

## Are You Suffering from HDD? (Humor Deficient Disorder)

In the world of parenting, a little humor goes a long way.

BY SEAN GROVER

What if I told you there's a miracle-parenting tool that improves parent/child relationships almost overnight? It enriches communication and enhances trust, in addition to reducing stress and tension—and it's yours absolutely free.

What is this magical parenting gizmo? It's humor. (Go ahead, laugh.) The positive effect of humor is spectacularly underappreciated. Whether a tiny chuckle or a colossal belly laugh, good humor is a powerful parenting force that can revitalize your relationship with your kid and open up new worlds of positive interaction. Numerous studies have also shown that humor is even good for your health.

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Let's take a look at some of the ways humor benefits kids and their parents:

**Humor Encourages Trust:** When you bring a sense of playfulness and friendly jesting to parenting, your kids reward you with open and intimate relationships. They feel more at ease around you; they don't have to strive to be perfect or hide their insecurities. Good humor also paves the way to unrestrained dialogue and makes it possible to discuss sensitive subjects with ease.

**Humor Reduces Tension:** Unrelieved emotional stress gets stored in our bodies and results in endless psychosomatic symptoms such as headaches, backaches, stomachaches, hyperactivity and sleeplessness. These symptoms are amplified in kids when their parents are too serious or worried. A good laugh does more than just relieve emotional tension. Well-documented studies show that laughter reduces stress hormones, stimulates endorphins, and

strengthens the immune system. It also brings lightness into a conversation and softens conflicts.

**Humor Promotes Flexibility:** When the body loses flexibility, it becomes vulnerable to injury. When parents lose their sense of humor, they're more likely to cause damage to their relationship with their kids. Without humor, parents often become impulsive, say hurtful things, and don't let their kids explain or express themselves; all these things only escalate conflicts. Hitting the pause button, or taking a moment to laugh at yourself or the absurdity of a situation, helps to reduce those destructive impulses. It keeps problems in perspective and gives you time to consider better options and solutions.

**Humor is Good Modeling:** Children look to their parents for good role modeling. Humor is a great example of how to manage life's difficulties with a cool head. Humorless parents tend to explode in angry rages, withdraw into depression or suffer chronic anxiety. All these choices are terrible modeling for kids. On the other hand, parents with a sense of humor are the most popular parents on the block; their kids take pride in them and enjoy bringing their friends over.

### Diagnosis: Humor Deficient Disorder

Recently I started working with (let's call them) the Humorless Family. Never have I met a family so bloody somber. The father lectured his son; the mother lectured her daughter; and the husband and wife lectured each other. They arrived in my office as if they had been summoned to the gallows. Here's a peek at how things went on the first day:

Deadly silence; everyone avoids eye contact. I try to break the ice:

"Please, don't talk all at once."

The father sighs deeply. "Things aren't going well in our family." He sighs again.

## HUMOR DEFICIENT DISORDER CONTINUED

“You guys look miserable.”

“We need some help . . .”

I thought, That’s a news flash.

“Have you tried laughing gas?”

The father looked perplexed. “Is that a joke?”

“Is that question?”

I banter with him until he starts to loosen up. His wife and kids manage to smile and snicker, but I can tell that getting this family to lighten up is going to be hard work.

When families are stressed out, I always strive to create a permissive jovial atmosphere in sessions. Humorlessness is like a magnifying glass; it makes problems look bigger. If I could get this family to have more fun together and stop focusing on each other’s shortcomings, many of their conflicts would vanish.

### Have More Fun with Your Kids

I decide to give them homework: they will have to create stress-free blocks of time throughout their week. Once a week, they will do things together that they enjoy. The father and son could go to the movies or attend a basketball game; the daughter and mother could go bike riding or to the theater. The whole

family could go to an amusement park or comedy club. During these allotted stress-free activities, bickering is forbidden. Hot-topics such as incomplete schoolwork, messy rooms, and missed curfews are banned. Their problems will never go away until they could learn to enjoy each other’s company again.

As the weeks unfold, we put aside time in our sessions to plan and review their stress-free activities. I make sure I emphasize that “having fun” is equally as important as “solving problems.” As the mood lightens at home, our sessions become more lighthearted and fun, and resolving their conflicts becomes infinitely easier.

### Prescription: Laughter

A healthy sense of humor is among the most important qualities a parent can have. Make time to have fun and laugh with your kids often. In return, they’ll open up and share more of themselves with you. Families that laugh together stay together and rarely drift apart. And there’s nothing funny about that. ●

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