

Humor as a Tool in the Workplace

by Jerry Parr

First, disclaimers: One, if this article were ever found in a refereed journal, the ref would have a couch, writing tablet, and prescription pad. Two, just because a committee did not review this article does not cause it to lack credibility; its total lack of relevance and authenticity cause it to lack credibility. Three, you can't teach your own kids to drive, edit your own written work, or manage your own department. Four, if you want something more tasteful than this article, chew gum.

A brief history of humor in early childhood:

In the Beginning . . .

. . . The very, wicked meanie monster saw the child care director laughing and enjoying her job and said I must make this stop. The meanie monster held a meeting with all the other meanie monsters to delegate responsibilities. The other meanie monsters formed committees, and soon, task forces, to study ways to stop the child care director from having so much fun. Fear spread amongst the ranks of the meanie monsters that if her humor were not soon stopped it could spread from the land of children and infect other workplaces. One alarmist meanie went so far as to suggest that if humor was not stopped even accountants might be infected. This could never be.

And a plan was created and put into place. A being was made real that was so horrible that even the meanest meanie was afraid. And the being was given a name, Licensing Lady. And the Licensing Lady was sent forth to do battle with the child care director.

The battle was fiercely fought, signs of the melee everywhere. Amid the litter of check-marked sheets and smoldering regulations stood the child care director laughing. Golden rays of light shown forth marking her victory. The child care director

helped the Licensing Lady to her feet and spoke upon her these words, "Your fight was a valiant one but your chance to succeed small, for before you came Lawyer and I smote him and before that came The Auditor and he, too, I turned aside."

And the child care director claimed as her prize for victory the right to decree that henceforth all child care directors would have the strength to keep and command their humor in the face of any and all obstacles both petty and great. And it was made so. And it was tested.

To this day we each owe thanks to that brave director for remembering us in her victory. Without humor in the child care workplace we might all have become meanie monsters . . . or worse . . . Licensing Ladies.

What Kind of a Tool Is Humor?

Humor creates possibilities. It is possible to continue the day with minimal disruption apparent to the children and staff because a shrug and a chuckle defuse a situation that could easily become destructive and counter-productive. Speaking of licensing ladies, we have a Licensing Lady that likes sinks. Sinks are very important to her. Small sinks, big sinks, shallow sinks, deep sinks, hand-washing sinks, diapering sinks, food preparation sinks, holy and ceremonious sinks used only

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during the summer solstice on a leap year when the moon is full . . . We have more sinks per child than we do chairs and crayons. We even made all the screen savers on the classroom computers into tiny flying sinks hoping that would help, but still she comes and we know it will be time to build another sink. Or three. Although barely heard over the sound of two dozen plumbers putting in more sinks, laughter helps us through the day.

Humor is a reflection of a director's respect for the staff. A director who can find humor in situations and deals with staff issues in a way that the messages are clear, the behaviors are modified, and the team is left intact is demonstrating that a win-win ending is better for the staff, children, and families. If a director truly respects the staff, then finding the internal resources to replace ego and temper with sensitivity and humor becomes a natural management tool.

Many years ago when I was just beginning a career in daycare (it's what we called it then . . . and okay, it was many, many years ago) I went to my first day of student-teaching in a parent cooperative center. I was introduced to my supervising teacher and her two-year-old class. On the second day I showed up at the center, expecting to observe and, at worst, be asked to join in when we played "Fuzzy-Wuzzy." Instead I was greeted with the information that I would be in charge until further notice . . . everyone else had been arrested the night before at a nuclear power plant demonstration! When I finally reached someone and asked them what I should do, she said "send food." The kids and I made care packages, sent funny stories about the panicked look on my face . . . and had a great time. I learned from that moment that humor will get you through tough times, that worrying about everything doesn't work, and that there is no point in sending canned chili to a bunch of vegetarians.

Humor is a bridge; anger is a torch. Humor links people together, allows opportunities to poke and jab at sore spots and come away stronger, provides opportunities to release some pressure before the lid blows off, and opens the door for answers to questions that are uncomfortable to ask. Many issues remain unresolved in a stressful child care environment when staff becomes too defensive to hear comments as constructive. Humor can often be the tool to first crack the defensive behaviors so that discussions that follow are receptive and responsive. When people are laughing they are listening; when they are listening they can make a difference.

Kids are natural humorists. Caregivers should be, too. Never make the mistake that children are laughing with you; they are laughing at you. Especially when you try to take yourself too seriously. Kids know every sore spot, every sensitivity, every blemish, but when the day is done they have forgotten and forgiven any slight and insult. Grudge is not a child's word. Adults in child care often need to learn that lesson. A sense of humor and an ability to acknowledge absurdity can keep a staff intact and restore a director's perspective. It also helps make it possible for you to play basketball while riding a donkey at the annual fund-raising event.

Humor is not a contact sport. Hiding behind humor is not the same as using humor as a tool. Then it becomes a weapon of destruction, demoralizing staff and creating credibility gaps. Telling someone something malicious, then pawning it off as "just kidding" when the reaction evoked is more than you can handle, is offensive. Being honest with someone and softening the response with humor promotes trust. There is a fine line between healthy humor and ridicule. Telling someone whose feet stink that they should replace the Limburger cheese with Dr. Scholl's inserts will probably not fix the problem.

The right tool for the right job is important. One key to the successful use of humor in child care is a sense of proportion. Like any job requiring tools, selection and variety are critical. You would not use a sledgehammer to fix a computer (sure, we've all considered it! Okay, once I actually did it and the computer worked better but that was back in the Windows 3.1 days) or a chain saw to perform delicate surgery. Humor has many forms from subtle wit to blatant (and often destructive) sarcasm. Carefully doled out, humor maintains the organizational culture and promotes risk taking and idea sharing. When staff feel secure that they can try new things without the risk of being verbally bludgeoned by supervisors, the entire program benefits. A director with a sense of humor is more likely to challenge staff to grow and develop than is a director who rules by fear and terror. If a director can laugh in front of the mirror, so can the staff.

A few words of caution regarding humor as a tool in the early childhood workplace:

Political Correctness did for workplace humor what the decision to use rubber bullets did for the British police force except we don't get to wear cool hats. It has been said (usually when men are all alone with relative certainty that they are not being overheard) that Political

Correctness was a deathblow to workplace humor. Gone are the innuendos, the puns, and the witty editorial cartoons faxed from office to office ultimately found adorning drab cubicle walls except from exempt work sites — see auto repair shop). E-mail has helped mitigate the paucity of politically incorrect humor but it is really hard to hang your monitor on the cubicle wall.

Cultural Correctness finished off what political correctness missed. The rules for culturally correct humor are still largely unwritten. Good guessing is critical. Lying about your family tree helps, too. I have one friend (I could probably end this sentence right there) who exercises his culturally correct rights in a clever way that enables him to ignore the entire PC/CC issue. He is Native American by virtue of birth (his first and only encounter with virtue) and has drafted (fabricated) a protective mythology. His claim is that wit and humor are traditional attributes cherished by his culture and are signs of great leadership ability. It has certainly worked well for him but in just nine years it has sent seven of my receptionists into therapy and/or new lines of work. His telephone calls tend to step rather hard on PC rules. His calls are, in fact, witty.

What research has to say about humor in the workplace: (I just tossed this in because 23 years ago my thesis committee accused me of not being able to do research.)

The chart below shows in increments of 10,000 how many web sites have been devoted to humor in the workplace (leave your calculator in the drawer . . . it adds up to

1,043,110!). Each web site contained dozens of articles and references (leave your calculator in the drawer . . . it adds up to a really, really lot!). This brings two issues to the table that require immediate resolution. One, how can so much evidence that humor is an effective tool in the workplace be ignored by so many crabby people? Two, my thesis committee was right.

Child care is a serious business. That doesn't mean a sense of humor is out of place. Go somewhere during the day and make someone laugh. They will appreciate you for it. Unless it's when they are looking at their raise!

