

## **"Spinach on the floor is funny", Interview by Franziska Storz, *Nido*, 5/2011**

*Nido* is a monthly magazine for young and hip parents. It's being issued by *Stern*, one of the most well-known weekly German news magazines. The topic of this interview is children's humour and the development thereof, jokes about taboo topics and possible differences between girls' and boys' humour.

Original interview in German: <http://www.humorinstitut.de/media/NIDO-kinderhumor.pdf>

*The most important thing is that it doesn't fit together properly: kids' humour follows simple rules.*

### **"SPINACH ON THE FLOOR IS FUNNY"**

*How do kids develop a sense of humour? If you allow them to do so, says humour researcher Eva Ullmann. It's probably in the nature of things that parents don't always join in the laughter.*

**Interview** Franziska Storz      **Photo** Knotan

#### **Ms. Ullmann, what do you find funny about kids?**

Kids don't think about whether a joke makes them look good or not – unlike most adults. They don't care whether their humour works or not. Now that's funny.

#### **Nearly all parents remember the moment when their child smiled for the first time.**

That may indeed be a magical moment, but it has nothing to do with real humour. It's a welcoming smile. The baby is able to recognize its parents at the age of about 12 weeks.

#### **And not much later it cracks up if you get close enough to its face, make weird noises, tickle it a bit or pretend that you want to scare it.**

That's when we experience the primeval forms of laughter. If you tickle someone's foot, they will pull away. If you repress that movement, the energy piles up in the body and breaks out again through the diaphragm: a very simple bodily reaction.

#### **And can you call that humour?**

The cognitive ability for humour, that is to say that related to the mind, develops at the age of one or two. Kids must be able to recognize contradictions and to change their perspective. Then they laugh themselves to stitches when they put a sock on their head. The spoon full of food belongs in the mouth. If the kid uses its hands to take spinach from the plate and throws it on the floor, that's funny.

#### **Very funny.**

For parents, the challenge lies in not always being the spoilsport, in not inhibiting all too strictly the development of humour and the development of the mind associated with it. But on the other hand, they also need to set clear boundaries.

#### **At which point does humour usually continue to develop along more normal lines, without necessarily messing up the dinner table?**

At the age of two to three, children begin using verbal jokes. Again, whatever is not normal is funny: a dog going meow, a horse that whistles. They start experimenting with strange sounds. And when they learn to use the potty, body-related words become funny. The fascination with pee, poo and

winds will go on for a while. This is related to the fact that kids now begin to develop a sense for taboos. For some people, this fascination lasts a whole lifetime... Kids between the ages of three and five also like to use their body to produce humour, they pull faces or wiggle their bum. They learn how to distinguish between reality and fantasy and are delighted about a story's crazy ending. And for them it's great fun to do something unexpected like not obeying or simply running away really fast.

### **Parents don't always find that funny, either.**

Psychologists believe that humour always develops when there's resistance. And the first time a kid becomes conscious of its lack of power is during the terrible twos, the age of defiance. Of course, this new form of humour can be exhausting for parents. Nevertheless they should avoid the line: "That's not funny."

### **Why?**

You don't have to teach nonsense to kids. Similarly, you can't make them give it up. A human being never laughs as much in later life as they do at the age of three. In my opinion, parents should view a sense of humour as a skill – like other things that are valued in education: reliability, courage, later perhaps punctuality. Kids lose their easiness soon enough; parents can provide a sort of safety zone. Because humour can be an important outlet, for instance to deflect aggression.

### **At the supermarket checkout, the three-year-old daughter of a friend pointed her finger at a man in a wheelchair. She laughed really loudly and for a long time because "the old man is still sitting in a stroller." What should one do in such a situation?**

In any case: do not turn away ashamed. Instead, join in the laughter but in a way that puts the man in a good light. He probably has a sense for self-irony. Most people with a visible impairment do. If you pretend that the kid didn't make the joke, that's discriminating. Rather comment on the situation: my daughter is currently experimenting with humour. We're in the phase where this happens at the expense of other people. Sorry.

### **Young children often laugh in quite an artificial manner when they believe this is a moment where they should be laughing.**

Children as young as two can sense that humour is welcomed by their surroundings. That's why they wildly experiment how they can make others laugh. They don't yet know the dramaturgic rules that jokes normally follow. But they know that adults like to join in the laughter if they pretend that something is funny right now.

### **What happens in our body when we laugh?**

Barbara Wild, a neurologist from Tübingen, describes something like a humour circuit in the brain: a region in the parietal lobe of the brain thus first registers surprise about the joke, then a region in the frontal lobe becomes active when the punch line is being understood, and finally an area in the temporal lobe signals a feeling of amusement. The brainstem then gives the facial muscles the order to laugh. When kids laugh really loudly, their entire body is given a good shake. The oxygen concentration in the blood rises and the blood circulation gets going. Afterwards, the body can relax much more easily. Hospital clowns also make use of this positive effect.

### **Are the development of humour and the development of intelligence connected?**

A psychologist would kill you for this question. It's too simplistic. There aren't enough studies dealing with humour in childhood. But it is nevertheless striking that humour is strongly associated with

other cognitive skills. Humour always means: I understand what's going on and I am able to abstract from that. Children usually only understand irony from the age of 10 onwards. Yet if irony is frequently used in families, children can learn to understand it earlier.

### **Do boys and girls laugh about different things?**

There are studies assuming that schadenfreude (or malicious glee) is more highly developed in boys. Young boys like to laugh about the misfortunes of other people; their humour is a little more conspicuous. Girls are ascribed a more subtle sense of humour. The findings of the US-scholar Paul McGhee, who was among the first to produce a comprehensive study about children and humour, also point in that direction: from the age of 6 onwards, boys tell more jokes than girls do and they also produce more physical humour. Boys laugh more often, while girls smile more often. Boys tell more jokes than girls do, if you ask them to, and they are also better at explaining why a particular joke is funny. Yet generally, girls and boys are equally good at understanding humour and they also appreciate it equally. Boys like hostile humour, schadenfreude, more than girls do. Girls and women use social laughter more frequently because they want social approval. Yet scholars generally assume that all of these differences are the result of nurture, not nature.

### **Speaking of women's and men's jokes: how can I avoid that my daughter will one day think that Mario Barth [a very popular German comedian fond of gendered and not particularly intellectual jokes] is funny?**

I don't think you can. Regarding the topic of humour, kids behave the same way they do with clothes. If there's something the parents really dislike, the daughter will find it appealing. The more vehemently you object to poo-jokes, the funnier they will seem to your three-year-old. Having said that, I myself don't define humour as good or bad along some kind of boundary of good taste. What is rather crucial is the question: is humour at the expense of someone else or not? Humour is dangerous whenever it offends or injures someone else. That's where the boundary is. Apart from that, every kid has their own taste and in the best case scenario that taste continues to develop quickly. For instance, as a teenager I thought that Monty Python was simply horrible. Today, I love it.

### **Can you tell us your favourite joke?**

No. I'm not particularly funny. Why do you think I founded the institute?

Translated by Dr. Karen Seidler