

# CHAPTER 5

## CHILDREN'S HUMOR



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**Editor's Note:** This chapter was written by Jennifer Cunningham, long-time investigator of language development, humor, and early schooling.

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**Defining Humor****What's So Funny?****Humor in Infancy and the Toddler Years****Humor in Early Childhood****The Elementary School Years: Integrating Social and Cognitive humor**

Some might not include humor as a type of play. We do so for three reasons: First, humor is enjoyable—in the ways that most play is enjoyable. Second, humor constructs an unreal world—much as make-believe play does. Third, the enjoyable, unreal world of humor often performs the same cognitive, social, and emotional functions as play in general. Even the simple scatological “jokes” of a preschooler (“You poo in your pants!”) are just instances of enjoyable pretense that observe the rules for ordering the real world by breaking them. Humor, then, is play, and humor’s development throughout childhood affords us a recapitulation of all the general issues about play’s development. We will, then, trace humor’s development both as a way of understanding yet another medium in which children play and as a way of recapping main themes about play’s development throughout childhood.

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 ● DEFINING HUMOR
 

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“You had to be there . . . Well, it was funny at the time . . . I don’t know what came over us . . . We laughed ourselves silly.”

Humor is not easily defined. What makes a person laugh depends on many factors, including personality, culture, and past experience. Think for a moment of things that make you laugh. A partial list might include:

- *The Simpsons*
- Puns and wordplay
- Silly Internet sites, such as animated dancing hamsters or singing cows
- The way your dog sneezes
- Nature film footage of monkeys cavorting in the jungle

Your list of funny things probably includes a wide range of jokes and situations, some of which are highly idiosyncratic. It might be quite difficult to explain why certain items on your list are so amusing. Even a list of “typically”

or “traditionally” funny things probably contains a wide range of types and situations. Lists of slapstick humor might include anything from *The Three Stooges* and *Three's Company* to the more recent equivalents of Ben Stiller in *Zoolander* or *Meet the Parents*. All of these feature physical comedy from the mundane to the outrageous—slipping on a marble, getting hit on the head, being kicked in the crotch, dangling from a rooftop. Other types of humor—such as jokes or riddles, character-driven humor, and mimicry of another person's voice and mannerisms—have their own quite extensive range of sub-types. The world of humor is indeed complex, and the different types of humor or, more precisely, humorous actions, which researchers often call (rather unhumorously) “humor events,” do not seem to have much in common other than that they elicit laughter. But why, exactly, are they all funny?

Our attempt to define “funniness” is complicated further when we consider that *all* humor is contextually dependent in one way or another. For each of our examples (a pratfall, a knock-knock joke, and an imitation or impression), we can easily imagine a context in which it would *not* be funny. What if Ben Stiller was actually seriously hurt in attempting a comic stunt? What if we'd heard the knock-knock joke several times before? What if we found the imitation to be hurtful, mean-spirited, or offensive? Furthermore, what if any of these jokes simply failed to “click” with our own sense of humor? Clearly, as adults, we can see that there is nothing inherently and always funny to all individuals in all situations. Thus, in attempting to understand children's humor development, we must examine how children arrive at intuitions about not only *what* is funny, but also *when* it is funny.

We see, then, that though humor can occur in isolation, it is, as is most play, a social phenomenon—a way of connecting with friends and a way of understanding the world around us. Our description of context must take into account not only the relatively simple situational rules for humor (e.g., It's not funny anymore if someone gets injured.), but also social variables: Are things as funny with strangers as with close friends? Acquaintances? Parents? Bosses? Do these variables effect whether something is humorous, or do they merely modulate our response to the humor?

These *insider-vs.-outsider* humor distinctions take on increasing influence during a child's social development, as his or her peer relationships become central to the child's self-definition. The trend is a familiar one: 4-year-old children frequently approach their preschool teachers with knock-knock jokes or funny stories, yet by middle school and high school, most students would not initiate these interactions. Indeed, it seems older children and teenagers frequently like to conceal from adults what they laugh about with their friends, as demonstrated by the typical “Teacher: ‘What's so funny?’ Student: ‘Nothing.’” exchange.

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As children grow, they begin to use humor not only for its intrinsic values but also for what it does for friendships and group bonds. Sometimes, the fact of sharing a secret or *in-joke* is more pleasurable than the joke itself. This realization might lead to many more realizations about how humor may be used to further social goals: joking to create solidarity and to relieve tension or conceal discomfort and avoid embarrassment. This growing awareness of social goals—of humor as a means to an end—is surely another key to humor development.

From childhood on, individuals vary tremendously in their responses to humorous stimuli. Indeed, as is the case with much of personal–social development, the developmental course may be looked upon as a journey from the universal to the idiosyncratic: As children play with each other and solidify friendships, they each develop their own unique style of humor, both in terms of what they find funny and in terms of how often they initiate humorous interactions. As a child progresses from shared laughter to in-jokes to a propensity to share joking mannerisms with friends, some basic individual differences are downplayed whereas others are amplified. In adulthood, our sense of humor becomes an integral part of the way we perceive our personality; as the saying goes, everyone thinks he or she has good taste and a sense of humor.

Thus, we may see children learning to use humor as working out three central questions: (a) “What is funny?”; (b) “When is it funny?”; and (c) “How is humor used in service of various social–emotional objectives?.” Yet, as we also begin to marvel at the complexity of why some things are funny, we can begin to appreciate how each child might arrive at very different answers to these questions.

### ● WHAT’S SO FUNNY?

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As we have seen by examining our own humor preferences, the question of what is funny can be extremely difficult to answer. Because humor involves the intersection of emotional, cognitive, and social dimensions of development, any theory that focuses on only one dimension provides an incomplete picture of how a child’s understanding of humor develops. Humor depends not only upon these three dimensions but also upon making connections among them and testing these connections. Dimensions and connections, then, make it difficult to categorize what all things humorous have in common.

However, if there is one way to categorize what all funny things have in common, the answer is deceptively simple: *Funny things are not serious*. As in the case of make-believe play, slapstick and jokes do not belong to the realm of the real world, and real-world rules do not apply. A humorous event

does not need to be assimilated into our knowledge about the real world: In the land of humor, the cartoon coyote can swallow dynamite, explode and come back the next day to try again to get the roadrunner. A clown who falls down the stairs may get cream pie in the face, but more serious consequences such as broken limbs or concussions never result. Verbal jokes, in which dogs walk into bars or rabbis and priests take camping trips together, also create an alternative universe that need not be plausible, let alone real.

Other types of humor, such as taboo violation (for example, bathroom humor, as when 4-year-olds repeat the words “pee-pee” and “poop”) also demonstrate this knowledge that things that are not okay in most situations are somehow safe to say when one is “only joking.” Thus, all the expectations of the “real world” are somehow violated, whether in the unexpected punch line of a joke, or in regards to the consequence of a controversial act (such as violence, or the use of a taboo word). In the words of humor researcher Thomas Veatch, “Humor is (emotional) pain that does not hurt” (1998, p. 164).

This unreality is at the center of many theories of humor and of play in general. For some theorists, the pleasure of humor is in the cognitive realization that the situation is unreal and incongruous with the “rules” of the world as we know it. As children begin to use their perceptions and past experiences to formulate expectations about situations and events, they often react with laughter and surprise when these expectations are violated.

However, though humor appreciation is certainly dependent upon cognitive abilities, the pleasure we derive from humor need not be cognitive; it may be more emotional or physiological.

As an example of a theory of humor focused on emotion, Freud (1905) maintained that laughter was a means of releasing excessive amounts of *psychic energy*, energy that often results in rechanneling sexual and aggressive impulses into an acceptable, indirect form of expression. For Freud, the appeal of slapstick, *Three-Stooges* style, may lie not in the “unreality” of the situation per se, but rather in the pleasure of seeing someone else act out our own aggressive impulses (pokes in the eye, smacks on the head) free from real-world repercussions.

However, like most forms of play, humor necessarily involves the intersection of the emotional, cognitive, and social dimensions of development. Any theory of humor's development that focuses on only one dimension would provide an incomplete picture of how a child's understanding, appreciation, and use of humor change over time. Therefore, one of the best ways to understand humor is to examine “snapshots” across childhood, snapshots not only of how a child *comprehends* humor, but also of how she learns to *use* humor as a playful way to facilitate social interaction and to test beliefs about the world.

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**Photo 5.2** Infants laugh most at spontaneous, unpredictable stimuli.

## ● HUMOR IN INFANCY AND THE TODDLER YEARS

The pleasure of realizing that something that might otherwise be considered threatening and scary is in fact fun and safe seems to be a key to early humor. Indeed, for very small children, the boundary between humor and fear is often fragile. Infants may laugh at peek-a-boo or other *surprise games*, but an unexpected noise such as clapping may result in either laughing or crying.

A child's first laughter often emerges between the fourth and fifth months, well before she exhibits capacity for symbolic play. Infants' early laughter is usually a response to perceptual stimuli such as whispering, blowing on the infant's hair, or "peek-a-boo." Pleasurable sensations, such as blowing, can elicit laughs over and over again, as can peek-a-boo (see chapter 2).



However, even in these early interactions, laughter expresses more than just pleasure: Babies as young as 7 months have been noted to laugh more at spontaneous, unpredictable stimuli than at stimuli that are repeated or expected, even if those stimuli have produced laughter in the past. Even a game of peek-a-boo, which may seem to adults to be the same over and over again, is exciting to infants because of its spontaneity: When researchers attempt to standardize peek-a-boo games for experimental purposes (eyes covered for 3 seconds and then opened, repeated five times), they often find that infants laugh much less than they would in an uncontrolled, naturalistic context (Sroufe & Wunsch, 1972). Surprise, then, is a needed ingredient for there to be humor—even for the very, very young.

This preference for novel events suggests that some of the pleasure of experiencing humorous events stems from children not knowing what to expect. Children's first attempts at humor production reflect this understanding that unexpectedness elicits laughter. Often, the first "jokes" that a toddler makes are nonverbal attempts to create *incongruity*, such as placing a toy in her cereal or in her shoe or on her head.

Of course, in other contexts, unpredictable and unpredicted situations might produce the opposite: anxiety instead of pleasure. From very early on, individual differences in temperament and personality can determine whether an experience is pleasurable or anxiety provoking. A mother of twins reported that although one of her daughters was clearly afraid of the family's dog, her other child loved to bat her own face with the dog's puffy tail, laughing uproariously at the interaction.

This fluctuation between laughter and distress remains common throughout early childhood. It may be familiar to anyone who has witnessed 2- and 3-year-olds at play. In early childhood, the physicality in most play can elicit laughter even as it has elements of danger. Toddlers and preschoolers tend to laugh much more during exciting or dangerous running games than during more reserved imaginative or constructive play. Children playing "chase" may laugh exuberantly until the game becomes too real, at which point they may suddenly burst into tears. In some instances, the laughter-arousal-anxiety cycle may be repeated several times. This was true of one preschooler named Max, who would initiate a game of chase in which he and five friends ran around the play yard, shrieking with laughter. When it came to be Max's turn to be chased, his laughter built up to hysteria and then quickly changed to tears. Max would then run to his teacher for comfort. Once comforted, he would quickly jump back into the game.

The psychologist Mary Rothbart (1973) noted this phenomenon in what she termed the *arousal-safety model of humor*; the child experiences "fight-or-flight" physiological arousal (increased heart rate, blood flow, and sensory

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awareness) in a context that he or she knows to be non-threatening. Long before children can appreciate riddles, knock-knock jokes, or other explicitly cognitive humor, early humor and laughter result from sensory stimuli at the appropriate level—exciting but not overwhelming. One might also see this situation as a cousin of Freud's impulse-channeling theory: In this context, laughter acts as a safety valve to release otherwise distressing levels of social arousal.

As children mature, they increase the strategies they have available to process intense feelings. The laughter and anxiety responses become increasingly differentiated from each other. However, the inclination toward laughter during tense situations remains present in most adults, who might be unable to prevent laughing nervously even in situations where they know laughter is inappropriate. The inclination to laugh during an overwhelming or tense situation might perhaps be a vestige of the earliest use of humor—as an outlet for intense emotions. This most primal need for laughter remains even as the humor response changes and evolves. Indeed, as children's cognitive and social capacities become more developed, this outlet may take on increased importance.

Children learn to laugh not only when they themselves experience arousing stimuli but also when they see others in similar situations. Likewise, the types of stimuli giving rise to laughter may also begin to expand exponentially. For example, one may laugh in response not only to low levels of fear or surprise, but also to higher-level emotions such as embarrassment (either experienced or witnessed). The inclination to laugh when one empathizes with someone else's embarrassing situation is often exploited in televised entertainment, both for children and for adults, as the enduring popularity of television shows such as *Candid Camera*, *America's Funniest Home Videos*, and MTV's *Punk'd* attest. However, as we shall see in the next section, though the conception of humor as a prima outlet for complex and conflicting emotional reactions never disappears with development, humor becomes reorganized around two specific dimensions—the social and the cognitive.

## ● HUMOR IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

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There are few things in this world that are as fascinating, endearing, and maddening as a 4- or 5-year-old comedian. The child usually begins with an opener such as "Let me tell you a joke!," but that is the first and last predictable utterance. The typical "joke" might be a simple statement such as, "My peanut butter sandwich can talk!" or an elaborate story such as, "One



day, a clown was walking in the woods, and he met a Pikachu, and the Pikachu said, come with me to visit my mother, and they went to the cabin, and the mother came out, and she was a spaghetti elephant!" The joke may meander from character to character, from silly thing to silly thing, but no one, least of all the child, will know where the joke begins or ends.

### A Preschooler's Meaning of Getting the Joke

One little boy, Abe, frequently volunteered to share a joke or a funny story, using his active imagination to come up with several characters and an elaborate plot, only to lose track of the story and announce he was starting over. Several of his favorite jokes took a full 5 minutes to tell. Although his teachers would often exchange quizzical looks with one another, his classmates clearly "got" the jokes. More precisely, they got what is important about the jokes—Abe had clearly figured out that, even in the adult world, a joke is frequently less about humor than about creating a context in which one can initiate social interactions, increase feelings of camaraderie and solidarity, and make others pay attention to you.

As children work to develop their own social identity, they begin to devote considerable time and energy toward establishing and maintaining friendships with peers. Educators and psychologists often regard this as the central task of the early childhood years. Not surprisingly, then, children's conscious *initiation* of humor events increases dramatically during early childhood (Masten, 1986; McGhee, 1980).

As children age and have more opportunities to interact with and identify with peers, the frequency and sophistication of their attempts at being humorous increase, as does their preference for sharing jokes with friends. One observational study of 86 3-, 4-, and 5-year-old children found that the frequency of children's laughter increased as they grew older (Bainum, Lounsbury, & Pollio, 1984). In addition, laughing and smiling behaviors tended to become more differentiated over time, with smiling used as a more general-purpose response to incidental pleasurable events, and laughter used chiefly to accompany intentionally-produced stimuli such as joke telling, silliness, or clowning. The only decrease observed in this study was in the older children's likelihood of laughing when they were alone. In other words, 4- and 5-year old children assimilate the concept of *audience* into their working definition of humor. Things become less funny when alone

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and more funny when others are around to take part. Thus, children are progressing toward utilizing humor for what Foote and Chapman (1976) have called a sophisticated form of social communication at the group level.

Sharing laughter together often serves as the precursor to other forms of social intimacy. Laughter becomes one of the earliest and most enduring tools for getting to know one another. The humor context is so powerful that it breaks down even difficult social barriers, as the following example illustrates:

### Knock-Knock Jokes to Enter a Play Group

In one early childhood classroom, a reserved little girl, Lucy, who spoke limited English, began sharing silly knock-knock jokes. She was so empowered by her ability to share that she began to initiate knock-knock jokes throughout the day. For the remainder of the school year (nearly 5 months) Lucy entered playgroups in the doll corner or block area by approaching her friends with “knock-knock!” to elicit the familiar “Who’s there?”

Although the intent to establish and reinforce social bonds develops as a primary motive for humor interactions, there is some evidence that the underlying “primal” arousal-release urge continues to play a role. For example, though the instances of *incidental* laughter (such as laughter in response to chasing) decrease over time, individual differences in children’s humor initiation correlate positively to frequency of aggressive behavior (McGhee & Lloyd, 1982). The fact that how aggressive a Kindergartener is might be moderately predictive of how often she or he initiates humor could perhaps be interpreted as evidence that some of the observed humor might be instances of rechanneling aggression into socially acceptable humor.

Alternatively, the positive correlation between humor and aggression could be due to the fact that in preschool, most social children show high levels of all activities, both positive and negative. Prosocial behavior and aggression don’t start to show a negative correlation until the child is older.

Yet, McGhee notes that this trend linking humor and aggression often continues throughout the elementary school years, perhaps because aggression, like humor, is a way for children to control people and situations. McGhee notes that “by consistently clowning or joking, a child remains in charge of the flow of conversation or interaction . . . by initiating a joke or comic behavior, the humorist puts others in a situation where they are obliged to react in some way” (1980, p. 233). The scatological stage of humor



**Photo 5.3** Elementary-school-age girls laughing and dancing in this photo are integrating social and cognitive humor.

development, which often makes its first appearance around a preschool lunch table, may also be interpreted as evidence of this deepening understanding, as children discover that words such as “peepee” and “poop” elicit strong reactions from adults and other children.

As children learn about the social world that humor creates, they learn to set humor apart from its literal context. For example, intentionally mislabeling the names of objects or people such as by calling a cow a dog or a car a bus can be humorous. Recall 4-year-old Abe’s silly stories. Although they may not quite correspond to our adult conception of a joke, Abe clearly determined that unreality is central to humor: Why else would he have chosen a spaghetti elephant as a main character, rather than a fireman or his sister Jessica? For many young humorists, then, the sillier the joke is the better. This is why Abe added a clown *and* a Pikachu to the spaghetti elephant; the more silliness, the better the humor.

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Abe's stories also illustrate another vital cognitive prerequisite to humor development during the preschool years, what psychologists call *theory of mind* or the realization that beliefs do not necessarily match reality and that different people hold different beliefs about the world (Perner, 1991). As mentioned in the introduction, children begin to develop a theory of mind early on; for instance, 3-year-olds demonstrate an ability to distinguish among the mental-state verbs *think*, *guess*, and *know*. Their subsequent mastery of this ability becomes a prerequisite for adult comprehension of verbal jokes involving characters who have ideas that are contrary to reality as the listener understands reality. Theory of mind (or the relative absence of it) also explains why young children sometimes have difficulty understanding adults' jokes, as when one 4-year-old named Gus failed to understand his parents' joke about his actually having alien parents who dropped him off during a visit from outer space.

### ● THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL YEARS: INTEGRATING SOCIAL AND COGNITIVE HUMOR

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Listening to elementary school-aged children tell jokes is a markedly different experience than hearing the elaborate impromptu stories created by preschoolers. The jokes of older children are far more likely to make sense to us; in fact, we are very likely to have heard them before, and maybe even told them ourselves 10, 20, or 50 years ago. A casual glance through *1001 Super Silly Halloween Jokes* or any other popular joke book aimed at 6- to 10-year-olds is enough to reveal that many of the same chestnuts we recall from our youth are alive and well.

The fondness many 6-, 7-, and 8-year-olds have for memorized jokes and riddles may be seen as a direct result of cognitive development beyond the preschool years. Following Piaget, Paul McGhee (2002) proposed a comprehensive stage-model of children's humor, with the last stage being in the elementary school years. As we have seen, a child progresses from being able to perceive incongruity in infancy (stage 1) to producing incongruity nonverbally in toddlerhood (stage 2), to producing incongruity verbally in early childhood (stage 3). Also as we have seen, incongruity in early childhood often means being silly. In the elementary school years, the silly quality of humor gradually gives way as children see humor as involving more than what is nonsensical. By stage 4, the final stage in McGhee's model, the "mature" humorist begins to prefer humor that presents not only an incongruity but also a *resolution* to the incongruity. This shift is evident in the following exchange, where the humor clearly functions on two distinct levels:

Knock-knock.  
 Who's there?  
 Potato chip.  
 Potato chip who?  
 Potato chip you!

(Liza, 4, to Sam, 7)

Knock-knock.  
 Who's there?  
 Olive.  
 Olive who?  
 Olive you! (I love you!)

(Sam, 7, to Liza, 4)

For Liza, these knock-knock jokes are funny because of the incongruity they present: In reality, an olive or a potato chip are equally unlikely to knock on a door, so the two scenarios are equally amusing. However, Sam recognizes that the second joke is funnier than the first because the absurd image gets resolved into a logical conclusion by reparsing "Olive" as "I love."

#### *Stages of Humor Development*

***Taking a cue from Piaget's cognitive stages, leading humor researcher Paul McGhee, first proposed a comprehensive stage-model of children's humor in 1979. This model, last revised in 2002, maps the type of humor the child is likely fascinated with to underlying changes in her ability to perceive and make sense of her world.***

**Stage 0: Laughter Without Humor.** McGhee dubs this pre-humor stage "stage 0," although children may exhibit smiling and laughter.

**Stage 1: Laughter at the Attachment Figure.** In this stage, the child demonstrates an increasing awareness of her interpersonal surroundings and participates in social humor with a parent or other attachment figure through games such as peek-a-boo.

**Stage 2: Treating an Object as a Different Object.** At stage 2, the child begins producing "jokes" nonverbally by performing incongruous actions such as putting her bowl on her head as a hat or pretending to talk into her shoe.

**Stage 3: Misnaming Objects or Actions.** Once the child's vocabulary hits a critical point, she can extend her incongruity humor to misnaming objects or actions. McGhee notes that children at this stage often enjoy calling things by their opposite name—cold as hot, boy as girl.

*(Continued)*

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(Continued)

**Stage 4: Playing With Words.** As the child's verbal competence grows, she is less dependent on objects as the source of humor. She may experiment with rhyming words, made-up silly words, and other humorous play that does not directly link to concrete objects within her reach.

**Stage 5: Riddles and Jokes.** As the child develops, she begins to understand that humor has a meaning—that jokes must resolve from something absurd into something that makes cognitive sense. She often starts memorizing riddles and jokes and using them as a means of initiating social interactions with peers and adults.

Several experiments have demonstrated this developmental shift by comparing children's responses to "original" jokes with versions lacking either the incongruity or the resolution (see the next table). They found that preoperational children (ages 6 and below), though rejecting the incongruity-removed version as "not funny at all," did not rate the resolution-removed joke as significantly less funny than the original. Yet older children overwhelmingly preferred the original joke to alternate versions that did not contain a word or phrase with a dual meaning. This developmental change is consistent with the Piagetian model of cognitive development, in which the concrete operational stage is marked by a child's newfound ability to consider different aspects of a situation at once—in this case, two possible meanings for a word or phrase.

<i>Original Joke</i>	<i>Resolution-Removed Version</i>	<i>Incongruity-Removed Version</i>
Call me a cab. You're a cab.	Call a cab for me. You're a cab.	Call me a cab. Yes ma'am.
I saw a man-eating shark in the aquarium. That's nothing. I saw a man eating tuna in the restaurant.	I saw a ferocious shark in the aquarium. That's nothing. I saw a man eating tuna in the restaurant.	I saw a man-eating shark in the aquarium. That's nothing. I saw an octopus.

Source: Partial sample from Shultz & Horibe (1974)

As cognitive abilities increase, children find pleasure in humor not only for its incongruity, its novelty, and the social connectedness it creates, but also, and



perhaps mostly, for the challenge it presents. In one experiment, elementary school children asked to rate the funniness level of cartoons consistently found the cognitively challenging jokes to be funnier. Furthermore, research has suggested that among 8- to 14-year-olds, there is a significant correlation between measured IQ and both humor appreciation and humor production. No such correlation exists for either younger children or teens (Masten, 1986).

But why this interest in humor involving cognitive mastery? Some researchers (Berlyn, 1972; Masden, 1986)<sup>1</sup> believe that the dilemmas that riddles and jokes pose to their elementary school-aged listener create a cognitive tension that can result in a physiological response similar to the more sensory-oriented arousal of toddlerhood and early childhood. As an older child struggles to resolve a humorous dilemma into her logically consistent worldview, this *intellectual arousal* is heightened if the situation is especially difficult or complex. If the older child does not have to perform cognitively rigorous “work” to understand the joke (for instance, if she has heard the joke before or can guess the punch line), then she will perceive it as less humorous.

This last observation seems to contradict the observation that a 7-year-old child armed with a copy of *1001 Super Silly Halloween Jokes* may find its jokes and riddles hilarious even after many repeated readings. A parent, teacher, carpool driver, or other captive audience may hear “*Where did the ghost get her hair done? At the boo-ty parlor!*” countless times before its teller tires. However, novel listeners are always approached with great zeal, and the teller’s delight may be mostly about a new audience getting his or her old jokes than it is about cognitive mastery and tension.

In this way, the special social context of humor is essentially unchanged throughout childhood. Most typically, children view humor as an *act*, either deliberate silliness or a memorized joke, an act performed by or for peers, an act that reinforces connection through shared laughter.

As school-aged children develop the cognitive capacity to appreciate humor more fully, some of the subtler aspects of the social elements of humor appreciation begin to emerge as well. Unlike preschool children, school-aged children demonstrate the adult-like behavior of *modulating* their humor behavior to depend on social context.

As children mature, they become more likely to look at or consult a peer when asked to judge whether something is funny. Although we all seem to laugh more in the presence of others than we would if we were alone, as we get older we adjust our reactions to more closely match those of our friends.

By the time children reach preadolescence (ages 9–12), this combination of progressively more important social constraints on humor reaction and an increased emphasis on comprehension or “getting” the joke often converge in the form of a well-known middle-school phenomenon: the *inside joke*.



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As humor increases the social connectedness among its participants, it highlights the differences among those who share in the understanding and those who do not. Rather than the central theme being a cognitive one, humor starts to transition to a more naturalistic way of looking at common experiences. Observational jokes, such as secret nicknames for people, are examples of this type of humor. Only a certain group knows why something is funny, and they are less likely to share it with others. Here is where we find the first occurrences of *metahumor*—joking about joking, a precursor of adolescent humor.

### Charlie the Tuna

As a gaggle of sixth grade girls gather at their lockers at afternoon dismissal time, they compare notes about the day's events.

One girl asks, "Do you have any homework?"

"Yeah. Charlie gave us an extra chapter of review."

They both giggle. "Oh Charlie! We had a pop quiz from Charlie today. I hate how he always quizzes us on Mondays!"

At this moment, the math teacher in question (whose name is Josh) greets the students. Their friends have joined in the laughter, and they can barely contain themselves.

In the girls' invented language, their teacher is named "Charlie"—after Charlie the Tuna, thanks to his tuna breath in their afternoon class. Yet however mean-spirited this may sound, the goal is not to openly mock him or hurt his feelings, but rather to reinforce bonds of solidarity within their own social group; they are speaking in code about something they have in common and that they each can observe and comment on.

## ● SUMMARY

We see in humor's development, then, all the main themes about play and play's development. In particular, we see complexity in its many forms—from slapstick to sarcasm—and in its many functions, with functions being added as children develop. Furthermore, we see how humor both reveals and drives social, emotional, and cognitive development. We see humor starting out mostly with familiar caregivers and ending with inside jokes kept

hidden from those very same caregivers. We see humor helping modulate difficult feelings such as fear and anger as well as the impulse to be aggressive. We see humor revealing thinking and reasoning about the world as children play at newfound cognitive abilities, such as the toddler's ability to match word to referent and the older child's ability to reason logically. Most importantly, we see humor developing as a wonderful alternative world to better appreciate and adapt to reality. Therefore, children's humor and its development does indeed mirror the main themes in play's development.

### KEY WORDS, NAMES, AND IDEAS ●

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Insider vs. outsider  
In-jokes  
Psychic energy  
Surprise games  
Arousal-safety model of humor  
Theory of mind  
Resolution  
Incongruity  
Intellectual arousal  
Modulating  
Metahumor

### NOTE ●

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1. See Berlyne, Rothbart

