

school-age



comic relief

No joke: Humor bolsters a kid's brain. Try these techniques to uncover her funny bone. *by ANN MUDER*

During a playdate, I overheard my 6-year-old daughter, Sydney, and her friend telling jokes to each other. They had obviously made up the riddles themselves. ("Why did the chocolate-chip cookie cross the road? To get to the milk! Get it?") They were each other's best audience, with every punch line getting a hearty laugh, closely followed by: "Wait! I have another one!"

Your child probably has cracked you up with her funny faces, silly stories, and mismatched outfits for some time now. But recently she's likely found a different outlet for getting a laugh: using her ever-growing vocabulary to tell jokes to anyone who will play along. "Five- and 6-year-olds love experimenting with what's funny and what's not," explains Janette B. Benson, Ph.D., associate professor of psychology at the University of Denver. "Humor is a good way for them to break the ice and form friendships, so it's definitely worth encouraging in your house." With these easy expert tips on how to foster her silly side, you'll no doubt be hearing that adorable giggle for years to come.



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Surprising advice about potty humor: Don't ban it. Instead, talk to your child about specific places, such as church and Grandma's house, where it's off-limits.

joke around

At this age, kids know each riddle has a question, an answer, and a laugh. But they don't appreciate the wordplay that's typically involved in punch lines yet—and probably won't until they're 7 or 8, explains Paul McGhee, Ph.D., author of *Understanding and Promoting the Development of Children's Humor*. That's why you'll hear jokes like, "Knock, knock! Who's there? Nobody's home!" But even if your son's jokes don't make sense yet, don't ignore them. Help advance his humor by chiming in with another version of his joke. And read books that promote wordplay such as *Click, Clack, Moo: Cows That Type* and *E-mergency!*

laugh it off

Maybe your daughter just spilled a huge glass of juice. Or she's upset about having to get a shot. The best way to break the tension is to help her see humor in the situation. One recent study at Stanford University and Lucile Packard Children's Hospital suggests it can actually help her feel better. Researchers showed video clips to kids as young as 6 and monitored their brain activity. They found that two areas of the brain saw more action during the clips that the kids rated as funny. "There was a spike in the midbrain, the area that helps people process rewarding feelings," says study author Allan Reiss, M.D. When your daughter knocks over the juice, you might say, "Was the table thirsty?" Model funny reactions to bad situations too. For instance, if you trip on the rug, channel your inner actress by saying "Ta-da!" while taking a bow.

get the sillies

You don't have to add resident comedian to the million and one hats you already wear, but try to find time to do wacky things with your kid: Blow bubbles with straws. Make up nonsense lyrics to your favorite songs. Jump over imaginary elephants. Follow the yellow-brick road to bed. It will give him a happier outlook, for sure. But there's another important benefit too: "Families bond over humor," says Dr. Benson. "Taking time out of your day to be silly will help strengthen your communication with your child." Goofiness, of course, can get out of control sometimes, and it's important to establish boundaries. If your son ventures into hurtful language or becomes too potty-mouthed for your taste, make it clear how he's gone overboard and what he can do instead to be funny and respectful, says Edward Christophersen, Ph.D., clinical child psychologist at Children's Mercy Hospital, in Kansas City, Missouri.

think big

School-age children thrive on over-the-top statements like "I swam underwater for a mile!" or "My cat is as big as your house!" Since exaggeration is a common comedy technique for joke-telling, build on your kid's natural ability, suggests Kelly Swanson, a comedian and mom from High Point, North Carolina. So if your child says something like, "I'm so hungry I could eat a dinosaur!" riff on that and come back with, "I was so hungry that I could have eaten like a dinosaur. But then I'd be extinct!" ☺

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