

## Humor in Teaching

Add some to your day!

It's been said, "Seven days without a good laugh makes one weak." That's a play on words, but in truth it's an understatement. We need to laugh daily, and if there's one thing that can instantly improve students' receptivity, it's a good joke. One of the most frequent comments we hear from students who attend our workshops or watch our video seminars—even those most resistant to doing a writing class—is: "He's funny. I like this." This is no accident. A good chuckle and a smile actually produce a physiological change in the brain, and when students are smiling, they learn better.

In the middle of the school year it's easy to get bogged down. It's winter. It's cold. Some parents even start to think, "Maybe I should put my kids in school...where's the joy we had last September?" Teachers start to count the months until May; kids get antsy and may spend more energy trying to avoid schoolwork than doing it. When this happens, it's time to break out the joke book. It's time to write some silly stories and lighten up.

Although some people seem to be naturally humorous, it is possible to develop your "inner comedian" and inject some lightheartedness into your teaching. School shouldn't be non-stop seriousness, and we who mentor our children must keep in mind their natural desire to laugh, to smile. Maria Montessori said that the work of a child is play, and yet we so often forget their nature and want them to "get serious" about school. Of course discipline and concentration are important, but it's a virtual guarantee that if they have frequent giggles and smiles in their environment, their focus will improve. Furthermore, if we can learn to laugh at our difficulties, it helps distance us from those pains and frustrations.

While many scientific articles have been written about the benefits of humor for health and wellbeing, few teachers consider it essential in the learning environment, and conscious instruction in humor is notably missing from most, if not all, teacher training programs. So let's take a moment to consider ways to start the day with a laugh and continue to smile often, thereby improving attitudes, motivation, and performance. Some of the elements of humor, the things that can make us laugh include:

1) Misunderstandings: Often we chuckle at children's statements when they demonstrate an understandable but absurd linguistic misunderstanding, for example:

*A young child, confused during Sunday school asked, "Which Virgin was the mother of Jesus: the Virgin Mary or the King James Virgin?"*

2) Impossible absurdities – Things that create such an impossible image, the craziness of it cracks you up:

*My friend had a pet elephant for a while, but then it got lost. It's somewhere in his apartment.*

3) Stating the obvious unexpectedly: Chesterton's book *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* begins with the line, "The human race, to which so many of my readers belong, has been playing at children's games from the beginning..."

4) Unpredictable actions & physical humor: My granddaughter will happily eat all the vegetables on her plate if she knows I will fall off my chair in “shock” when she succeeds. She laughs at the fall, and for her, that one minute of glee is worth the chore of eating the carrots and broccoli.

5) Hyperbole & Exaggeration: Jack Prelutsky’s very popular poems almost all use this form of humor:

*Homework! Oh, homework! I hate you! You stink!*

*I wish I could wash you away in the sink.*

*If only a bomb would explode you to bits.*

*Homework! Oh, homework! You’re giving me fits.*

*I’d rather take baths with a man-eating shark,*

*Or wrestle a lion alone in the dark,*

*Eat spinach and liver, pet ten porcupines,*

*Than tackle the homework my teacher assigns.*

6) Understatement

*“They had heat-seeking missiles and grenades—you know, stuff that can really ruin your day.”*

7) Plays on words & Double Entendre—words or phrases with multiple meanings:

- *Notice from the Electric Company: “We would be delighted if you send in your payment. However, if you don’t, you will be.”*

- *Sign at an Optometrist’s Office: “If you don’t see what you’re looking for, you’ve come to the right place.”*

- *Why did the egg cross the road? It had the inclination...*

9) Common Sense or the Painful Truth:

*“Men occasionally stumble over the truth, but most of them pick themselves up and hurry off as if nothing had happened.”*

*-- Winston Churchill*

*“Never let schooling interfere with your education.”*

*-- Mark Twain*

10) Derogation & Caricature: This, the lowest form of humor, is characterized by blonde jokes, lawyer jokes, etc. The only really acceptable form of this is self-deprecation.

To train your self in humor, read funny things. Get a good joke book and learn a few to tell to your family, even practicing them with a bit of dramatic flair. As you memorize some good jokes, you begin to internalize a sense of what makes people chuckle. Laugh out loud (but not at your own jokes). On your own, analyze what makes things funny, and try to think up a similar situation, poem, misunderstanding, or pun. The best humor generally combines more than one element, and when you understand them, you will find opportunities to apply them in daily life. You can become more humorous with practice; it really is possible. And if you do, your students will be grateful—and they'll be attentive, mostly waiting for the next thing that gives them mirth.

Humor should be an essential part of an education. Garrison Keillor observed: "Jokes are democratic. Telling one right has nothing to do with having money or being educated. It's a knack, like hammering a nail straight. Anyone can learn it, and it's useful in all sorts of situations. You can go your whole life and not need trigonometry or physics for a minute, but the ability to tell a joke is always handy." Be sure to include humor in your curriculum—for your benefit, and theirs. ;)