



turning potential into performance

Laughter, Play and Imagination

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We heard the shrieking from upstairs. Shrieks of glee, shrieks of possibility, shrieks that caught our attention. Soon they were running downstairs, these two young girls, 10 and 11, dressed-up for the evening, eyebrows heavy with makeup, smiles wide.

It was New Year's Eve and we had gathered together for dinner at a friend's cottage tucked quite away from urban life, ensconced in a sleepy river town, a place where we have often gathered to celebrate and bring in the New Year. 2010 had proven itself as a tough year; it felt good to be taking time to re-energize, to re-connect with friends, to re-commit to what's important.

The girls had been in the upstairs bathroom, making up their faces with a new Christmas 'tweenage' compact, imagining our Black & White Ball that night, parading around the cottage dreaming of their future escapades.

Infectious, their energy drew us all into squeals of laughter and play, into a creative process quite appropo to welcoming in the possibilities of a new year. Midnight found us laughing, enjoying shared company and dreams. Laughing felt good.

Laughter

Did you know that adults laugh a mere fraction of what kids do; some say only 15x per adult to 300x per kid, per day?

Dr Madan Kataria, a physician in Mumbai, India and founder of the Laughter Yoga movement, indicates that part of the reason for this sharp reduction in laughter in adults is that we use what he calls the *mind-to-body model*, where whether we laugh or not depends upon our ability to understand what makes something 'funny' or 'humorous.'

Kids, however, use the *body-to-mind model* meaning that the laughter comes straight out of their bodies as they're playing and exploring, thus bypassing the intellectual part of the brain that 'determines' humor. This results in the variety of chortles, belly laughs, and shrieks as kids actively engage in the moment.

We can all purposefully stimulate laughter simply by moving our bodies—leg slapping, belly shaking, wide grinning, body contorting actions (think dancing for example), and by engaging in playful activities—gibberish games, silly skits, storytelling. Yet, why should we?

Laughter is nonverbal, prosocial, and a highly contagious activity; folks are 30 times more likely to laugh when they are with others than when alone. The social lubricant of laughter cultivates

cooperation and altruistic behavior in groups, generating creativity and trust. Plus, the benefits of laughter outnumber any doubts you may think you have about laughing out loud just because.

Physiological benefits:

With laughter we increase our respiration, resulting in greater oxygen intake which means an increase in energy. This, in turn, promotes circulation, reducing blood pressure and decreasing the release of stress hormones while our immune systems gets a boost. All from laughing.

Psychological Benefits

Psychologically, with the reduction in stress hormones, we're less anxious and tense; in fact, we're more likely to experience an elevated mood and a felt sense of having more energy. This enhances both our memory and creative juices, as well as our critical thinking and problem-solving capacities. Of course, the people around us will notice this and very likely our relationships will improve because we're more, well, friendly, playful even.

Play and Imagination

Laughter arises naturally as we play. What is it, anyway, to 'play,' to 'use our imagination'?

We can see it so easily in kids; our 10 and 11 year old girls' minds were open to vast possibility, dreaming up all kinds of fun, frolic, and mischief.

Imagination is that key ability to create mental images of something not currently present to the senses in that moment. It is a creative ability for experiencing, constructing and manipulating mental images.

Imagination makes it possible to experience a whole world inside our minds. It presents us a different point of view, enabling us to mentally explore the past and the future.

We credit imagination for a wide range of fantasy, original and insightful thought. When you think, 'what if' or 'let's suppose,' or 'let's pretend,' you're moving into imagination's arena.

Now you may wonder why all this focus on laughter, on imagination?

All the stated benefits aside—stress reduction, increased energy, increased creative and critical thinking—while I was at the Black and White Ball over New Year's Eve, with friends young and old, I was laughing, imagining a 2011 full of new possibilities, hope for a new future. My creative juices were on tap that night.

It's early February now and super cold here in Chicago having just seen the splendor of a big storm along with all the necessary shoveling required to simply get out of the house. And, I could use a bit of that laughter now, that elevated mood, those creative juices shrieking through me like it did with those girls. How about you?