



# The Power of Laughter

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## *Humor helps keep life in perspective.*

One Sunday in sacrament meeting, my four-year-old son was making a major disturbance. After several minutes of trying to calm him down, I picked him up, tucked him under my arm like a sack of potatoes, and headed for the nearest exit. Shocked by the sudden departure, my son looked up at me and said, “Hey, Dad, where we goin’?” His innocent comment caught me by surprise and defused my anger instantly. He had no idea he was in trouble. He thought we were going out to play.

I have learned that the ability to laugh at everyday family difficulties helps keep life in perspective. If we will learn to laugh and play more with our families, not only will we feel better but so will they. “A merry heart doeth good like a medicine,” says Proverbs 17:22. Studies show that humor and laughter help people live longer, happier lives; be more creative and productive; and have more energy with less physical discomfort.<sup>1</sup> Humor reduces stress, fear, intimidation, embarrassment, and anger.<sup>2</sup> Laughter also has extraordinary healing power.<sup>3</sup> When a person laughs, blood pressure decreases, heart rate and respiration increase, the body releases endorphins, and depression declines.<sup>4</sup> After the laughter subsides and you relax again, that good feeling has a lasting effect, even until the next day.<sup>5</sup> Not many medicines will do that.

### **Becoming More Childlike**

On average, children laugh 400 times a day, while adults laugh about 15 times.<sup>6</sup> Why the gap? Did we lose something? Have we forgotten the way we used to be? Why is it that children seem to cope with life’s oddities better than adults? Perhaps it’s because they do not fully understand. But I think it’s simpler than that—they laugh. As we grow older, we get far too serious. Watch children play. They don’t need expensive toys to entertain them. Everything is fun. They are spontaneous. Only when we become adults do we start to get boring. Do we need to cultivate a different attitude? Humor is in the way we see things, the way we think. It’s an attitude, not an event. Perhaps the key lies in becoming more childlike.

Years ago I saw through my kitchen window a grown



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man playing with his children in a sandpile at a small neighborhood park. He was right down there on his hands and knees in the sand, building an imaginary town with streets, cars, trucks, trees, houses, stores, and schools. I could see the father pushing a wooden block bulldozer through the sand, pretending to build a road. He even made the sound effects of the bulldozer engine. I remember thinking, “Now there is an example of a great dad who knows how to play with his children.” He was in plain view to every passing car. Was he embarrassed or ruffled? Not at all. He seemed oblivious to the people passing by. Does this mean we should play in the sandpile with our children? Absolutely. Laugh more, play more, swing out of familiar places, be more the way you were when you were a child.

Laughter and play are closely related. Play puts everyone on an equal footing, first by the nature of play itself, and second because you can change the rules to fit the situation. Play brings families together. It is a subtle tool for interaction and talk. It builds confidence because you can modify the rules to bring about success or any outcome you desire. Our inhibitions are minimized, and our real personalities emerge. Through play we develop relationships naturally. We tend to like people we have fun with. Play allows us to use our minds and break out of familiar molds. It allows us to explore more.

### **Creating Fun Family Relationships**

Someone once said, “A little craziness once in a while perpetuates sanity.” When I return home from work each day, I consciously think about what I’m going to say the moment I enter the house. I actually practice my entrance



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a few seconds before I open the door. I usually shout some outlandish remark to get my family's attention. A typical loud verbal entrance for me is "Hello, all you

lucky people. I'm home." Such greetings usually raise an eyebrow with anyone visiting our home, but for the rest of the family, they know that it's just Dad. This may sound somewhat strange, but I find that it helps set the tone for a fun home and instantly puts everyone at ease. I'm sure that it occasionally embarrasses my children, but the good outweighs the bad. It also helps me to make the change mentally from work to home. I do not want to come home tired, ornery, or dull. Most of us try to be our best selves at work. Doesn't our family deserve at least the same effort?

I think laughter is more important than a family vacation because it's always available and it's free. Vacations are not. Big family events and vacations are wonderful, but these will not replace the daily humor and laughter in a home. Laughter is like getting away without going away. It gives you a break.

Laughter improves communication and builds relationships because everyone laughs in the same language. Your children will remember your humor much longer than they will the things you buy them. Children are more receptive when they are having fun. Laughter helps us remember. And we remember what we feel.

One must guard against building a showcase home rather than a fun home. Early in our marriage, my wife said, "Let's make our home more fun for our kids than

any other place they could be." Laughter and play are the best ingredients for that. We cannot duplicate Disneyland or any other amusement park, nor should we. A family firmly rooted in love and wholesome recreation is far better than that. In other words, home should be a fun place to hang out with family and friends.

Laughter makes us approachable. It removes barriers. If you want to talk to your children about a serious matter, try a lighter approach. Parent and child talks could often be more effective if play, laughter, and refreshments were added.

### **Humor in the Home**

Humor, used with sensitivity, can unite spouses. While I was serving as bishop of a singles ward, an engaged couple asked me if they could have their wedding reception at our house. I quickly replied, "Of course you can." I forgot to tell my wife. When she received their wedding invitation a few days before the big event, she happened to notice the address of the reception. When I got home from work she asked me if I had forgotten to tell her something important. After considerable thought I said, "No, not that I can think of."

"Are we having a wedding reception at our house?" she asked. From the expression on her face, I could tell I was in trouble.

"Ooooooh, you mean that reception," I replied. At such times you hope your wife has a good sense of humor. I



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When using humor, however, we must be careful not to offend, intimidate, or embarrass. We should

quickly helped her prepare the home for the wedding reception—under her able direction, of course.

Humor disarms most family tension. Once when I was talking to my children about some family issues, one of our teenagers crouched over, wrinkled up his nose, and with a tone of disapproval, blurted out some outlandish comment about what I had said. I was taken aback by his behavior. But suddenly I crouched over, wrinkled up my nose, and with a tone of disapproval, blurted out some outlandish reply, perfectly mimicking his behavior. The entire family burst into laughter, and the tension vanished.

Humor can be an effective tool when dealing with delicate matters. It allows you to walk among the sacred cows without disturbing the herd. For example, one year when Brigham Young University President Rex E. Lee was reviewing the BYU dress and grooming standards with the university community, he began by announcing that he wanted to show some examples of inappropriate dress and grooming standards on the huge screen in the Marriott Center. He caught us completely off guard. The slides were of him dressed in a variety of humorous, inappropriate outfits. He took a sensitive subject and presented it in a humorous way. We got the message. We never forgot it. You can do the same with your family.

laugh together rather than at someone. No one likes to be teased. No one likes to be the brunt of a joke. By learning to laugh at ourselves, we usually become safe from offending. Marjorie Hinckley appreciated this quality in her husband, President Gordon B. Hinckley. “He didn’t take himself very seriously and was often the first to poke fun at his own quirks.”<sup>7</sup> We should also be careful not to use humor in settings where it could be disruptive to the Spirit or where it would make light of sacred things.

Many family difficulties, however, given enough time, can be a source of humor. The trick is finding humor in the event now. Does this mean we go around laughing all the time? Of course not. But we certainly could all laugh more than we do. ■

#### NOTES

1. See R. Robinson, D. N. Khansari, A. J. Murgo, and R. E. Faith, “How Laughter Affects Your Health: Effects of Stress on the Immune System,” *Immunology Today* 11, no. 5 (1990), 170–75.
2. See W. S. Hamerslough, “Laughter and Wellness” (paper presented to the Southwest District of AAHPERD, June 22, 1995, Kahuku, Hawaii).
3. See N. Cousins, *Anatomy of an Illness* (1979).
4. See L. S. Berk, “Neuroendocrine and Stress Hormone Changes during Mirthful Laughter,” *American Journal of the Medical Sciences* 296, no. 7 (1989), 390–96.
5. See K. S. Peterson, “A Chuckle a Day Does Indeed Help Keep Ills at Bay,” *USA Today*, Oct. 31, 1996, p. 10D; see also Berk, *American Journal of the Medical Sciences* 296, no. 7, 390–96.
6. See Robinson, “How Laughter Affects Your Health.”
7. Sheri L. Dew, *Go Forward with Faith: The Biography of Gordon B. Hinckley* (1996), 106.