

1. Choose to Laugh

Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy.

Then it was said among the nations, "The LORD has done great things for them." The LORD has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy.

—Psalm 126:2-3.

Just when I thought my youngest son, Jake, was old enough to take a shower without constant supervision, he did something that shocked me. He got out of the shower, dried off and dressed, and stood in front of me looking as if he wanted to tell me something. I looked at him for a moment, asking myself, *Why does he look so different?*

Then it hit me.

"Jake, did you shave off your eyebrows?" I asked.

"Yep," he said. I think he was waiting to see me go through the roof.

"Um—why?" I asked.

"I watch Daddy shave, and I wanted to try it. That was the only hair on my face."

His eyebrows were completely gone! He had cleanly shaven them off. Fortunately, he hadn't cut himself. I had

mixed emotions as I looked at him standing so innocently in the kitchen. I knew he was imitating his father, and that's a normal thing for a boy, but I never dreamed he would take a razor and carefully shave off his eyebrows. I wanted to scold him—he knew better than to play with a razor. At the same time, I felt an uncontrollable urge to laugh. What else could I do? I exploded with laughter. He started laughing, too—I think from relief that I didn't lecture him or ground him or make him scrub the bathroom floor with a toothbrush.

“Wow, that looks so—weird,” I said as I ran my thumb over his eye where his eyebrow once was.

He started laughing even harder. “How long do you think it will take to grow them back?” He barely got his question out between giggles.

“I have no idea.” That was my standard answer for most of my boys' questions.

It took a long time—like until Christmas, which turned out okay because we came up with a unique Christmas card that year.

I love getting cards from friends and families around the country, but sometimes they seem sort of, well—superficial. For some reason people decide that's a good time to update everyone on their past year's accomplishments, including but not limited to, their kids' activities, ranging from ballet to football to fencing, their kids' academic excellence, new pets, world travels, and any other topics of interest or disinterest to their readers. I know many people put many hours into writing those heartfelt Christmas letters, but what about those of us who have nothing to say except “My son shaved off his eyebrows this past year”?

So instead of trying to create a long letter to make our life sound better than it actually is, we did a different type of Christmas greeting. A picture was definitely out of the question since Jake still looked kind of weird. So we sent out a one-pager, titled at the top, “What I Learned About Life Last Year.” Then each person in our family wrote a quick sentence about something he or she had learned. But it had to be something silly—nothing serious or deep. We were going for goofy but true. We wrote the following:

I learned to never hug your dog when he comes running to you unexpectedly. Mine had just been sprayed by a skunk, and it took days for the smell to leave my hair and pajamas. —Jean

I learned to never hug your wife after she’s hugged the dog that was just sprayed by a skunk. And it’s not a good idea to make her take off her skunk-smelling pajamas on the front porch and leave them in the yard for three days. The neighbors are still wondering about that.

P.S. Tomato juice does not get rid of skunk smell. —Zane

I learned never to let my mom cut my hair ever again. The bald patches were really embarrassing, and I had to wear a baseball cap for five weeks. —Josh

I learned never to make your little brother mad; it can be dangerous. —Jordan

I learned never to shave off your eyebrows. They take a really long time to grow back. —Jake

We had fun writing these and getting responses back. We received notes from families with funny little stories about their children and their lives, and these notes kept us laughing all season long.

From this experience, I realized people really do love to laugh, and funny stories spark memories of someone's own funny stories. Then they get passed around, creating joyful memories for many families.

I know life is not always funny. It's not funny when your teenage daughter is cutting herself or when your son is addicted to drugs and then steals your money to fund his habit and you have to send him away to a special treatment program. Those things will make you cry, and cry hard.

Sometimes laughing hurts someone else's feelings. Boys love to spar verbally with each other. And being boys, they try not to show that words truly do hurt. The saying "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never harm me" is a bunch of baloney. Sometimes family members tease each other to tears. In his book *Good Spousekeeping*, Dave Meurer offers a great guideline for joking with each other: "If only one of you thinks something is funny, it isn't."¹

I don't know how anyone gets through life without a daily dose of laughter, especially when raising sons. If I took everything seriously, I would probably lose my mind. Laughter is a great stress-reliever, and anyone rearing a son knows how stressful that can be. Sometimes my boys will do something that completely throws me for a loop—something so unexpected and so ridiculous, like shaving off their eyebrows, that all I can do is laugh. The other alternative is to scream and cry and stomp my feet, but where would that get me?

The writer of the Book of Proverbs must have been thinking of parents of boys, especially mothers, when he wrote, “She is clothed with strength and dignity; she can laugh at the days to come” (Proverbs 31:25). I guarantee that boys will give us plenty of things to laugh about in the days, months, and years to come. And like the Proverbs 31 woman, if we learn to laugh rather than scream, cry, and stomp our feet, we’ll exhibit strength and dignity.

Laughter is a gracious gift from God. It’s good medicine, especially in those moments of raising boys when we don’t know whether to laugh or cry. Choose to laugh.

And never assume boys are old enough to be left alone with scissors, razors, or other sharp objects.

Digging Deeper

Did you know laughing is good for your health? It’s widely believed that it reduces stress, lowers blood pressure, elevates mood, boosts the immune system, improves brain functioning, protects the heart, connects you to others, and fosters instant relaxation.

Unfortunately, most adults don’t laugh as much as they did when they were children. An article entitled “Science of Laughter” on the Discovery Health Web site states, “By the time a child reaches nursery school, he or she will laugh about 300 times a day. Adults laugh an average of 12 times a day.”²

This study also found that women laugh 126 percent more than men.

Questions for Reflection

How often do you laugh?

When was the last time you laughed?

Write down a funny story about your son, and read it to him. Children love to hear stories about themselves and will probably ask to hear it again and again.

How can you teach your boys the difference between laughing *with* someone and laughing *at* someone?

Plan a party with your friends, and ask everyone to share something funny his or child did or said recently.

Suggested Reading

All *Calvin and Hobbes* comic books, by Bill Watterson.

Here are Scripture references for further insight regarding joy and laughter: Nehemiah 8:10; Psalm 81:1; Proverbs 17:22; Galatians 5:22.