

Scientists capture humor's earliest emergence in young children

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Young children's ability to laugh and make jokes has been mapped by age for the first time using data from a new study involving nearly 700 children from birth to 4 years of age, from around the world. The

findings, led by University of Bristol researchers and published in *Behavior Research Methods*, identifies the earliest age humor emerges and how it typically builds in the first years of life.

Researchers from Bristol's School of Education sought to determine what types of [humor](#) are present in [early development](#) and the ages at which different types of humor emerge. The team created the 20-question Early Humor Survey (EHS) and asked the parents of 671 children aged 0 to 47 months from the UK, US, Australia, and Canada, to complete the five-minute survey about their child's humor development.

The team found the earliest reported age that some children appreciated humor was 1 month, with an estimated 50% of children appreciating humor by 2 months, and 50% producing humor by 11 months. The team also show that once children produced humor, they produced it often, with half of children having joked in the last 3 hours.

Of the children surveyed, the team identified 21 different types of humor. Children under one year of age appreciated physical, visual and auditory forms of humor. This included hide and reveal games (e.g., peekaboo), tickling, funny faces, bodily humor (e.g., putting your head through your legs), funny voices and noises, chasing, and misusing objects (e.g., putting a cup on your head).

One-year-olds appreciated several types of humor that involved getting a reaction from others. This included teasing, showing hidden body parts (e.g., taking off clothes), scaring others, and taboo topics (e.g., toilet humor). They also found it funny to act like something else (e.g., an animal).

Two-year-olds' humor reflected [language development](#), including mislabeling, playing with concepts (e.g., dogs say moo), and nonsense

words. Children in this age group were also found to demonstrate a mean streak as they appreciated making fun of others and aggressive humor (e.g., pushing someone).

Finally, 3-year-olds were found to play with social rules (e.g., saying naughty words to be [funny](#)), and showed the beginnings of understanding tricks and puns.

Dr. Elena Hoicka, Associate Professor in Bristol's School of Education and the study's lead author, said, "Our results highlight that humor is a complex, developing process in the first four years of life. Given its universality and importance in so many aspects of children's and adults' lives, it is important that we develop tools to determine how humor first develops so that we can further understand not only the emergence of humor itself, but how humor may help young [children](#) function cognitively, socially, and in terms of mental health.

"The Early Humor Survey addresses an important gap of when different types of humor develop. It has the potential, with more research, to be used as a diagnostic tool in early development in terms of developmental differences, and to help inform early years educators and the UK's national curriculum for 0-5 years."

More information: Elena Hoicka et al, The Early Humor Survey (EHS): A reliable parent-report measure of humor development for 1- to 47-month-olds, *Behavior Research Methods* (2021). [DOI: 10.3758/s13428-021-01704-4](#)

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