

Educating the Young Child 15

Advances in Theory and Research, Implications for Practice

Eleni Loizou

Susan L. Recchia *Editors*

Research on Young Children's Humor

Theoretical and Practical Implications
for Early Childhood Education

 Springer

Educating the Young Child

Advances in Theory and Research, Implications
for Practice

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Eleni Loizou • Susan L. Recchia
Editors

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Preface

This book provides a wide spectrum of research on young children's humor from multiple perspectives, illuminating its depth and complexity. Our interest in humor began while working with infants in the infant room of the Rita Gold Early Childhood Center at Teachers College, where Eleni was doing her doctoral studies and Susan was her supervisor. In a constant endeavor to comprehend infants' thinking, we were drawn by the repetitive humorous interaction between two boys, who, while at the eating table, would look at each other and begin to laugh. We saw this as an excellent topic for research which intrigued us both back in 2000, when almost no research on humor in infancy had been done. Inspired by children's humorous behaviors and interactions with their peers and caregivers, Eleni developed her dissertation, the outcomes of which led to two specific theories, Theory of the Absurd and the Empowerment Theory. Expanding on her commitment to doing research with young children, Eleni continued to explore these theories with preschool and kindergarten children in different contexts. The resulting publications and conference presentations provided multiple opportunities to share our understanding of young children's humor production and appreciation. On one of these occasions, at the European Early Childhood Education Research Association conference in Ireland, we were invited by Springer to consider submitting a book proposal on the subject of humor.

We were very excited and a little worried about inviting researchers who combined in their work a focus on the unique concept of humor and how it applied to young children, knowing that there is still limited research of this nature. However, as we began to recruit our chapter authors, we were pleased to discover the growing diversity of approaches to studying humor with a wide range of ages that our contributors add to this volume. The chapter by the pioneer of young children's humor, Paul McGhee, is a strong addition to the book, while those of other reputable researchers, who have explored children's development, skills, and interests in play and other areas, add additional depth to this diverse volume. The variety of ways that humor can and does contribute to early development and learning are reflected in the chapters with an aim toward eliciting among researchers and practitioners further interest in investigating young children's humor. Additionally, each chapter

author offers practical implications of their research, making the volume useful to both researchers and practitioners.

Although humor studies with very young children, particularly infants and toddlers, continue to be a very small area of the field, humor research across populations has grown in the past two decades across fields. It has become a more prominent feature in positive psychology, for example, where it has been reimaged as a form of resilience and strength as opposed to previous conceptions of humor where it was seen as a defense rather than a resource (Abel, 2008; Edwards & Martin, 2014). The time is right to bring new focus to the topic of humor and the depth of its reach in both psychology and education. This book is an attempt to shed new light on the early emergence, use, and appreciation of humor in young children while also informing the diversity of possibilities for furthering its study in the field.

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Eleni Loizou
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Susan L. Recchia is a Professor of Early Childhood and Special Education at Teachers College, Columbia University. Professor Recchia's scholarship focuses on issues of development and diversity and explores the ways that early childhood teachers come to understand children's multiple learning needs and enact practices to meet them. She is drawn to questions about social and emotional experiences in early learning; the development of adult-child relationships; issues in inclusive early care and education; and early childhood teacher development. She explores children's developmental changes and teachers' transformative experiences within particular sociocultural contexts, such as infant childcare and early childhood inclusive classrooms. Professor Recchia's publications span a variety of both national and international journals and books. She is a co-author (with Yoon-Joo Lee) of *Inclusion in the early childhood classroom: What makes a difference?* New York: Teachers College Press and a co-editor (with Leslie J. Couse) of the *Handbook of*

Early Childhood Teacher Education, Routledge. Professor Recchia also serves on the executive board of the New York Zero to Three Network and the editorial board of the *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education* (JECTE). She is also the Faculty Director of the Rita Gold Early Childhood Center (RGC), TC's on-site inclusive, culturally responsive center for early care and education, which has provided a special context for synthesizing her scholarship, practice, teaching, and outreach.

Chapter 1

Young Children's Humor



Eleni Loizou and Susan L. Recchia

Defining Humor

Humor, as an area of research, has been explored from multiple perspectives including health, communication, sociology, advertising, education, psychology, and linguistics, among others (Alden, Mukherjee, & Hoyer, 2009; Bergen, 2007, 2015a, 2015b; Dines, 2009; Hoicka & Akhtar, 2011, 2012; Loizou & Kyriakou, 2016; Martin, 2007; McGhee, 2002; Mireault et al., 2012; Nwokah, Burnette, & Graves, 2013; Schwartz, 2010; Westwood & Johnston, 2013). It can be defined in simple words as an experience which is either produced or appreciated and causes smiling and/or laughter, the social indicators of humor. There are other terms used to explain humor that take on different points of view and/or describe specific situations or events, such as irony, satire, teasing, and sarcasm. Although humor seems to be a familiar experience for most people, it is indeed perplexing at times to clearly define and deconstruct it, especially when examining young children's humor. As unique human beings who have their own way of understanding the world and expressing their thinking, which is often quite different from that of adults, young children can present quite an interesting scientific challenge to researchers attempting to explore their production and/or appreciation of humor.

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Origins of Humor

Theories which explain why we laugh are based on different perspectives on humor. For example, the Superiority theory suggests that we laugh at people who experience an unfortunate event (e.g. tripped and fell down in the mud) because watching them makes us feel superior (La Fave, Haddad, & Maesen, 2007). McGhee, one of the chapter authors in this volume, is a pioneer in studying children's humor and was the first to provide us with a developmental scheme of children's humorous abilities. McGhee described four stages of humor development which were directly related to children's cognitive development as explained by Piaget and which support the Incongruity theory. The four stages include the following: Stage 1: Incongruous Actions Towards Objects, where children use objects in unexpected ways to create a humorous event (e.g. use a banana as a phone); Stage 2: Incongruous Labelling of Objects and Events, where children purposefully misuse words and phrases (e.g. touch their nose and say ear); Stage 3: Conceptual Incongruity, where children alter the elements of classes of events in order to produce an incongruous situation (e.g. drawing a dog with wings); and finally Stage 4: Humor in Multiple Meanings, where children purposefully play with reversibility of situations, through the use of language and actions (e.g. the riddle-what is black and white and is red all over?). McGhee's stages of humor development have been further explored and elaborated by other researchers to advance our understanding of children's humor and to provide more tools to examine children's humor. Loizou (2005) for example supports a socio-cognitive framework of considering young children's humor elaborating on the Theory of the Absurd and the Empowerment Theory. Specific categories within these theories include: Incongruous Appearances (e.g. drawing a house with hands and feet), Humor Symbols (e.g. drawing a clown with colorful clothes), Violation of Rules (e.g. a story with a child at the beach putting sand on his head and laughing), and Violence (e.g. a story about a whale who ate everything in the ocean, her belly grew really big and then exploded); all help to expand our understanding of young children's humor.

Studies Investigating Humor and Young Children's Development and Learning

Research on young children's (infancy-third grade) humor, although limited, highlights the connection between humor and children's development and learning. Connections are made between their ability to appreciate/produce humor and specific cognitive and social skills (Bergen, 2016). At first, children enjoy and produce humor by recognizing and producing an incongruity during a humorous event. As they develop more cognitive skills (e.g. language and conceptual understanding)

and experiences, they begin to notice the incongruities and comment on their resolution which adds to their humor experience. For example, a 2 year old child can consider a picture of a cat with wings humorous and as she gets older she can comment on the fact that this picture is funny by saying that cats do not have wings, birds do. The younger children are, the more they appreciate visual and motor humor. During preschool and kindergarten years verbal and abstract humor receive more interest (Semrud-Clikeman & Glass, 2010). Humor development provides educators a window into children's learning and development, but further exploration is needed in order to highlight its importance and potential use in children's lives. Several studies have examined humor and its kin with learning and development concepts, skills, and knowledge. Examples of such studies include: the connection between humor and creativity (Boyle & Stack, 2014); joke creation and recall by children with and without hearing loss (Nwokah et al., 2013); humor perception and creation between parents and infants (Mireault et al., 2012); toddlers distinguishing between pretending and joking (Hoicka, 2016); the use of clowning as play and empowerment motives in an early childhood setting (Loizou, 2016).

Humor as a Pedagogical Tool in the Early Years' Classroom

The pedagogical implications of humor most often refer to the impact it can have on classroom environments, linking the environment to how well children learn or acquire specific skills or knowledge. There is limited research which examines the use of humor in the classroom and when this is the case, participants are usually elementary school children and college students (Garner, 2006; Wanzer, Frymier, Wojtaszczyk, & Smith, 2006). Typically, research examining the relationship of humor to children's development and learning provides us with suggestions and implications in reference to classroom practice. It is often suggested that positive humor supports an affirmative classroom climate which in turn makes the relationship between the teacher and the students positive enough to enhance their well-being (Jeder, 2015).

It is important to highlight and acknowledge that research on young children's humor, which is limited and at times hard to frame, needs to provide a general picture of children's production and appreciation of humor. Moreover, it must also consider humor as an intellectual process while at the same time exploring the social and emotional processes involved, to more fully understand the impact of the culture and context in which humor takes place, and the humans involved in the experience of humor (Mireault & Reddy, 2016).

This collection of chapters provides a wide spectrum of research on young children's humor from multiple perspectives, illuminating its depth and complexity. We have divided the chapters into three distinct parts, each of which is described below.

Part I: Development and Learning

The chapters in this part of the volume focus on very young children, revealing complex understandings of the connections between early humor development and other aspects of social experience. In Chap. 2, Doris Bergen provides a meaningful overview of the literature on early humor, bringing the strong connections between humor and play to life. She highlights the developmental characteristics of play and humor starting from infancy through constructivist and psychoanalytic perspectives. Drawing on findings from both her own studies and other people's work, Bergen highlights the socio-emotional, language, and cognitive links between play and humor. Concepts of joy, playfulness, and imagination are shown to be manifested in both play and humor experiences. Finally, she provides practical suggestions for fostering humor and play, supporting the importance of a playful environment in the home and at school.

In Chap. 3, Elly Singer provides us with descriptions, anecdotes, and examples from interactions between toddlers, elaborating on different sources of laughter. She bases her writing on a previous study in which she and her colleague (Singer & De Haan, 2007) explored laughter episodes as exhibited by 2 and 3 year-olds during free play in their child care center. They specifically highlight how laughter unfolds during a socially embedded experience. Children begin to know the pattern of behavior which causes pleasure and influences the partner, thus experiencing agency together. Singer describes three sources of laughter: a. social laughing; b. incongruity-based humor; and c. pleasure to function. Her work encompasses a broad framework of humor focusing on laughter sources and allows us to consider the connections between play, playfulness, laughter, and humor.

In Chap. 4, Lucy James and Claire Fox explore the different styles of humor employed in daily life such as affiliative, self-enhancing, self-defeating, and aggressive. They describe the four humor styles approach to explain the development of the Humor Styles Questionnaire (HSQ) for adults and then show how they have explored the HSQ with younger children aged 8–11. Using an experimental framework, they examine children's understanding of the different humor styles. They also make associations between children's humor styles and aspects of psychosocial adjustment. For example, they suggest that aggressive or maladaptive humor can be negatively associated with friendship. They provide suggestions for future directions in researching children's humor styles.

In Chap. 5, Wen Liu, considering humor as a characteristic of ones' personality, explores the development of 3–5 year-olds' sense of humor. Through a series of experimental tasks and the implementation of different measures (e.g. Sense of Humor Questionnaire, Temperament Questionnaire, and Humor Styles Questionnaire) she examines how children's temperament and their parents' sense of humor can impact their own sense of humor. Her work, among other findings, fosters the cultivation of children's sense of humor and highlights the age of four as a turning point for children's development of sense of humor.

Part II: Teaching and Classroom Experiences

The chapters in Part II of the volume explore ways that humor emerges in classroom life as a vehicle for teaching and learning. In Chap. 6, Paul McGhee, a pioneer in young children's humor, elaborates on why we should and how we can incorporate humor in early childhood education (ECE). He makes a case for humor in the classroom by articulating how play has been a leading way of "teaching" in ECE, but changes in education policy, with their emphasis on standards and measurable outcomes, have compromised opportunities for play. Drawing on different research studies, McGhee explicates humor as a useful tool that can support children's attention and memory and can create an overall positive emotional state which supports learning. He also refers to the impact of humor on teachers' own emotional state explaining how crucial it is for teachers to use humor to cope with daily difficulties. Humor, as explored through different infant studies, can help infants copy humorous behaviors and better understand the intentions of adults. McGhee discusses a number of research studies which have explored humor in either older children or even college students, cautioning us on how we use their specific outcomes in reference to younger children. Finally, he provides different practical ideas for incorporating humor in the ECE classroom, suggesting that this should be done in order to create a positive climate in the classroom, to challenge children who lose their attention, and to confirm previously acquired knowledge.

In Chap. 7, Eleni Loizou and Evi Loizou describe a teaching intervention which included a series of creative structured activities with elements of humor and examine its impact on children's humor productions, narratives, and visuals. The artifacts produced by the children were examined in relation to the Theory of the Absurd and the Empowerment Theory framework in order to unfold their understanding of humor and highlight their original thinking. Findings support both of these elements and infer that the use of a structured program with creative activities and humor elements can scaffold children's humorous narratives and visual productions of humor.

In Chap. 8, Nikos Chaniotakis and Magdalini Papazoglou focus on the place of humor in the classroom. They include a presentation of the literature which explores classroom uses of humor and highlights the types of humor teachers might use in the classroom as well as the reasons why teachers might choose not to use particular types of humor during their teaching. Then, through their own work, they elaborate on the use of humor by teachers and students both quantitatively and qualitatively. Their findings suggest that humor used in the classroom may or may not relate to the content of the subject area being explored, and it is mainly used positively. They provide suggestions for how humor can be employed in the classroom by teachers and support its use as an important teaching tool.

In Chap. 9, Eleni Loizou and Simoni Symeonidou share their pilot study on the use of cartoons as an educational tool to fight disability stereotypes. Specifically, the researchers describe their intervention program which was implemented with a small group of children between the ages of 6 and 9. They explain the details of the program, referring to the deconstruction of disability stereotypes, exploration of

cartoon genre, and the combination of the two where cartoons are used to deconstruct disability stereotypes. Findings suggest that when guided appropriately, children begin to understand the use of humor, especially the production of cartoons, as an empowering tool to develop a critical stance on disability stereotypes.

In Chap. 10, Lisa Arter provides us with a thorough examination of picture books, types of jokes, and novels (for example *Chicka, Chicka Boom Boom* by Bill Martin Jr., *Interrupting Chicken* by David Ezra Stein, *Amelia Bedelia* by Peggy Parish, riddles and puns) whose authors employ humor in their writing. She then gives detailed suggestions as to how teachers can use these texts in order to support children's literacy development. The chapter is structured based on children's ages and skills, starting from infancy (18 months) and continuing to elementary school age children (until 11 years). She specifically highlights texts that can creatively support children's vocabulary development and makes practical suggestions for each age group.

Part III: Other Perspectives and Contexts

The chapters in Part III expand on our understandings of young children's humor by introducing new ways of seeing children's worlds through the prism that humor provides. In Chap. 11, Vasu Reddy provides examples of infant humor exchanges, uncovering humor cultures and describing how these are formed and maintained through: (1) Dialogicality, referring to the importance of dialogue that emerges from and within interaction, and considering laughter as the outcome of a joke that adds to the comic of the situation; (2) Particularity, referring to time and space which differentiate the content of the humor experience making it context specific; and finally (3) Precariousness, referring to ambiguity as an element which exists in the experience of producing or appreciating humor and can impact the creation and re-creation of the humor culture.

In Chap. 12, Laura Jennings-Tallant uses Bakhtin's theory of carnivalesque as a framework for understanding children's humor. She provides empirical data to show how children's humor is presented as carnivalesque clowning and is employed as a means to question authority. She discusses how teachers need to consider young children's humor and how through this perspective it can be considered as part of the curriculum.

In Chap. 13, Jennifer Mata-McMahon explores the connections between humor and children's spirituality. She suggests that elements of joy, compassion and kindness, relating to others, creativity, and imagination are common in the development of the humorous and spiritual self. While exploring children's humor experiences one can pinpoint elements of spirituality. Moreover, Mata-McMahon infers that humor experiences, when positive, produce joy and this leads to happiness. She makes the claim that happiness, which she supports as the ultimate state in a person's life, is what school and curricula should aim at.

In the final chapter of the volume, Susan Recchia and Eleni Loizou provide a summary of the different studies and work presented on children's humor. We attempt to make connections between the ways that children exhibit their humorous behavior, how they understand humor, and how adults, especially early childhood teachers, can nurture these behaviors and capitalize on them to support learning and development. The chapter also provides a framework for future research, suggesting ways young children's humor can be explored further with specific research questions as a means to fill the void in this area.

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Part I
Development and Learning

Chapter 2

Young Children's Play and Humor Development: A Close Theoretical Partnership



Doris Bergen

Mom says, "Are.... you.... (long pause) the cutest baby in the world?????" while tickling A. (9 months). A. laughs uproariously and sometimes she even falls over with laughter.

Mom: During feeding B. (12 months), I tried to remove the spoon from his mouth, but he grasped the spoon with his teeth and would not let go. While I was trying to remove the spoon, he began to laugh (and so did I).

Mom: G. (age 3.5) informed me that he had changed his name. When I asked him what his new name was, he first replied "California Beef Stew." After I called him that a few times as a joke, he changed it to "Beef Stew with a Forklift on his Head" and laughed.

Mom: B. (age 3.6) frequently laughs when objects or animals talk, in movies or books. Specifically, she laughs at Mrs. Pots and Chip talking in the Cinderella book.

Mom: We asked N. (age 3.7) if there was anything special she would like for dinner and she made an exaggerated face and exclaimed, "Pickle, peanut butter, asparagus, za'atar, spaghetti sandwich." She played this game for about a week and we reinforced this by trying to be even more silly, suggesting, "apple, ice cream, watermelon, pancake soup?"

Dad: When I asked M. (age 4.2) to tell me a joke, she said "I don't know." I asked again and she said "Happy birthday to you... No birthday for you!" She paused and then she started laughing.

Mom: L. (age 5.4) told me this riddle and laughed:
What do you call a cow with no legs? Ground beef!

Then he told this joke:

Knock, knock; Who's there?

Broken pencil; Broken pencil who?

Never mind. It's pointless.

(Then he said, "mom, what's pointless?" and I had to explain the word was "pointless" and what it meant.)

Teacher report: A boy and girl in the playhouse initiated a series of "Pour coffee on your head; pour coffee on your cheek, poor coffee onetc., laughing after each new remark." (The teacher allowed this playful humor escalation to continue.)

Teacher report: The boys were making play-do cookies for Mrs. W. After she "ate" them, they laughed and said, "We tricked you – they had a bomb in them!" Mrs. W. reacted in "horror" and then the boys said, "Just a joke!"

These various examples, taken from parent and teacher records of young children's humor (Bergen, 2007, 2017), clearly show how early humor is closely con-

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nected to playfulness and suggest that it is usually supported and often fostered by the playful adults in young children's lives who initiate some humor expressions and respond to or elaborate on child humor attempts during everyday playful adult-child interactions. There is wide variation in adult initiation and responsiveness to children's humor attempts, however, with some adults being very supportive of children's humor expression while others are less so (see Bergen, 1998, 2002). Researchers doing observational studies of humor and play in both homes and preschools typically find many humor examples generated by children during their play (e. g., Bergen, 2001; Hoicka & Akhtar, 2012; Klein, 1985; Loizou, 2016; Rossi, 2015; Varga, 2001). Studies conducted in both these settings have noted many examples of the ways that children express a range of humor types, and the researchers have pointed out how this humor shows both children's thinking processes, language competence, and social-emotional skills. Often the out-of-home child humor occurs during the "free play" times at preschools, which unfortunately now seem to be a disappearing feature of many early childhood classrooms (Frost, Worham, & Reifel, 2001).

Although there are both substantial reports of children's humor development occurring during their play and an extensive body of research literature describing children's play development, the body of literature and research specifically discussing the humor instances that occur during young children's playful actions at home and at school are more limited. Often, play researchers' accounts make it seem as though play is a very serious activity because they often do not record any of the humor instances that may be occurring during that play (Bergen, 2001, 2015). Although there are certainly times when young children's play does appear to have a serious focus, there also are many times when children's humor is exhibited, both in their playful "out of bounds" actions and their exuberant expressions of language that elicit gales of laughter. As the earlier list of examples suggest, young children's humor attempts often are closely connected to their playful attitudes and behaviors and these early humor attempts usually serve to increase the playfulness of all participants (e.g., child, parent, teacher, other children).

In contrast to the humor-absent reports of some play researchers, the close connections between playfulness, especially activities that show the "playful mind," and young children's early enjoyment of and specific expressions of humor are very apparent to researchers who study early humor development. These researchers typically give many examples showing the ways young children's initiation of and response to humor primarily occur during playful interactions. They have identified many play-related behaviors that generate humor, such as teasing, clowning, discovering and performing incongruous events, and engaging in word play with pre-riddles, riddles, and jokes (See Bergen, 1998; Reddy 2008; Reddy & , 2015) for examples of these varied humor types.). Humor researchers do not always discuss the theoretical play/humor connections, however, or the common theoretical bases for both of these constructs. The thesis of this chapter is that a "play frame" (see Bateson, 1956) appears to be an essential setting for early humor expression as well as for early play development, and the interconnections of play and humor can be

observed beginning in infancy, expanding into childhood, and continuing throughout life.

Children's growing ability to initiate and appreciate humorous situations and language during play is a vital factor in enhancing the development of both these important abilities, as well as in advancing their social-emotional, language, and cognitive development. Play and humor have strong theoretical connections, and they both support other areas of development. There is now a growing body of research that highlights their interactive nature, and the ways that children's development, both typically and atypically, is often enhanced by these play/humor connections.

Theoretical Connections Between Play Development and Humor Development

There have been historical accounts of the interaction of human playful and humorous behaviors, language, and thought over many centuries. Play has been described as having evolutionary origins arising from neurological bases in humans and in other animal species and some theorists have pondered the evolutionary significance of playful actions. Other theorists have discussed the evolutionary basis of humor and its connection to other areas of human development. Also, some theorists have described specific developmental aspects of the human play/humor relationship, noting the psychological meanings involved in social-emotional, language, and cognitive themes demonstrated in this relationship. Those who have been particularly interested in the role of social communication also have discussed the play/humor relationship (Black, 1992; Blanc, Adrien, Roux, & Barthélemy, 2005; Lewis, Lupton, & Watson, 2000).

Evolutionary Perspectives on Play and Humor

Both play and humor have been studied extensively (although often separately) and questions have arisen about the meaning of their pervasiveness in human behavior because, from an evolutionary perspective, they both seem to be nonessential behaviors (Boyd, 2004). That is, neither of them seem to be essential for human survival. In contrast to many other human behaviors that are clearly-related to survival, the question of why they have had such a strong developmental presence throughout human history when they do not seem to be immediately related to supporting survival needs, has been of theoretical interest. These theorists have concluded that both play and humor have been and continue to be vital components of human development that have fostered human evolutionary progress and they have tried to explain their evolutionary purpose.