

“Laughter is the sun that drives winter from the human face.”

Victor Hugo

It’s 10:15 a.m. on a Wednesday morning, and I’m leading a discussion with six of my middle school students in community service class. They are supposed to be coming up with a slogan to go with our community service theme for the year involving picking up litter. We are totally stuck. No one has any ideas. I look into their focused, anguished faces and out of my mouth comes, “Pick up trash, have a bash!” The students react in slow motion, lifting first their eyes, then their heads, and then the corners of their mouths. Laughter begins, and is contagious, and soon we are all giggling.

“Get out of your funk, pick up junk!” shouts a student. “Don’t drop that trash or you’ll get a rash!” exclaims another. This does not get quite the same reaction, but they are getting the idea. More silly slogans are thrown out, one inappropriate, and so it is time to reign in my pre-adolescents.

As the laughter dies down, the tension and seriousness in their faces are also gone. They are suddenly full of ideas! After several creative, spontaneous suggestions, we settle on, “Pick Up Litter, Make The World Glitter!” The community service project is on its way!

These moments of spontaneous humor are not uncommon in middle school. In fact, when I think back on each of my fifteen years as a teacher, what makes me excited every September to begin again are the personal relationships with each student and the many shared moments of laughter.

My students know the benefit of humor and share with me, in conversation, that, “ Things that are funny are more likely to catch my attention than dull, normal things. “ and “It lightens my mood and relaxes me. It makes the class more fun.” One student confesses, “It keeps me interested in the lesson. “

I’m curious, so I ask them, “What are the top three attributes in a teacher that you most appreciate?” I am not surprised when the answers are, “Humor, interesting person, friendly” and “Kind, fair, a sense of humor” and “Humor, more humor, and a lot of humor.”

As a teacher of older children, eleven to thirteen years of age, I see that my role as a middle school educator definitely requires a sense of humor. A charismatic personality and the ability to lighten things up go a long way in enjoying and being enjoyed by this age group. A certain amount of levity in dealing with typical developmental issues is also the key to surviving and enjoying pre-adolescents.

I wonder, is this unique to this age group or is it true with younger students too? Is there actual benefit, educationally, in using humor and if so, can this be taught?

Montessori herself tells us, “A teacher must amuse. She can tell stories, have some games and sing, use nursery rhymes and poetry. The teacher who has a gift for charming the children can have them do various exercises, which, even if they have no great value educationally, are useful in calming them. Everyone knows that a lively teacher attracts more than a dull one, and we can all be lively if we try” (*The Absorbent Mind*, p. 254).

She goes on to describe a sort of 'pied piper' of teacher seductiveness that uses charm to direct the children toward purposeful work or a harmonious community.

She also warns against the overly strict teacher, “If the teacher were harsh to the children, then the basic essentials would be lacking for the goal at which she aims. The teacher.....must be like a flame which heartens all by its warmth, enlivens and invites” (*The Absorbent Mind*, p. 253).

Even in her recommendation of how to redirect a child who is annoying others, her value in the relationship and lightheartedness is evident. She advises the teacher to “show a special and affectionate interest in the troublesome child, inviting them to come with you to see something or asking for their help in some way.”

Tales From The Classroom

“Laughter is the shortest distance between two people.”
Victor Borge

Thinking of Maria’s words got me to thinking of two teachers within my school who are known for their natural gift of warmth and humor, both with the children and among their colleagues. Debbie Molinelli runs the after school program for our primary children, aged 3 to 6, and Carole Golcher is our art teacher for children 3 to 13.

I met with each of them to discuss their thoughts on using humor with students and the benefits of a dynamic personality.

Mrs. Molinelli, who had been my son’s primary after school teacher, has a gift with helping children transition by using a little humor and light-heartedness.

When parents of primaries in after school would arrive to pick up their son or daughter, the children would be immersed in an activity; sharing something with a friend, totally engrossed in the present, and not ready to be whisked away by mom or dad just because she or he was ready to go. Many a parent was greeted by a scowl, crying, or pleading for more time to finish the task at hand.

Mrs. Molinelli had a knack for handling these moments. One day, as I was picking arriving to pick up my son from primary afterschool, I waved through the glass window in the door as I caught her eye. My son, back turned to me, was working intently on

some project begun probably minutes before. On this particular day, Mrs. Molinelli sauntered over, and instead of tapping him on the shoulder, leaned down and began a conversation with him about his project, which I wasn't privy to, but could witness the motions of through the window.

After a minute, she put her hand on his back, whispered something in his ear, and gestured at me through the door to which James's eyes followed. There was a shared laugh between them, and my son popped up, raced to put his things away, and approached the door.

"*Ms. Willard*", announced Mrs. Molinelli, "*I present to you, sir James!*"

James bowed, gave me a big hug, ran around me pretending to do something, though I couldn't tell what, then looked back at Mrs. Molinelli with a knowing look.

"*Got it?*" Mrs. Molinelli asked.

"*Got it!*" exclaimed sir James.

On the drive home, I asked James what it was that Mrs. Molinelli had whispered to him. "*Oh*", he said casually, "*she said my mom was in the hallway and.... and there was a sneaky dragon lurking in the hallway and she needed a brave knight to go out and slay it.*"

"*Man*", I thought, "*I love that Mrs. Molinelli.*" We both got a good chuckle all the way home about that one.

On another pick up day, Mrs. Molinelli swung the door to the after school room open and greeted me with, "*O.k., which one would you like? Take your time, take your time. We've got blonds, brunettes, boys, girls. Some with bad tempers, some with good.*"

You gotta appreciate this at the end of day. I did, at least.

Mrs. Molinelli tells me that she feels humor is a great equalizer.

"It gives the children something to talk about amongst themselves and brings a positive presence into the classroom. By sharing my personality as teacher, it lets the children see me as a real person who feels and reacts, someone living a life of her own with funny times and sad times. In sharing certain aspects of what makes me 'me', it helps the children to see what makes them 'them' and opens up a means of sharing."

So, I wanted to know, beyond the subtle humor in making a transition smoother, does she tell knock knock jokes or what exactly does she do with three to six year olds in using humor to build community? She goes on to tell me that almost daily she tells the class stories about her dog, Rosie.

"Rosie is my furry four legged daughter and has gotten into many funny situations. The kids look forward to hearing about her each day at lunch. In fact, one mother told me that while her son was having a hard time with separation and wanted to stay home, his

looking forward to the daily Rosie story helps him to overcome his separation anxiety and look forward to school each day.”

If I had any doubt that my positive experience with using humor in the classroom might not apply to classrooms with younger students, Mrs. Molinelli’s students will remind me otherwise, and so will the parents of her students.

Mrs. Golcher, our seasoned art teacher, delights in teaching children, and it shows in the anecdotal stories she tells to parents about their children. She recently stopped a parent of a primary-aged child in the hallway to tell them her son had called her ‘Mrs. Sculpture’ today in art class, in his early attempts at humor.

As a parent, not a year goes by that I don’t receive at least one email telling a similar art class anecdote about my son. So, a humorous moment shared with parents lets them know you enjoy their child and builds a relationship of trust. Let’s face it; most of us think bad news is coming when we hear from the teacher, how nice to share the lighter days’ events as well!

Mrs. Golcher believes that using humor in the classroom setting has more than one simple benefit.

“ It is especially helpful in diffusing arguments and disagreements among students. Upper elementary and middle school students often spend too much time complaining about the amount of work an assignment will involve. Humor helps them to see how ridiculous their complaint really is. It also helps them to not take themselves too seriously. I’ve seen first hand how humor dissipates tension, allowing students to be more relaxed, creative, and better able to learn and perform.”

What the ‘Experts’ Have To Say

“The human race has one really effective weapon, and that is laughter.”

Mark Twain

Finally, I chatted with Ginny Cusack, director of Princeton Center for Teacher Education (PCTE), who, prior to this position, was director of her own school.

I started by asking Ginny what she thinks Maria Montessori would say if I could ask her about dynamic personalities in the classroom or the use of humor with students.

“I think she would tell you that teachers should be full of life and joy and share personal experiences which can often be humorous.”

She warns though, that humor can do the opposite of what we intend if we are not careful. What we may think might “lightening up a moment” might be humiliating or uncomfortable for a child.

Regarding humor being addressed in teacher training, Cusack believes, “*Humor flows from personality and style. Some teachers are naturals. Others can develop it over time. Everyone is different. Our most important message is for teachers to be emotionally healthy. From that healthy place, effective humor and funny stories will flow.*”

She believes that what is most effective is in sharing humorous anecdotes with parents as this can build trust, sending a message that you know their child, care about him, and delight in him.

Outside of my Montessori sphere, I recently attended a conference on ‘*Learning and the Brain*’ in Cambridge, Massachusetts. One of the keynote speakers, Dr. Robert Brooks, an invigorating and moving lecturer, talked of the power of the ‘charismatic adult’ in the lives of children. He said that, when asked, most people look back on their favorite teacher, the one who had the most positive influence on their life, as having a charismatic personality, demonstrating empathy and warmth, and yes, using humor.

He challenged us to think back to *our* favorite teachers from childhood. Although most of us, as Montessori teachers, didn’t experience the wonders of the Montessori philosophy in our own education, we all experienced good teaching at one point or another (hopefully!). What was it about those special teachers that made learning so fun? I’ll bet a good sense of humor was in there somewhere!

In his book, *Professors are from Mars, Students are from Snickers*, Ronald Berk points out that, “*Physiological benefits of laughter have been found for the muscular, respiratory, cardiovascular, endocrine, immune, and central nervous systems.*” In other words, humor is just what the doctor ordered! What’s the real research on using humor in the classroom though? Berk goes on to state that the research evidence gathered over the last 30 years is “sparse, inconclusive, and contradictory” as it is difficult to scientifically measure the benefits.

Yet, he says, student responses confirm that teachers who use humor in their classes aid the learning process. It has been said to:

1. *Improve attitudes toward the subject, decrease anxiety, tension, stress, and boredom*
2. *Improve attitudes toward the subject*
3. *Increase comprehension, cognitive retention, interest, and task performance*
4. *Increase motivation to learn and satisfaction with learning*
5. *Promote creativity and divergent thinking*

(Professors are from Mars, Students are from Snickers, 2003, p.8)

Is There A ‘Wrong’ Kind of Humor to Avoid with Children?

“If we couldn’t laugh, we would all go insane.”

Jimmy Buffet

Of course, there are inappropriate types of humor one does not want to use in a classroom. As Katherine Abbott stated in her article titled, "Humor In the Classroom: Cultivating Camaraderie To Maximize Learning", recognizing bad or destructive humor is easy. *"You know it when you experience it. It is clearly inappropriate or it just doesn't feel right."*

She concludes that sarcasm, in particular, is a sure-fire ways to poison the energy of your class because it is usually based on assumptions and beliefs that exclude some group or an individual.

I most like her closing thoughts, which are, *"As a teacher your job is to provide a safe learning environment where camaraderie is built upon shared humor. Your job is not to be a comedian. Encourage your students to cultivate humor they can all identify with, which is unique to that particular group."*

Can Humor Be Taught?

"Among those whom I like or admire, I can find no common denominator, but among those whom I love, I can; all of them make me laugh."

W.H. Auden

My next question was, can using humor appropriately and effectively be learned? Of course, there is no formula, and some of us are more skilled at this than others, however, as David Seabury once said, *"Good humor isn't a trait of character, it is an art which requires practice."*

Yet, it can still be intimidating to try to add humor. Abbott also reminds us that not everyone shares the same sense of humor by stating, *"All humor is subjective, contextual, ephemeral, and above all, highly personal."*¹ This thought can leave one a bit intimidated to be spontaneous, but we all can begin by sharing a bit of ourselves, as Mrs. Molinelli did with her 'Rosie' stories, and go from there. We have nothing to lose but stress, tension, and an uptight classroom.

So, appropriate humor and a charismatic personality, in the hands of a seasoned Montessorian, can create a sense of community, acceptance among each other, and a way to express our joy in being with children. As I found Maria reminding me in the Absorbent Mind, *"Everyone knows that a lively teacher attracts more than a dull one, and we can all be lively if we try."*

¹ www.abbottcom.com/Humor_in_the_classroom.htm

Why Use Humor in the Classroom?

SIDEBAR

Top Ten Reasons to Use Humor in the Classroom

1. Humor can stimulate learning
2. Humor can build trust, rapport, and cooperation with students and parents
3. Humor draw and sustain student attention
4. Humor has a positive psychological effect on the body and mind
5. Humor makes students more receptive to learning
6. Laughter reduces stress
7. Humor stimulates us emotionally and intellectually
8. Humor generates camaraderie
9. Humor provides temporary relief from a kids' world of restrictive regulations
10. It's a serious world, we could all use a laugh, even kids...especially kids!

Do's and Don't of Humor

DON'T:

- Use sarcasm or wit as a disciplinary tool
- Make jokes inappropriate for the age of the children
- Make a child the object of a joke
- Make jokes at the expense of someone else
- Tell jokes that include stereotyping, racism, or gender bias
- Use humor to 'put someone in their place

DO:

- Be spontaneous
- Smile and laugh
- Share personal stories
- Laugh at yourself
- Have fun
- Lighten a tense moment
- Let your students generate the laughs
- Make it clear your class is a place to have fun

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