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School-age children talking about humor: Data from focus groups

Jacqueline S. Dowling 

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Abstract

School-age children use humor to form relationships with peers and adults, to celebrate life through expressions of joy and laughter, to play with words to develop cognitive and linguistic competence, and as a way of coping with the psychological, social, and physical constraints of growing up. The purpose of this study was to gain insight into school-age children's understanding of humor and explore ways the children use humor to cope with daily life stressors using focus group methodology. In this study, eleven focus groups were conducted with four to six participants in each group at a local elementary and middle school. As anticipated, the developmental level influenced the type of humor the child thought was funny ranging from recalled riddles of second graders to more complex jokes and humorous observations of fourth graders to elaborate jokes and spontaneous witticisms from the sixth graders. Gender also played a role, with tickling being a common theme among the girls and the minor misfortunes of others among the boys. The children used humor to help them cope with the daily life stressors associated with interpersonal relationships, school and after-school activities, and life at home.

Keywords: school-age children; humor; qualitative research; focus group methodology

About the article

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Dr. Jacqueline Dowling is an Associate Professor and Director of the Baccalaureate Nursing Program in the School of Nursing at the University of Massachusetts Lowell. She received a Bachelor of Science from the University of Vermont School of Nursing, a Masters of Science from Boston University School of Nursing and a Doctorate in Philosophy in Nursing from the University of Massachusetts Amherst. In addition to being the recipient of various regional and national grants, Dr. Dowling has authored and co-authored several articles for nursing journals and textbooks; presented at international, national, and regional conferences on her research topics of children's sense of humor and nursing workforce diversity; received the department's Teaching Excellence Award and is a Past-President of the Eta Omega Chapter of Sigma Theta Tau International Nursing Honor Society.

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