Laughter Really Is the Best Medicine

Parenting can be incredibly rewarding. It can also be downright demanding. It is the only job we have 24 hours a day, seven days a week. For many of us, it is only one of several hats we wear throughout our lifetime. Sometimes, this job is taken on in joyous anticipation, but other times it comes to us out of tragic necessity. Either way, if you are parenting children from hard places, it can sometimes leave you feeling completely crushed and inadequate for the task.

So, what is a parent to do? Laugh. Yes – laugh. Please. And be silly.

Losing the ability to be playful, laugh, and have fun is a common parenting mistake. When you parent children who have lost their childhood, it is an even easier mistake to make. We come to believe that it is unnecessary, or perhaps we were raised in families where playfulness was frowned upon. Without humor and playfulness, what are we missing?

Humor and a playful spirit can give a myriad of gifts. All we must do is let them in. Research points to physical, mental, and relational benefits for us and for the children we care for. So, let’s learn a bit more about the oldest and best medicine.

Research has established that laughter and humor lower blood pressure and increase blood flow. A good, hearty session of guffaws gives our lungs, stomach, back, and face a workout. Oh – and sleep? That thing you don’t get enough of these days? Laughter can help you unwind and fall asleep faster, as well as enjoy better quality sleep once you manage to get there. This is true for you, and it’s also true for your kids.

Additional physical benefits of laughter and playfulness include encouragement of the release of endorphins, our body’s “feel good” chemicals. Stress hormones like adrenaline and cortisol (all too familiar to most of us) are reduced. This leads to a more positive outlook overall. But there’s more. Laughter has been shown to increase memory and learning, and it may even cause you to be more creative since it activates many parts of the brain in harmony, much like creativity. Many of us seem to have lost our creativity in childhood, and it would make sense that perhaps we are all just a bit too serious as adults.

Most importantly, a positive outlook and a good sense of humor improves our relationships with others. We were born to connect, and anything that acts as glue in making connections is very good for human beings. In general, people enjoy being with people who laugh. When there is tension or difficulty, humor can disrupt it. A silly comment made at the right time in a conflict can completely derail a meltdown. Escalation is avoided, and forward motion is allowed. It is important, however, to be sensitive to timing in these cases.

There are lots of easy ways to bring more playfulness home. If the best medicine is free, we certainly want some. Read on for some simple how-tos that can bring laughter to your family.
Humor: High-Return Investment

Injecting humor into daily living has physical and emotional benefits for all practitioners and participants. Seeing the funny side of things does not require being a joker or comedian. It is, however, imperative for a parent to be flexible in their thinking and to view life from a different, maybe even “on-your-head” perspective. Humor is typically an underutilized tool when a parent is faced with a frustrating situation or behavioral escalation.

Researchers have identified some general categories of humor. Other-oriented humor is either aggressive or affiliative. Aggressive humor is impulsive, derisive, and disparaging to others. Parents need to avoid this category entirely. It might have worked for comedian Don Rickles, but a child does not need to be on the receiving end of that type of screaming, in-your-face sarcasm and insult. Affiliative humor builds social cohesion, something that our children need desperately. This type of humor affirms oneself or others in a tolerant and non-aggressive manner.

Self-oriented humor, often thought of as coping humor, is either self-enhancing or self-defeating. It helps maintain optimism in the face of adversity or stress. The use of self-enhancing humor is a significant predictor of adaptive coping strategies. A form of self-defeating humor is self-disparagement by allowing oneself to be the focus of another’s joke, hopefully gaining favor in the process. When a mother moans that she is suffering from “PMS” or “Putting up with Morning Siblings,” it is a way to poke fun at herself to ease the stress of morning hassles. Recently when discussing frustration from dealing with their child’s toileting issues, a parent hit upon her own diagnosis of “PPTSD” or “Poop and Pee Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.” Alternative acronyms are universally appreciated, fun to construct, and great family shorthand for communicating.

Scouring resources yields some simple tips to keep the humor coming. Author Brita St. Clair in 99 Ways to Drive Your Child Sane, provides a wonderful source of inspiration. Her first suggestion is a fantastic antidote for parents suffering from P’TSD:

Sprinkle peas around a child’s room when they are gone. Then with great excitement and in the child’s presence collect the peas in a bowl and exclaim, “I knew this would happen if you just peed enough, peas were sure to grow.” Then make sure you serve peas (clean ones) that night for dinner.

Other ideas include:

- Sing your request to your child instead of giving an outright demand to clean a room.
- Make an inanimate object talk. The bathtub can say, “Trevor, I miss you! Can you come in and play bubbles with me?” Continue the request in a goofy voice to get your child laughing.
- If a snotty attitude is coming from your teen, hand them a tissue and when he asks what it is for, respond with a neutral, “I thought you might need it.”
- Put on a Yoda mask and speak backward. “Much to learn, you still have.”
- If a child is arguing, grab a calendar and ask if you can set a date for the argument, you would love to argue, but you just can’t devote the time right this minute.
- Try your hand at acting; overact with obvious exaggeration about a situation to lighten the mood. You could use movie lines that are familiar to both the parent and the child to get a laugh. “Susan, I’ve got a feeling we’re not in Kansas anymore.” “Phone home.” “Hasta la vista, baby.” Or “I’ll be back.” Of course, one must use the Schwarzenegger voice on the last two lines. When people are familiar with a common line, it provides an immediate connection and can garner a chuckle.
- To grab a kid’s attention, dress weird; walk into their bedroom with socks hanging off your ears and underwear worn as a cap. It just might help them to remember to respond to your request of putting away their clean laundry.
• Read joke books or cartoons together. Cut out the ones that resonate and put them up on the fridge. Zits comic strip is a great source of laughter about the teen/parent relationship. A joke of the day calendar is another great way to incorporate a daily ritual into the family.

• Get a photo and draw mustaches on all the family members. Frame it! We have you covered with craft supplies below.

• Got a spatula in your hand? Wave it around your crabby child, touch their head, and whisper a magic potion. “I now pronounce you all sweet!”

If you don’t currently incorporate humor into your parenting strategies regularly, you’ll need to practice it. Your child might first be taken aback if it is an unfamiliar approach. Don’t be discouraged if you don’t get immediate results. Change takes time. Better coping skills, a more positive life-view, and a higher rate of parenting satisfaction are some of the paybacks of using humor. Investing in the humor bank will pay out high emotional dividends in the long run.

Hope to see you at our Humor in Parenting class on Thursday, September 19 (complete details on the training schedule)!

Choose Your Mustache

Let each family member select a mustache. Cut them out, attach to a skewer or stick, and have fun!
Our Vision

FamilyForward leads the community in providing innovative solutions for advancing safer, healthier relationships for children and families.

Our Mission

FamilyForward moves vulnerable children in the direction of hope by delivering comprehensive therapeutic and educational services to support biological, foster, and adoptive families.

Visit familyforwardmo.org/publications to read LifeLines online.
Educational Opportunities for Adoptive and Foster Parents

Each session counts as training toward your licensure requirement. Sessions are provided at low or no cost to all adoptive and foster parents. Registration is required.

Please note that all classes are for adults only. Children are not permitted in the classroom as training content is often not appropriate for them. Please arrange for childcare in your home as children cannot be left unattended in the lobby or hallways of the building. Thank you for helping keep your children safe.

Back to the Basics
Tuesdays: July 2, 9, 16, 23, 30, August 6, 13, 20, 2019 | 6:00 pm – 9:00 pm
Community Based Education in Nurturing Parenting provides parenting lessons for promoting the philosophy of nurturing. Topics include common practices that promote nurturing, ages and stages of growth for infants and toddlers, enhancing positive brain development, communicating with respect, building self-worth, feelings, developing family values, praising, alternatives to spanking, and learning to deal with stress and anger. Using an assessment tool, families will get a baseline of their current parenting philosophies.

Prioritizing Your Partnership
Mondays: July 8, 15, 22, 2019 | 6:00 pm – 9:00 pm
Families can only be as strong as the parents’ relationship. Take advantage of summer school break to strengthen the parenting duo. In this three-week course, couples will learn evidence-based principles and techniques designed to help strengthen their connection to one another. Course content includes a brief examination of historical changes within marriage/partnership and the importance of realistic expectations. Systems theory and the critical role of prioritizing the parent partnership in providing a strong, stable family base is at the core of this curriculum. Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs is presented as an important way to consider adjustment of expectations in times of crisis. Couples are asked to commit to all three weeks.

Trauma and Its Impact in the Classroom
Thursday: July 11, 2019 | 6:00 pm – 9:00 pm
This class reviews the impact of trauma on a child’s development and how it relates and manifests within the school setting. Practical tips for providing a trauma-sensitive environment are covered. Parents are encouraged to invite their child’s teachers to attend.

School Issues
Thursdays: July 25, August 1, 2019 | 6:00 pm – 9:00 pm
Many children with a history of abuse, neglect, or other trauma struggle in school. Whether it is a learning disability, a developmental delay, or an emotional issue, children will often find the academic and social demands of the school environment to be challenging. Parents discuss a variety of challenges, ways to ease the transition for children as they begin a new school year, and ways to communicate effectively with school personnel in this two-week class.
Healthy Relationships
Wednesday: August 7, 2019 | 6:00 pm – 9:00 pm
Children in the foster care system often have not had healthy relationships modeled for them within their families of origin. They may have witnessed domestic violence, inappropriate familial and peer relationships, and experienced violation of their bodies distorting what is or is not appropriate in relationships. Exploring topics that may be difficult for adults to discuss with children and teens is the starting point of becoming comfortable with the subject matter. Developing healthy self-respect is the foundation for future healthy relationships and as their caregivers, we must engage our children in ongoing conversation.

Collaborative and Proactive Solutions
Wednesday: August 14, 2019 | 6:00 pm – 9:00 pm
Formerly known as Collaborative Problem Solving, the class originator Dr. Ross Greene works under the assumption that children do well if they can. By viewing challenging behavior as a deficit in cognitive skills, specifically the domains of flexibility/adaptability, frustration tolerance, and problem solving, parents can view their child through sympathetic eyes. Parents practice the three steps of collaborative problem solving: Empathy, Define the Problem, and Invitation.

FamilyForward’s Parenting KIDS (Kids In Difficult Situations)
Mondays: August 26, September 9, 16, 23, 30, October 7, 2019 | 6:00 pm – 9:00 pm
Children with histories of abuse and neglect tend to exhibit very difficult behaviors such as chronic lying, stealing, aggression, difficulties with eating and/or sleeping. Trauma-focused parenting is discussed with an emphasis on the impact of trauma on brain development. Insuring a child’s physical, emotional, and psychological safety is paramount to decrease behavioral issues and “re-wire” the brain for appropriate behavioral responses. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network curriculum is utilized and supported with additional material/videos from professionals in the field of developmental trauma. 18 hours of class time is covered in six weeks.

Stop Bullying Now!
Thursday: September 5, 2019 | 6:00 pm – 9:00 pm
Parents gain an understanding of why a child bullies, signs of a child being a victim of a bully, and intervention approaches within the community and school setting. Content is based on the national program, Stop Bullying Now!

Psychopharmacology
Thursday: September 12, 2019 | 6:00 pm – 9:30 pm (note longer class time)
This course introduces basic use of medications in the treatment of mental health and behavior concerns commonly found in the childhood population who have experienced chronic, complex early childhood trauma. The course reviews the roles of neurotransmitters in altering moods and behavior, their metabolism, special dietary interactions, and potential side effects. Navigating the medical system, advocacy, and partnership with the medical team will be addressed in addition to medication storage, administration, and disposal.

Humor in Parenting
Thursday: September 19, 2019 | 6:00 pm – 9:00 pm
Humor has many benefits, yet it is an underutilized tool in parenting. Come, laugh, and see how humor can impact your family life for the better – you don’t need to be a comic!

Trauma 101
Wednesday: September 25, 2019 | 6:00 pm – 9:00 pm
When a child is abused or neglected, it can affect every aspect of the child’s development: physical, emotional, social, psychological. A video will kick-start the discussion that focuses on the reasons for delays and challenges based on the neurobiology of brain development. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network Core Concepts of Traumatic Stress are presented. This course incorporates the required reading material that is mandatory for all resource parents.

Register for Training
Contact Sarah Gamblin at 314.968.2350 ext. 5230 or sarah.gamblin@familyforwardmo.org

Training Location
1167 Corporate Lake Dr, Saint Louis, MO 63132-1716

Visit familyforwardmo.org/calendar to view training information online.
All classes are in-person and registration is required.