

Laughter in the Home

What's a parent to do?

At dinner-time, fourteen year-old Lucas, his four year-old cousin Cathy and his parents were enjoying their meal. Cathy was visiting with them for the weekend. At the conclusion of dinner, Lucas solemnly shook out his cloth serviette and placed it on his head. Cathy watched with eyes as big as saucers while Lucas explained that this was the way to indicate you were finished eating. So she put her serviette on her head as well.

What's the appropriate parent response to such behavior? What would you do? Should you focus on the bad role modeling from the older cousin? What about a lecture on table manners? Or maybe the concern should be about whether the serviette is dirty and now their hair needs washing? Is this a discipline issue, a respect issue or a manners issue?

The parents in question didn't hesitate. They each put their serviettes on their heads and proceeded to clear the table. Ten years later this story still elicits a laugh from the family.

The issue wasn't manners, respect or role modeling. It was silliness, plain and simple. And silliness has an important role to play in parenting.

Silliness

Parenting is an important and serious job. But, fun, humour and laughter are important to the growth of strong family ties. Parenting is based on the relationship between parents and children. When they can have fun together, be silly together and lose it together the relationship is strong.

Sometimes we are afraid that if we are silly with our kids we will lose their respect. But, the opposite is the case. When our kids see us play and have fun with them it enhances the connection and the stronger the relationship we have, the healthier the respect.

Time is another issue. Today, we're all so busy. We're rushing from one activity to another, from work to daycare to home. We just want to

get everything done and fooling around just isn't on the list of things to do.

But fooling around makes it all possible. The joy of rolling around on the floor giggling with a toddler, laughing at those impossibly pointless and stupid jokes from our preschoolers or enjoying outrageous responses from our school-aged children make it all fun. Suddenly, what we need to get done doesn't matter so much. We're simply enjoying each other.

What's a parent to do?

In the serviette story Lucas's parents chose to join in on the silliness. When children are just being silly, parents can join in, or relax and let them go. We underestimate our children when we assume that because we can be silly and laugh with our kids, they learn they can do whatever they want. Children quickly learn that different situations require different responses.

For example, if Lucas's straight-laced grandparents had also been present at dinner he would have behaved in a much different manner. Children can be flexible. After all, they behave in much different ways at pre-school and when they're visiting their friends.

Take a look at the most stressful time of your day. Is it mealtime? Then what about having a silly meal? Start with dessert or put utensils in a bag and allow each child to choose only one, then serve spaghetti and pudding. Is it mornings? If so, you can lighten up by playing rousing music. Imagine your children's shock if they're roused by the 1812 Overture rather than your nagging.

Silliness and fun aren't always the answer. But having fun and laughing will reduce family stress and improve relationships. Family jokes make for strong connections. Good jokes can cause laughter for years. All a family member has to say is, "remember the Christmas tree of 1988?". Every year that old story causes renewed laughter.

Relax, save the serious responses for the serious issues. Parenting can also be fun, if you let it.

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