



pact's

point of view

The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

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Laughter, Attachment and Adopting Older Kids

by Pat O'Brien

One of my favorite folks in the entire world is Barbara Tremiere, a well-known national expert in the area of special-needs adoption and preparing families for what to expect after the kids arrive. She has always offered a most interesting statement about attachment; as she reminds us, "it is not the newly-placed older child's job to attach to his or her new adoptive parents but rather the new adoptive parents' job to prove to the newly-placed child that they are worth attaching to." What Barbara means is that we can't place the burden of attaching on the new child; further, whether attaching ever occurs or not has a lot to do with whether the new adoptive parents can prove in one way or another that they are worth the trouble of attaching to. When placed at an older age, these children enter placement with the assumption that it is just a matter of time before they will be rejected yet again and ultimately kicked out. They usually proceed very cautiously and protect themselves from the expected hurt by staying somewhat detached and by resisting getting close to the family.

How can new adoptive parents of an older child prove they are worth attaching to? I've placed many older children over the past 10 years and I can think of no better answer than shared humor and shared laughter.

In his book *A Laughing Place*, Christian Hageseth noted that "humor is essential to the enterprise of being a parent. It may be the single best antidote for parent burn-out. Humor plays a central role in parent/child attachment." Dr. Laurence Peter, of "Peter Principle" fame, noted in *The Laughter Prescription* that "shared humor creates a bond between people. It says 'we both see, understand, and enjoy.' The shared memories of the funny stories cement relationships." Shared laughter between parent and child is an incredibly effective way to cement a new parent/child relationship and to speed along the attachment of that relationship.

Be ASAP (As Silly As Possible):

Children love silliness. Children love playfulness. Children love to see their parents act silly and playful. Even those teenagers who seem not to appreciate anything and who never show appreciation for anything really do appreciate it when the adults in their lives act silly and playful. Such behavior relays to the child that you are someone really neat — to go out on a limb, to take the risk of embarrassing yourself by being playful and silly — and perhaps gives them the message that you might be someone worth attaching to.

A lot of people think acting silly is stupid. Dr. Steven Allen, Jr., MD, the son of the famed comedian, had this to say about silliness and those who say silliness is stupid: "Stupid means ignorant and uneducated. You do stupid things because you don't know any better. Having fun and playing is not stupid — it is silly." Silly, Dr. Allen goes on to point out, "derives originally from the Old English (ge)saelig, which meant completely happy, blessed. Silly was a blessing you wished upon those you loved. It meant to be happy, prosperous, and healthy."

So, concretely speaking, what sorts of silly and playful things can you do with new children placed in your home, or do with other children you live with, to encourage the attachment-promoting experience of shared laughter and smiling? I can offer suggestions of things that I have done with the children in my life. Many of the ideas have been taken from Vicki Lansky's book, *101 Ways to Make Your Child Feel Special*.

- Take your children to the local "Hocus Pocus" shop or magic store. Buy some magic tricks and help your child learn how to do some. Kids love to be able to trick other people. It is very empowering for children to possess a skill that other people do not share. It is so obvious, it's simple. Kids love to play, and the magic tricks stimulate their playful impulses. They will always recall fondly the person who took them to the store and bought the tricks for them.
- Let your child plan an "unbirthday" party, inviting a group of friends or family members. A silly idea that all the kids will enjoy and remember your child for. And this is a shared experience that your child will always remember you for, too.
- Send your child a funny greeting card by mail. You can make it or you can buy one especially designed for kids. Kids love to receive mail. And if the mail is funny, they won't forget.
- The next time you see one advertised in a catalog or magazine, order a copy of the newspaper that was published on your child's birth date. Give it as a special birthday gift. This sends your child the message that his or her birthday was one of the most important days in your life, simply because he or she was born on that day.
- Remember those photo booths in airports, shopping malls, and amusement parks? Next time you and your child pass one, invest in some funny-face

photos of the two of you together. They will be treasured for a long time.

- When you find a comic strip or cartoon relevant to your child, photo-copy it with a cut-out picture of your child's head pasted over the head of that favorite comic character.
- Teach your child a few simple riddles and jokes to tell friends so that she or he can get a good laugh. Creating a laugh gives kids a powerful and wonderful feeling.
- Designate one special frame for a permanent, prominent display of the current school photo of your child. Keep putting the new one on top of the old one, letting the frame serve as storage for those pictures of past years.

Share Your Imperfections:

One of the most important ways to show your child you are neat is to share your imperfections. Let your child play with your vulnerabilities, telling your child about your most embarrassing moments and encouraging your child to share with you his or her most embarrassing moments. Kids feel imperfect about a lot of things; this is particularly true for new kids placed at older ages. Children appreciate an adult who can playfully make a fool out of everyday foibles, or an adult who can take a joke from a child, or an adult who will allow that child to play with their imperfections, or an adult who, after being accidentally embarrassed by a child, can laugh about it anyway.

For example: It isn't a secret in my house that I have a hard time translating spelled-aloud words unless I can write them down first. If you said to me, let's go to the C-A-R, I'd have no idea you want to go to the car unless I first wrote it down: C-A-R. At an early age, my daughter learned about this imperfection and has played with this information many times.

One day when she was about three years old, as she sat in her stroller with her coat on, ready to take a walk outside, my wife stopped me and suggested, "Why don't you take her to the P-A-R-K?" "Where's the Penny Arcade?" I asked. "No, the P-A-R-K," repeats my wife. After several more rounds our three-year-old daughter finally says, "No, Daddy! The park. Mommy said the park!"

From then on, my daughter knew about my imperfection. She also knew I wasn't defensive about it. She had my implicit permission to play with it. One day she had a friend over when I came home from work. I started playfully kidding with the two little girls, when my daughter decided to tell her little friend that her Daddy "is a S-I-L-L-Y B-O-Y." I had no idea what she had spelled. I wanted to know, because it was an eight-letter word that began with S and I wanted to make sure she wasn't spelling out some curse word (like sh—head) or something. So, I'm running around all over the house finding a pencil here, a piece of paper there, and then I spell out S-I-L-L-Y B-O-Y — and I realize that it's not only not a curse word, that indeed it was probably one of the biggest compliments a daughter can bestow on to her father.

For years, in order to avoid being understood by their young children, parents have spelled words aloud. In my household, however, my young child spelled out words in front of her father so that her father did not know what was being said. She took full advantage of playing with her father's imperfections. Kids do many things to embarrass their parents.

It is up to the adult to use it as an attachment experience.

Please read the following: "The opportunity for attaching is nowhere." Did you read "The opportunity for attaching is now where" or "The opportunity for attaching is now here"?

We all saw the same thing but we might have made of it something completely different. You have a choice: you can look at routine situations, particularly those in which your child's action leads to an embarrassing moment, either as attachment experiences or as its opposite. Whether the experience is an "attaching is now here" opportunity or an "attaching is no where" opportunity is completely up to you.

One summer day, a co-worker, Liza, of mine brought her newly-adopted 8-year-old son Richie into the office because she was getting ready to go to a birthday party for herself after work.

"Hey Liza, how old you gonna be?" I asked, knowing perfectly well she was approaching the 40-year mark.

"It ain't none of your business!" Liza retorted.

"Oh, come on, tell me!"

"No way!" Then Richie jumped in,

"Mr. Pat, I know how old Mommy's gonna be!"

"Don't you dare tell him!" his mother threatened. Following his mother's instructions obediently, Richie said calmly,

" Mommy's 22."

"Well, okay, you tell him anything you want," says Mom, joining in everybody's laughter. Now, I'm wondering why he thinks his mother is 22. I figured we might get another little laugh out of discovering that his mom actually tells him she is 22.

So I ask, "Hey Richie, how do you know your mom's 22?"

Very innocently, Richie replies, "Because whenever I look in Mommy's dresses, they all say 22 in them."

Did you ever try to hold in a laugh that needs to come out? Everyone in the office wanted to burst out laughing, but we all had to hold it in and look over to Liza first. When Liza started laughing, every one joined her in relief. It was one of those precious moments that Liza and Richie will be able to share forever. This potentially awkward situation turned into an attachment experience because Liza allowed it to do so. She could have gotten very angry, taken Richie home and punished him. Many parents would have done so for a lot less. But Liza saw the "now here" humor in the situation.

Think about these two stories, and the next time you stumble on the opportunity to share an imperfection or two with your child, do so. It is one of the most wonderful attachment experiences there is.

Develop a "Joy Journal":

I could share these stories with you for one reason and one reason only: because after they happened, I wrote them down. I was able to recall them time and time again because I took the time to write them in my "joy journal." If we can simply

recall the funny things that have happened in our lives, we'll never stand in need of another joke to tell.

Taking the time the time to help your child develop his or her own "joy journal" is another wonderful attachment experience. Kids love to be able to tell things that make people laugh. Keeping a joy journal full of funny stories, especially stories that have occurred since their placement as an older child with, will continuously remind them of the good times they have experienced since moving in with you, which can only help cement the parent/child relationship and bond.

Probably the best case ever made for developing a joy journal was offered by C.W. Metcalf in his book *Lighten Up: Survival Skills for People Under Pressure*. He told a story of working as a volunteer with a terminally-ill 13-year-old boy named Chuck who had been sent home from the hospital to die. As the following passage indicates, Chuck really believed in recording his joyful moments of life. Fortunately, both Chuck and Mr. Metcalf remembered to write it down:

The Gift of Joy:

Chuck was thirteen when he came home from the hospital. He came home not because he was getting better but because he wanted to be with the people he knew and loved when he died. A nurse was on duty to help with medications when I came by the house to visit with him and his family several times a week. On most of my visits, Chuck was unconscious or groggy from the heavy intravenous doses of morphine he was given for pain control.

But the last time I saw him alive, he was awake and remarkably lucid. "I got something for you."

He reached under his pillow and withdrew a rolled-up, somewhat crumpled sheaf of papers. "I want you to give this to my mom and dad after I die. You'll know when it's right, I guess. Will you?"

"What is it?" I asked.

"It's a list of all the fun we had, all the times we laughed."

I almost gasped in amazement. With all the fear and anger and disappointment he had every right to be feeling, here he was trying to look out for his parents.

"Like what?" I asked feebly, trying to regain my composure. Chuck grinned, and launched into a story I wouldn't have thought he had the strength to tell.

"Like the time Mom and Dad and Chrissie and Linda and me were dressed up as those guys in the Fruit of the Loom underwear ad, and Dad's driving us to a costume party. Dad was a bunch of grapes and I was an apple, and the others were different things like bananas and stuff. And Dad gets pulled over for speeding.

When the policewoman came up to the car, she looked in and just started laughin' really hard. I mean, she could hardly stand up, ya know? And we all started laughing and the cop said: 'Where you all headed — a salad bar?'

Dad said he was sorry to be speeding, but his kids were getting so ripe that they were starting to draw flies. And the cop laughed till she had to take off her dark glasses and wipe tears from her eyes, and she said 'Well, get out of here, but go slow; I don't want to find you squashed all over the highway.'"

Chuck laughed and so did I. Later that night, I looked over the pages, reviewing a list that included Disney World, horseback riding, camping, the speeding fruit story, and others, some of which made me laugh out loud. What an incredible gift, I thought. The list ended with a note from Chuck to his parents. "I know you're real upset right now that I'm going away, but I don't want you to forget this stuff. I don't want you to just remember me being skinny and sick. Think about these things, too, because these are what I remember most."

Conclusion:

I can go on all day with stories about how humor, laughter, playfulness, and silliness help cement relationships. The most important thing to learn from all of them is the importance of being silly, of sharing your imperfections, of giving your child permission to kid around and joke with you, and of savoring these stories by writing them down in your own, and your child's, joy journals.

I'd like to end with a letter written by a young adult whom I placed with a single mom. Mom had been so proud when her daughter made it to college. She so much wanted her to succeed good grades that she would get very upset when her daughter's grades weren't so good. One day this mom got a letter from her daughter:

Dear Mom:

I am sorry that I have not written, but all my stationary was destroyed when the dorm burned down. I am now out of the hospital and the doctors says that I will be fully recovered soon. I have also moved in with the boy who rescued me, since most of my stuff was destroyed in the fire.

Oh yes, I know that you have always wanted a grandchild, so you will be pleased to know that I am pregnant and you will have one soon. The wedding date is set for the middle of the month and I hope you can make it.

See ya soon.

With Love, Carla

PS. There was no fire, my health is perfectly fine, and I am not pregnant. In fact, I do not even have a boyfriend. However, I did get a D in French and a C in Math and Chemistry. I just wanted to make sure that you keep it all in perspective.

Pat O'Brien offers day-long training seminars, keynotes and workshops to train in using humor and laughter to reduce the stress, tension and pain of every day life. In his workshops, he also incorporates a lot of his experiences running adoption agencies placing teens and pre-teens. A portion of all proceeds from his workshops are donated to "You Gotta Believe! The Older Child Adoption and Permanency Movement, Inc.," an agency Pat founded to place teens and pre-teens into permanent families, regardless of whether these children are freed for adoption or not. If you would like Pat to conduct a training seminar in your town, please contact him at 1 800 601-1779. If you would like more information about his workshops or "You Gotta Believe!" write to him at 1220 Neptune Avenue, Suite 166, Coney Island, NY 11224 or fax him at (718) 769-0051.