

PARENTING

OPINION

Laughter as pandemic medicine — sharing humour with your kids can help them be resilient in a difficult time

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There aren't a lot of things less funny than a global pandemic that has taken the lives of nearly 2.5 million people.

But humour could help get us through the final weeks of this challenging COVID winter as well as the next few months while we wait for the vaccine campaign to work its magic.

Sue Stephenson, a retired school principal and the founder of a non-profit that teaches comedy to kids, certainly thinks so.

"I'm not a comedian, but I guess I've always used laughter and humour to cope with whatever has been thrown my way in life," said Stephenson, who is also the author of "Kidding Around: Connecting Kids to Happiness, Humour and Laughter." "I'm a breast cancer survivor and it played a huge role in facing that serious time in my life, just like we're facing right now."

While it's pretty tough to make room for laughter while grieving the loss of a loved one, coping with job loss or struggling with health problems, most of us can benefit from bringing a little levity to a heavy time, she said.

That could look like signing your kids up for one of the virtual comedy programs run by her charity, [Stand Up for Student Well-Being](#), or it could simply mean making a point to choose funny books and movies you enjoy together, to share the funniest meme or TikTok you saw that day, or hosting your own family comedy hour one night each week.

"I think all of us are struggling with days when we're down and days when we're happier. But parents kind of need to give themselves permission to laugh and to see kind of the lighter moments in what we're dealing with."

Stephenson is well versed in trying to inject humour where there doesn't seem to be any.

"What I was struck by was when I was a vice-principal and a principal, especially in Toronto, was that I couldn't find laughter and happiness in the curriculum anywhere," said Stephenson, who now lives in Cobourg, Ont.

After she retired from her career as a principal, she worked with two comedians to develop a comedy curriculum tied to mental health and literacy expectations and rolled it out to Grade 7 classes at North Kipling Junior Middle School.

That became Stand Up for Student Well-Being, which runs in-school programs — virtual during the pandemic — as well as weeklong camps that focus on using healthy humour as a form of self-expression.

Stephenson said parents can help encourage that same kind of lighthearted expression at home by naming and rewarding all displays of humour, whether it's a preschooler making a fart joke, a school-age child wearing a funny hat to virtual school or a teen quoting a favourite funny line from

“Brooklyn Nine-Nine.”

Even better when you’re adding to the laughs, too, groan-eliciting dad jokes included.

Not only has laughter been proven through research to release endorphins, the body’s feel-good hormones that help relieve stress and pain, a sense of humour is something we can draw upon in tough times.

It’s a little easier to enjoy our kids’ humour — overused knock-knock jokes, poorly timed potty humour and all — “if parents realize that they’re developing and sharing a sense of humour with their kids through this, and that it’s helping them be resilient and kind of find the funny at a difficult time.

“So it’s really a life skill that they’re teaching kids.”

For Joel Buxton, a writer, comedian and former high school teacher who recently joined SUSWB as creative director, comedy has had “tremendous mental health benefits.”

“When I teach comedy, one thing that I talk about, that I think is very beneficial, is it gives you a mechanism for when stress comes into your life. You have that moment where you can sort of step back and say, ‘What’s funny about this?’”

While many of us can find some humour in a tough situation once we’ve got some distance from it, “what’s unique about comedians is that they train themselves to immediately start processing that. A really nice benefit of that is life becomes less bleak,” said Buxton, who lives in Toronto.

That’s come in handy during the pandemic, he said.

“I’m really lucky that my partner is a comedian as well. So I found even just us being able to joke around with each other really, really helps with the mental toll as the pandemic rolls on, us being able to make each other laugh.”

Buxton recommends establishing some small rituals that help incorporate humour into family life. “You know, rather than just saying, ‘How was your day?’ maybe it could be ‘What’s the funniest thing that happened in your day?’ Or ‘What’s the weirdest thing that happened to you today?’ And I find that just applying those different emotions often generates a deeper response and a more thoughtful response.”

He and his comedian friends have been playing online video game Quiplash, in which players are given prompts like “the worst birthday gift” to respond to, then vote on the funniest answer — a game that would translate well for pandemic play with family and friends in other households near or far.

Buxton also suggests looking online for improv games you can learn together to put a funny spin on the usual family game night.

There’s also the simple pleasure of watching funny TV shows and movies together.

“I would just say take it a step further and debrief. So you would ask, ‘What was your favourite part of that?’ It’s interesting to see kids process that information, because they don’t often get asked that; they just laugh. Well, all of us, you know, we consume, react and move on. But that extra step of ‘Why did I laugh?’ — it’s the first step of understanding what tickles your funny bone and, once you start to understand that, you can start to express humour as well.”



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