

## "Sooo funny!", by Kathrin Bädermann, *Eltern family*, 4 / 2015

*Eltern family* is a monthly magazine for parents whose children are between the age of 3 and 13. The topics here are children's humour, the role of humour in education and how we can equip our kids with humour as a coping tool in life.

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### **Sooo funny!**

*It's a long way from fart jokes to a clever punch line. And parents have to endure quite a lot in the process. But it's worth it.*

Since I'm a Mom, I've learned quite a few things. Recently, we were invited to a family celebration in a posh restaurant. There, I learned the following lessons: 1. Jokes about farts, bums and other matters below the belt are apparently a must for kindergarten kids. And 2. The voice of a four-year-old can easily drown out the conversations among 50 grown-ups. "Jan, say tomato," my daughter prompted her cousin. "Tomato," he obliged. And my daughter, with mischievous pleasure and loud enough so that everyone could hear it: "Your willy can do karate!"<sup>1</sup> Hahaha! Endless giggles at the kids' table, chuckles and the occasional awkward silence among the adults.

And I was left with the question: Is that normal? "Perfectly normal," says Eva Ullmann, director of the German Institute for Humour in Leipzig. "This kind of joke is a classic at that age and it represents a typical phase in the development of humour. Two things come together here: on the one hand, kids discover their body during this phase. Differences between the sexes, digestion – these topics fascinate them. On the other hand, they immensely enjoy breaking taboos and breaking precisely the rules they have just learned and understood." Okay, I get it. That's why weird comments like "You're a poo sausage, hihhi" are particularly trendy at the moment. Topic of digestion + breach of taboo = maximal enthusiasm.

[...]

Each child develops at its own pace, also where the sense of humour is concerned. A kid growing up with parents prone to use irony may perhaps already understand at the age of seven what Mom really means when saying: "Great! You spread all of your beads evenly across the whole apartment!" Others may only start wordplay and mixing up letters at the age of six because they were busy practicing the correct pronunciation beforehand.

"Kids' jokes are always representative of their development," says Eva Ullmann. Humour thus reveals what a child has already understood about the world and sometimes even how empathetic he or she is. If you want to cause laughter, you must not only be alert but also empathetic: what do other people know, what amuses them and where are their sore points?

Humour is a wonderful thing, as many further studies on the topic show: it helps kids to reduce aggression and stress, to defuse conflicts, to solve problems in more creative ways and to learn things more easily. It boosts their self-confidence. And it helps kids to find their role within a group, to initiate friendships and to differentiate themselves from others. The witty ones are always the popular ones.

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<sup>1</sup> In German, "karate" rhymes with "tomato".

Yet humour also has unpleasant aspects: schadenfreude (or malicious glee), ridicule and mockery, for instance. "These variants don't have to be condemned in principle," says Eva Ullmann. "But if someone really feels hurt, then a limit has been reached. Kids have to learn with whom they can make what kind of jokes." They learn this from people's reactions – the reactions of those being made fun of but also the reactions of the parents who are watching.

And sometimes, humour is just plain annoying. I know that feeling very well, sometimes I'm simply fed up. For instance, the other day, Saturday bath time just escalated. My daughter was sitting in the bathtub, shouting with glee while playing high and low tide. That is to say, mainly high tide. The bathroom was flooded. I scolded her. No reaction whatsoever. On the one hand, I was angry because I already knew who would be the one to clean up the mess. On the other hand, I had a happy child before me who was clearly having a blast. What to do? Show clear limits or slacken the rules?

Eva Ullmann says: "As an adult, you cannot always avoid being the spoilsport. Yet if there's nothing at stake, you can sometimes turn a blind eye. Parents can change roles from time to time without having to fear a loss of authority."

### **Humour helps us through life**

Parents cannot determine what a child will find funny later in life. According to humour scholars, that depends on a number of factors, on genes, but also on friends, parents, (pre-school) teachers, role models. Parents can nevertheless support their kids in their humour development. On the one hand, by simply laughing with them often, by occasionally going along with their nonsense. Tickling them all over, puffing until traffic lights turn green, speaking like a crazy opera singer – that's fun, it clears our heads and strengthens family bonds. On the other hand, parents can show their kids the whole panoply of humour. "If a boy flunks his math test, I can add to his shame and go on and on about it – or I can joke about it to make him look good: 'Hey, today you're the hero of bad grades!'" says Eva Ullmann. That preserves a good atmosphere and helps to take the mishap lightly: humour as a coping strategy. "If we equip our kids with this view on misfortunes, quirks and opposition, we provide them with a great gift for life."

Translated by Dr. Kareen Seidler