

GUIDANCE MATTERS

Dan Gartrell



A Spoonful of Laughter

ON A LATE WINTER MORNING, the lead teacher told the preschoolers it was time to leave the playground and go back inside. Ryan kept playing on the snow hills. The teacher called Ryan to come, but he continued to run from hill to hill. Jessica, a student teacher, went over to the hill where he stood and looked up at him.

Jessica: Ryan, it's time to go inside. I need you to come down from the hill.

Ryan: NO!! (*He runs to another hill and laughs.*)

Jessica (*walks over to the other hill*): Can you go to the door by yourself, Ryan, or do I need to help you? It's your choice.

Ryan: NO!! (*Ryan runs past Jessica, back to the other hill.*)

Jessica: I see that you need help to go to the door, so I will help you now. (*She walks up the hill, picks him up, and carries him inside.*)

Ryan kicked his legs and screamed until Jessica put him down. He walked (stomped) over to his cubby and sat inside it with his outside clothes still on. She walked over and knelt down beside him.

Jessica: I need you to start taking off your stuff now, Ryan.

Ryan: NO!! I don't want to.

Jessica: We can't go to the multipurpose room with all of your snow clothes still on.

Ryan: I don't care.

Jessica: Please, Ryan. It's going to be a lot of fun. Don't you want to go and play with your friends?

Ryan: NO!! (*He crosses his arms in front of him.*) I'm going to keep all my stuff on.

Jessica: Are you going to keep them on all day? Even when you go to bed?

Ryan: Yep, all day. (*He nods his head and smiles.*) I'm even going to wear them around my house.

Jessica: Oh, really? Are you going to wear them in the bathtub too?

Ryan: No, that's silly. I'd sink like a stone. (*He laughs and takes off his outside clothes.*)

Jessica (*smiles*): Thank you for taking your stuff off, Ryan. (*He smiles back at Jessica.*)

A (seemingly eternal) classroom challenge occurs whenever a teacher asks a child to do something and the child says no. Anecdotes for this column sometimes illustrate conflicts in which teachers respond successfully "the first time." This anecdote illustrates a situation all teachers face: initial requests given to children that go wrong, and the emotional scramble for a second request that will go right. Let's look at what was different in Jessica's two requests.

1. Although she maybe did so too quickly, Jessica went by the textbook in her attempt to get Ryan to come in from the playground. She used the established "logical consequences" technique: if you choose a particular

option, you have selected the consequences that go with this choice.

The problem is that what seems logical to a teacher often does not seem logical to a child. Ryan's brain was telling him, "This is what my body should be doing right now: running up and down these snow hills. If the teacher chases me over the hills, that will even be more fun!"

To a four-year-old, options A, go to the door by yourself, and B, go with help from Jessica, don't sound that attractive when option C, the one the child has an organic connection with, is not offered. Hence the conflict. As a responsible student teacher, Jessica follows through and has to cope with the consequences of her own choice as well as Ryan's.

2. So then an unhappy Ryan sat in his cubby, and Jessica, who felt really bad about having to carry Ryan in, tried to get him to take off his snow gear. With some thought, Jessica decided to try a different approach: she picked up on a comment Ryan made and used humor. And her friendly humor, a quality that learners of all ages appreciate in teachers, worked.

When Ryan pictured what it would be like to take a bath wearing snowduds, he laughed. The tension was

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Illustration by Patrick Cavanagh.

broken. Jessica found a response that redeemed Ryan's dignity *and* their relationship. Not even experienced teachers can always recover as Jessica did. Forgiveness (including of one's self) and a bit of creative thinking are wonderful qualities for all teachers to practice—even if it is on the second try.

FRIENDLY HUMOR SHOWS CHILDREN

that adults can be understanding and gracious; that the teacher is working with them not against them; that the child as well as the teacher has a valued place in the classroom community. In a broader sense, a shared humorous moment removes the dilemma faced by every person in a less-powerful position: What do I do when this more powerful person and I disagree? Humor can change the perception of "you are against me" to "you and I can work this out together"—essentially the difference between making war and building peace. (This learning is good preparation for life in a democratic society.)

Please note that the person in charge has to decide to let humor into the situation and determine how to go about doing so. These are high-level skills. It is my own experience that the person we are "in charge of" is usually so relieved we are using friendly humor—rather than an alternative—that the jokes don't even have to be good ones. If we don't use force, the person is more likely to want to get along!

Alice Honig (1989) studied humor as a developing attribute in young children. She concludes that older preschoolers delight in their newfound conceptual understanding of wordplay, which is the basis of much of our humor. To take a bath with your clothing on is silly. Just ask children's authors, such as Laura Joffe Numeroff (*If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*), who have perfected wordplay techniques in their books.

Friendly humor is transformative. It *really* can change a situation. During a very loud thunderstorm, a teacher

said to her anxious class, "It is raining cats and dogs out there!" The children all immediately looked out the window. One child turned back and said with a smile, "Teacher, it is raining elephants even." Other humorous comments followed. The teacher noticed that the children grew more relaxed about the storm.

In this instance, as with Ryan and Jessica, the exchange between the child and teacher, not just the teacher's comment, creates the bond and improves the mood. Using humor effectively means listening and sharing, usually not just telling your own joke and enjoying it—even if it is funny.

Finally, the humor has to be friendly. It has to lighten you up rather than weigh you down. How do you know which it is doing? You watch the children.

On a dreary Monday morning after a sunny weekend, a child care teacher noticed that everyone, including the other teachers, was really lethargic. She stood up and said, "Hey, everyone, let's boogie to some music to wake ourselves up!" To her amazement, no one moved. "Oh my goodness! We're so sleepy this morning that I think we should just get out our mats and take a nice nap." At this, the children smiled, stood up, and sleepily spread out to dance to the music.

The teacher's tone of voice told the children she was kidding, she recognized how sleepy everyone was, and they were going to do something "fun" about it. Another tone of voice, more threatening, would have gotten a very different reaction.

If children, like Ryan in the earlier anecdote, see the humor and share in it, they are more likely to respond to the request even if they don't particularly want to. They will do it because they like their teacher; that is how transformative humor is.

To increase your knowledge:

Locate and read these articles, which talk about using humor with children:

Honig, A.S. 1988. Research in Review: Humor development in children. *Young Children* 43 (4): 60–73.

Kolb, K., ed. 1990. Humor. *Early Report* 18 (1). Online from the University of Minnesota, Center for Early Education and Development: <http://education.umn.edu/ceed/publications/earlyreport/fall90.htm>.

Palumbo, A. 1999. Sillyumpbuses: Bringing children the gift of humor. *Reclaiming Children and Youth* 8 (2): 71–73.

Shaeffer, M.B., & D. Hopkins. 1988. Miss Nelson, knock-knocks, and nonsense: Connecting through humor. *Childhood Education* 65 (2): 88–93.

Varga, D. 2000. Hyperbole and humor in children's language play. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education* 14 (2): 142–51.

A step you can take:

Take the plunge. Try using humor with children in situations when you might not usually. It may take some practice, but go for it. The jokes don't have to be great, just a little amusing. The rest of the class—adults too—will appreciate the gift of mirth you will bring to your teaching.

References

Honig, A.S. 1989. Talk, read, joke, make friends: Language power for children. *Early Childhood Education Journal* 6 (4): 14–17.

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