

To Laugh or Not to Laugh: Humor and Adoptive Families

Gordon was 15-years-old when he was arrested for vandalizing several cars parked at a local shopping mall. Gordon had been adopted, internationally, when he was 2 and 1/2 -years-old. He had been difficult from the start. This arrest was one more situation on a very lengthy list of negative behaviors! While at the police station awaiting his parents arrival, Gordon decided he was thirsty. Spotting a vending machine, he attempted to stick his hands—which were handcuffed together—up the slot where a can of pop would drop out. Yes, his hands got stuck! Trying to steal a pop—from a police station vending machine nonetheless—wasn't working out too well for Gordon! Ultimately, a police officer heard his cries for help. Several officers worked to free Gordon's hands from the machine. However, the machine had such a tight grip, the paramedics had to be called. After removing many parts from the pop dispenser, Gordon was finally liberated from the machine's hold. Gordon's parents arrived just in time to witness the paramedics at work! Certainly, at the time, Gordon's parents weren't happy! However, later, Gordon's father couldn't help but laugh over the image of his son's attempt to steal—while at a police station—and get caught—by a machine!

Nancy, now 12, was adopted via the foster care system, when she was 8-months-old. She spent an inordinate amount of time fantasizing about her birthmother. From an early age, she asked question after question about her birthmom. She frequently verbalized that she "couldn't wait" until her birthmother returned for her. Nancy entered therapy at age 10 for the purpose of working through this reunification fantasy. Therapy was difficult. Nancy had a very hard time hearing any truthful information. Then, finally, when about 11 and 1/2, she started to accept that her placement with her adoptive family was permanent. After a particularly wonderful therapy session, Nancy waited for her Dad to come home from work. As soon as she saw his car pull in the driveway, she ran to greet him. "Dad, I had a great therapy session!" Dad, a very good Dad, was just as excited for her as if she was any of his children running to the car to share an accomplishment! Later, he said to his wife, "I never thought I would be congratulating any of my children about a therapy session!" The visual image of this made both parents chuckle!

Certainly, each of the above situation carries a gravity. Yet, within each, a bit of humor can be gleaned! Humor allows us to experience joy even when faced with adversity (Wooten, 1996).

The benefits of humor are amazing. Humor ...

- reduces stress
- lowers blood pressure
- elevates mood
- boosts the immune system
- improves brain functioning
- protects the heart
- results in a respiratory cleansing, leading to muscle relaxation similar to deep breathing
- increases energy
- gives us a sense of perspective on our problem
- is free.

Some events are clearly not occasions for laughter. However, most situations do not carry that type of gravity. Learning not to take ourselves and daily events too seriously is important. In other words, there will be times when lightening up is important. At these times, take a step back and put the situation in context and find the humor within the event.

Adoptive families would benefit from creating a “humor kit”— a collection of their favorite funny movies, books, CDs of their favorite comedians, comic books—anything that is guaranteed to generate a chuckle! Adoptive parents are responsible for setting a positive and nurturing mood in their home. There will be days when this is difficult—very, very difficult! Humor will be a most important tool for carrying this out because when we laugh together, it can bind us closer together instead of pulling us apart (Lindeman, Kemp and Segal, 2007).

To laugh or not to laugh will be your choice!