able direction, of course. We laughed together and went to work.

Humor disarms most family tension. Once while talking to my children about some family issues, one of our teenagers crouched over, wrinkled up his nose, and, with a tone of disapproval, blurted out some outlandish comment about what I had said. I found myself taken aback by his behavior when suddenly I crouched over, wrinkled up my nose, and, with a tone of disapproval, blurted out some outlandish reply, perfectly mimicking his behavior. The entire family burst into laughter and the tension vanished.

Of course humor will vary depending on our personalities. While some people seem to have a natural sense of humor, most of us must work to develop it. Some of us will tell stories, while others will share jokes and one-liners. Still others will use art, humorous clippings, and e-mails. For some of us, smiling will be our humor. Smiling is something we can all do, and smiling leads to laughter. As Sister Marjorie Pay Hinckley said, “The only way to get through life is to laugh your way through it. You either have to laugh or cry. I prefer to laugh. Crying gives me a headache.”

There are some cautions with humor. Family members must be careful not to offend, intimidate, or embarrass. We should laugh with rather than at someone. No one likes to be teased. No one likes to be the brunt of a joke. By learning to laugh at ourselves, we usually become safe from offending. As Sister Hinckley said about her husband, “he didn’t take himself very seriously and was often the first to poke fun at his own quirks.”

Most family calamities, given enough time, provide humor. Like the time I took my misbehaving 2-year-old son, Tyler, home from sacrament meeting. After turning on cartoons for my son, I fell asleep. I didn’t wake up when my 5-year-old showed up to take Tyler back to Primary. Trouble was, Tyler had stripped down to moon boots and training pants and picked up his popgun rifle on the way out the door. Sacrament meeting was not quite over, and the bishop was pouring out his soul to the congregation. It was whisper quiet when Tyler, wearing moon boots and training pants, marched up the aisle with his rifle, took aim, and shot the bishop. It woke up the congregation. Of course, it wasn’t funny then. Time helps humor emerge gradually. The trick is finding the humor in the event now.

So does this mean we go around laughing all the time? Of course not. But we certainly could laugh a lot more.

Gary K. Palmer, Ed.D., is a teaching professor in the Department of Recreation Management and Youth Leadership at BYU. He and his wife, Shirley, have six children and fourteen grandchildren.

ADDITIONAL READING
Jack Canfield (1998), Chicken Soup for the Kid’s Soul: 101 Stories of Courage, Hope and Laughter (Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications).
George D. Durrant (1976), Love at Home, Starring Father (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft).
Bruce Lansky (1999), Laugh Twice and Call Me in the Morning (Minnetonka, MN: Meadowbrook Press).

NOTES
2 W. S. Hamerslough (1995, June 22), Laughter and wellness; paper presented to the Southwest District of AAHPERD; Kahuku, Hawaii.
5 K. S. Peterson (1996, October 31), A chuckle a day does indeed help keep ills at bay, USA Today, 10D; Berk (1989), 390-396.
6 R. M. Sherman and R. B. Sherman (1964), Just a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down, Mary Poppins (Walt Disney Pictures).
7 Robinson (1990).
8 Anonymous.
9 Quoted in Virginia H. Pearce, ed. (1999), Glimpses into the Life and Heart of Marjorie Pay Hinckley (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book), 107.