

# Parents who use humor have better relationships with their children, study finds

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They say that laughter is the best medicine, but it could be a good parenting tool too, according to a new study led by researchers from Penn State.

In a [pilot study](#), the research team found that most people viewed [humor](#) as an effective parenting tool and that a parent or caregiver's use of humor affected the quality of their relationship with their children. Among those whose parents used humor, the majority viewed their relationship with their parents and the way they were parented in a positive light. The researchers published their findings in the journal [PLOS One](#).

"Humor can teach people [cognitive flexibility](#), relieve stress, and promote creative problem solving and resilience," said Benjamin Levi, professor of pediatrics and humanities at Penn State College of Medicine and senior author of the study. "My father used humor and it was very effective. I use humor in my clinical practice and with my own children. The question became, how does one constructively use humor?"

While aspects of humor and play have been studied across various settings and in [child development](#), the use of humor in parenting hasn't been formally studied, the researchers said.

"There's an interesting parallel between business and parenting, which are both hierarchical. In business, humor has been shown to help reduce hierarchies, create better environments for collaboration and creativity and diffuse tension," said first author Lucy Emery, who was a [medical student](#) at Penn State College of Medicine at the time of the research and currently a pediatrics resident at Boston Children's Hospital.

"While [parent-child relationships](#) are more loving than business relationships, [stressful situations](#) happen a lot when parenting. Humor can help diffuse that tension and hierarchy and help both parties feel better about a stressful situation."

This preliminary research was a first step to examine how people view

the relationship between humor, their experience of being parented and their experience of parenting. The study will help lay the groundwork for understanding how to use humor constructively and the kinds of situations that are riskier for using humor.

They surveyed 312 people between the ages of 18 and 45. More than half said they were raised by people who used humor and 71.8% agreed that humor can be an effective parenting tool. The majority said they do or plan to use humor with their children and believe that it has more potential benefit than harm.

The team also found a correlation between a parent's use of humor and the way their children, who are now adults, viewed the way they were parented and their relationship with their parents. Of those who reported that their parents used humor, 50.5% said they had a good relationship with their parents and 44.2% reported they felt their parents did a good job parenting them.

On the other hand, of those who said their parents didn't use humor, only 2.9% reported a good relationship with their parents and 3.6% reported that they thought their parents did a good job parenting them.

While it's not surprising that parents would use humor with their children if they were raised by caregivers who did the same, Levi said the stark differences between the two groups was unexpected.

The research team is expanding on this preliminary study and are surveying a larger and more diverse cohort of parents as well as collecting qualitative research based on parents' experience using humor.

"My hope is that people can learn to use humor as an effective parenting tool, not only to diffuse tension but develop resilience and cognitive and emotional flexibility in themselves and model it for their children," Levi

said.

Erik Lehman, biostatistician at Penn State, and Anne Libera, director of comedy studies at Chicago's The Second City, also contributed to the paper.

**More information:** Lucy Emery et al, Humor in parenting: Does it have a role?, *PLOS ONE* (2024). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0306311](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0306311)

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