Humor in Child Care: The Double-Edged Sword

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ABSTRACT: Humor is a valuable resource in child care work. It can be conceptualized as a double-edged sword, capable of constructive or destructive functions. The article examines the functions of humor and suggests six conditions that promote constructive humor.

Q. How many child care workers does it take to change a lightbulb?
A. Only one, but the lightbulb must want to change.

Humor is a weapon in the arsenal of the child care worker. It functions as a weapon against narrow perspectives, burnout, stagnation, and sickness. It is also a weapon of aggression, defense, and superiority. A double-edged sword symbolizes the functions of humor in child care. One edge of the sword represents the positive functions of humor; the other edge represents the negative functions. This article will examine these functions and provide six conditions to facilitate constructive humor. It is based on five years of experience in youth care at a residential treatment center for adolescent boys.

Humor is difficult to understand. Even the relationship between laughter and humor is confusing. Tickling, laugh tracks, jokes, tense situations, and nitrous oxide are just a few of the sources of laughter. Yet some of these sources are not humorous. In this article, humor is conceptualized as the appreciation or construction of a communication intended to be playful or funny.

Constructive Humor

Humor as Reframer

People frame others, themselves, and reality. These frames influence how they perceive a situation. At the end of the Fifth Canadian Child Care Conference, Winnipeg was hit by a November blizzard that set records for snowfall. The objective amount of snowfall was the same for everyone (even though Americans saw inches while Canadians saw

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centimeters). Yet people framed the event differently. Some people felt angry about the shovelling and inconvenience, while others laughed at the "joke" nature played on the city. Owners of snow removal equipment called the blizzard a white gold rush.

Humor is an excellent way to reframe work. Early in my career as a child care worker, I was confronted by a 6'2", 250 pound boy of sixteen who bellowed, as I walked up the steps: "What the f... do you want?" I quickly reframed the meaning of "child." I also learned to reframe the "care" in child care when I unplugged toilets, fixed holes in the wall, and refereed television-induced wrestling matches in the living room. Creating and expressing humor with children and staff provided new frames to counterbalance the seriousness of work. This comic consciousness prevented "hardening of the categories."

**Humor as Healer**

Humor functions as a healer. Early Greek physicians viewed health as a balance of the four humors. Norman Cousins, the former editor of *The Saturday Evening Post*, developed a spinal illness. He believed laughter induced by watching Candid Camera and the Marx Brothers played a role in his successful recovery. Laughter also decreases muscle tone (Moody, 1978) and enhances respiration (Fry, 1977). Deep breathing and decreased muscle tone are the key components of relaxation strategies. Laughter, the "best medicine," may serve as a mini relaxation exercise helping children cope with physical or emotional pain.

**Humor as Stress Reducer**

A sense of humor can reduce or prevent stress by providing a physical release through laughter and by providing a new perspective. Christina Maslach (1982) believed that detached concern was an important skill in coping with stress, and humor is a way to detach from the emotional and stressful effects of child care work. For instance, one staff I worked with would often meet after work. Even though we swore we would not talk shop, the conversation would inevitably concern "the kids." Many of our anecdotes were humorous. Our laughter during these informal meetings alleviated stress and helped us regain energy for the next shift. The process works similarly for young people in care.

**Humor as Relationship Builder**

Building meaningful relationships is a major skill in caring for adolescents. Prasinos and Tittler (1981), in a study of humor and family dynamics, concluded that humor was an attempt by adolescents to