

The Use of Humor When Working With Adolescents

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To accuse another of not having a sense of humor is an extremely derogatory statement in western culture (O'Connell, 1975). We place a very high value on this attribute. Humor is basic to emotional well being and positively contributes every day to our interpersonal relationships. The therapeutic use of humor is an invaluable tool as Dreikurs (1958) makes clear:

Unfortunately, one of the most successful means of relieving a situation is too rarely employed. This is humor. . . . The quality of humor should never be wanting in dealing with [adolescents]. If you possess it, your lot will be much easier. You can relieve strain not only in others, but in yourself as well. If you make someone laugh, he cannot possibly hold a grudge against you (p. 79).

The present paper focuses on the use of humor for all adults who have interaction with adolescents. The purpose of this focus is to specify the areas where humor is applicable and to provide guidance for its implementation.

Equality

Humor is the great equalizer. To share humor is to do away with the artificial levels of inferiority and superiority in human worth. When we laugh together, domination and subservience cannot exist. Humor forms a common bond. Humor and equality are in abundance where people are emotionally well adjusted. This is well illustrated in contrasting groups. Those who are experiencing psychosis are without humor. They live in their own world apart from the human community. Whereas, the altruistic, humanitarian above all is characterized by an excellent sense of humor. Albert Sweitzer was a paradigm in this regard.

Gaining Cooperation

When working with adolescents it is essential to gain their cooperation. Humor can provide the vehicle to cooperation. Those who laugh together

communicate as equals. The promotion of equality is the key to behavior change and developing concern for others. The discouraged adolescent believes that life should be fun and free of responsibility. That belief leads to continual conflict with adults and society at large. Humor can point out the fallacious thinking "that life should be fun and free of responsibility." For example, the adolescent who says, "I'm going to move into a place of my own." The worker can reply, "that is not possible." "Why not?" retorts the adolescent. "You cannot take your mother with you," replies the worker. "Who will tell you what to eat? Who will remind you to clean your room? Who will remind you to look for a job? With whom will you fight each day?"

When using humor it is important that it not be demeaning or sardonic. Adolescents have a great facility with wit. Too often, however, it is used as a cheap method of elevating themselves at the expense of another or to control by putting another down through sarcasm. Encouraging their use of humor whenever it is positive will promote cooperation without threat to their leadership status. This can be done by laughing with them and showing appreciation for their positive use of humor. Too often the adult is afraid to show appreciation for the teenager's humor for fear that "the situation will get out of hand." "I must remain serious or they will walk all over me."

Similarly, the adult is afraid to initiate humor because the joking may turn into an uncontrolled situation. The distorted images that teens have of adults is in part due to this fear of sharing humor. It is easier to see adults as being difficult and not understanding what life is really like when the only image the adult is projecting is one of "life is always serious business."

Authenticity

"Them and us" is a concept which is difficult to hold when people laugh together. Humor provides a common ground for sharing experiences and relating authentically (Olson, 1976). Conversely, the adolescent is not going to cooperate with the adult who is not genuine or tries to con. The teen is a master at spotting phony behavior. Struggles and intensification of the war between adolescents and adults is the predictable outcome when the adult is not genuine.

Similarly, adults who believe that one must show teens who is "boss" will never have a truce with adolescents. The philosophy, that there is always a winner and a loser whenever conflict is presenting itself, will never promote cooperation. The winner may feel better, but the loser is only further motivated to defeating the winner at a future time: "I'll get even with you" is the private logic. However, it is very difficult to maintain a war when the two sides are sharing laughter.

Burnout

One of the early symptoms of burnout among those working with adolescents is the regular uttering of sarcastic wit. Belittling the adolescent is a clear sign that the adults are discouraged and have lost optimism. They have little belief that their actions will be beneficial. They feel defeated. As soon as this pessimism sets in, adult effectiveness is lost.

An additional incidious result of this thinly veiled, belittling form of wit is the self-inflicted assault on the adults' self-concept. This lowering of self-esteem occurs in two ways. Firstly, the adults know that it is demeaning to put down adolescents. Even when they attempt to justify the action as "release of tension," it goes against their own image of themselves as being good teachers, parents, workers. Secondly, whenever we make use of negative evaluations to judge the worth of another, we will use that same criterion and negatively judge ourselves when we make mistakes. When we criticize our worth as a human based upon our performance rather than criticizing the action alone, we lower our self-esteem. We cannot be effective when working with others when we feel worthless. Continual self-derogation results in feeling worthless.

Encouragement

By sharing humor adults demonstrate that they are everyday people, not someone who is attempting to exercise their position of authority to dominate and set themselves above the adolescent. Whenever adults create a setting of equality they are fostering encouragement. Humor lets the adolescent know that any present difficulty is not insurmountable (O'Connell, 1975). Just as humor tends to be contagious (Olson, 1976) so too is encouragement.

When constructive criticism is presented with a smile, it more readily conveys the message "that particular behavior makes life difficult for you, but I still respect you and care about you as a person." Troubled adolescents have a history of rejection and nonconstructive criticism with little assurance of being valued regardless of their actions.

Learning to laugh at one's self is a positive indicator of good adjustment. Adults who laugh at themselves are demonstrating their own self-acceptance. They are demonstrating that no one is perfect and they neither expect perfection in themselves nor in others. Their action shows that in spite of their regular stupid behavior, they like themselves. Mistakes noted with humor recognize human frailty and acknowledge the infallibility which we all share.

Modeling Humor

Modeling is one of the best ways of teaching humor (O'Connell, 1975b). Adults convey this skill as well as many other skills most efficiently through

demonstration. If we would like adolescents to exhibit more appropriate coping behavior, then it behooves us to make regular use of humor. Those who are very concerned with being right and not making mistakes will usually have difficulty in producing humor. Humor is a creative product and therefore carries no guarantee of success. Even noted comedians omit comedy which is often not deemed humorous by audiences. One is always at risk and unsure of the results, when creating humor.

The Courage to be Imperfect

Those who produce humor are demonstrating the courage to be imperfect. Demanding to be right with a guarantee of not making a mistake is not compatible with the humorous attitude. Even recipients of humor must take a chance that their interpretation will be in accord with that intended by the creator. As a consequence we have countless individuals with good intellectual ability who simply “don’t get” the humor. They are concerned with interpreting correctly and have no rule to which they can make reference. The result is that they usually sit with a blank expression as their mind scans a myriad of possible interpretations. If they do happen to fit one of the possible interpretations with some previous association to present company and they feel certain enough to say to themselves or aloud, “Oh I get it.” The moment has sufficiently past so as to no longer be humorous.

Dreikurs (1971) places great emphasis upon the courage to be imperfect. As adults working with adolescents it is especially important for us to model this form of courage. We can do this in many ways. Humor readily, throughout each day, provides a way for us to demonstrate the courage to be imperfect. The courage to be imperfect reflects the attitude, “Let’s try it and see how it turns out.” It means a willingness to take a risk without a guarantee of success.

For many adults working with adolescents it may appear that an attitude “Let’s try it and see how it works out” is one of the principal ways in which adolescents get themselves into difficulty. That which is not obvious and is unknown to those without training is that poor performance by adolescents is the result of discouragement. Adolescents who do not feel that they can live up to their own and others’ expectations of perfection turn to useless behavior where there seems to be more assurance of success: “If I can’t be the best at doing what is right and expected of me then I will be the best at being bad” (Dreikurs, 1973).

This aspect of discouragement results from too much ambition rather than too little. Adults, especially well educated adults, confuse adolescents’ lack of performance with not having self-goals and too little motivation. Adults do not see the massive inferiority feelings which burden adolescents. Adults do not realize that adolescents who perform poorly even though they have much greater ability are the product of their own impossibly high standards.

They assume the attitude: "nothing ventured, nothing lost" (Mosak, 1979). Rather than try at all and risk the possibility of failure, they turn to useless behavior such as indolence or delinquency which frees them from this burden of perfection (Dreikurs, 1957).

Assuming an attitude of: "I'll try and we'll see how it works out," is taking a courageous and realistic approach to life's problems. Humor is an excellent example of this attitude.

Levels of Humor

There are two levels of humor: appreciation and production (O'Connell, 1969a). Both levels reflect creativity and generally correlate positively with courage. However, the producer of humor is demonstrating more social creativity and is more likely to be in a leadership role (O'Connell, 1969c). The adolescent who produces humor differs markedly from the producer of hostile wit. The former is a popular and productive leader while the latter is demeaning of others, lacks courage and strives for individual attention rather than for the welfare of the group (O'Connell, 1975).

Encouraging Humor

Both the appreciator of humor and the producer of hostile wit can learn to use positive humor. Adults can show appreciation and positively reinforce productive humor. Conversely they can ignore, preferably if possible by leaving the area, any hostile wit. It is unlikely that the adolescent is without humor in any form so the task is possible in a community atmosphere which values and encourages this form of communication.

Reinacting situations which were upsetting can encourage the use of humor. For example, if two adolescents had an argument over the use of the paper towels in the restroom, they can be instructed to go through the exact scene as if it were occurring for the first time. Each adolescent would use the same wording and emotions as in the previous argument. When upsetting situations are purposely reinacted the individuals do not feel out of control or victimized by the other. This takes the tension away and allows the reality of the situation to be clearly seen. The result is typically laughter by everyone involved.

Calling adolescents on their excuses for having gotten into difficulty or avoiding their responsibilities can be facilitated with the use of humor. "Come on Sarah," said with a twinkle in the eye and a smile is better received than the same words uttered with a serious tone and demeanor. Adolescents profit from knowing that their behavior is not fooling anyone, but if the adult points up the situation in a discouraging manner, a negative outcome is predictable.

Humor as Release of Tension

Day to day work with adolescents can be extremely stressful. A humorous comment can interrupt the stress and provide an opportunity to reassess the situation. Whether the humor is shared with the adolescents or among the adults (in fact the more the better) the results are usually positive. One of the early signs of staff burnout is a diminishing sense of humor. The loss of laughter is a certain indicator that relationships between adults and adolescents are poor. Humor provides an immediate release of tension for both the individual and the group.

Not uncommonly, adults find that they and their adolescent are not speaking. This silent treatment is discouraging to both parties. The suggestion of writing to each other rather than trying to talk the problem through is often effective. A refinement of this technique involves having the two parties use typewriters, assuming that both can type. The result is not only the breakthrough in positive communications but additionally a very amusing scene with two individuals barking at each other through the rapid and intense pounding of typewriter keys.

Private Logic

Discouraged adolescents are prone to dichotomous thinking, e.g., "You're either for me or against me," "You either take from people or they will take from you." Catching adolescents uttering such statements with a comment such as "always!" (This said again with a twinkle in the eye and a smile) will serve the purpose of pointing out the fallacious thinking without presenting an argumentative challenge.

Self-damning and a poor sense of humor are positively correlated (O'Connell, 1968). The discouraged adolescent engages in continual self-blaming. In like fashion to alcoholics, they chastise themselves with additional help from their family. Rather than preventing future misbehavior, the private logic (Dreikurs, 1966) of the adolescent now dictates feeling justified in indulging in more of the same self-defeating behavior: "I am such a worm I may as well go ahead and do it anyway" or "Since they don't trust me anyway, I may as well do what they are accusing me of." Typically after a blaming session, adolescents feel that they have paid the price for their former misbehavior and a bit more as well so they can now get rid of that feeling by acting out in some way deleterious to themselves and others. None the less the acting out is an immediate relief from feelings of self-loathing. Just as those working or living with alcoholics are taught to stop blaming, those working with adolescents can learn to not blame. Blaming only contributes to the problem.

Humor is an excellent replacement for those who feel that they cannot open their mouths in response to adolescent behavior. "You've had another

pleasant bout with dope!” said to the adolescent who has just been incarcerated for a drug related charge is more helpful than the usual blaming statement. Again the comment is accompanied by a smile and twinkle in the eye which says: “It’s not the end of the world.” “You can change.” “You don’t have to repeat this behavior again.” and very importantly, “I reject your behavior, but I still care about you.” The statement and humorous attitude can be further assisted by adding the statement, “Now what are you going to do about your situation?”

Self-Responsibility

The statement, “Now what are you going to do about your situation?” places responsibility directly with the adolescent. Too often adults, after spending much time and effort attempting to correct maladaptive behavior, feel let down by further misbehavior. One can only feel let down if one has been leaning, that is if one has become dependent upon the adolescent.

One can feel little more than mildly disappointed by repeated maladaptive behavior unless the adult has been assuming responsibility for the adolescent’s behavior. Even though workers and even many parents realize this fact, there is still a tendency to forget that they can only assist. They cannot become the adolescent. Humor keeps this fact clearly in focus. When the adult comments to the adolescent with a humorous demeanor, both the adult and adolescent are already reminded wherein lies the responsibility.

Rehabilitation with Humor

Research into humor production and appreciation shows that community leaders rate highest in this attribute (Worthern & O’Connell, 1969). This fact is worth bearing in mind for both the adult and the adolescent. It is unlikely that one will be an effective leader of youth if one does not have a sense of humor. Adolescents are much more likely to respect or listen to, and follow the guidance of one with a humorous attitude.

If we are able to foster this attitude in the youth with whom we work, we are much more likely to set them in a positive direction. Rehabilitation of discouraged youth will correlate highly with the instilling of the humorous attitude.

Restoration of Humor

Loss of humor among adults is a certain sign of burnout which may also be seen as a loss of leadership ability. Since it would appear vital for adults working with adolescents to maintain, or regain their sense of humor, daily practice in cultivating the humorous attitude is time well spent. Regular humor exercise can be approached in many ways. Remembering to smile and put a twinkle in the eye is perhaps the most effective exercise.

Formal joke telling is unnecessary. A belief that 100 years from today the particular upsetting behavior will be of little historical importance will keep the incident in perspective while removing any deadly seriousness about the situation. Rudolf Dreikurs (1971) used to say, "Pretend that you are a little bird sitting upon a limb overlooking your grave 100 years from today. Of what importance will this unpleasant event be as you view it from your present perch." This view of life forces one to not take themselves too seriously and exposes the possibility of being able to laugh at one's self.

Another worthy exercise in the development of the humorous attitude is to make a point each day to catch one's self taking one's self seriously. We all have that aspect or aspects of ourselves about which we are overly sensitive or touchy, that to which we dislike having others make any reference. Take a daily jesting jab at that sensitive characteristic and share the laughter of the jab with others, especially adolescents.

The development of the humorous attitude is fostered by being able to laugh at one's self, to realize that no one's action or life situation is very significant, especially our own. When we can laugh freely at ourselves, we keep today in perspective and model courage, leadership and hope for adolescents and our fellow partners who have assumed charge for guiding adolescents.

Conclusion

The use of humor when interacting with adolescents is an invaluable skill. As with any skill, regular practice in the use of humor increases one's ability to effectively employ this form of communication. More importantly the practice of humor brings its own intrinsic reward. Equality, cooperation, laughter and enjoyment are immediate correlates of humor.

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“All the problems of human life demand capacity for cooperation and preparation for it. How we cooperate is the visible sign of our appreciation for how we are connected with our fellow human beings, our social feeling. It is this feeling which urges us to reach a higher stage, to rid ourselves of the errors that mark our public life and our own personality. If humankind is given enough time, the power of social feeling will triumph over all that opposes it. It will be as natural to people as breathing. The alternative for the present is to understand and to teach that this will inevitably happen.”

—A. Adler, 1933
