



"LET THEM LAUGH: How Teachers and Parents Can Tell the Difference Between Healthy and Unhealthy Laughter"

By Steve Wilson
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"What should I do when all the kids in my class are cracking up with laughter and it's getting to be too much?" An elementary school teacher asked that question during an in-service training session, *Laughing Matters in the Classroom*. "I'm afraid they will get out of control," she said, "and then they won't be able to concentrate on their lessons." The expressions on the faces of the others in the group told me that they all were familiar with those giggling, cackling, irrepressible outbursts.

Some of the skeptics in the group wore facial expressions that seemed to say, "Ah-ha, Mr. Smarty-pants, Psychologist-Joyologist! Here's a challenge for you: You say laughter is supposed to be so good for kids and we need more of it in the classroom. Well, what about "too much of a good thing"? Don't we have to set limits on laughter?" A challenge indeed.

Based on my own childhood experiences as a student and later experiences in the world of work, I recognized that some teachers and parents (and some supervisors and bosses) don't feel they are really "in charge" unless they keep such spontaneous expressions of mirth under control. I didn't want my answer to support teachers-must-exercise-authority-over-outbursts thinking.

My extemporaneous answer was that the "problem" of laughter in the classroom might depend on how often it happens. If this is a low-frequency behavior, occurring say, three times a year, then I wouldn't consider it a problem which required intervention. I explained that the students might actually be doing themselves some good by using the natural tension-reducing effects of laughter to relieve stress. They might try to understand what the stress or pressure is, I said. When I could see most of the training group nodding in agreement I thought I had disposed of the question. But, as sometimes happens, the question kept coming back to me. The question of when and how to interfere with the laughter of children deserved more careful attention.

In the hours that followed the training session, I found myself going through what has become a familiar and very helpful "personal de-briefing". This is when I mentally review a program I have presented to see where I could have done better. Sometimes my wife has to remind

me that I am a very harsh critic of my own work. More often, through this process I can spot ways to improve and make notes about how to do things differently--better--next time.

I wanted a better answer; something more complete than what the brief Q & A period had allowed. For many years I have been pleasantly taken with the notion that it would be quite a positive achievement if I could live life in such a way that others would accuse me of having "too much fun". The concept intrigues me. What on earth is "too much" fun, anyway? And how, exactly, might one go about having it?

In my own childhood family, the concept of "too much fun" was linked to a sort of ancient guilt trip. "Laugh before breakfast, cry before supper" was one of my grandmother's superstitions. "Don't be too happy about good times or you will surely bring on trouble" was another one I heard from my elders. It is a way of thinking that frightens and is meant to control us, but it is just not true. These ideas diminish self-esteem by implying that we don't deserve the good things that happen to us, at least not for any extended length of time. And (worse) they imply that such fragile and short-lived happiness might actually be God's will for us. Sadly, after more than twenty-five years of practicing psychotherapy, I see that this kind of thinking is quite common in our society. A simple question about children's laughter in school was beginning to have some profound implications.

How do I see it now? What have I learned from study and observation and being in this existence for fifty years? I absolutely do not believe that anyone should feel guilty for feeling happy. In my opinion, pleasure is our birthright. Not everything is funny, of course, and tragedy is also part of life, but I believe God intends joy for us more than anything else. A rabbi told me there is an ancient scriptural writing warning that when we meet God we are going to be held accountable for not taking greater advantage of the many wonderful things put here for us. Imagine that! The bounty and beauty of this world is put here for our pleasure and we have a responsibility to enjoy life. In Buddhism, it is said that the beginning of wisdom, of understanding the meaning of life, is manifested by a smile; not weeping. When we truly understand why we are here on earth we won't wail and moan. When we "get it" we will be laughing. It is said that "the halls of heaven ring with laughter of the saints", "even the gods love a joke" and, "laughter is the natural sound of childhood". These notions helped me understand the laughter of children so I can offer a more complete answer to the question that had been nagging at me.

We are apt to engage in mirthful, prolonged, irrepressible outbursts of laughter at any developmental stage--not only in childhood. I have often seen adults doing this. I do it myself from time to time as does my father now in his 82nd year. Perhaps you do it, too; who hasn't? It is actually quite satisfying somehow, even if your sides hurt and the tears are streaming down your face and you can't seem to catch your breath for a moment.

Among humor "academicians", theorists who are far more seriously research-minded than I, there is much speculation as to why we laugh in the first place and why we can't seem to repress laughter under some circumstances. However, it is important for teachers to distinguish uncontrollable laughter from irrepressible laughter; healthful, mirthful laughter from what may be called malignant or pathological laughter. Uncontrollable laughter can be chemically induced. There are intoxicants and poisons which have this effect. There are also several psychiatric and

neurological conditions in which this kind of laughter is a characteristic symptom. But such is not usually the case with the children in classrooms.

If the children are laughing long and hard it is important for the teacher or parent to make an assessment before interrupting. Criteria have been developed that can help to differentiate "true/mirthful" or "everyday" laughter" that should be permitted and encouraged, from "pathological/malignant" laughter, which signals a need for adult intervention and guidance. Here is what you can watch for:

(1) If laughter is contagious, sounds warm and inviting, it is probably the "true/mirthful" type, and likely to be healthful. It is not uncommon to hear this kind of laugh and feel like smiling or laughing yourself, even when it comes from another room and you haven't seen "what's funny". However, observers report that laughter associated with pathology has a hollow, shallow sound and others do not readily join in.

(2) In true/mirthful laughter there is usually a build up of some kind of tension (tension builds during the telling of a joke, for instance, if it is done well) and the laughter eventually leaves one with a sense of relief or release, a "whew, that felt good" or "I really needed that" feeling; refreshed. To the contrary, in pathological/malignant laughter, the laughter reports a build up of tension but no sense of relief or release. Because the person laughing does not experience a reduction of tension, they have no sense of being refreshed or relaxed.

(3) When compared to pathological/malignant laughter, true/mirthful laughter would not be hostile, aggressive, spiteful, or malicious. Laughter at another person's expense, that is offensive and derisive of physical, racial, ethnic or other rather permanent characteristics is not the true/mirthful type. In these cases, adult intervention and guidance would be appropriate. For example, you might teach a child "the 5-minute rule": Do not poke fun at something that another person could not change in the next five minutes.

(4) Even if adults don't "get the joke" that causes children's laughter, if it is the true/mirthful type, careful observation usually reveals the source of the humor in the objective reality, i.e., we can "see" that something has happened to which the children are reacting. On the other hand, pathological/malignant laughter has little or no such observable stimulus in objective reality--perhaps because it is chemically induced or the result of an hallucination. (A word of caution about this criterion: many laughter experts hold that even some laughter is irrational in the sense that we cannot always account for our laughter, we don't always have a "reason" for laughing, or need one; a quite normal experience for many people.)

(5) In addition to serving psychological and physiological functions of reducing tension, true/mirthful laughter is a self-limiting behavior. That is, once we start, we have a built-in mechanism that stops us when we've had enough. It's part of the miracle of who we are. No one has ever laughed "forever". Although at the time you might feel like you will never stop, eventually you do. We all do. "Self-limiting" means you never have to tell another person to stop laughing. They will when they're ready; when they've done enough. Isn't that wonderful? Let people "be" when they are laughing and they (nature, God) will take care of themselves. Give support but don't interfere and a natural healing process will take place. Interfere and you cut off

the process and "unfinished business" gets terribly bottled up, draining psychic energy, perhaps for years.

Children in classrooms are being natural. As long as their laughter is mirthful and healthful we should not call it uncontrollable and don't need to feel compelled to interfere. At certain stages of development it may be "bathroom" words or "sex" words or other forbidden talk that creates the emotional tension that triggers the need for release through giddy laughter. Or, the children might be sharing a joke that strikes them silly and is entirely invisible to the "adult" sense of humor. So what? As Joel Goodman, Ed.D., is fond of saying, "when it comes to senses of humor, its different jokes for different folks". Even if you, the adult, don't "get the joke", as long as the laughter is mirthful and healthful, let 'em laugh. Even if it seems "out of control", it is temporary, and the laughter will stop shortly. (Of course, "shortly" may be relative to your ability to remember the benefits of healthy laughter and to be patient.)

One good option available to a teacher or parent when faced with outbursts of children's mirth is to join right in. You probably could use a good laugh yourself anyway, and you also become a role model of healthy laughter. When the laughter subsides, you will all be more relaxed. You will have added a shared positive experience to your mutual history, which is good for morale and self-esteem. You will all be refreshed with your collective spirits lifted and you will be ready to get back to work.

My Sense Of Humor?

Assess the situation, discriminate "good" laughter from "bad" laughter and, when it's healthy, you can join in. Go ahead, let them laugh!

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