

Norbert Neuß

# Children's humour

## Empirical findings on primary-school children's everyday use of humour

**Children laugh about many things, e. g., about language games or practical jokes they play on others. Other people's little misfortunes and playing with others' expectations, according to this multi-method study, are the most frequent sources. For the girls, aesthetically produced comedy elements such as funny voices or appearances top the list; boys particularly enjoy others' minor mishaps.**

7-year-old Jerome tells the following joke: "Mum, I just peed into the swimming pool." "Never mind, that happens to a lot of people!" "Yes, but not on the top diving board!" Writing an article about children's humour is no easy task. The more one tries to define their humour, the greater the risk of losing one's own. And yet I would like to report on a large-scale empirical study on primary-school children's humour I was commissioned to carry out in 2002 by the IZI. The focus was on what children laugh about in their everyday lives; that is, in daily family and school situations, and on television. In this study, we placed particular emphasis on television as a part of children's daily activities.

### 1. Questions and Methods

The study set out to assess empirically what children find funny and what they laugh about. This research project also aimed at providing media

and television producers with an empirically reliable insight into what primary-school children consider to be funny. This qualitative study differentiated between boys and girls and between first-/second-year pupils versus third-/fourth-year pupils.

The central research questions were:

- What do children laugh about in everyday life (daily family and school situations)?
- What jokes do children tell each other and what practical jokes or pranks do they create?
- What television programmes do children find funny?

#### *a) Group discussions with primary-school children*

173 children were interviewed in the 30 group discussions. The approx. 1,400 interview sequences taken from these group discussions were evaluated using qualitative and quantitative methods.

The children were mainly interviewed at the primary school in same-sex groups of six to eight children. The interview was based on a discussion thread that served to standardise the structure of the approx.



Illustration 1: Group discussion setting

45-minute group discussion. There were three interview phases: after a loosely structured (introductory) interview ("What was the last thing that made you laugh at school, among your friends or at home?"), the children were requested to tell a joke or talk about a practical joke they had heard. In the third discussion phase, the children were asked to say something about scenes on television they remembered as being funny, at first without any assistance and subsequently with the help of some video prints. They were also asked about programmes they would describe as comical and "instructive". The group discussion method has the advantage of permitting peer-to-peer communication as well as behavioural patterns different to those exhibited in an individual interview. The major disadvantage is group-dynamic effects: the group generates normative pressure (one child laughs and the others follow suit; the opinion leader problem; the children's inclination to go one further than the others, etc.). In short, the communicative guidance of a discussion leader is necessary. Furthermore, only reflexively conscious scenes – not spontaneous laughing situations – can be assessed (cf. Ill. 1).

#### *b) Parents' diaries record humorous episodes in everyday family life*

In view of the shortcomings of group discussions, it was considered important to collect data on natural everyday situations that make children laugh. 15 parents kept a "humour diary" for approx. half a year, in

which they described as many situations as possible when their child had laughed in an everyday situation, i. e. with the family, while watching a television programme, when playing with friends etc. They were also requested to note down the jokes told by their child – word-for-word, whenever possible.

For uniformity purposes, the parents received a diary thread containing a few instructions on how to compile and standardise their notes. This method of observing others seeks use of the parents' presence and observation powers.

The advantages of the method are derived from the children being observed in natural, daily situations over quite a long period of time, by those close to them who have a sound knowledge of their biography. One clearly positive aspect is that it provides a larger cross-section of empirical descriptive material gathered of authentic everyday humorous situations. The disadvantage, however, is the possibility of normative distortion by the parents (What do I want to reveal about my child?) and the problems related to standardisation. Altogether, 407 episodes from the humour diaries were typified and evaluated.

## 2. What makes primary-school children laugh?

The following are the findings from the analysis of the group discussions and parents' diaries. All the 1,400 interview sequences and 407 diary episodes were typified.<sup>1</sup> The analysis yielded 9 principal categories (including several different subcategories) of child humour, which I would like to outline below with a few examples.

### a) *Playing with language and meaning*

This category includes rhymes, cool expressions, the use of scatological language, playing with the context

and the meaning of concepts, humorous designations and terms, as well as plays on words and language. Simon says in a group discussion, e. g.:

"In the film *Der Schuh des Manitu* [Manitou's Shoe] there was a funny part. The (...) blood brother said: 'Abahatschee, my brother' and the other one standing next to him said: 'Bless you!'"

The humour in this scene is generated by the reaction of an ignoramus who says "Bless you" on hearing the mixture of "Apache" and "Hachee" (German for "atishoo").

Of course, the informed television viewer is aware that Abahatschee is the name of a character in the film, i. e. a proper name. A similar play on words comes about when children ask their joke questions. Yuri asks in a group discussion: "Is there a type of 'ham' you can't eat?" All the children and the interviewer look blank. Yuri replies: "Beckham." They all have to laugh.

### b) *Conflicts and solutions*

Children cannot help laughing, either, about solutions found by combining quick-wittedness, cunning and a touch of trickery. Conflicts are often settled by the "small" character outwitting the "big" one – sometimes by the former emerging victorious after a fight, sometimes by an original, crafty solution that settles the conflict and thus overcomes the problem in hand. An example of such an original solution is the following episode taken from a parent's diary:

"Linda tells me her dream: 'Mum, I was so lucky. I dreamt the alarm clock was ringing. So I wanted to turn it off. I put my hand on the lever (i. e. switch) and it was really ringing and I switched it off. You know, if I had switched it off before, I would've overslept!' Linda laughs."

Many jokes children tell have a similar structure, e. g. Andy told us this joke:

"There's an American, a German and a Chinese. The German, no, the American lies down on a bed of nails. After five

minutes he goes: Oh my back, oh my back! Then the German goes and lies down. After five minutes: Oh my back, oh my back! Then the Chinese goes and lies down. Six hours later: Oh my back, oh my back! The German goes up to him and asks: How did you stick it so long? Chinaman not stupid, he turn bed of nails over! Look, he lie on smooth side."

### c) *Playing practical jokes*

Children laugh and have fun when they can watch others provoking, annoying, scaring, kidding, fooling, deceiving, telling fibs or chasing. An example from a diary episode on *Meister Eder und sein Pumuckl* [Master Eder and his Pumuckl]:

"A friend of Master Eder is standing in the yard and shouts up towards the window of Eder's room: 'Eder, Eder ...!' Eder comes up from behind him, stands behind his friend, and watches his friend calling him. This situation suffices to make Mieke laugh. A short time later Eder reveals himself; his friend turns round and jumps. This makes Mieke laugh again."

Of course, they have just as much fun playing these or similar practical jokes on others, as illustrated by excerpts from a group discussion with second-year boys. David:

"I was at the swimming pool with Dad. Dad was standing at the edge of the pool. I pushed him with a big splash into the water."

And Alex reports:

"I sometimes do a joke on the phone. I just press different numbers and say: 'Hello and goodbye!' and hang up" (Laughter).

This form of humour also seems to be a reaction to normative limits the children know from their daily lives. Playing practical jokes and transgressing the boundaries are an attractive form of reacting to experienced limits.

### d) *Playing with expectations*

Children laugh very often when expected actions or behaviours sud-

denly do not come about, when somebody acts contrary to the norm, when totally inappropriate and unexpected reactions occur, when a misunderstanding or a mix-up takes place, when something or someone is presented in an extremely exaggerated or stereotyped fashion. Such playing with expectations appears in the following joke told repeatedly in various group interviews.

"Fritz's grandma and Fritz are out for a walk. Fritz finds a 10 Euro banknote. Fritz asks Grandma: 'Can I pick that up?' Grandma says: 'No. You mustn't pick up things lying around on the ground.' They walk on a bit and there's a banana skin lying on the ground. Grandma slips up on it and cries out: 'Fritz, give me a hand.' Fritz says: 'No, we aren't allowed to pick up what's lying on the ground.'"

In this category many jokes are told that are characterised by the punch line not being recognisable until the very end. The listener's thoughts are channelled in such a way that he or she is not prepared for the sudden twist at the end. The surprise effect creates the humour in this case.

#### e) *Delicate issues*

Children also laugh about topics they find embarrassing or delicate due to their lack of experience with this kind of themes. These include the naming of the genitals, laughing about nakedness, falling in love, getting married, kissing and sex. This phenomenon is well illustrated by the following example taken from a group discussion:

D: I've got something else. You know, Maike sexed with her boyfriend.

I: What? What did she do with her boyfriend?

A: She sexed! ... She kissed!

I: Oh, O.K., that word's new to me!

D + A: Laughter.

This category also includes embarrassing moments such as unwanted "physical noises".

Harry: Remember when Dominik farted in class? (Everyone is laughing.)

Max: Right in the middle of the lesson! (Everyone is laughing.)

It is quite conspicuous that mentioning certain words such as "fart" is enough to make the children in the group laugh. Helmers (1965) refers to this as follows:

"Adults' unrelenting claim that certain disdained expressions are devious lead to their extremely frequent use by children between the age of 9 and 11 for creating a comical effect. (...) Hence the child, who is still being inducted into his or her mother tongue at the age of around 10, develops a fascination with using effectively such scorned expressions. But let us make no mistake: The reason for the frequent use at this age is not yet the forbidden fruit aspect, the pleasure in doing something against the rules; what generates laughter is rather the comically perceived evasion of the norm as to what may be said in the standard spoken idiom."<sup>2</sup> A similar phenomenon is the designation of or reference to the genital areas of the body, which may be described as pre-pubescence behaviour. This is demonstrated by the joke told by 7-year-old Claudia:

"'Grandma, can I do a cartwheel?' Grandma says: 'No, everyone can see your knickers.' 'Mum, can I do a cartwheel?' 'No, everyone can see your knickers.' Mum goes shopping. 'You just did a cartwheel.' 'I took my knickers off before, though.'" (All the children laugh.)

Weinrebe (1977) also notes that schoolchildren tell each other obscene jokes even before puberty. Although there are counter-examples, primary-school children frequently do not recognise the sexual context referred to. Usually they know or suspect that such delicate jokes should only be told in rather private and almost secret situations. The secrecy element is the main appeal.<sup>3</sup>

#### f) *Others' little misfortunes*

Laura says the following in a group discussion:

"I couldn't help laughing once when I was in the bathroom. I was washing my hands and I noticed that there was no wash in the washing machine. Then I looked inside again to check if there was only black wash inside and I said to my Mum: 'You forgot to put the washing inside'. The whole family burst out laughing."

This category also includes accidents caused by awkwardness, clumsiness, inexperience, bad luck, or plain stupidity leading to concrete damage or considerable confusion. In this connection, the children naturally refer to TV programmes that focus solely on others' clumsy behaviour and misfortunes. 9-year-old Nicki says:

"In this programme called *Die dümsten Fußgänger der Welt* [The World's Dumbest Pedestrians], a car kinda drove into a farmyard. But at the gate there was so much mud. Then there was this hump where the guy got stuck 'cos he couldn't drive any further because of this mud. He's stuck. Then he gets out of the car and falls over. Every time he wants to walk up the hump, he slips up again and again. He walks up the hump and falls over into the mud. Again and again."

According to Helmers (1965), "values are negated by an exaggerated sense of malicious joy at others' misfortunes. The aim is the disparagement of another person."<sup>4</sup>

Kuschel (1994) also maintains that when someone laughs for reasons of malicious joy, they do not laugh "for fun". Their laughter arises from "fun derived from comic situations hinging on disparagement of others. (...) Laughing in this case (...) borders on malicious pleasure, with no moral regard for the weaker party who does not have the joke on his side, but is the target of the joke."<sup>5</sup>

This clearly negative appraisal of malicious joy is due to Helmers' and Kuschel's interpretation that the damage incurred is the cause of the laughter; they pay less regard to the function of humour.

A functional analysis reveals that this form of humour is related to the rein-



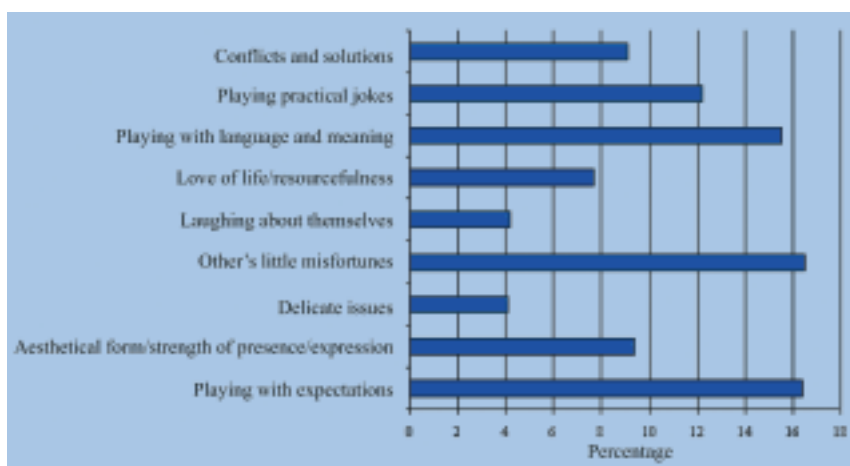


Chart 1: What do children laugh about most frequently?

forcement of self-esteem. Primary-school children frequently laugh about the mishaps of their teachers, parents, and other people in positions of authority. Children find situations particularly funny in which adults behave physically or cognitively in a less competent manner. In such cases, the “powerful” adult loses his or her superiority and children feel powerful or competent.<sup>6</sup>

#### g) *Love of life and resourcefulness*

This category of children’s humour includes role-playing when children act out “let’s pretend” situations and situations in which children spontaneously have fun or laugh with others as a result of their own or others’ crazy ideas. An example taken from a diary episode serves to illustrate this:

“Annette returns from school with her friend Felix. Laughing, she says: ‘Hi Mum! Today it was really funny. Felix and I had an umbrella contest. We put the umbrellas on the road and the wind blew them away. My umbrella flew the furthest. It was real cool. We had such a good laugh. The umbrellas always wanted to land between the cars, but they couldn’t. My umbrella was too big.’”

Funny games and game situations are also part of playful humour:

“Luca is rocking on Ikea’s banana-shaped chair with his friend, who is also 9 years old. Both of them are kneeling at one end, holding each other by the arms. They swing wildly and laugh until one or both

of them tumble off the banana, laughing their heads off.”

In this category the connection between creativity and humour is at its clearest. In research into humour, investigating creativity is one area that has received little attention.

This may partly be due to the fact that humour usually occurs in stress-free situations (e. g. among friends, in the family or similar contexts) that are rarely the subject of research.

McGhee (1977) refers to various studies carried out as early as in 1977, however, which focussed on the qualities of creative children. They revealed a close link between humour, playfulness and creativity.<sup>7</sup>

#### h) *Aesthetical form, strength of presence and expression*

Children possess a certain sensitivity towards strange sounds and singing, comical appearance, and odd, unfamiliar language (e. g. foreign languages and variants). Often, they find all these forms of expression demonstrated by man or animal extremely funny. For example:

L: “At school today Lilli had such a funny voice, such a high voice, she was singing so high. I couldn’t help laughing.”

This form of humour, usually derived from a human being’s external habitus, is of course often embedded in situations or contexts that further in-

tensify the subject’s strange appearance, noises, or voice.

#### i) *Laughing about themselves*

This category was found only in the group discussions, not in the parents’ diaries. In the group discussions, children report situations in which they themselves experienced minor mishaps or errors or in which they had to laugh about their own anxiety, stupidity, or personal idiosyncrasies. Daniel cites one example:

D: I once rolled off the couch. I just wanted to see if Mum and Dad were coming and fell straight onto the table.

I: Did you hurt yourself?

D: No, I just burst out laughing. (The others join in.)

The comforting function of humour certainly plays a role in Daniel’s story. Laughing eases inner tension and anxiety (What’s happening to me?) and gives the child relief.

### 3. What do boys and girls laugh about most frequently?

In order to gain an impression of what makes children laugh, a frequency count (descriptive statistics) was conducted including all of the 1,400 group discussion sequences in addition to all the episodes recorded in the adults’ diaries. The frequency distribution is displayed in Chart 1.

Primary-school children laugh most frequently about *others’ little misfortunes*, followed by *playing with expectations* and *playing with language and meaning*.

The comparatively high value of “playing with language and meaning” is particularly conspicuous. These three main categories, when viewed on another level, show the “deviation from the norm” as the common (but not sole) interface. Events such as an adult falling over, somebody making a slip of the tongue or breaking with an expected convention in a certain situation strike children as particularly humorous (cf. Chart 2).

Chart 2 shows us that boys and girls have quite a markedly different understanding of humour. Whereas girls laugh about “aesthetical form, strength of presence and expression” and “playing with others’ expectations” at an above-average frequency, boys laugh more often than girls about “other people’s minor misfortunes.”

#### 4. Do children have a different type of humour?

In summary, children’s humour ranges from abstruse playful actions such as teasing, annoying, practical jokes to verbal games like ridiculing and joking as well as satirical, wily ideas, sometimes bordering on irony. Children relish playing with logic and language content, violating the rules of the language with reinterpretations and distortions, with exaggerations, combinations of the uncombinable, concoctions and collages – either by means of their own creations or by adopting given parameters.

Their language games and constructions are an expression of the pleasure they derive from twisting, overstating, deforming, and contradicting but also from excessively taking things literally in inappropriate situations, from violating rules and conventions. At first sight, children’s humour does not fundamentally differ from that of adults, since adults also like to laugh about exaggerations of all kinds and fun with language conventions.

The difference is rather to be found in the complexity of witty comments and remarks. The resulting joke is no longer so apparent: subtly often supersedes open “tinkering with the language” typical of children’s verbal humour. The phenomenon that children tend to engage in (verbal) humour on a different plane hinges on their cognitive and linguistic development.<sup>8</sup>

It should have become clear in this article, however, that children’s humour is more complex than many

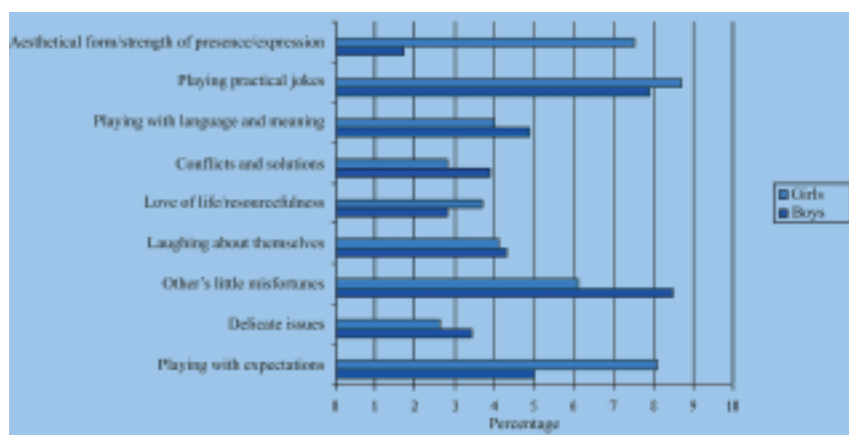


Chart 2: What makes boys and girls laugh?

adults would have thought. Children use the vehicle of humour for tuning into themes that are new for them; through humour they establish common links with their peers. Moreover, via humour they express their playful and creative way of interpreting the world combined with their spontaneous experimental approach.

After all, when was the last time you organised an “umbrella race”?

#### NOTES

- 1 Cf. Kelle and Kluge, 1999; Kluge, 1999.
- 2 Helmers, 1965, p. 126.
- 3 Cf. Weinrebe, 1979, p. 32 ff.
- 4 Helmers, 1965, p. 140.
- 5 Kuschel, 1994, p. 25.
- 6 Cf. Popp, 1990, p. 99 ff.
- 7 McGhee, 1977, p. 203.
- 8 This article does not seek to provide a development-psychological, psychoanalytic, phenomenological and anthropological analysis of children’s humour.

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