

LITTLE
Ways
to LIVE a
BIG LIFE

HOW TO
MAKE CHILDREN LAUGH



MICHAEL ROSEN

The bestselling author of *We're Going on a Bear Hunt*

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Introduction

Charlie Chaplin once said that to really laugh, you should take the things that you find painful and play with them.

We all love the sound of a child laughing. I have performed in front of children many, many times, and I always gauge how well a show is going by how they laugh. As I do my show, I'm listening to them laughing. The more they laugh, the better I perform, and the happier the whole room grows.

As you'll see in the following pages, making children laugh isn't terribly difficult. You just have to understand where the laughter is coming from, and why it's necessary in a child's development. I'm no scientist, neurologist or psychologist, but I know it helps them find their way in life.

It's well known that if you pull humour apart you can kill it stone dead – but I'm going to risk a bit of dissection in the hope that my personal angle into what tickles kids will help you create enough laughter to make some rooms grow happy!

PART I

The Theory

‘What’s brown and sticky?’

‘A stick.’

How does this joke work, and why is it so popular with children who hear it and then can’t resist repeating it to each other all the time?

There are two main triggers.

The first is that the joke appears to be talking about poo, and children love breaking the poo taboo. Poo is disgusting, intriguing and fascinating – what’s not to like? It’s a complex subject for kids for several reasons at once: they’ve been taught not to do it in their pants (that’s what babies do, and nobody wants to be a baby); they’ve been told it’s not polite to talk about it; adults seem to spend an awful lot of time and energy cleaning it away and hiding the smell of it. There’s a lot for them to unravel here.

The second is that the person telling the joke isn’t actually talking about poo. As we find out in their answer, they’re talking about a stick. The comeback plays with the idea that both the joke-teller and the listener are thinking that the answer should, by rights, be poo.

At the heart of all this is anxiety: anxiety about behaving like a baby, anxiety about the unexpected, anxiety about appearing stupid. This particular emotion – anxiety – is a key motor for a good deal of humour. Let’s look at this theory more closely.

There is no intrinsic reason for poo in itself to be funny. For that matter, we can widen the net so that it includes bodily functions that are appropriate for children, and the words for those functions: weeing,

farting, burping, puking – even, if you tell the joke right, bleeding. In isolation, these natural biological activities just don't make you laugh.

It used to be that you wouldn't find references to such physical processes so much in children's books, but now they're easy to find. Think of the BFG 'whizzpopping' in front of the Queen in Roald Dahl's *The BFG*; Tony Ross's *I Want My Potty*, in which the Little Princess comes to terms with forgoing nappies; Dav Pilkey's *Captain Underpants* books, with wild excessive descriptions of all things loo-related (one of the titles, *Captain Underpants and the Tyrannical Retaliation of the Turbo Toilet 2000*, says it all, really). And have you come across the extraordinary *The Story of the Little Mole Who Knew it Was None of His Business* by Werner Holzwarth, with its illustrations by Wolf Erlbruch of a mole with a turd on its head? Suddenly, in the right context, bodily functions become funny.

(Having said that, in some countries children have been laughing at such things in books for centuries, as in the German Till Eulenspiegel stories which I adapted as *The Wicked Tricks of Till Owllyglass*. All you need to know at this point is that it includes a climactic bum-kissing joke which saves the trickster Till's life.)

The reason bodily functions are funny is because they are surrounded by hundreds of rules of the 'dos and don'ts' variety. Part of what psychologists call 'socialisation' is instilling these 'dos and don'ts' into children so that they fit the norms that any given society thinks right: don't wee in your pants, do blow your nose, don't burp at the table etc . . . Children live in a world they haven't created and have very little control over. For a good deal of their lives, grown-ups – sometimes well-intentioned, sometimes not so – exert authority over them, telling them what to do, what not to do, where to go, when to come back and so on.

Children are therefore often anxious about whether they're saying or doing the wrong thing. If you have a character breaking a bodily function taboo, you shouldn't make it pathetic or sad, because it won't be funny. Truly pathetic or sad scenes bring out sympathy in us, and sympathy doesn't usually make us laugh. Think of, say, a child begging in the street, or how you'd react to someone breaking their arm.

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