

Silliness and Showing Off

	Strategies	Key Takeaways
Balancing Silliness with Seriousness		
Calming the Silliness		
Continued Silliness and Talking to Parents		

Balancing Silliness With Seriousness

Proactive steps to promote productive playfulness

Providing children with productive ways to meet their needs for silliness and performing will go a long way toward preventing them from meeting those needs in other ways. For instance, if they don't have opportunities to be silly, the giggles may come out just when you want them to be most attentive. What follows are some guidelines for encouraging an appropriate balance of fun and seriousness to enhance children's social-emotional and academic growth.

Give some silly time

Consider these ideas for ways to meet children's needs for playfulness and learning:

- ▶ **Add to the classroom library.** Stock it with humor-based books that children can explore. As you choose books for read-alouds, consider children's developmental needs. For example, Louis Sachar's *Sideways Stories from Wayside School* usually meet first graders' silly needs; Jack Gantos's books often do the same for older students.
- ▶ **Include fun games and energizers.** Look for light-hearted games like *Do You Love Me, Honey?* or *What Are You Doing?* to play at morning meetings or closing circles. Consider using brief energizers to break up the daily routine and make it easier for children to focus in on the next lesson or task.
- ▶ **Build humor into academic lessons.** For example, look for books and articles that reveal the humor in historical or scientific events. Or, design tasks that tap into children's playful side. Instead of having students write a report, give them a choice of doing an interview or infomercial. For an insect unit, I let students create their own insects. Their creations had to be scientifically accurate, but students were free to imagine unique ways their insects might use body parts.
- ▶ **Give children the occasional spotlight.** Use Readers' Theater or dramatic interpretations of stories to allow children to be the center of attention. Do dramatic readings of poems, sing songs, play games with a dramatic element, and let those who like to perform shine in similar, productive ways.

Teach how to stop and refocus

Children need help learning to regulate their emotions. Model what it looks and sounds like to laugh about something funny for a few seconds and then to stop and refocus. For instance, after everyone laughs at something, you might say, "Oh, that was funny. Now, I'm going to take a few deep breaths to get myself focused back onto our discussion." Sometimes, I would even go to our take-a-break spot to show how that helped me to regroup.

Signal when shifting gears

Children are better able to refocus on academics when you provide a quick transition from fun to work. If, instead, you go right back into academics, it can feel jarring to them, and they may continue with the joking. After a funny incident, use a signal, such as a raised hand to show “Stop,” to alert students when it’s time to transition back to learning. You might also want to say, “OK, let’s get back to _____” or “Now it’s time to return to our lesson. Who can remind us of our goal for this lesson?”

Establish expectations for seriousness

Use class rules as the starting point for a conversation about behavior expectations for instructional and work times, and why these are important. Model what it looks and sounds like to listen, stay on topic during discussions and partner chats, and focus on independent work tasks. You may also want to teach children creative ways to show appreciation (such as silent clapping or another nonverbal signal) rather than whooping it up.

As you strive to help children live out these expectations, be consistent in your response to jokes, silly comments, and playful antics. It’s confusing if a child’s fooling around is acceptable one day, but a similar behavior receives a consequence on another.

Be mindful of your own silliness

Because we usually have center stage, it’s easy for us to overdo humor, especially when students enjoy our antics. Of course we want to be natural and playful. When we are, it helps children relax, improves our relationships with them, and makes learning more enjoyable. However, we can go too far. Sometimes when I got too silly, my students responded in kind and it was hard to get them back on track. Also, if we’re frequently joking or going into “actor” mode, but rarely allowing children to do the same, they may try to compete with us or resent us for being unfair.

Teach how to keep the sillies away

To help them keep their focus on learning, teach children respectful ways of responding when someone is trying to make them laugh. Use Interactive Modeling and role-play to demonstrate responses such as ignoring the behavior, moving away, or respectfully telling the person to stop (for example, “That’s funny. I need to concentrate on my work now. Maybe we can trade jokes during lunch.”).

TEACHING TIP

Avoid Overdoing Humorous Activities

While it’s important to read humorous poetry and be playful with students, it’s also important to know when not to do such activities. If students are on the verge of the giggles, try doing calming activities, such as a silent version of Simon Says or a peaceful song.

Reinforce students' efforts at regulating themselves

Managing one's emotions is a skill that takes children time and practice to develop. When you take time to reinforce students' efforts at exercising this skill, you'll help them solidify it. Remember to name specifically what they did that was helpful.

Reinforcing Language in Action	
If a situation like this happens	Try this
Your class often has a hard time regrouping after something funny happens. Today, a poster fell down while you were teaching. Students laughed, but quickly refocused when you said it was time to return to the lesson.	"Wow! Look at how fast you have your voices off and your eyes back on me. You're learning how to regroup after something funny happens."
Two students usually giggle for a long time when their classmate Doris makes funny noises. Today, Doris tries to engage them in her silliness, but they stay on task.	Privately (after Doris goes to the time-out spot): "Tonya and Denise, even though Doris tried to make you laugh, you stuck with your stories. I can't wait for you to share what you wrote."
Michael frequently makes comments using movie lines. Today, he makes such a comment. You use a private signal to alert him that this isn't the time for these. Michael refrains from making another comment during the lesson.	Privately: "Michael, our signal seems to be working. I signaled after you quoted from <i>Star Wars</i> and you held off making any more comments. What strategy did you use to stay focused on our lesson today?"

Calming the Silliness

How to Respond Effectively in the Moment

Even with our best proactive work, children will occasionally struggle with silliness and showing off. It's also challenging for children to regulate themselves if someone near them is laughing or being goofy. As children learn how to stay focused and ignore distractions, they're bound to make mistakes and get caught up in the moment. When that happens, here are some tips for bringing the silliness to an end and helping children refocus on learning.

Respond early

As you get to know your students better, you'll be able to detect some signs that children's willpower is diminishing. The sooner you respond, the sooner children can regain self-control in most situations. If you wait until a fit of giggling has set in, children will have a much harder time recovering. When you respond early, you're also more likely to get children back on track quickly—with just a few words or a nonverbal cue, such as eye contact. The more timely—and “smaller”—your response, the less interruption to learning there will be.

Respond respectfully and minimally

When you respond, be respectful, but refrain from giving the child too much attention, which can provoke more silliness. For example, if you respond with a lecture, sarcasm, or “What's so funny?” you can make the situation worse. Instead, remind or redirect children with matter-of-fact language, using as few words as possible.

Reminding and Redirecting Language in Action

If a situation like this happens	Try this
<p>During a science lesson on the planets, you say the word "Uranus," and most of your class bursts out laughing.</p>	<p>Redirect: "Now that we have that out of our system, eyes up here, voices off, hands in laps. Take a deep breath." Pause so that students can regroup and then start back into your lesson.</p>
<p>Your class has an inside joke about the word "hobnob." When someone says it, everyone laughs. However, students have agreed to use the word for fun only during snack, lunch, and recess.</p> <p>Today, Jaime says "hobnob" during a lesson, and many children begin to snicker.</p>	<p>Redirect and remind: "Stop. Show me what we agreed to do." Make eye contact and wait for students to follow through with their agreement.</p>
<p>Lila and Frankie are partners for a math game. You notice that they're starting to get giggly and lose focus.</p>	<p>Remind and move closer to them: "Lila, Frankie, show me how to have fun and still focus on math. I'll watch." Stay for a few minutes until they seem to be back in control.</p>

Use logical consequences

If you respond early, your reminder or redirection will often be enough to help a child shift gears and return to a learning mindset. At other times, a logical consequence may be more effective. Perhaps you missed the early signs or the child has lost too much self-control. Or from what you know about the child, your teacher instincts tell you that a redirection at this point will likely not help. In situations like these, use a reasonable logical consequence.

Logical Consequences in Action

If a situation like this happens	Try this
<p>Lila and Frankie are partners for a math game. When they first started to get silly, you moved close to them and helped them get back on track. Just a few minutes later, they're throwing cards at each other and laughing loudly.</p>	<p>Use loss of privilege:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I'm giving you each a new partner," or • "You each need to play the game on your own. Take turns against yourself." <p>Follow up with each child later (because of how disruptive their behavior was): "What was going on for you during the card game? Do you know why you lost the privilege of playing together? What could you do differently next time?"</p>
<p>Instead of "hobnob," Jaime keeps trying other humorous words to get the class to laugh.</p>	<p>Use time-out: "Jaime, take a break."</p>
<p>During a math lesson, you direct students to partner chat about how they came up with their answers. While you check in with two students, you hear Kim and Mary singing a pop song and giggling instead of talking about their work.</p>	<p>Use time-out: "Kim and Mary, each of you needs to take a break."</p> <p>Follow up with each girl later (because of how off task they were): "What was going on for you? Do you know why I sent you to time-out? What's something that would help you follow our rules next time?"</p>

In addition to responding in the moment, keep evaluating why a particular child or your class may be struggling with silliness or showing off. Continue using proactive strategies, adapting them according to the individual child and situation.

If a Child Continues to Act Silly

If some students continue to struggle with too much clowning around or ill-timed jokes, you may need to supplement your use of proactive and reactive strategies. Try some of these ideas to provide additional support for these students.

Hold a class discussion

If silliness is an issue for many students, a class discussion can be an effective way to address the issue. Rather than doing all the talking, state the fact that too many silly antics will negatively affect students' learning and guide them in coming up with realistic solutions. Here are some tips for helping these discussions be productive:

- ▶ Tell children not to name others or describe an incident in a way that lets everyone know whom they're discussing.
- ▶ Hold these whole-class discussions only for issues that are continuous and involve many children. In response to a specific incident, address it privately with the children involved.
- ▶ Make sure all voices are heard and that children work together toward a solution.

Children often have a great deal of insight into what's causing the problem and what solutions might help. During one class discussion I held, my second graders let me know that after quiet time, they sometimes became silly because we went straight into math; they didn't feel they had a chance to reconnect after being on their own. We decided to play quick games or have brief partner chats to help with this transition.

Use problem-solving conferences

If the problem is with just one or two students, a problem-solving conference can offer similar benefits to them as a class discussion does for everyone. During these conferences, explore with a student why he's cracking jokes or being silly during serious lessons or discussions. Together, brainstorm strategies for the student to use to limit or prevent these instances from occurring.

To prepare for the conference, think about:

- ▶ **What to say** to begin the conference on a positive note.
- ▶ **How to state the problem** and its impact in concrete terms. For example: "Often you tell jokes during a serious classroom discussion or make funny faces to make the person next to you laugh."
- ▶ **Possible causes of the problem.** Be open to the child's ideas as to what's causing his behavior struggles. If the child is at a loss, name some possible reasons and see if he thinks any ring true.

- ▶ **Strategies that may help**, such as taking a break when he feels the impulse to make jokes or distract others, setting a designated time or two when he could tell a few jokes, or using a joke book in which he could record jokes or funny comments. Also encourage the child to offer strategies of his own, if any come to mind.

Consider an individual written agreement

Occasionally a student may develop a regular habit of fooling around or seeking attention at inappropriate times. For these situations, and after trying other strategies, you may want to use an individual written agreement to help the child gain control over when and how she uses humor at school. It provides the child with a concrete goal to work toward, frequent feedback on how she's doing in meeting the goal, and, when appropriate, some extrinsic, nonmaterial reward.

Here's an example of one such an agreement:

- ▶ **A clearly defined goal.** “Lucia will stay focused during instructional time by looking at the speaker, listening, and refraining from making jokes.”
- ▶ **A reasonable standard for success** in meeting the goal—“Lucia will be successful eighty percent of the time.”
- ▶ **A way to track success** that's easy for the student to understand—check marks on a chart, for example.
- ▶ **A nontangible reward** for meeting the goal—“If successful, Lucia can spend time at the end of the day with a friend reading joke books.”

Be empathetic

At times, you may notice a marked change in a child's behavior. Perhaps he's suddenly acting silly a lot more often. Such a change can be a sign of anxiety, stress, or another serious issue. Be understanding as you respond to the child. Try to find out what may be causing his change in behavior. Reach out to his parents, school counselors, and other school specialists.

Likewise, during stressful times at school or in the community, be prepared for some children to cope by acting extra silly or showing off more. Remind yourself to be patient, and seek support from colleagues as needed.

How to Talk With Parents About Silliness or Showing Off

As you think about how to approach parents about their child's difficulties with controlling silliness or sharing the spotlight, try to maintain a big picture perspective. During your teaching, children's jokes and laughter can derail learning and be frustrating. Yet in the grand scheme of things, too much silliness and showing off are usually just a temporary detour. Most children outgrow these behaviors (or channel them productively, as Jim Carrey did). You'll be more likely to maintain credibility and have parents hear you if you don't "oversell" silliness or showing off as a catastrophic problem.

When you discuss an incident with parents, describe the specific details of what's happening without ascribing negative intentions to their child's behavior or using charged words (even "silly" or "showing off" can have loaded connotations for parents). Also, let parents know why the behavior is a concern for the student's learning or relationships with classmates.

Remember to invite parents to share their observations. If a child is acting silly at school instead of focusing on a task, parents often see the same pattern at home. They may have strategies to suggest or offer other ways to help, and they may be more open to your suggestions if they have a chance to express their point of view.

At times, parents may turn to you for help with their child's silliness or showing off. If so, you may want to offer some of these suggestions:

- ▶ **Help the child identify strengths** other than joking. The positive feedback children often receive from joking (laughs from family and friends) can lead them to focus just on this area. Make sure children can shine in multiple ways.
- ▶ **Be aware** of how family members tend to use humor in various situations. Sometimes children model themselves after the adults in their lives.
- ▶ **Discuss why seriousness matters** at certain times. Do this at a neutral time, not when the child is "in trouble" for joking around—otherwise the topic will feel like a lecture.
- ▶ **Respond to early signs** that a child is beginning to act silly in inappropriate times. When adults respond early, it's easier for children to get back on track.