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

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

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1 Introduction

School-age children demonstrate an appreciation for humor in the riddles and jokes that they tell as well as the smiles and laughter that they express. Using Piagetian theory (Piaget 1962; Piaget and Inhelder 1969), McGhee (1979) explains that it is during the stage of concrete operations (7 to 11 years) that children have the ability to understand multiple meanings and are better able to explain the reason for their amusement. They also appreciate the complexities of humor, such as its structure and the motivations behind its use (Bariaud 1989). Freud (1960) posits that jesting and joking begin when children understand the

meaning of humor. With increasing age, children learn how to use the “joking façade” (Wolfenstein 1954) such that humor becomes an acceptable form of displaying hostile and sexual feelings. Researchers have observed children’s expressions of humor in school and playground settings (Honig 1986; Klein 1985; McGhee 1971; McGhee 1979), examined the case records of parent and teacher observations of children’s humor (Bergen 1998; Neuß 2006), conducted experiments to determine children’s appreciation of riddles and jokes (Schultz 1972; Schultz 1974; Schultz and Horibe 1974), and interviewed small groups of children (Neuß 2006). The types of humor most often observed include the performance of incongruous actions (e.g., wearing wacky pajamas to school on spirit day), humorous responses to incongruous actions and objects (e.g., swimming cat or singing dog as seen on America’s Funniest Videos), the expression of joy during times of play, and the use of nonsense words. Other types of observed humor involve clowning (e.g., making faces, exaggerated body movements), verbal or behavioral teasing, riddling, joking or playing jokes, and self-disparagement (e.g., laughing at one’s own mistakes). Researchers also have measured school-age children’s sense of humor (Dowling and Fain 1999; Ho et al. 2011) and found that a sense of humor is a protective factor that influences children’s ability to cope with stressful life events (Dowling et al. 2003; Okhuizen-Stier 2008; Taxis et al. 2004). Children who used humor to cope with stress had lower state anxiety and fewer symptoms of behavioral stress (Okhuizen-Stier 2008). According to Honig (1986) and Martin (1989), humor may enable children to view a stressful event from an alternative perspective and reappraise it as less threatening and more of an opportunity or challenge. Additionally, humor may lessen associated feelings of anxiety, fear, anger, frustration, and discomfort.

In general, the type and use of humor expressed by school-age children follow usual developmental patterns. Second- and third-grade thinking is quite subjective and concrete, demonstrating a preference for slapstick humor, clowning, exaggeration, word play, and socially unacceptable topics such as bathroom humor (Franzini 2002). In the fourth and fifth grade, humor begins to change from prosocial to antisocial jokes as humor revolves around peers with an increased emphasis on the opposite gender and with friends making mistakes; children show an increased tendency to make fun of others and demonstrate more spontaneous wit and accidental incongruities such as Freudian slips (Bergen 2003; Franzini 2002; Howe 1993; Socha 1994). As cognition moves from concrete to abstract thinking and incongruities are better understood, sixth graders demonstrate more sophisticated jokes and riddles and engage in joking with classroom teachers. At the same time, the aggressive and sexual content of their antisocial humor increase as seen in crude behavior, body noises, and grossness (Bergen 2003; Franzini 2002; Howe 1993). Less clear are reported differences in gender.

Boys (6–11 years) showed more frequent laughter, acted silly by clowning around and saying “funny” things, and showed more hostility in their laughter and humor than girls (McGhee 1976). Yet Canzler (1980) and Franzini (2002) noted that boys tend to initiate humor more and girls laugh more but initiate less. Additionally, Neuß (2006) reported that girls laugh more frequently about the esthetical form, expression of humor, and playing practical jokes while boys laugh more frequently about the mishaps of others. As in all development, individual differences in humor skills differ based on cognitive and social development as well as personal preferences and the influences of family, peers, other significant adults, and the media.

Humor studies that analyze data from the observations, experiments, and responses to written instruments of school-age children most often reflect the theoretical perspectives of adult researchers. Adult researchers make an assumption that they can understand how children experience humor without asking children to voice their own viewpoint. Understanding humor from the child’s point of view will advance the knowledge of children’s humor and offer insight into its use in coping with childhood life stressors.

2 Method

A qualitative research approach using focus group methodology and purposive sampling was employed in this study. Focus group is an established interview technique used to obtain data about a particular topic of interest. According to Krueger and Casey (2000), a series of group discussions is conducted to elicit perceptions from participants of similar characteristics in a permissive, non-threatening environment. Although this methodology is limited in children’s studies, several investigators have used focus groups to generate school-age children’s insights into their beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors (Horner 2000; Horowitz et al. 2003; Kennedy et al. 2001). Horner (2000) noted that children are more relaxed, honest, and explicit when discussing topics among peers. In addition, this approach allows the investigator to examine children’s experiences from a developmental perspective, while avoiding the limitations of literacy levels that plague self-report quantitative methods (Kennedy et al. 2001). Focus group methodology is not without its challenges. These include entry and acceptance, informed parental consent and children’s assent, confidentiality, scheduling group sessions, cognitive development, group composition and process, school milieu, and appropriate procedures (Horner 2000; Horowitz et al. 2003; Kennedy et al. 2001). While there are methodological challenges to conducting school-based focus groups, when one considers the spontaneous nature of humor, this approach

helped to document the verbal and nonverbal expressions of humor as well as the children's perceptions about humor and its use.

2.1 Participants

School-age children at two local public elementary and middle schools in the northeastern United States voluntarily assented to participate in focus group interviews after parental consent was obtained. The participants included 31 girls and 27 boys ranging in age from 7 to 12 years, of whom 21 were enrolled in second grade, 19 were in fourth grade, and 18 in sixth grade. While ethnicity and economic status were not obtained from each student, the elementary and middle schools reported >85% Caucasian and <10% were eligible for reduced or free lunch.

2.2 Procedure

In consideration of the cognitive development and possible gender differences in humor expression among school-age children, the focus group interviews for this study consisted of four to six participants of single and mixed-gender groups. Focus groups also were sorted by grade level to reduce potential hierarchy that might occur when groups are mixed grades (Horner 2000) and were scheduled for 45–60 minutes, the recommended amount of time that 7 to 12-year-olds are able to stay focused on the group's discussion (Archer 1993; Kennedy et al. 2001). The groups were scheduled during the school day at a time convenient in the children's class schedules (i.e., lunch time).

After receiving approval by the academic Institutional Review Board and both elementary and middle school administrative personnel, written parental/guardian consents were obtained prior to group meetings. Before focus group discussions, participants were given verbal explanations regarding the purpose and nature of the study. Additionally, written assents were read aloud and signed by the participants. Participation was voluntary and could be withdrawn at any time. Each child received a certificate for participation, and each school received a monetary gift of \$5 per participating child to augment their school's learning resources.

As outside disclosure can be an issue with focus group methodology and moral development is sufficient for children seven or more years of age to understand the implications of their assenting to participate in research (Horner 2000), the participants were asked to agree not to share any private information talked about in the group with people outside the group. The children clearly under-

stood that “what is said in the group stays in the group”. All personal identifiers also were omitted from audiotaped transcriptions and observational notes.

Each meeting was facilitated by a discussion moderator and recorded by an observer/recorder. The moderator introduced the participants, ground rules, and the topic as well as facilitated the discussion by maintaining open communication, reflecting participant assertions, summarizing group comments, and generating questions to clarify the group’s perspective. The interview guide was semi-structured such that there was a list of topics to be discussed but the sequence of questions varied to take advantage of the topics that arise naturally during focus group discussions. Examples of questions included: Tell me what the word “humor” means to you? What makes you laugh? How do you make others laugh? What is the funniest thing that happened in school today? At home yesterday? Tell me about a time when jokes and laughter have made you feel better? Worse? Questions were directed to each participant of the group to ensure that everyone had an opportunity to participate. A variety of strategies were used to encourage participation. These included non-verbal feedback (e.g., nodding, raising eyebrows in surprise) and probes such as “Tell me more”, or “I saw that you had something to add”. The observer/recorder documented group discussion and observations. Discussions were audiotaped and then transcribed verbatim for analysis. Observational notes were taken during group discussions and were written immediately after each group meeting. Data collection continued until repetition of data occurred without discovery of any new themes.

Data analysis began during focus group discussions as children share their own insights as well as react to peers’ responses. Follow-up questions, validating responses, and seeking clarification are a type of data analysis done during group discussions (Krueger 1998). Krueger’s (1998, 2000) systematic analysis process for focus group methodology was used to analyze and interpret the data. This process includes identifying the specificity or detail of the responses, frequency (number of times responses are said versus one key response), emotion or intensity of responses, and extensiveness (number of times different participants said the same or similar responses). Audiotapes, transcripts and observational notes were examined by the researcher and research assistants; and interpretations were cross-checked to ensure parity between interpretations. While the guideline questions served as initial categories and provided a common structure for analysis across interview sessions; analysis of audiotapes, transcriptions, and notes helped to identify themes and patterns of relationships between categories, themes and personal contexts. Several steps needed to be taken to assure rigor in data collection and analysis (Kidd and Parshall 2000). In this study, these steps included training the research assistants in focus group data collection, writing up observational notes after each group session, tape recording and having the

focus group discussions transcribed verbatim, and using two or more researcher/research assistants to code and interpret data. While verbatim transcriptions were useful in identifying examples of themes, repeatedly listening to the audiotapes was extremely helpful considering the verbal and non-verbal expressions of humor and number of participants in each focus group.

3 Results

The following are the findings from the analysis of eleven focus group discussions. The calculated Kappa value, representing inter-rater reliability, was 0.84. Qualitative analysis revealed several themes of child humor, its meaning, as well as grade and gender similarities and differences. All are presented below with examples and supported by descriptive analysis of preferred types of humor by grade and gender of the children.

3.1 Minor misfortunes

School-age children, especially boys, most often laughed about the minor misfortunes of self, peers, family members, and pets. They described many events in which they experienced or observed little mishaps or mistakes that occurred at school, at home, or during after school activities. One boy remarked “This kid . . . in football, he intercepted a pass and ran the wrong way” and a second boy exclaimed, “Oh no! That’s kind of funny”. A girl talked about a family pet, “My cat she was like walking on [top of] the couch and . . . she was like really scared because my brother jumped down the stairs and she . . . like jumped and she fell on the couch (laugh). It was funny”. One boy shared, “My dad stepped in dog pee . . . I’m still laughing”. A sixth grade boy provided much detail when he said,

Last night me and my sister were playing *Battleship* . . . and the fourth time when I won . . . she got so mad she . . . flipped it on me and all the pieces went all over the floor . . . and then my Mom came in and [said to my sister], “No, you pick them up and you spend the rest of the night in your room” . . . it was just kind of funny cause my sister got wicked mad.

3.2 Sparks a memory

School-aged children laughed about things that create a lasting image in their mind. They described these incidences as something that they laugh about at a

later time, as well as a way to prepare for school tests. As one child explained, “Like my dad is funny . . . after he says something I laugh wicked hard . . . in the middle of the night I wake up and then look at my dad and I just start laughing again. And he’s like, ‘What’s so funny?’ and I’m like, ‘Remember last night’ . . . and we both start laughing”. Another child shared, “When I’m studying my vocabulary words with my dad. If I don’t understand it, [then] he’ll try to do something funny so when I’m doing the test I will remember that word by what he did”. A third explained,

Last year in 5th grade my teacher came walking in . . . and she tripped over . . . a chair and she fell and landed . . . almost on somebody and then she tried to jump out of the way and she ended up landing on his desk, and I . . . like I was laughing so hard I almost cried. It was so funny and then after . . . I cried I was just like . . . like wicked tired.

3.3 Laughing at myself

School-aged children found their own actions and words to be a source of humor in many situations. They described several events that happened as a younger child, as well as circumstances that happen at or after school. For example one child stated, “One day I was playing football and I caught the ball when I was running, I tripped and I was playing on the hill and I rolled down the hill. And that was pretty funny”. Another child declared, “When I get hurt I always laugh no matter how serious the injury is . . . I laugh”. And a girl disclosed, “So this is just being . . . me, being like totally out of it, right . . . So I . . . like my parents didn’t leave me any lunch money or anything. I forgot that I made myself a lunch . . . So I had to . . . get [a] lunch slip, and then I go back to my back pack . . . there’s a lunch . . . whoops (laugh)”.

3.4 It just happens

The children spoke of the randomness of humor. Many frequently reported that just noting the obvious was found to be humorous by themselves and their peers. One child said, “The other day when my step mom was vacuuming the floor, my new dog . . . [ran] up to the vacuum [cleaner] and barked at it (laughs). It was so funny. I was like laughing to death”. A second child remarked, “The funniest thing that probably happened in school is my friend had a yogurt today . . . [she] went to go get a spoon and she got a fork instead (laughing)”. Another explains, “I laugh when my sister says these random comments like ‘taste the rainbow and

eat crayons’”. And there was considerable laughter in one group when a member shared, “When we had the book fair, we were waiting to go in and look at all the books and all the boys started singing and dancing”. Lastly, humor occurred in the moment of the focus group discussions. A student was asked if he could tell a funny joke but he couldn’t think of one; then another student said “Pressure!”, and everyone laughed.

3.5 Breaking the rules

Humor was observed when children talked about the behaviors and misbehaviors of self and others as boundaries were transgressed in their daily lives at school and at home. One second grader stated, “My [music] teacher danced with one of my classmates. Pretty much everybody laughed”. Another shared, “Someone in my class, I forget who it was; he was standing on his desk and (giggle) he was singing”. One child added, “In English class [our teacher] asked a question. The person he called on . . . kept repeating everything the teacher was saying” (others laugh). And when asked about the funniest thing that happened at home yesterday, one child shared, “When me, my brother and sister are like jumping and fooling around”.

Bathroom talk also was forthcoming primarily in the jokes, books, television shows, and movies shared by children. One girl asked, “When you are outside the bathroom you are American. What are you when you are inside the bathroom? . . . EUROPEAN!” (i.e., “you are peeing”). Much laughter arose from the discussion group members. Several children mentioned the humorous antics of “*Walter the Farting Dog* . . . it’s [a book] about a dog who farts a lot and he gains a family because of it”. Other children verbalized that whoopee cushions and farting sounds were funny in the television shows *Hannah Montana*, *Family Guy*, and *South Park* and in the movie *Kangaroo Jack*. One child revealed that in *Kangaroo Jack*, “all the camels are farting so much and then from the back comes a huge, long fart and the person in the back goes ‘sorry that was me’ and everyone can’t stop laughing”.

3.6 Often better . . . sometimes worse

Humor was said to be fun. Humor could cheer up or motivate a child. But when humor poked fun at a child or the child’s preferences, some children reported feeling angry, sad, and hurt. For example, one child stated, “When I don’t want to do something . . . my grandfather tells me a joke and then I want to do it”.

Another said, “My favorite TV show sometimes [is] Curious George . . . he makes me laugh and feel better”. One sixth grader explained

we pick[ed] on my friend’s sister – like not bad but he got these little guns for Christmas that shoot little bullets that stick to the walls and stuff . . . and we shot it and I hit his sister right here (points to his forehead) and it stuck there . . . and his sister got mad; and whenever I say something funny she like feels better so I did that and she felt better.

A fourth grade boy explained, “One time my brother was being a jerk and my sister came in and said a joke about him and that made me feel better”. A sixth grade girl commented, “I was feeling all upset because of my sister . . . I saw my sister and then she starts making fun of me. And that made me feel worse”. Another agreed, “When someone makes a joke about you . . . it just gets you real mad at them”.

3.7 Making others laugh

School-aged children make others laugh by producing funny faces, funny noises, riddles, jokes, and nonsensical statements. One second grader said that he makes people laugh “by crossing my eyes, making weird noises, and doing the hula”. Another shared, “It’s kind of weird but when I sneeze people laugh because I kind of have a weird sneeze”. A sixth grader explained that he makes others laugh “By saying funny . . . nonsense phrases really fast, I’ll say it slow and then I’ll do it fast [for example], ‘Have little aliens ever invaded your brain and told you to free all the monkeys from the zoo?’” Prolonged laughter erupted from all members of this group.

3.8 Others make me laugh

School-age children frequently laughed at the antics of friends, family, and pets, as well as at people, pets, and events in their favorite books, cartoons, television shows, and movies. They often described situations where the behaviors of their cats, dogs, friends and family members resulted in much enjoyment and laughter. One child remarked, “My friend noticed that I was upset so she put frosting on my nose . . . It made me laugh and it made me feel better”. With a lot of chuckling, a second grader explained that, “Somebody farted on a whoopee cushion”. One girl giggled, “My cat acts like a dog . . . sometimes she sits under the table while we’re having dinner and then she’ll try to get our attention; and sometimes

she sits in a chair and then puts her paws up sort of pretending”. A child shared, “My cat and my bird [make me laugh] because usually cats go after birds but my bird goes after the cat”. Another commented, “My brother . . . takes these two black socks and he puts them on his ears and he barks like a dog” (lots of laughter from group members). Tickling by others, be they family members, friends, or pets was reported by several girls across all grade levels as making them laugh.

3.9 From recalled riddles to spontaneous witticisms

While there were many common themes in what school-age children say is humorous, other themes varied according to developmental grade level. Second graders often cited riddles from their lunchroom favorites, Popsicle sticks and cheese stick wrappers, such as “What goes up and down but doesn’t move? Stairs”. and “Why is six afraid of seven? Because seven eight [ate] nine!” They can tell you that something was funny but they sometimes have a hard time recalling it later. When asked to tell a humorous story, one child began, [it’s] “where the guy only knows three words”. When prompted to tell the story, he replied “The whole story . . . I don’t know”. Another child shared that *Chowder* is a funny television show but when asked why it is funny she also answered, “I don’t know”. And their attempts at spontaneous humor were not always successful. “I made this up . . . Knock knock. Who’s there? We. We who? We can play Wii”. The boy telling the joke laughs and the rest of the children are silent.

Fourth graders tell more complex jokes and stories that they heard from others, share humorous observations, and do or say something funny on the spur of the moment to make others laugh. Gesturing also was observed more often from children in this grade level. One child enacted the following, “A boy went up to blonde-haired girl and said I like your hair. She says it’s natural. A boy goes up to the brown-haired girl and says I like your hair. She says it’s natural. A boy goes up to the green-haired girl and says I like your hair. She goes Achoo (sneezing in her hand), its natural” (wipes her hand over the top of her hair). Group members responded with great laughter. When asked about the funniest thing that happened in school today, a fourth grader shared, “When we had the book fair, we were waiting to go in and look at all the books and all the boys started singing and dancing” (more laughter). An example of a spontaneous humor occurrence was described as, “Today at morning recess, all the boys were singing, it was on *Sponge Bob*, it’s the *Goofy Goober* song”. Lastly, a fourth grade boy verbalized that “Anything I do makes people laugh” and then he laughed really loud and everyone else laughed too.

The sixth graders told more elaborate jokes, played telephone pranks, and offered spontaneous witticisms during focus group sessions. Both genders equally blushed more often than children in the other grade levels within mixed and same gender discussion groups. One boy shared,

I heard this one from my mom's best friend's daughter's father. Ah . . . so it goes . . . one guy goes to the grocery store and he [asks] "Got any grapes?" And the clerk says, "No, we don't have any grapes today". And he goes home. The next day he comes back, "Got any grapes?" The clerk says, "No, we don't have any grapes". And the guy comes back again. He asks, "Got any grapes?" And the clerk says, "No, but if you come back here one more time I'm going to staple you to the floor". So the guy goes home. He comes back the next day, he asks, "Got any staples?" And the clerk says, "No", and then the guy goes, "Got any grapes?"

Laughter emanated from all of the group members. Another group member offered,

Me and my friend Zack were at his house and I'm like, "Zack, can I use your cell phone for a second?" And I called this random number and I [say], "Hello, this is Bob from Hat World" (others laugh) and then they're like "Hat World?" . . . and I was like "Bob, from Hat World" . . . and then I hung up.

Another confessed, "Yesterday on the bus, my friend (whispering) called [a local radio station] . . . (laughter from group) . . . and we were listening to it on the radio and he goes . . . 'hello, hello' like in this weird accent . . . and then they blocked his number". When asked about a time when a joke or laughter made you feel better, one sixth grader began telling this story, "My friend fell off a see saw and I tried to make her feel better so I ran to get her a bag of ice and I dropped the ice and slipped and I fell and I crashed into the cabinet". Then another student quickly commented, "At least you had the ice".

3.10 Humor – What is it?

When asked about the meaning of the word *humor*, children frequently stated that humor means something that is funny or hilarious and makes you smile or laugh out loud. While second graders had more difficulty defining the word humor beyond "it's something funny" or "makes you laugh"; fourth-grade boys and girls verbalized that humor makes them feel better. A fourth-grade girl explained that humor is "something that can make a person who is not having a good day, have a great day". "Humor is something that is funny like joking and playing around", according to one sixth grader. Another another stated that "It's a

thought or an idea that makes somebody laugh”, while yet another sixth-grade boy added, “Like [when] I feel hurt or really upset sometimes I just laugh . . . sometimes a good joke . . . just, you know, [helps me] feel much better”. A sixth grade girl summarized that humor is “something that makes you laugh and makes you feel good”.

3.11 Preferred types of humor

In a discussion about their favorite funny book, cartoon, television show or movie, the children mentioned 10 books, 14 cartoons, 10 television shows, and 16 movies (Table 1). While there was little agreement among the books and movies, *Sponge Bob Square Pants* was the most popular cartoon for both boys and girls (22%) across all grade levels. Also inclusive across all grade levels and more popular among the boys were the cartoons *Family Guy* (8%) and *Tom and Jerry* (6%), while the girls favored the television shows of *The Suite Life of Zack and Cody* (12%) and *Hannah Montana* (6%). When asked why their selected cartoon or television show was funny, the majority of children shared examples that reflected incongruous actions (36%), such as the singing slugs in *Sponge Bob*, the crabs carrying the ship in *Pirates of the Caribbean*, and the magical forces in *Harry*

Table 1: Humorous books, cartoons, television shows and movies

Books	Cartoons	Shows	Movies
Bernstein Bears	Ben Ten	Chowder	Aladdin
Cat in the Hat	Boomerang	Drake and Josh	Alvin and the Chipmunks
Granny Torrelli	Fairly Odd Parents	Full House	Back at the Barnyard
Makes Soup	Family Guy	Ghost Hunters	George of the Jungle
Harry Potter	Pink Panther	Hannah Montana	High School
Jennie B. Jones	Pokémon	PeeWee’s	I now pronounce you
Little Red (Sox)	Road Runner	Playhouse	Chuck and Larry
Book	Scooby Doo	Phineas & Fern	Kangaroo Jack
Mama Rex and T	Simpsons	Santa Claus II	My Cousin Vinny
Pick of the Litter	South Park	Suite Life of Zack	Night at the Museum
Ralph S. Mouse	Sponge Bob	& Cody	Pirates of the Caribbean
Walter the	Timmy Turner	Wizards of	Rug Rats
Farting Dog	Tom and Jerry	Waverly Place	Surfs Up
	Yugioh Dx		Tak and the Power of Juju
			Transformers
			Wild Hogs
			Without a Paddle

Potter. Other children mentioned disparaging or socially unacceptable topics (23%), such when the two step-brothers, *Drake and Josh* get into trouble, the father in *Family Guy* does a “fart-out”, and Chucky from the *Rug Rats* has accidents because he doesn’t know how to use the toilet. Clowning behaviors (16%) also were reported, such as when Sponge Bob is being really silly or when “a Pokémon guy’s eyes pop out and his tongue flies out of his mouth”. One quarter (25%) of the children could not remember why the cartoon or television show was funny or chose not to answer the question.

From a total of 272 examples of humor, affiliative humor (36%) was the primary type of humor shared by both boys and girls across all grade levels (Table 2). Examples included laughing *with* others at the minor misfortunes, riddles, jokes, amusing stories, nonsensical words, nicknames, and comical faces, sounds and actions. Observing the incongruous behavior of others often was mentioned (32%) while only a handful of boys reported performing incongruous acts themselves (2%). Also mentioned were examples of aggressive behaviors (21%), when a child would laugh *at* the mishaps or disobedience of others or shared that others sometimes laughed at them. A smaller number of children provided examples of self-enhancing humor (6%) or self-disparaging humor (5%). Many children provided several examples of varying types of humor and all children provided at least one example.

4 Discussion and conclusion

Most of the previous studies of children’s humor analyzed data from children’s responses to written instruments and experiments, as well as the observations and assumptions of researchers, parents, and teachers. Understanding humor from the child’s point of view through focus group interviews confirmed past analyses of typically-developing children and offered new knowledge and examples about children’s perceptions of humor and use in coping with childhood life stressors. Clearly, children find humor in all that is around them, in school, after-school, at home, and in books, television shows and movies. The preferred television cartoon was *Sponge Bob Square Pants* and the primary type of humor shared was affiliative, although all styles of humor were present. Enjoyment from observing the incongruous actions of others also was highly reported by both genders and all grade levels. Aggressive humor was apparent when the children laughed at the misfortunes and misbehaviors of others or were laughed at by others. Self-enhancing humor cheered or motivated children even in the face of stressful events. Lastly, self-disparaging humor was noted as children found humor in their own misbehaviors when transgressing boundaries such as school and

Table 2: Preferred types of humor by grade and gender

Types of Humor		2 nd	4 th	6 th	Examples
Affiliative (36%)	Boys	13	12	17	"I think when somebody gets hurt but they're still okay . . . I think that's kind of funny . . . last week my friend fell down three steps of stairs and landed on his butt and started laughing so I started laughing with him."
	Girls	17	20	19	"I scraped my chin on the wall. I kept saying 'ahh, my chin stings, my chin stings.' So now my aunt always calls me 'Chinstings' (laughs). It's a nickname."
Incongruity (32%)	Boys	13	15	14	"This kid . . . in football . . . he intercepted a pass and ran the wrong way."
	Girls	13	15	18	"Cats go after birds but my bird goes after the cat."
Aggressive (21%)	Boys	14	6	16	"I pushed my sister in the snow, face first (laughs), she didn't care."
	Girls	8	6	6	"I fall . . . and it hurts and then my friend laughs and says 'Nice that was a great fall' and then it kind of makes me feel bad."
Self-enhancing (6%)	Boys	1	4	2	"I was sad . . . and then I was with my friends . . . I was on my bike; we were all on our bikes. And my friends got up the hill and then I drove up and fell off the hill, it was grassy and we were . . . all three of us were laughing."
	Girls	3	2	3	"When someone was upset we would say, 'turn that frown upside down.' The other person would always be looking down so you would bend over and go upside-down and make a wicked stupid face and it would always just make whichever one of us feel much better."
Self-disparaging (5%)	Boys	5	–	5	"So if [my teacher] says, 'No running around in the library' [then] I'd look like I'm running around [while sitting in my seat]. So I was over exaggerating."
	Girls	1	–	1	"Well this wasn't really funny for me but it was really funny for my dad . . . well it was sort of funny for me actually . . . but he got me to try this scooter that was really fast. So I got on it . . . and I crashed into a tree."
Total number of shared humor examples = 272					

household rules as well as talking about socially unacceptable topics such as bodily functions and bathroom humor.

As anticipated, the complexity of children's humor progressed with the children's grade and developmental level. The children offered many examples of incongruous actions, humorous responses to incongruous actions and objects, expressions of joy, gesturing and clowning, and the use of nonsense phrases. While second graders shared riddles that were not always meaningful or they could not always tell you why something was funny, fourth graders were quite animated gesturing often when telling their jokes and stories, and sixth graders blushed more often when sharing more elaborate jokes and spontaneous witticisms even within focus groups of the same gender. Moreover, we were able to capture the meaning of the word *humor* across the three grade levels. Interestingly, humor was defined from a therapeutic rather than a disparaging perspective. The words children use to define humor become important when researchers examine the items of questionnaires measuring children's humor or develop interview questions for qualitative research studies.

Bergen (2009) found similar results in interviews with 74 gifted children (7–12 years old) in grades 4–6. *Sponge Bob* was the most popular television show. Additionally, observing or performing incongruous actions and humor with a disparaging or aggressive tone were more frequently reported when the children shared examples of home or school fun. However, Bergen concluded that this group of gifted children was slightly more proficient in their humor development than those of typically-developing children. Likewise, nine children (7–11 years old) with a diagnosis of mild to moderate intellectual disability who viewed a 12-minute episode of *Sponge Bob* greatly appreciated the television show (Degabriele and Walsh 2010). However, the children rated the physical and visual humor as funniest (85% and 84%, respectively) and verbal humor as less funny (77%); leading the authors to hypothesize that the last stage of humor development may be more difficult for these children than typically-developing children.

Similar to the findings of many researchers, the minor misfortunes of self, peers, family members, and pets more often were reported to be humorous by boys. In contrast, girls often reported that the tickling by others made them laugh. There is some controversy as to whether laughter from tickling is related to the same kind of laughter elicited by incongruous actions (Provine 2000), however the girls' perceptions of the intentions of the tickler may be viewed as incongruous behavior especially when this playfulness is unexpected (McGhee 1989).

The children used humor to help them cope with the daily life stressors associated with interpersonal relationships, academic performance, after-school activities, and life at home. The children provided examples to support the

benefits of using humor as a coping mechanism such as humor made them feel better, cheered them up, motivating them, and created memories that support relationship building and knowledge acquisition. Additionally, the children recognized the negative effects of humor making them feel worse or angry when they were the target of the humor and ridiculed by others.

There are several limitations to be considered when focus group studies are conducted with children. First, the study was carried out in one school district and only with children who assented to participate as well as received parental consent to do so. Triangulation of sources, such as verifying results with parents or teachers, was not done, however themes were validated among four trained research assistants. Lastly, study results cannot be generalized to a larger population except to validate the findings of past research studies and promote future humor research studies with children.

This study extends the developing body of humor research from the voices of school-age children. A strength of this qualitative focus group methodology using purposive sampling for thick description is the rich insight into school-age children's understanding of humor and how they use humor to cope with daily life stressors. As with all focus group studies, limitations include the possibility of social desirability response bias, interaction effects between children and researchers, and dominance by more outgoing, talkative members of the group.

Further research is needed to investigate the deliberate choice of humor as a coping strategy among school-age children. At what point in a child's age and development is coping humor evident? Is it during the ages of 7–11 years when children in the concrete operations stage of cognitive development understand the implied incongruities of humor and can explain the reason for choosing to use humor as a coping strategy? Or can coping humor be observed in earlier ages? How often and under what life circumstances or stressors is coping humor used? Are there gender and ethnic differences? Longitudinal and global studies using a mixed method approach may help researchers explicate this phenomenon and identify which variables contribute to children's deliberate use humor to cope with daily life stressors.

Acknowledgments: Thank you to Bridget Adams and Kevin Riley, undergraduate research assistants, and Christina Geier and Catherine Yu, graduate research assistants, who assisted with this study.

This collaborative faculty-student research study was supported by grants from the University of Massachusetts Lowell's Teaching and Learning Grant Task Force of the Faculty Teaching Center, and the Eta Omega Chapter of Sigma Theta Tau International Nursing Honor Society.

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