



ASHBROOK INDEPENDENT SCHOOL

To Challenge and Nurture Academically Capable Students

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Is it Monday Yet? 4/30/24



Learning to Laugh as a Healthy Practice for our Children... and US!

Did you know that May 5th is World Laughter Day? Until my wife shared this calendar item with me a few days ago, I had no idea. And I have to say, now that I know it, I am making no deliberate plans to laugh on Sunday, any more than I usually would, which is to say, "a lot." I feel very fortunate to be one of those people moved easily to laughter, maybe not as easily as the man in [Bodhisattva in Metro](#), the definition of "infectious laughter," but pretty easily. Moreover, and I am sure I am not alone in this, I am naturally drawn to those who make me laugh and I enjoy paying it forward by giving others the gift of laughter when I can.

When I was raising my family, nothing got me going easier than the things my kids used to say and do as they were trying to make sense of the world, not unlike aliens who just landed and adopted a "fake-it-till-you-make-it" strategy to fitting in while figuring it out. I have a catalog of these moments I could share, and I am sure you have your own list, as well.

And this is not to say that raising three children was/is not hard: I think a certain amount of stress (worry, fear, anxiety... guilt, etc.) is inevitable for parents, and maybe what we signed up for, but I also remember making the conscious decision not to let the stress get the best of me, and to be open to seeing joy first, which I knew would help me to think more clearly, make better decisions, feel better, and provide the healthiest possible example of the behavior I wanted my children to emulate.

These days, nothing cracks me up more than my dog, like last weekend when he got a hold of a can of shaving cream, bit a hole in it, and ran around the house spraying foaming soap everywhere. He seemed like he was having a good time and I would swear he was laughing (visit [Dozens of Animals Laugh Too, Study Shows](#), a three minute listen on NPR). Hilarious... maybe not at the time, but later. After it was all cleaned up, I laughed, and it did make me feel better. And it was at that moment that I thought of a quotation by the psychologist William James (brother of novelist Henry), considered to be the father of American psychology, who said, “we don’t laugh because we’re happy – we’re happy because we laugh.”

In fact, research connected to human biochemistry, revealed many years following this James-ism, that simply moving the facial muscles into “laugh position” is enough to trigger the release of endorphins, a fact I try to remember when walking into my apartment these days, which still smells like a barbershop.

Notwithstanding for the sake of brevity and to give me a topic for a future article, the sayings “if I didn’t laugh, I’d cry,” and “sadness is the root of all humor,” often attributed to Mark Twain, both suggesting a close relationship between the sad and the funny, it is often said that “laughter is the best medicine,” but what exactly does that mean?

In fact, the act of laughter does play a crucial role in promoting good health. Its benefits are related to our physical, psychological, and social well being, making it a readily available, no-prescription required enhancer of health in several domains, and what a GREAT lesson to teach our children, by both example and exhortation.

Physical Health Benefits

Laughter triggers a cascade of biological reactions that benefit the body. One of the most immediate effects is the stimulation of organs due to increased oxygen intake, as laughter enhances respiratory function by expanding the lungs and replenishing the system with fresh air. This boost in oxygen levels energizes the body and relaxes muscles, providing short-term relief from stress and physical tension.

Furthermore, laughter has been shown to improve immune function. It increases the production of antibodies and activates T-cells, which help ward off pathogens. This immune boosting effect makes laughter a valuable ally in combating common illnesses like colds and even more severe health conditions.

Laughter also promotes heart health by improving blood vessel function and increasing blood flow, which can help protect against cardiovascular problems such as heart attacks and strokes. Additionally, it can help lower blood sugar levels, making it beneficial for individuals with diabetes or those at risk of developing the condition.

Finally, yuck it up as you are grabbing that donut from the staff room: laughter actually helps burn calories by raising your heart rate!

Psychological Health Benefits

The psychological benefits of laughter are profound. It releases endorphins, the body's natural feel-good chemicals, which provide an overall sense of well-being and can temporarily relieve pain. Laughter also helps reduce the level of stress hormones such as cortisol and adrenaline, lowering stress and enhancing mood.

Moreover, laughter provides a psychological buffer against despair and can improve the outlook of those suffering from depression or anxiety. It promotes resilience by enabling individuals to view stressful situations more clearly and provides a coping mechanism that reduces the perceived intensity of problems.

Social Benefits

Laughter has a unique ability to create and strengthen social bonds. Shared laughter fosters emotional connections, promotes group cohesion, and enhances communication by breaking down barriers and reducing conflicts. It serves as a powerful tool for managing interpersonal stress and conflict, facilitating more positive relationships at work, in family settings, and within social groups. In fact, your body is evolutionarily wired to smile at times of stress related to conflict, one benefit of which is the calming impact of a friendly face (NEVER tell a child who is smiling while being criticized, to "wipe that smile off your face." Although it may look like they are not listening or taking you seriously, they are smiling BECAUSE they are listening and taking you seriously... and likely have no idea they are smiling).

Therapeutic Applications

Given its myriad benefits, laughter therapy has been integrated into various therapeutic modalities, with a great deal of research in this area published in the wake of the stress we all experienced during the COVID lockdown (see [Laughter Therapy: a humor-induced hormonal intervention to reduce stress and anxiety](#), published by the NIH; or [Stress relief from laughter? It's no joke](#), published by the Mayo Clinic). Some examples are laughter yoga and humor therapy, which involve voluntary laughter to provide the benefits even when something humorous isn't actually happening. Such therapies have been effective in improving morale and reducing stress in clinical settings, including hospitals and elder care facilities.

Laughter, like play and napping, is often undervalued because, culturally, we somehow think of it as counterproductive or not a behavior engaged in by serious people. On the contrary, however, there is plenty of research to support the importance of each of these behaviors as an important part of a productive and healthy life, and if Google's Books

Ngram Viewer is any indication, we seem to at least be using the word a lot more these days, which I suppose is a good sign.



Whether it's a spontaneous giggle or a hearty laugh, incorporating more laughter into our lives can be a simple yet powerful way to uplift health and well-being, and we don't need to limit it to only a single day of the year.