

Association for the Professional Development of Early Years Educators

**OCCASIONAL PAPER 5** - **The Development of Humour and Pretending**

**from Infancy to Three-Years**

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**Introduction**

Play is an important part of early learning and development. It is central in the *Early Years Foundation Stage*, with exploration and imagination included as specific learning goals (Department for Education, 2014). Humour and pretending are two forms of play which have the potential to encourage exploration and imagination. Humour, at its most basic, involves enjoying something done wrong, e.g., putting a sock on one’s hand (Hoicka & Gattis, 2008; Hoicka, Jutsum, & Gattis, 2008). In contrast, pretending involves something technically wrong, but right in one’s imagination (Nichols & Stich, 2003). For instance, one could imagine the sock is a mitten. This article will discuss:

1. types of humour and pretending in infancy through 3 year;

2. how social factors influence humour and pretending;

3. humour and pretending in developmental disorders; and

4. differences in humour and pretending.

**Types of Early Humour**

Humour mostly relates to the body in the first year– for instance, making funny faces and sounds, hiding one’s face and revealing it, and mothers crawling on all fours. When asked to make their infants laugh, parents spontaneously showed clowning behaviours (making silly faces, strange noises, raspberries, odds movements), and this made 6-month-olds smile and laugh (Mireault et al., 2012). When mothers were instructed to act out specific jokes for their infants, 7- to 9-month-olds laughed at tactile and auditory jokes, e.g., blowing raspberries on their tummies, or making strange sounds like horse neighs (Sroufe & Wunsch, 1972). Ten- to 12-month-olds laughed at visual and social jokes, e.g., mothers putting socks in their mouths, or crawling like a baby. From 7 or 8 months, most parents report infants repeat funny clowning actions (e.g., funny faces, splashing, squishing head into neck, revealing tummy by lifting shirt) when their parents laughed (Reddy, 2001). Finally, most parents report infants under 1 year make peek-a-boo jokes (Hoicka & Akhtar, 2012).

One-year-olds appreciate humour which employs objects. This is an interesting transition as it reflects an important aspect of human culture. We create and use objects (e.g., bowls, televisions), and have cultural norms about what is considered correct (cereal in bowl, not bowl on head). That 1-year-olds become engaged in this type of humour suggests a good understanding of how objects work in their culture. In an observational study of 6 1-year-olds in a nursery, toddlers joked by misusing objects, e.g., wearing an apron as a skirt (Loizou, 2005). In an experiment, from 19 months, toddlers copied wrong actions paired with laughter (boot on hand, toy cat on head) 75% of the time (Hoicka & Gattis, 2008). Additionally, parents report 1-year-olds produce jokes involving silly bodily actions, and tickling/ chasing. Interestingly, most parents did not report 1-year-olds produce jokes involving misusing objects (Hoicka &

Akhtar, 2012). Therefore they appreciate this type of humour more than they produce it.

Two-year-olds appreciate and produce a greater variety of humour. Most parent report 2-year-olds produced jokes involving misusing objects (e.g., shoe on hand); nonsense humour, i.e., verbal humour in which children say nonsensical things, e.g., “dinosaurs eat the wall” or making a toy pig say, “moo”; and taboo humour, involving gross concepts, e.g., burps, stinky feet, and especially poo (Hoicka & Akhtar, 2012). This shift reveals competency in using objects and language. Children are also aware of social taboos, converging with theory suggesting people joke to express taboo subjects (Freud, 1916), and toddlers joke to gain empowerment (e.g., over potty training) (Loizou, 2005). Experimental evidence suggests 2-year-olds understand mislabelling jokes, e.g., calling an apple a banana, however most parents do not report children do this until 3 years (Hoicka & Akhtar, 2011, 2012).

When joking with young children, consider their age. While 1-year-olds may be confused by jokes involving mislabelling, as a general guideline, they are likely to appreciate silly actions, such as putting a toy cat on one’s head. However it is important to remember children are different, and so not all children within an age range will react to humour in the same way.

**Types of Early Pretending**

Children start pretending from 15 to 18 months (Jackowitz & Watson, 1980; McCune-Nicolich, 1981). The first stage is symbolic pretending, and involves using empty objects as they are meant to be used. Most commonly, this involves “drinking” out of an empty cup, but this could also apply to “eating” from an empty plate, or “washing” hands without water. Pretending may only emerge at this age because it generally involves using objects, therefore children must have object knowledge and manual skills that may not be required for humour. Toddlers start pretending on themselves, e.g., bringing an empty cup to their own mouth. They then move onto pretending on others, e.g., putting an empty cup to their parent’s mouth. Finally, pretending becomes a turn-taking activity; pretending to drink themselves, then feeding their parent, then their doll.

The next stage of pretending is object substitution, which begins around 2 years (McCune-Nicolich, 1981). This involves using one object as another, e.g., block as hat (Fein, 1975; Harris & Kavanaugh, 1993; Jackowitz & Watson, 1980). This is an important development because children must no longer rely on correct objects to pretend. Therefore they can pretend anything (e.g., block) is anything else imagineable – e.g., rocket ship, boat, unicorn. However, this is a difficult concept, and so children do not automatically use just any object as any other object. Two-year-olds use non-descript objects, such as blocks, to represent other objects (Jackowitz & Watson, 1980). Three-year-olds use objects very different in form and function to the original (e.g., phone as car), and 3.5-year-olds pretend with nothing at all, i.e., gestures (Elder & Pederson, 1978; Jackowitz & Watson, 1980).

Another form of pretending is role-play. Young children might pretend to be their mother, a baby, or a police officer. Most 2-year-olds do not engage in role play (Youngblade & Dunn, 1995), although it appears around 2.5-3 years (Howes, Unger, & Seidner, 1989). Three-year-olds engage in role-play quite often (Nielsen & Dissanayake, 2000).

Pretending with one’s own body has not received much research attention. This could include pretending to cry, sleep, or snore. Infants may fake cry by the end of the first year (Nakayama, 2010, 2013). It is possible infants do these behaviours without it constituting pretending. However, future research could examine the link between faking in the first year and later pretending.

When pretending with a child, keep their age in mind. While an 18-month-old will likely respond well to a pretend tea party with replica cups and teapot, they may be confused if you “eat” a car, pretending it is a piece of cake. However, it is important to remember some children may not appreciate the same types of pretending as their peers.

**How do we Know Children are Really Joking or Pretending?**

We cannot be sure children are really joking or pretending, but some evidence suggests this is the case. Parents report children smile, laugh, and look for a reaction when joking, suggesting children intentionally share their unusual act (Hoicka & Akhtar, 2012). This is supported by observational and experimental research finding 2- and 3-year-olds are more likely to laugh, or smile while looking for a reaction, when doing something that looks like a joke compared to something that looks normal (Hoicka & Akhtar, 2011, 2012). Additionally, 3-year-olds are more likely to smile and laugh when intentionally producing humour rather than producing humour accidentally (Bainum, Lounsbury, & Pollio, 1984). Interestingly, children are more likely to look to an experimenter, but somewhat less likely to smile, when pretending versus being literal (Rakoczy, Tomasello, & Striano, 2005).

Second, from 2 years, parents report most children invent their own jokes (instead of just copying others’ jokes), suggesting children understand the content of jokes and what makes them funny (Hoicka & Akhtar, 2012). This is supported by observation finding a third of 2-year-olds’ jokes were their own (instead of copying parents), while 3-year-olds mostly made up their own jokes (Hoicka & Akhtar, 2012). Additionally, an experiment found 30-month-olds create their own novel jokes that they were very unlikely to have witnessed before, through giving the wrong object to the one requested (e.g., experimenter asks for spoon, child gives shoe), or mislabelling familiar objects (e.g., calling cup, “goojooboojoo”; Hoicka & Akhtar, 2011). Finally, from 3 years, children extend pretend situations beyond what was modelled (Rakoczy, Tomasello, & Striano, 2004).

**Social Learning**

Social learning is a great tool for joking and pretending. Children are happy to copy others’ jokes (Hoicka & Gattis, 2008). Older toddlers (from 2 years) use others’ jokes as a model for how to make up their own jokes (Hoicka & Akhtar, 2011). Similarly, children often copy others’ pretending, and also follow verbal directions to pretend (Bosco, Friedman, & Leslie, 2006; Harris & Kavanaugh, 1993; Jackowitz & Watson, 1980). Copying others’ pretending also leads to 3-year-olds elaborating and coming up with their own pretend acts (Nielsen & Dissanayake, 2004; Rakoczy et al., 2004). So a useful way to get children to joke or pretend is to do it yourself and ask them to try; or ask them, e.g., “Can you pretend this block is a sandwich?”

**Parental Support**

Parental support is important to both humour and pretending. Humour occurs between parents and infants from 3 months, and parents scaffold humour understanding not only in the first year, by smiling and laughing when joking (Mireault et al., 2012), but also in the second year. When parents read a humorous versus literal book to their 18- to 24-month-olds, parents expressed more disbelief (Hoicka et al., 2008). For instance, if a parent read a joke such as, “The ducks say moo”, parents then said things like, “Ducks don’t say moo!” helping their toddlers realise they were joking, and not serious. Additionally, parents spoke louder, higher, and slower when joking (exaggerated Infant-Direct Speech, or IDS) making the joke clearer to hear; and used a rising linear contour, which sounds like a question (Hoicka & Gattis, 2012), marking the joke as questionable, and not to be believed.

Like joking, parents scaffold toddlers’ understanding of pretending. When parents pretend to drink and eat with their 15-month-olds, they repeat actions, use words relating to drinking and eating (e.g., cheerios) and use sound effects more than if they are actually eating and drinking (Lillard, et al., 2007; Lillard & Witherington, 2004).

Parents encourage pretending with toddlers. Most mothers and fathers of 24- to 36-month-olds in an American middle class sample reported enjoying pretending with their toddlers (89% of mothers; 85% of fathers), and most thought pretend play helps toddlers’ development (96% of mothers; 92% of fathers; Haight, Parke, & Black, 1997). Indeed most parents engaged in pretend play with their toddlers during freeplay (85%-100% at each age), both initiating pretending, and responding to their toddlers’ pretending.

However there are cultural variations to parents’ engagement with pretending. Taiwanese parents encourage pretending more than European-American parents, who in turn encourage pretending more than both Korean-American and Mexican parents (Farver & Howes, 1993; Farver, Kim, & Lee-Shin, 2000; Haight, Wang, Fun, Williams, & Mintz, 1999). This may reflect the importance of socialising children in Chinese cultures compared to American culture; and because European-American parents see pretending as important to learning, while Mexican and Korean-American are less likely to have this view. This leads to children pretending more with siblings and other children in Mexico than the USA, and more in the USA than in Taiwan. Interestingly, American children use more objects in their pretending, while Taiwanese children use more gestures and socio-dramatic plays. One reason for this may be that American parents buy more toys for their children. However, another possibility is that Taiwanese children get more guided support in pretending from parents rather than peers, perhaps helping them better understand more abstract forms of pretend play (i.e., gesture, socio-dramatic).

We can use research on parent-child interactions to inform ways of helping children understand joking and pretending. If you want to make it clear to a child you are joking, you can smile, laugh, use a questioning tone of voice to mark the joke as unbelievable, and also explain why the joke is not true. Being deadpan with toddlers is likely to be much less effective as they may assume that, since you are an adult, you are is telling the truth.

When pretending, encouraging children to pretend may encourage more sophisticated pretending, as adults may help scaffold abstract types of pretending, such as gesture or socio-dramatic play. In particular, you can talk about the objects in the pretend scenario a lot, exaggerate and repeat actions, and even use sound effects to show you are pretending. In 3-year-olds, even using the word “pretend” can help children figure out you have entered an imaginary world (Rakoczy, Tomasello, & Striano, 2006).

**Developmental Disorders**

Young children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) share their humour less than children with typical development (TD). While parents reported children with Down’s syndrome (DS) laughed at events children with TD find funny, e.g., silly faces, slapstick, and socially inappropriate acts (e.g., putting potty on head), children with ASD reacted differently. While they laughed as much as children with DS, and also laughed at similar things like tickling and slap stick, they rarely laughed at funny faces or social inappropriateness. Additionally, they often laughed at things parents did not understand (Reddy, Williams, & Vaughan, 2002). Thus children with ASD develop a sense of humour, but it might be more independent than other children.

Pretending is another area where children with ASD develop differently to children with TD. Indeed, a lack of pretending is a diagnostic criteria for ASD (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). In one study, most 20-month-olds with TD pretended by themselves, both using symbolic pretending and object substitution (Charman et al., 1997). In contrast, while more than half of children at risk for ASD did symbolic pretending, e.g., feeding doll with spoon, most did not engage with object substitution, e.g., feeding doll with wooden block. Additionally, most did not copy others doing pretend actions, whether symbolic or object substitution was involved. In another experiment, an experimenter pretended to do different actions, and children with ASD, TD, or moderate learning difficulties (MLD) were asked what the experimenter was doing (Bigham, 2008). While children with ASD did as well as other children identifying symbolic pretending and object substitution with ambiguous objects, they had difficulty identifying object substitution with objects with dissimilar form and function (e.g., bar of soap as teapot), or with gestures. In contrast, children with MLD did as well as children with TD.

Children with DS pretend, but because of cognitive delays, it takes them longer to produce more advanced types of pretending. A group of children with DS from 20 to 53 months were observed during free play, and also measured for cognitive development to assess their mental age (Munday Hill & McCune-Nicolich, 1981). Mental age correlated more strongly with their level of pretending than chronological age, suggesting delays in the development of pretending were due to delays in cognitive development.

When joking or pretending with children with developmental disorders, it is worth considering their cognitive and social development when trying to joke or pretend with them. For children with ASD, it may work better to follow their interests rather than the other way around. For children with DS, it is important to think about their current level of cognitive development.

**Joking vs. Pretending**

One remaining question is whether joking and pretending are the same or different. In a recent study, parents acted out jokes, pretending, and literal play for their toddlers (16-24 months; Hoicka & Butcher, 2014). Parents treated joking and pretending differently. When joking versus pretending, parents showed more disbelief and less belief through their language and actions. For example, if parents joked a toy chicken was a shoe, they said things like, “That’s not really a shoe”, and did non-shoe like things, e.g., putting the toy on their head. However when parents pretended, they were less likely to show disbelief than when joking, and endorsed it by saying things like, “It goes on my foot” and putting the block on their foot. Parents also used subtle cues to distinguish joking and pretending (Hoicka, 2014). Parents looked to their child and smiled more when joking versus pretending, and used more exaggerated IDS, suggesting joking is more socially motivated in nature than pretending.

Children also expressed less belief through their actions when parents joked versus pretended, and this was guided by parents’ actions and language. Children also gazed to their parents more, and to objects less, when parents joked versus pretended, suggesting they saw the joke situation as more social. Their gaze was guided by parents’ social cues.

Additional research suggests 2-year-olds distinguish joking and pretending (Hoicka & Martin, 2014). Experimenter 1 (E1) always pretended (e.g., poured “tea”, i.e., nothing, from pot) or joked (e.g., putting teapot upside down). Experimenter 2 (E2) then did both new joke and new pretend actions. Overall, children objected to E2 joking more than pretending (e.g., saying, “No” or correcting them). Thus children, like parents think jokes are more wrong than pretending.

Interestingly, if E1 pretended, children objected more to new actions (joke or pretend) E2 did. In contrast, if E1 joked, children were more accepting of new actions (joke or pretend) E2 did. Thus once a pretend situation is set up, children are more of the attitude that rigidly structured rules should be followed. Additionally, despite children objecting more to jokes overall, once a humorous situation is set up, children are more open to change (whether humorous or not).

This suggests different roles for humour and pretending. Three-year-olds learn and generalise information about the real world through pretend play (Sutherland & Friedman, 2012). By rigidly adhering to specific make-believe scenarios in pretend play, pretending may allow children to engage with real-world ideas (e.g., space travel), even when access to materials for these ideas is unavailable (e.g., rocket ship). In contrast, humour may provide a gateway to do away with social norms, and think creatively in open ways. Older children produce more creative ideas after listening to a humorous record (Ziv, 1983). Thus humour may signal permission to do things wrong or differently, and think in novel ways. Therefore in teaching young children, pretending and joking may be employed in different ways. Pretending can be used to learn real information, while joking can be used to increase thinking in open ways.

**Conclusions**

Children engage in a variety of types of humour and pretending from infancy through 3 years, reflecting their developing understanding of artifacts, language, and social norms, as well as increasingly abstract thought. The development of humour and pretending are supported by social learning (imitation, verbal instruction, cues), often scaffolded by parents. Both humour and pretending are difficult for children with ASD. Finally, even though humour and pretending have similarities, they are different. Humour may highlight things are wrong or different, but also gives permission to do things differently. In contrast, pretending may allow children to learn real information about concepts which may be difficult to explore empirically.

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