A family's healthy sense of humor helps kids cope

Done with grocery shopping, Devene Godau of Royal Oak loaded her kids back into the car and drove away -- forgetting the bags in the shopping cart, which was parked in the store lot.

Rather than get angry when she realized her mistake, Godau chose to laugh. "It's a good thing my head is screwed on," she said to her sons -- about 6 months and 5 years old at the time -- who had gone along with her on her errand while her older daughter was in school.

"My philosophy in life has always been life is too short not to laugh," said Godau, whose children are now 1 1/2, 6 and 8. "I always try to make sure they wake up with a smile. ... We always take about a half an hour after school just to tell jokes and laugh and just lighten the mood."

According to experts, Godau's decision to lighten the mood is good for her and for her kids.

It teaches them it's all right to shrug off life's small complications and to laugh at themselves.

"I think it's important for parents to create a sense of humor in the family where the family can laugh together and kind of laugh at mistakes that are made as long as it's done in a kind way," says Steven Abell, professor of psychology at University of Detroit Mercy.

"It shows children it's OK to make mistakes," he says. "If we can laugh at some of our mistakes, they're less afraid to try things."

Says Doris Bergen, a professor of educational psychology at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio: "A parent who can be silly or enjoy doing things that are kind of fun and exaggerated, I think gives children some really good coping skills. Life is going to have things that are not going to go the way you want them to, and it helps if you have an ability to see the funny side of things."

Dave Noble, 51, of Southfield agrees.
When Noble's young son got upset about not getting his way or about having to leave the playground and go home, Noble would look at him very seriously and tell him it was OK to be mad, but that under no circumstances could he laugh.

The mock seriousness always left Noble's son, Josh, in fits of giggles.

"I know there are times when humor's not called for. I think I use my discretion wisely," says Noble. But, he adds, "I think you're just looking for ways to keep your kids happy. You don't like to see them mad. It can bring a parent down, too."

Noble's no-laughing rule worked from the time Josh was about 4 until he was 8 years old.

"Then he caught on," Noble says with a chuckle. "Now virtually nothing I say is funny to him because he's 17."

When it comes to helping children cope through humor, Bergen suggests parents start early.

"Very young children begin to see things that they think are funny at a very early age," says Bergen, who has done research into humor and play. "Even in the first year of life, there are some things that are just kind of nonsense or funny things that happen."

"Toddlers are very tuned in to what might be funny," she adds. "They make up lots of little jokes. If you want to encourage your children to have humor, you need to be responsive to that, and kind of join in the fun."

She advises parents to look for humor in books they read to kids and to help them "understand the humor and why it's funny."

She also suggests using peekaboo and surprises carefully. Kids interpret them as funny in comfortable, warm situations, but scary when they're somewhere that's unfamiliar, she says.

The goal, Bergen explains, is to get kids to appreciate jokes as well as to know how to take and make a joke themselves.

"Some children perhaps naturally are more likely to see the humor in things," she says. "But I think it is also something parents encourage or don't encourage in children."

The important thing to remember, says Abell, is to not make fun of others.

"If the humor is mean-spirited or disrespectful or making fun of someone, that's not healthy," he says. "We want to teach kids how to be respectful, and we don't laugh at people who have misfortunes."

Once children get past 8 or 9 years old, silly may not always work -- particularly if the intent is to tease.

Parents must be mindful of whether the intended humor might be hurtful, Bergen says.

"Teasing is something that parents can help children distinguish between what's playful or not," she says. "The key is that (all parties should be) enjoying it."

*Free Press staff writer Georgea Kovanis and Judy Hevrdejs of the Chicago Tribune contributed to this report.*