



Publication Details:

San Diego Family Magazine
April 2004
p. 116
Approximately 800 words

Play the Fool: Reconnect With Your Silly Side and Your Children

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These days, parents have such a full plate that time with their children is often spent interviewing them about their day, or focusing on how they could behave better.

When we're worn down from the details of life, we can forget about connecting with our kids in the simple, silly ways they crave. The bonds we build in fun make our children feel more at ease when they need to talk about something important, and help them hear us with fresh ears when we need them to listen.

Adam Ladd of "The Stupendous Circus Show," a comedy variety show for kids, based in San Diego, has learned a lot about connecting with children using humor. Ladd's circus show involves lots of physical humor that makes the child feel like the expert.

For example, Ladd suggests, "To make very young kids laugh, do something obviously wrong. Try to open the door and miss the doorknob, or put your shoe on your elbow. They love that kind of thing." Physical games are also great for giggles. "Remember, kids like to move around. Games like 'Stand on one foot; now stand on one foot with one eye closed' are fun," says Ladd.

During his many years entertaining children, Ladd has found that, when trying to connect in an affectionate, playful way, it is best to avoid questions. Granted, questions have their place in conversations with children, but according to Ladd, when your goal is creating closeness with your child during playtime, questions interrupt the flow of the moment.

For example, if a child is immersed in building with clay, a parent might attempt to connect with the child by asking, "What are you making?" The child is no longer able to spontaneously enjoy his exploration of the clay; he now has to analyze his activity and come up with something to satisfy the question.

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Even with the best intentions, questions often zap the fun out of the activity. Instead of interviewing the child about his play, Ladd suggests using positive, declarative statements to show enthusiasm like, “You sure are doing neat things with that clay.” Encouraging statements about what you see your child doing will help your child feel competent, foster a sense of accomplishment, and won’t stall the creative momentum of play, according to Ladd. So, keep it positive and follow your child’s lead when joining in their play.

San Diego’s Risa Goldberg, “The Musical Clown,” has worked as a clown for 20 years and also writes children’s poetry. She was a substitute teacher for 14 years, during which time her humorous outlook most certainly helped smooth over the rough spots. Her message to parents is simple. “Make an effort to be present in the moment with your children. Listen to your kids. Get out of your head and into your heart.”

Goldberg, suggests setting aside a fun activity weekly with kids’ input, if they are old enough. She explains, “The activity can be as simple as cooking dinner together, watching a funny movie, going to the park, or doing crafts.” One of Goldberg’s favorites is decorating cookies together. “Establish a tradition that will stick with you when times are tough. This gives everyone something to look forward to,” says Goldberg.

Goldberg urges parents to start having more fun with their kids by setting their own silly side free. “We forget the silliness of life,” remarks Goldberg. She includes the children in a marching band as part of her act and is always amazed by the magnificent costumes kids create out of simple square pieces of fabric. “Give credit to the kids for who they are. They have lots of good ideas and come up with such unique solutions. Kids come straight from the heart,” comments Goldberg.

Toby Prager, also known as “Toby the Clown,” based in San Diego, has worked with children for 17 years. Prager also suggests establishing fun rituals for daily activities. Make a game of putting toys away; animate toys with silly voices. Make eating fun, and kids will look forward to mealtimes. Prager says, “With pre-verbal children, create body language that makes them smile and says ‘Let’s have fun.’ Children have that little twinkle; mimic that back to them.”

Happy April Fool’s Day!

For April Fools’ high jinks visit www.familyfun.com and click on “Quicklink to Holidays.” Peruse a few of the pranks and have a rollicking day! A couple of my favorites were the “Time Warp” and “Alien Milk.”

Go ahead and get silly, and not just on April 1st. Come on out and play. Remember, the biggest fool wins the most giggles.

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Ondine Brooks Kuraoka, MSW, is a freelance writer from San Diego. She learned everything she knows about silliness from her parents. Her website has more published clips: www.sandiegofreelancewriter.com.