

*Humor appreciation in 10-year-olds:
the influence of affective disposition
towards cartoon protagonists
and their status in dominance hierarchy*

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1. Introduction

Laughter and sense of humor are intrinsic parts of human nature. They are as old as the records of human history and, most probably, the reflection on the nature of causes, influencing factors and mechanisms of the laughter reaction is equally old. Its origins can be found in antiquity: both Plato and Aristotle had tried to uncover the mystery of humor. They are the authors of the first, incomplete, theories to which other great thinkers referred throughout history searching for the answers to the questions: what evokes laughter, and why?

One of the obstacles to finding the answers is the fact that humor and other related terms are ambiguous and vague, both in the everyday and in scientific language. In the present paper the following definitions have been accepted:

– *humor*¹ is understood as ‘a property characteristic of some configurations of events encountered in life or presented by art which evokes in an observer, who

¹ In Polish language the property of an object which evokes laughter is described with a term “komizm”, close to English “comic”. However in English tradition this property is more often referred to as “humor”.

can also be a participant or even a creator of such configurations, reactions such as smile/laughter and/or subjectively experienced amusement, which at the same time excludes strong negative emotions such as fear, disgust, despair or sympathy' (see Głowiński, Kostkiewiczowa, Okopień-Sławińska i Sławiński 1995),

– *a joke* is 'a purposeful manifestation of humor, captured in linguistic or visual form which conveys the comic content (e.g., aggressive or sexual), or is the source of comic effects (because of its structure, e.g., incongruity); (see Głowiński et al. 1995).

Reacting with amusement to the manifestations of humor such as jokes requires having *a sense of humor*, which is 'a psychological disposition, both active (creative) and passive (receptive) to perceive art and life events in the categories of humor' (Głowiński et al., 1995).

1.1. Freud's view

Freud (1905/1993) identified two types of jokes – tendentious and non-tendentious. Non-tendentious (innocent) joke is a goal in its own, is an amusing presentation of a thought based on particular means of expression (word play, double meaning, etc.), often called "the joke work". It is a likely source of moderate amusement. A tendentious joke, on the other hand, is governed by drives. It allows fulfilling repressed desires through bypassing internal inhibitions. Freud identifies three types of such jokes:

- malicious – which has an aim to hurt, to ridicule or to retaliate after an attack;
- obscene – which has a purpose to expose;
- cynical – criticizing and blasphemous.

The tendentious jokes have the same means of expression as the innocent ones, but may include contents classified as a social taboo. Both the form and the specific content are the source of pleasure in a joke, but we can never be sure what is really making us laugh and to what degree: the "masking facade", i.e., the technique of a joke, or rather the tendency itself. The facade justifies the narrator of a joke in his/her own eyes and allows circumventing his/her internal inhibitions by attributing the experienced amusement to neutral (non-tendentious) elements. Thanks to this facade an individual can express aggressive or sexual contents without feeling guilt, shame or fear of rejection.

Freud thought that pleasure taken from aggressive jokes, i.e., the ones which disparage a protagonist, demonstrate his/her destruction or suffering, is a sym-

bolic, camouflaged form of attack and, as such, may offer a cathartic reduction of aggressive motivation.

Situations facilitating such role of a joke require that the following elements are present: a person who disparages an adversary, an object of aggression and listener/observer, who takes pleasure from being a witness of a given event.

Numerous studies have been performed that seem to support Freud's theses. Some of them focused on reception of humor by persons in which aggressive motivation had been elicited. The following results have been found:

- humor as such (both hostile and neutral) lowers the level of experienced hostility and tension (Dworkin & Efran 1967), but in the case of very agitated (i.e., strongly upset) subjects the aggression is reduced especially well by hostile humor (Singer 1968);
- subjects in whom an aggressive motivation had been elicited compared to those in which a sexual motivation had been elicited, judged as less funny those jokes that did not have an aggressive content (Strickland 1959);
- subjects who were aggravated thought that the hostile humor was much more funny than subjects who were not aggravated (Dworkin & Efran 1967).

Other researchers focused on the influence of activating internal inhibitions on appreciation of hostile humor. Their findings may be summarized as follows:

- subjects in whom inhibitions pertaining to expression of aggression had been activated evaluated the aggressive jokes as less funny than the control group (Singer, Gollob & Levine 1967);
- when subjects realized that the content of a joke is aggressive, they evaluated it as much less funny than in the case of neutral (nonsense) jokes (Gollob & Levine 1967).

1.2. Theories of: superiority, affiliated objects and reference groups

Many theories focus on the type of humor that Freud called tendentious – malicious. They include superiority theories (Hobbes 1650/1966, see: Zillmann 1983) according to which laughter is a spontaneous manifestation of superiority feelings and triumph experienced when we compare ourselves to somebody who is in some aspect inferior, which puts us in a positive light.

However at the same time laughing at other's flaws or maltreatment depends to a great extent on our affective dispositions towards them. This relationship has been captured by the theory of affiliated objects (Wolf, Smith & Murray 1934, see Zillmann & Cantor 1976), which has its origins in James's theory of

empirical self (James 1890, see: Zillmann & Cantor 1976). "Things" that people can call "theirs" and to which they have similar attitudes as to themselves constitute, according to James, the "larger self", or – according to Wolf et al. – a class of affiliated objects. Disparagement of such an object is as painful to an affiliated person as the disparagement of the person him/her-self. This implicates that only disparagement of non-affiliated object may be funny because it gives us a temporary superiority feeling.

It is possible, however, that we do not feel strongly connected to "our" group – for example to groups such as our class, ethnic group, neighborhood, local community association etc., in which the structure and membership are imposed by external factors (imposed affiliation). This problem has been the focus of another theory which is also based on the superiority concept, namely Hyman's reference groups theory (1942, see: Zillmann & Cantor 1976). The reference groups are the groups to which an individual relates or would like to relate as a member. La Fave (1972, see: Zillmann & Cantor 1976) describes them as identification classes. According to this theory a joke is considered funny to a degree to which it glorifies the positive identification class or to which it disparages the negative identification class (however this last statement is controversial, because there is no evidence that a success of a positive identification class is funny as such, see: Zillmann & Cantor 1976).

1.3. Disposition theory of humor

Another theory that lies at the basis of our research is the disposition theory of humor, formulated by Zillmann and Cantor (1972, 1976), which is broader than the approaches presented above.

According to this theory, predictions concerning appreciation of derogative humor should be based on affective dispositions towards both the disparaged and the disparaging protagonists of a joke (Zillmann & Cantor 1976). The authors introduced also a continuum of affective dispositions to replace the traditional dichotomy of group or class membership. The dispositions may take the form of personality features and may change depending on mood fluctuations.

Dislike is considered as a factor motivating humor appreciation – in order to evoke amusement, something malicious or potentially harmful has to happen; somebody, or something must be perceived as inferior. At the same time for disparagement to appear funny, the situation must be identified as "humorous", which implies the necessity to overcome the inhibitions stemming from the social consequences of laughing at somebody's misery.

Humor appreciation is reversely proportional to the degree of favorable dispositions held toward the disparaged object and is directly proportional to the degree of favorable dispositions held toward the disparaging one. A joke is considered funnier when the person whom an individual likes is the disparaging person (Gutman & Priest 1969; Zillmann & Cantor 1972), and when the person who is being disparaged is the one we do not like (Zillmann & Cantor 1973; Gutman & Priest 1969; Zillmann, Bryant & Cantor 1974; Zillmann & Cantor 1972). A process of interpretation of a "humorous" message consists of an identification of the respective roles and aspects of behavior and taking the side of a person who seems the closest to the receiver, because he/she shares similar experiences. At the same time the receiver of a joke takes a position against the person, whose role or behavior is associated with negative feelings. In research by Zillmann & Cantor (1972) subjects evaluated as more funny those jokes in which a person who was disparaging had the same position in hierarchy as the subjects and the disparaged person was from the antagonistic (opposite) group, than the jokes in which those relations were reversed.

It occurred also, that subjects find the most funny those jokes in which the "retaliation" is proportional to "provocation" by the disparaged protagonist. When the "retaliation" is not proportional to the "offense" (either too severe or too mild) the joke is not thought as funny (Zillmann & Bryant 1974).

The basic assumptions of the disposition theory have been experimentally confirmed in the case of children, beginning from preschool age (with the qualification that girls, especially from the low-income families do not seem to have a favorable disposition toward their own gender and therefore think that jokes that disparage girls are more funny than those that disparage boys – see McGhee & Lloyd 1981; McGhee & Duffey 1983) as well as in the case of adults (Zillmann & Bryant 1980).

Research which aimed at verification of disposition theory may be summarized as follows:

– dispositions towards protagonists of jokes were the result of their behavior (Gutman & Priest 1969; Zillmann & Bryant 1974), profession, attitudes, achievements (Cantor & Zillmann 1973), race (McGhee & Duffey 1983) and their position in dominance hierarchy (Zillmann & Cantor 1972);

– when protagonists of a joke were in superior/subordinate relationship, the only premise on which to base the inferences concerning dispositions towards the protagonists of a joke was the position in this relationship (because superior/subordinate relationship is characterized by some degree of animosity; Zillmann & Cantor 1972);

– in the cases in which protagonists of a joke had an equal status, the jokes in which aggressor was perceived as a positive person and the victim as a negative person were considered the funniest, the jokes in which both protagonists were perceived as positive were perceived as less funny but still more funny than the jokes in which the dispositions towards both of the protagonists were negative. Finally, the least funny were considered those jokes in which the disposition towards the aggressor was negative and the disposition towards the victim was positive (Gutman & Priest 1969).

1.4. The main research problem

In the existing literature there seems to be no reports of attempts to investigate the influence of both status (position in the dominance hierarchy) and affective dispositions on humor perception. The present research was aimed at filling this gap, and thus its exploratory character. The main question was as follows: what is the influence of liking or disliking a protagonist who shares the same experiences with the receiver of a joke (e.g., his/her position in dominance hierarchy) on the appreciation of a joke (in this case, a cartoon).

Thus in the present research:

- there was a superior/subordinate relationship between protagonists presented in the cartoons (child/adult);
- dispositions towards the child protagonist who was presented in a cartoon as disparaging or disparaged were manipulated by the identification of a protagonist with a liked or disliked peer of a subject;
- dispositions towards adult protagonists were not manipulated and were assumed to be mildly negative (the relation between a child and an adult is the superior/subordinate relationship which often implies some animosity, see Zillmann & Cantor 1972);
- in half of the cartoons a child disparaged an adult and in the other half an adult disparaged a child.

The following **hypotheses** have been proposed:

- situations in which the disparaging protagonist is identified with a liked child and the victim is an adult should be perceived as the most funny;
- as less funny should be perceived those situations in which:
 - the perpetrator is a disliked child and the victim is an adult;
 - the perpetrator is an adult and the victim is a disliked child;
- the situation in which a liked child is disparaged by an adult would be perceived as the least funny of all situations;

- situations in which a child disparages an adult should be, in general, evaluated as more funny than the ones in which an adult disparages a child.

2. Method

2.1. Subjects

The subjects were thirty four pupils from two fourth grade classes of the primary school in Kobyłka, in the suburbs of Warsaw (17 girls and 17 boys). The mean age was 11 years. The two classes formed two experimental groups. Both classes had 17 students; in one of them there were 8 girls and 9 boys, and in the other 9 girls and 8 boys.

All the subjects were reassured that the results of our research will not be disclosed to class masters, teachers or other staff at school without their knowledge and consent. Children were free to resign from participation in the experiment at any time they wished. However none of the children did so. The class masters, school pedagogue, and school psychologist were asked about the cases of maltreatment of children and reported that to their knowledge none of the children were maltreated by an adult within the period of last four years.

2.2. Material

Material consisted of a set of 20 black-and-white cartoons. Persons in the cartoons were depicted in a schematic way, without traits that could indicate their gender. This assured an easier identification of cartoon protagonist with a liked/disliked peer. The selection of the cartoons had two stages: the initial set consisted of 500 cartoons from a variety of comic magazines and booklets, depicting relations between adults and children. In the first stage about 40 cartoons were selected on the basis of the situations they displayed – i.e., only those were chosen which presented the disparagement situation (either of a child by an adult or the reverse). In the second stage, the 40 cartoons were given to five adult raters. The raters evaluated on a 5-point scale how funny were the cartoons and how much of aggressive content they contained. Only those cartoons which were evaluated higher than 3 on both scales by all 5 judges were included in the final set.

Ten out of twenty cartoons depicted a situation of disparagement (domination, malicious jokes or aggressive behaviors) of a child by an adult and other ten – disparagement of an adult by a child. A short verbal description of each cartoon is presented in Table 1, and the cartoons are presented in Appendix 1. Carto-

ons were presented in random order, the same in the two experimental groups. A board with the following evaluation scale was used:

- 5 – a very funny cartoon
- 4 – a funny cartoon
- 3 – a mildly funny cartoon
- 2 – a little bit funny cartoon
- 1 – the cartoon is not funny at all

and another board showed drawings of faces which smiled to a different degree. The faces were an illustration of the evaluation scale.

Table 1.

Description of cartoons used in our research

Cartoons in which a child disparages an adult		Cartoons in which an adult disparages a child	
1.	An adult is shaving and a child startles him by smashing a paper bag.	2.	An adult sits on a cage in which a child is locked.
3.	A child sees the steps of a ladder on which an adult is standing.	4.	Mother is pulling a child out of a bath with a toilet cleaner.
5.	A child, while helping to wash a car splashes an adult with water.	6.	An adult shooting an arrow hits a child instead of an apple on his head.
8.	A child frightens his/her aunt by showing her his/her favorite animals – spiders and worms.	7.	A mother makes a child hang on a broken rope by holding the ends of a rope in each hand.
10.	A child puts squeaking toys on the way of an adult who is trying to enter the house silently.	9.	A nurse brings to a doctor's office a child caught in a butterfly net.
11.	A child draws a bull's-eye board on the back side of the adult's pants.	12.	A child is kept hanging outside of a boat on a fishing rode.
13.	A child, sliding down a railing, pushes an adult, makes him/her fall and scatters his/her shopping.	14.	An adults makes a child fall asleep by hitting him/her on the head with a book.
15.	A child refuses to eat by tipping a full plate on an adult's head.	16.	A bushy hair of a child is used as a dusting brush.
17.	A child is worried that an adult did not hurt him/her self while jumping from a spring-board.	18.	A child is kept under a bell jar and made to practice a cello.
19.	A child knocks unconscious an adult when trying new boxing gloves.	20.	An adult shakes a child and reprimands him/her for using his/her tools and a disrespectful answers.

2.3. Experimental design

Experiment was conducted in two sessions.

In the first one, a sociometric in both classes test was performed. Its aim was to establish the liking/disliking relations among the pupils in a class. The results obtained were used in the second stage of the experiment, in which a set of cartoons was presented to each pupil individually. In one class children were asked to imagine that a child presented in a cartoon is a person whom they liked (as shown in the sociometric test), and in the other class – a person whom they disliked (the affective disposition towards the cartoon's protagonists was an independent value). Children evaluated on the 5-point scale how funny each cartoon seemed to them (dependent variable).

2.4. Procedure

2.4.1. First stage: a group sociometric test

The experimenters asked children to answer in writing the following question:

"Imagine that your class is going on a few days trip. You will be sleeping in double rooms. Write down with which of your classmates would you like to share the room." When children finished writing the experimenters asked: "And now, please write down, with whom you would not like to share the room."

2.4.2. Second stage: evaluation of cartoons

The second stage was conducted 7 weeks after the sociometric test. Each child was tested individually. The instructions were as follows:

"This booklet contains various cartoons. In each of the cartoons you will see a child and an adult. I will show you now the cartoons one by one and ask you to tell me how funny they seem to you. (In this moment the evaluation scale and the board with the faces were placed in front of a child). Please evaluate the cartoons just as the teachers evaluate you at school. If you think a cartoon is not funny at all, give it a 1, if you think it a little bit funny, give it 2, mildly funny – 3, funny – 4, and very funny – 5. These faces are here to help you evaluate. If you laugh when seeing a cartoon as much as any of these faces, give it a mark that is next to the face. Before we start I would like you to imagine that the child presented in the cartoons is (here the name and the surname of a child pointed as liked/disliked by the subject in the sociometric test was given), and that it is him/her, who takes part in the events illustrated in the cartoons".

The cartoons were then presented, one by one. After seeing each of them a child evaluated how funny it was. After the presentation was over, the experimenter thanked the child and asked him/her not to talk about the experiment and

the cartoons to his/her peers. The average time of this session of the experiment was about 10 minutes.

We realized that the procedure in one of the classes – the one where children were to evaluate cartoons in which the protagonist (an aggressor or a victim) was identified as a disliked peer – could intensify the aversion toward the disliked pupil. This, in turn, could have caused worsening of the socio-emotional atmosphere in the class. In order to prevent such consequences we took some specific measures. In the period of 6 months after the completion of our experiment we kept in touch with the schoolmaster, class master, teachers and pupils. We also asked the school psychologist to pay a special attention to this class and to inform us of any case of declining of the social relations that she would notice. The psychologist, however, did not recognize any disturbing changes in interpersonal relations within the class. Also the class master and the teachers did not observe an increase in hostility, aggression or ostracism towards any of the pupils. Subject themselves did not report appearance of any problems that could have been related to their participation in the experiment. Therefore, since we did not observe an escalation of interpersonal aversion, an additional psychological help did not seem to be needed.

3. Results

Results were analyzed using a Student's *t* for repeated measures and ANOVA in the SPSS statistical package. More details and the results of statistical tests are presented in Table 2.

Tabela 2.

Mean ratings of cartoons depending on status (positions in superior-subordinate relation) and affective dispositions towards the cartoon protagonist

Person disparaging	Disposition towards a child		
	Positive	Negative	Total
Child	X = 3,55 s = 0,44	X = 3,27 ^{b)} s = 0,65	X = 3,41 s = 0,56
Adult	X = 3,6 ^{a)} s = 0,74	X = 2,86 ^{a) b)} s = 0,85	X = 3,23 s = 0,87
Total	X = 3,58 ^{c)} s = 0,51	X = 3,07 ^{c)} s = 0,69	

- a) Difference significant at $p < 0,01$ level; $F(1) = 7,39$;
- b) Difference significant at $p < 0,01$ level; $t(16) = -2,86$;
- c) Difference significant at $p < 0,02$ level; $F(1) = 5,99$.

The order of the situations with respect to the appreciation of how funny they were was as follows (from most funny to least funny):

- An adult disparages a liked child
- A liked child disparages an adult
- A disliked child disparages an adult
- An adult disparages a disliked child

Cartoons in which a child disparaged an adult were, in general, evaluated as more funny than the ones in which an adult disparaged a child, however this difference did not reach the level of statistical significance. The difference between the appreciation of the cartoons in which a liked child appeared and those in which a disliked child appeared was statistically significant. When the disposition towards a child was positive, the cartoons were evaluated as much more funny than when the disposition was negative, independently of child's status. Thus the predictions of the disposition theory did not confirm.

4. Discussion

The results obtained in our study did not confirm the proposed hypotheses. The order of the presented situations on the dimension of being funny for the subjects is not congruent with the predicted one: situations in which an adult disparaged a liked child were, surprisingly, evaluated as the most, not the least funny. This result contradicts the disposition theory of humor and is difficult to interpret, because none of the research described in the literature had similar results. The disposition theory assumed that the appreciation of a joke should be higher when the disposition towards the aggressor is positive. This relation should be the opposite with respect to the victim. Gutman & Priest (1969) found that the main source of amusement is the aggressor's character (identification with the aggressor is connected to higher appreciation of humor than identification with the victim). In our research these relationships are not confirmed. The result of cartoon appreciation seems to depend more on the character of the disposition towards the child protagonist of a cartoon: when this disposition was positive the cartoons were evaluated as much more

funny than when it was negative, independently of the role of a child as the aggressor or a victim. This result cannot be explained by the disposition theory, because it predicts that the positive disposition towards a child who was a victim should lower the appreciation of a cartoon. It seems that children, when evaluating a cartoon, did not take into account who was the aggressor but were guided solely by the feelings towards the peer who was the protagonist of a cartoon. We can try to interpret this fact as a in-group bias (Tajfel 1982, see Aronson, Wilson & Akert 1997). This phenomenon involves evaluating the members of a group with which we identify, higher than the formal criteria would allow us to. According to this interpretation children perceived the peers that they liked as members of a group of their friends and treated them in a privileged way, giving higher notes to those cartoons in which they were featuring. The cartoons in which the protagonists were identified with disliked children were evaluated as less funny because the children were perceived as members of the "other" group.

The difference between the jokes in which a child disparages an adult and in which an adult disparages a child, although not significant, is in the direction predicted by the disposition theory of humor (Zillmann & Cantor 1972). Subjects appreciated more the situations in which the dominant person was a child (i.e., a person who shared similar experiences with them, and who were in the same position in the dominance hierarchy) than when the dominant person was an adult. Subjects were asked solely to evaluate how funny were the cartoons. We did not check how they interpreted the situations depicted in the cartoons. It is possible that subjects did not perceive them as aggressive at all. This type of humorous aggression is often present in TV cartoons, and thus children may already be "immunized" against it and treat it as harmless, playful, not constituting any danger. In such a case the assumptions of disposition theory do not apply. Since we do not know of any research that would corroborate such interpretation, it should be verified empirically in further studies.

As mentioned before, the research presented above had an exploratory character. Further research in which both affective disposition and status would be manipulated would require a pilot study, with children as subjects, in which it would be determined how they interpret the content of the cartoons. It is possible that after such a pilot study the predictions of disposition theory would be corroborated, or that other interesting relationships would surface.

If the hypothesis about the influence of the in-group bias on humor appreciation was confirmed, it would constitute a significant contribution to our knowledge concerning the influence of the relations in a peer group on social and cognitive functioning of a child.

Humor appreciation in 10-year-olds ...

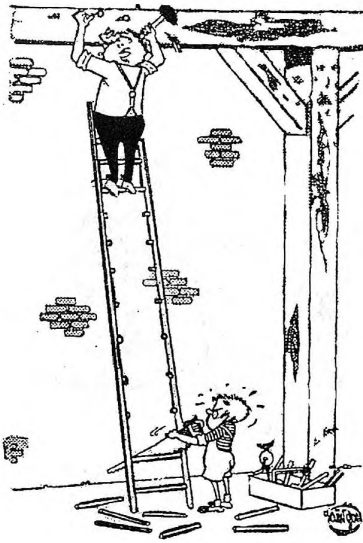
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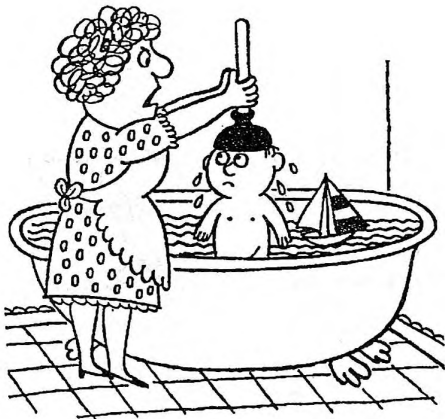
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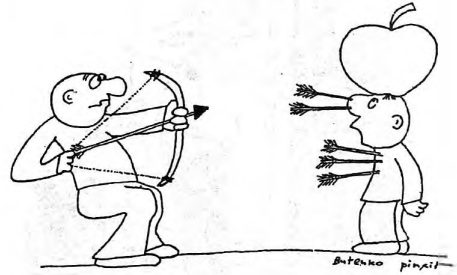
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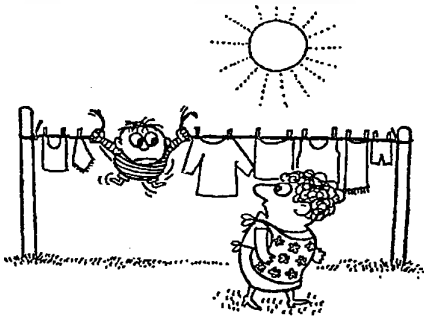


- 5 -



- W końcu kiedyś musi się udać!

- 6 -



- A teraz mocno trzymaj, dopóki nie wrócę z kawałkiem sznurka.

- 7 -



- Ciociu, chcesz zobaczyć moje ulubione zwierzątko?

- 8 -

Humor appreciation in 10-year-olds ...

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- Udało mi się go złapać, panie doktorze!

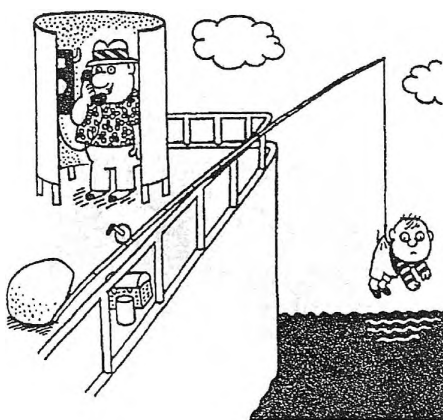
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- 10 -



- 11 -



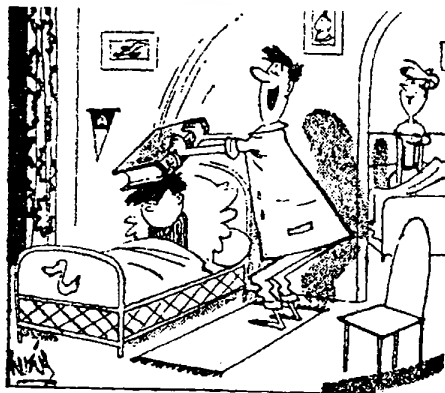
- Nie ma strachu, na pewno mi nie uciekniesz.

- 12 -



– Wujku listonoszu - masz dla mnie listy z życzeniami urodzinowymi?

– 13 –



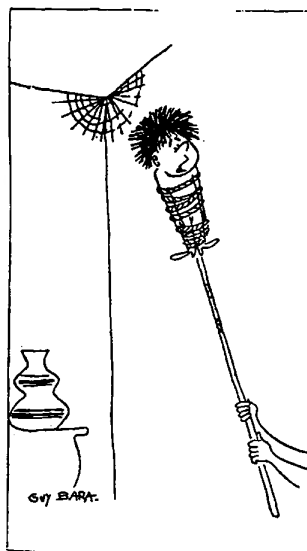
– Ta książka z przygodami świetnie usypia!

– 14 –



– Wiesz kochanie, przekonałem się, że jest jeszcze jedna potrawa, której nasze dziecko nie lubi!

– 15 –



GUY BARR.

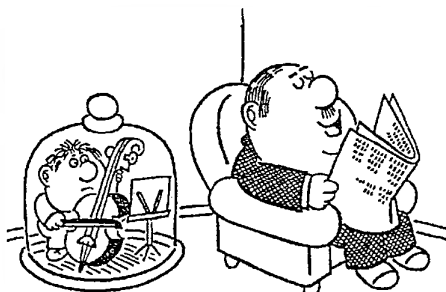
– 16 –

Humor appreciation in 10-year-olds ...

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– Dlaczego płaczesz?
– Ten pan spadł z trampoliny, ale umiał pływać...



– Dopóki nie skończysz ćwiczyć,
nie ma grania w piłkę.

– 17 –

– 18 –



– Właśnie wypróbowałyśmy nowe rękawice.

– 19 –



– Co powiedziales? „Żyjemy przecież w wolnym kraju”? Do czego się ma to odnosić, co?

– 20 –

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Poczucie humoru u dziesięciolatków: Sympatia dla bohatera a śmieszność dowcipu

Badanie miało charakter eksploracyjny. Jego celem było sprawdzenie przewidywań dyspozycyjnej teorii humoru. W badaniu wzięło udział 34 uczniów klasy IV szkoły podstawowej. Składało się ono z dwóch etapów. W pierwszej fazie przeprowadzono badanie socjometryczne w celu ustalenia relacji sympatii i antypatii między poszczególnymi członkami grupy. W fazie drugiej badanym prezentowano zestaw dowcipów, z których połowa przedstawiała dziecko poniżające dorosłego, a połowa dorosłego poniżającego dziecko. W jednej grupie badanych dziecko występujące w dowcipie utożsamiano z lubianym, a w drugiej – z nie lubianym kolegą osoby badanej. Następnie dzieci były proszone o ocenę zabawności dowcipu. Za najbardziej zabawną badani uznali sytuację, w której dorosły poniżał dziecko lubiane. Mniej zabawne w ich ocenie były sytuacje, gdy dziecko lubiane poniżało dorosłego, dalej - gdy dziecko nie lubiane poniżało dorosłego. Najmniej zabawna okazała się sytuacja, gdy dorosły poniżał dziecko nie lubiane. Ponadto dowcipy, w których występowały dzieci lubiane, były oceniane jako znacząco bardziej zabawne, niż dowcipy, których bohaterami były dzieci nie lubiane, niezależnie od tego czy były one ofiarami czy prześladowcami.