

Humor and the well-being of the child

When the first baby laughed for the first time, its laugh broke into a thousand pieces, and they all went skipping about and that was the beginning of fairies.

James Barrie

Humor and its many expressions are important to a child's development. Inspiring, encouraging and preserving an atmosphere of humor in the family and social environment, helps the child to grow, to improve his or her use of language and to develop capacities of self-censorship.

A sense of humor helps to see the incongruities of life and provides moments of joy. These positive emotions can create neurochemical changes that cushion the immunosuppressive effects of stress.¹ Finding humor in a situation and laughing freely with others can be a very powerful antidote to stress. It gives the ability to feel joy and to reduce tension.² Dr. Labott has studied the chemical impact of laughter and tears and observed that the stimulation created by humor strengthens the immune system.³ Humor and laughter cause two processes: stimulation and subsequent relaxation of the body, which result in a feeling of pleasure and enjoyment.

The oncologist Lisandro Lopez-Herrera is developing a theory of pain associated with disease. He believes that people who laugh too little or who lack a sense of humor are more likely to suffer from serious diseases like cancer. Through his study of suffering, he finds that humor is a healthy form of escape. According to the researcher, humor functions as a shield against disease, bringing relief. For Lopez-Herrera, the study of humor must be linked to social values.

According to Freud, "Humor is the most easily satisfied among the species of the comic. It completes its course within a single person; another person's participation adds nothing new to it. I can keep to myself the enjoyment of the humorous pleasure that has arisen in me, without feeling obliged to communicate it." He continues, «It is not easy to say what happens in a person when humorous pleasure is generated, but we can obtain some insight if we examine the cases in which humor is communicated or sympathized with, cases which, by an understanding of the humorous person, we arrive at the same pleasure as his."

For R. Spitz, from the first quarter of life, a smile is motivated by the sight of the human face⁴ and a smile attests the establishment of the rudiments of the self. According to John Bowlby⁵ an infant's need for a strong relationship with a meaningful and effective mother figure is critical. This is not necessarily the biological mother but is any person providing care, ensuring physical proximity and a loving relationship. For Bowlby, the smile is one of the five basic skills that will enable children to establish strong ties of devotion to the mother figure.

Paule Aimard's book, *Les bébés de l'humour* (The Babies of Humor), underlines the importance of humor for a child's development. According to her, humor is a way for children to "strengthen their sense of self, their power, their territory and to attract attention and receive compliments." She says that humor is a regulator that helps to clarify and preserve the balance between the child and his family. Through the filter of humor the child can negotiate and manage difficult situations.⁶

¹ Wooten P. "Humor: an Antidote of stress," in *Holistic Nursing Practice*, 1996, Vol.10, No. 2, pp49-55

² Lefcourt H, Martin, R. *Humor and Life Stress*. New York NY: Springer-Verlag, 1986

³ Labott S. M., S. Ahleman, M. Wolever, and R. Martin. "The Physiological and Psychological Effects of the Expression and Inhibition of Emotion." *Behavioral Medicine* 16.4, 1990

⁴ Spitz R.A., *First year of life: A psychoanalytic study of normal and deviant development of object relations*, Intl Universities Pr Inc, 1965

⁵ Bowlby J., *Attachment and Loss: Vol I, 2nd Ed.* Basic Books, 1999

⁶ Aimar, P., "Les bébés de l'humour," Mardaga, 1988

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Relevant projects

Currently, laughter therapy and **humor workshops**, under various names, play a very valuable function in many countries of the world to help improve the quality of life of individuals and populations, especially those that are in distressful situations. Children, adolescents and adults with cancer and AIDS benefit especially.

In Bombay, India, in 1995, Dr. Madam Kataria, created the first **Laughter Club**, at which people meet regularly in order to laugh. The concept has spread to more than 1,300 clubs around the world. Canada, Germany, France and Switzerland are pioneers in this type of therapy through training schools such as the Teodora Foundation in Switzerland.

In Colombia, Chile and Argentina, in the wake of an experiment at the Hospital Udaondo in Argentina, **Payamédicos** (clowns doctors) travel from one hospital to another, providing laughter and fun for children.

Clowns doctors, particularly those of the French association **Le Rire Médecin**, play a fundamental role for hospitalized children. They parody hospital routines to help children adapt to this environment. They distract children during painful and/or frightening events. They provide moments of fun and laughter and help children forget for a moment that they are sick. Everyone benefits – patients, families and health care teams. Clown doctors are professional artists who have undergone special training in hospitals and who work in partnership with health professionals.

All these projects have a common element: humor involves an ongoing effort to understand and give meaning to experience and the courage to face difficulties.