

Good parenting is just a joke

October 27 2011

Parents who joke and pretend with their toddlers are giving their children a head start in terms of life skills. Most parents are naturals at playing the fool with their kids, says a new research project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). However parents who feel they may need a little help in doing this can learn to develop these life skills with their tots.

"Parents, carers and early years educators shouldn't underestimate the importance of interacting with young children through jokes and pretending," researcher Dr Elena Hoicka points out. "Spending time doing this fun stuff with kids helps them learn how to do it themselves and gives them a set of skills which are important in childhood and beyond."

The latest [research findings](#) on joking and pretending with children will be highlighted at a half-day event organised as part of the ESRC's Festival of [Social Science](#) 2011. One key aim of the event will be to boost parents' confidence in joking and pretending with their toddlers through a range of hands-on activities.

Dr Hoicka's study has examined how the two very similar concepts of joking and pretending develop in children aged between 15 and 24 months. Explaining the difference between joking and pretending, Dr Hoicka says: "Both involve intentionally doing or saying the wrong thing. However, joking is about doing something wrong just for the sake of it. In contrast, pretending is about doing something wrong which is imagined to be right. For example, parents might use a sponge like a

duck while pretending but use a cat as a duck when joking."

The study examined whether parents offer different cues such as tone or pitch of voice in order to help their toddlers understand and differentiate between joking and pretending. Findings reveal that parents rely on a range of language styles, sound and non-verbal cues. For example, when pretending, parents often talk slowly and loudly and repeat their actions. Conversely, parents tend to cue their children to [jokes](#) by showing their disbelief through language, and using a more excited tone of voice.

"We found that most parents employ these different cues quite naturally to help their toddlers understand and differentiate these concepts," Dr Hoicka points out. "While not all parents feel confident in their natural abilities, the research does show that making the effort to interact in this way with toddlers is important. Knowing how to joke is great for making friends, dealing with stress, thinking creatively and learning to 'think outside the box'. Pretending helps children learn about the world, interact with others, be creative and solve problems."

Parents can learn more about the different cues used in joking and pretending during an event to be held next week. "We will be offering a range of activities to help [parents](#) experiment with joking and pretending," says Dr Hoicka. "We will also give some short talks on the early development of joking and pretending in [toddlers](#) as well as some initial findings from our research project."

Provided by Economic & Social Research Council

Citation: Good parenting is just a joke (2011, October 27) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2011-10-good-parenting.html>

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