

# CHILDREN AS AGENTS, TARGETS, AND INTERMEDIARIES OF FAMILY HUMOUR

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**Abstract:** The paper focuses on the humour produced by, aimed at, or referring to children in family communication. It seeks to establish which roles children play in family's humorous communication, and how these roles reflect their agency in the interactions with parents. The research results show that much of family humour is generated by children either consciously or unconsciously. Many of children's idiosyncratic words that provoke laughter when they are originally uttered can go on to form long-standing jokes in family folklore, sometimes losing some of their humorous flavour but still being cherished by adults as children grow up and stop using them.

Plenty of family humour is also generated at children's expense. This aspect of family humour highlights the different power dynamics between children and their parents, some of whom tend to playfully tease their children to a greater extent than they do each other. However, when parents do laugh at one another, children may be mentioned as a point of reference: being compared to a child often means being a target of family humour.

Humorous family folklore does not only assign children the roles of subjects, objects or intermediaries of jokes. It is also used by parents didactically, helps families to bond and can both reinforce and challenge power dynamics in family interactions. Finally, by referring to children metaphorically in family jokes, adults maintain the generalized image of children that exists in popular imagination.

**Keywords:** agency, children, family, functions, humour

## INTRODUCTION

Humour is one of the playful activities that people regularly enjoy as adults. At the same time, humour production and appreciation are important aspects of growing up and cognitive development of children (see, for example, Guo et al. 2017; Bergen 2021), and the particularities of children's and adolescents' humour have long been a topic for academic research (for an overview, see

Zimmermann 2014). Moreover, children can also become a target of humour due to their naïve worldview, incongruous actions or non-conventional speech patterns. Whereas children do not constitute a particular social group, their generalized image in folk imagination is distinct enough to stimulate the creation of jokes on their behalf.

Laughing at and with children is especially prominent in the nuclear family context where children and adults interact closely on a daily basis. Family humour involving children mostly takes the form of conversational joking, but it also includes making practical jokes, sharing humorous personal experience narratives, using well-known catch phrases, telling canned jokes, etc. As contemporary family communication transcends the boundaries of oral interaction and becomes increasingly digitalized (Fiadotava 2020), so does the humour revolving around children. Many parents share humorous memes and other forms of internet humour with their children and accommodate the generic patterns of internet humour to tease their children.

Children's presence in family humorous folklore also manifests itself metaphorically as adults often compare themselves and each other to children. Such comparisons shed light on the representations of children in popular imagination and also contribute to our understanding of jokes made about and by children.

The research question of this paper is to establish which roles children play in family's humorous communication, and how these roles reflect their agency in the interactions with parents. I place the discussion of children's role in family humour within the broader frame of the functions of humour in family communication.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

The use of humour by and with children has been a prolific subject of study at least since the 1970s. Among the disciplines that were the first to pay attention to children's humour and have since continued to contribute extensively to its study is developmental psychology. Researchers in this area look at the different types of humour used and preferred by children of different ages, and the general issues of the relations between humour and children's development (see, for example, Honig 1988; Bergen 1998; Semrud-Clikeman & Glass 2010), including their practical applications (McGhee 2013a). Cognitive psychologists outlined different age stages and the types of humour that correlate with them (Zimmermann 2014) and tested them empirically (see, for example, Johnson & Mervis 1997). In the context of the current paper, psychologists' studies are

mostly used to contribute to the general understanding of why some types of humour are produced and appreciated by children while others are not.

There are also various linguistic approaches to children's humour. Semantics focuses on the meaning-making processes that stem from the appreciation of some content as funny (Zimmermann 2014: 124). While examining the content of humour performed by and aimed at children also lies within the scope of this paper, it mostly discusses humour within broader communication settings; thus, it is informed by the pragmatics approach. Pragmatics looks at the ways children's appreciation and interpretation of humour is conditioned by their understanding of the underlying contexts of humour production and performance and not solely by the content of humorous utterance (Schnell 2012; Hoicka 2014). It also provides empirical evidence of how children differentiate between humorous incongruities and genuine mistakes (Hoicka & Gattis 2008) and how the information about a humour producer's character traits (Pexman et al. 2006) and their family relations with the target of humour (Whalen & Doyle & Pexman 2020) impacts humour detection and processing.

A more practical approach is adopted by psychologists, sociologists, and educational scholars who investigate the impact of humour on knowledge and skills acquisition. The importance of humour use to facilitate learning in the educational settings has long been recognized by researchers (see Krogh 1985; Bergen 1992; Bryant & Zillmann 2013 [1988], etc.), including not just formal educational institutions but also learning at home (Lovorn 2008). Humour can be used not only to teach children academic subjects, but also to develop their social competences (Billig 2001: 32) as it generally "contribute[s] to children's social development" (McGhee 2013b: 119). The link between humour use and social competences is also explored in this paper, with a specific emphasis on the humorous potential of folklore both to reinforce and subvert the power dynamics of family interactions.

Whereas psychology, linguistics and social studies have contributed to my analysis of children as subjects and objects of family humour, I mainly approach this issue from a folkloristic perspective. Children's humour has been recognized as an important area of study by folklorists; they have focused on the categorization of its different genres and the interpretation of meanings attributed to them (Bronner 1988: 113–142; Tucker 2008: 26; several contributions in Sutton-Smith et al. 1995), on particular genres within the theoretical frameworks of folklore and humour studies (Voolaid 2016), on the link between humour and identity (Lanclos 2003: 48–83), on the educational potential of children's humorous folklore (Mingazova & Sulteev 2014) and on other topics. Folklorists' studies helped me to map the topical and generic field of children's

humour, as well as to outline several functions humour can potentially have for children.

Alongside these disciplinary approaches, the interdisciplinary field of humour studies has provided plenty of insights that are useful for the study of children's humour. From discussing humorous frames in interaction (Norrick 2004) to exploring the boundaries between humour and aggression (Lockyer & Pickering 2005), humour scholars have provided a conceptual background that can be applied to provide a new perspective on humour in family communication between adults and children. The current paper uses humour scholars' categorizations of the general functions of humour in communication (Meyer 2000) and, in particular, the functions of humour in family communication (Everts 2003). Among the functions of humour that humour scholars have outlined there are several ones that are especially relevant for the interactions between children and parents: creating an in-group solidarity and shared identity, maintaining power relations, marking the borders between a family (or a part of a family) and other people, etc. (Meyer 2000; Everts 2003; Fiadotava 2021).

Many of the scholarly works that created a foundation for this study focus primarily on the humour children produce and share among themselves. Moreover, researchers often paid more attention to the genres of humour with a more or less fixed structure ("canned" jokes, riddles, rhymes, etc.). While acknowledging the conclusions made in the earlier research works, the current study looks at the humour performed by and aimed at children from a slightly different perspective. Firstly, its focus is on family communication that includes both children and adults. Secondly, the analysis is based mostly on the cases of conversational joking, funny personal experience narratives, idiosyncratic family idioms and other fluid genres of family humour. Thirdly, it also takes into account humorous interactions that do not involve the presence of children, but only metaphorical references to them. Such an approach aims at providing a versatile representation of the role of children (and their idealized popular image) in everyday humorous communication in a family setting.

## **METHODS AND DATA**

The data derives from the fieldwork on family humour that I conducted among Belarusian families during my doctoral studies in 2016–2019. The fieldwork consisted of two phases. In 2016–2017 I interviewed 60 couples about their humorous family folklore and their general attitudes towards the use of humour in family communication. Most of the couples that I interviewed lived in Minsk (the capital of Belarus and its largest city) at the time of the research,

but there were also several couples from Mogilev, Brest, Slutsk, and other smaller Belarusian towns, as well as two couples living abroad. The interviews were oral (conducted face-to-face, over Skype/Viber or via telephone) and semi-structured. The questions encouraged my research participants to reflect on the most popular topics and forms of humour that they use in the interactions with their family members, on the practices of teasing and the reactions to them, as well as suggested that they share particular examples of humorous family folklore with me. Whereas my questionnaire included questions about “canned” jokes, most of the data that I collected during the interviews belonged to the realm of conversational humour, humorous practices, funny catchphrases and humorous personal experience narratives.

While such a method of data collection has generated a significant amount of data and allowed for making certain generalisations on Belarusian families’ humour (see Fiadotava 2021 for more details), it also became evident that some forms of digital humour are difficult to access via oral interviews. To circumvent this limitation and to supplement my data with the examples of humour that Belarusian families share digitally among themselves, I created an online survey in 2019. The survey received 175 responses which provided me with 260 humorous items as well as comments on the circumstances of their sharing, and the meanings attributed to them in family online communication (see the discussion of the findings in Fiadotava 2020). The pool of the survey participants partly overlapped with the pool of the interviewees as in both cases research participants were recruited via snowball sampling among my friends and the friends of my friends, but due to the fact that the survey was anonymous and asked the participants to submit only their basic demographic data (gender and age), it is impossible to establish to what extent these two sets of research participants coincided with each other.

When I was initially outlining my research design, I was planning to focus exclusively on dyadic traditions (Oring 1984), in particular, on humour between husband and wife. However, as I started conducting interviews, it quickly became obvious that children could not be excluded from humorous family communication, and thus I adopted a broader focus on my data. I amended my interview questions in a way that stimulated my interviewees to also reflect on the humour that they shared with their children, as well as the jokes, teases, and other forms of humour that they made at their children’s expense. Moreover, during some of the interviews that took place at my interviewees’ homes, children also tried to join in and remind the parents of some family humour, or comment on what the adults were telling me. Even though the children’s perspective during my fieldwork was not consistently represented and thus had

only a limited impact on my research findings, the very importance of children in family communication inspired me to explore this issue in more detail.

The data that I collected was subjected to qualitative analysis. I singled out the instances when my interviewees and survey respondents mentioned their children, or children in general, either in their reflections on humour or in the examples they shared. I analysed primarily the content of the examples, but also took into account the family context, as well as the broader social and demographic situation in Belarus. The examples were divided into three categories for the purposes of the analysis: (1) children's humour, i.e., the jokes, witty utterances, humorous behaviour, and funny mistakes made by the children themselves; (2) humour at children's expense, i.e., parents' deliberate attempts to tease or mock their children; (3) using children as a point of reference in humorous family folklore. Whereas the first two categories are partly overlapping (e.g., children can make funny mistakes and then parents start teasing them), this distinction gives an opportunity to provide an overview of children's various degrees of agency in family humour.

## CHILDREN'S HUMOUR

As many of my interviewees told me, much of the family humour is generated by children themselves, especially when they are still small. Children's idiosyncratic worldview often transpires in their utterances. Some of these utterances are based on pronunciation mistakes that children make:

*After I was absent for two days, my son meets me and asks me: "Mom, do you have a paspat?" – "What? A passport? Haven't you recognized me, son?" It turned out he meant "puzzles". (Female, 33 years old, survey)*

Others feature semantic alterations. Children often tend to substitute less familiar words with the more familiar ones in idiomatic expressions or sayings; as a result, the meaning of the expression becomes totally different:

*When my son was young, he said "vverkh romashkami" [camomiles over heels] instead of "vverkh tormashkami" [head over heels; the original expressions in Russian sound rather similar]; he still talks this way, I didn't correct him. (Female, 40 years old, interview)*

In other instances, children's utterances might be phonetically and semantically correct, but the context of their use deviates from the conventional norms.

*If she [little daughter] asks for something, she says “quietly” [tikhon’ko], she thinks it is a magic word, or “just once”, “the last time”, but she doesn’t mean it – the main thing is to get what she is asking for. And she also says “Oh, let’s...” [Nu davaaaaj], she thinks it is something that has to be said to achieve the result. “Oh let’s, just once” is a typical request. (Female, 28 years old, interview)*

Such errors in early word use (also labelled as “naming errors”, “developmental errors”, or “incongruent labels”; see Johnson & Mervis 1997) are typical for young children and are incongruous enough for parents to notice them and consider them humorous. They are also similar to the phenomenon that has been labelled as “lapsesuu” (‘out of the mouth of a child’) in Estonian folklore studies (Pöldmäe 1941; Voolaid 2016). As children grow up, some of these weird and funny expressions fall into oblivion, while others become a stable part of family folklore.

In some cases, the humorousness of children’s utterances derives from the fact that they transgress the border with aggressiveness. Such transgression would be condemned if it occurred in adults’ speech (see discussions on the borderline between humour and aggression in Lockyer & Pickering 2005), but it is amusing when performed by children.

*My sister-in-law has just come, she lives in Russia. And she says something to my daughter, and she [the daughter] replies: “And don’t look at me, auntie Alisa [pseudonym], with your such sly and wicked eyes!” (Male, 61 years old, interview)*

*When I was a small kid [in the early 1980s, the time of deficit in the USSR] my father used to take me with him to stand in a queue because people would let him skip the queue. Once there was a queue in a bookstore, but the man who was standing in front of us didn’t want to let us skip the queue. ... So I asked my father loudly: “If this man dies, will we be able to skip the queue?” (Female, 36 years old, interview)*

Despite the aggressive meaning that can be attributed to these utterances in adult conversations – and, as a result, the adverse reaction they might provoke – in the two cases above the children’s utterances were perceived as merely amusing and did not cause negative reaction. This might be due to the fact that these remarks – as well as children’s other humorous verbal attacks cited by my research participants – did not contain any swearwords or other taboo expressions, so they were mild enough to be conceptualized as humour.

Children's verbal attacks can be thus compared to a certain extent to court jesters' sarcastic and often unpleasant remarks that were sometimes the only form of criticism acceptable by the ruling class, or to medieval carnivals that provided a temporal suspension from serious everyday reality and opened up discussions that would be impossible otherwise (Bakhtin 1984). Similarly to carnival being a liminal space, and jesters occupying a liminal position in the medieval court hierarchy, children often possess some features of liminal beings (Sherman 1997: 251). On the one hand, it puts them on the margins of the power dynamics of family interactions, but on the other hand, it gives them an opportunity to provide new perspectives even on the most ordinary aspects of everyday life.

Another interesting aspect in the discussion of children's funny utterances is the degree of intentionality of humour in them. In the latter case cited above, my interviewee argued that she did not plan to amuse her father (or other people standing nearby), but rather was genuinely willing to find out whether skipping the queue was possible. However, in other settings children may consciously opt for humorous utterances either to shift the frame of communication from bona fide to humorous one (for the transitions from one frame to another in conversational joking, see Norrick 1993) or to maintain the playfulness of the interaction.

*The favourite expression of my child (he is almost 8 years old) is "Down with you" (Russian "Tebe kryshka", literally meaning "A lid on you"). I take a lid out of the fridge and suddenly put it against [his] back with a bloodthirsty yell: "That's it, down with you" ("Nu vsyo, tebe kryshka!"). He replies immediately: "If you blow a gasket, don't touch the casket" (literally "If you went mad, don't touch the tableware"; the original expression in Russian rhymes: "Lishivshis' rassudku, ne trogaj posudku"). (Female, 36 years old, survey)*

The deliberate use of humour by children is an important indicator of their development and it is often one of the few ways available for children to resolve issues and express their concerns (Bronner 1988: 113). Parents often enjoy and encourage children's attempts at humour production, as it brings not only entertainment and pleasant emotions, but also the feeling of closeness between family members. Moreover, the ability to use incongruity humour in early childhood is one of the signs of children's giftedness (Bergen 2014); and as the sense of humour is closely associated with the intelligence (Esterhuysen et al. 2013), parents are even more appreciative of children's use of humour.



Humour also contributes to children's integration into family communication as its equal members. In many cases humour initiated by children is quickly picked up and elaborated on by parents. Co-creation of family humour (on the notion of co-creation of humour, see Norrick 2004) by parents and their children helps to bond families together and establish intimacy in the intergenerational communication (Gibbon 1988; McGhee 2015), but also renegotiate the power relations and in-group belongings within the family. For example, one of my interviewees (male, 31 years old) told me that he humorously appropriated the language of "Qumi-qumi" and other cartoons when speaking to his young son. By sharing the language of cartoons, they exclude the interviewee's wife from their communication; for example, by quoting the line uttered by "Qumi-qumi" characters when in danger, the father can playfully resist the mother's attempts to scold the child. Thus, the conventional power dynamics between parents and children can shift with the help of humour. It gives children an opportunity to enhance their position in family interactions.

Apart from using incongruous speech patterns, children often display non-conventional behaviour that can be considered humorous by their adult family members.

*One of the recent funny stories happened when he [little son] was at the grandparents' place, he managed to forget the keys, then it turned out that he had them, then it turned out that he didn't have them, and then ... when I already thought that he lost them, it turned out that he had lost them in his own pocket. But when he found the keys, he came without his backpack. (Female, 41 years old, interview)*

Children's behaviour also elicits humour when children (try to) reverse the power dynamics in the family. For example, while responding to my questions about their family humour, one of my interviewees (female, 66 years old) told me that her 5-year-old granddaughter tried to make her grandfather (the interviewee's husband) quit smoking by blackmailing him that he would never see her again if he continued smoking. Whereas the adults are usually the ones who try to correct children's behaviour, the reverse situation is perceived as incongruous and thus creates fruitful grounds for humour. Moreover, the way the little girl tried to influence her grandfather is also not typical for young children; most likely, she mimicked adults' words which makes the situation even funnier from their point of view.

Similarly to the verbal humorous banter, funny behaviour can be co-created by parents and children. One of my survey respondents (female, 36 years old) shared a photo of her daughter holding oranges in front of her eyes, with a bunch

of bananas on her head and sticking out her tongue. The survey respondent commented that this was a photo of her daughter's and husband's shopping trip; she also mentioned that her husband and their children often make funny photos and videos together.

While much of the humorous flavour of children's incongruous speech and actions is inevitably lost as time passes, and many of the funny words and deeds are quickly forgotten, some of the children's humour forms long-standing jokes in family folklore. Idiosyncratic words and phrases continue to be used by the parents and other adult relatives after the children grow up and abandon them. Even when they do not elicit laughter anymore, they are kept as nostalgic reminders of the times when children were small. They also mark the in-group borders of the family as these words, expressions, and memories are not meaningful for the outsiders. In other words, they perform both the roles of identification and differentiation that are among the most common functions of humour (Meyer 2000).

## HUMOUR AT CHILDREN'S EXPENSE

In contrast to the cases described in the previous section, there are also situations when children do not produce humour themselves in family communication. Sometimes they become targets of their parents' and other adults' humour. During my interviews some of my research participants told me that they tend to tease their children playfully to a greater extent than they do each other.

Wife (44 years old): *We don't tease each other, he [her husband] gets offended.*

Husband (47 years old): *I also don't make any jokes.*

Wife: *We used to constantly tease Ksyusha [pseudonym], the older daughter. She asked: "What is this white thing in the sky?" And everybody wanted to outdo each other by telling her that it was an explosion, or it was painted by a crazy artist, and she would say philosophically: "Okay, it's a plane." She got offended if someone tried to make fun of her.*

The issue of children's unfavourable reaction to such teasing – usually labelled as “being offended” by their parents – often arose when my interviewees discussed such unilateral teasing. The fact that parents' humour targets their children while the latter cannot effectively joke back reflects different power dynamics and attitudes towards humour between adults and children:

*Our kid often tells us with a tight-lipped frown: “But I don’t have a sense of humour, I do not understand why you are laughing.” – “So that’s exactly why we are laughing!” Or it can be: “I do not understand your jokes!” – “How cannot you understand, we are just teasing benevolently!” – “No, I am still offended.” (Male, 36 years old, interview)*

An important feature of the parent-child interaction that was described above is the meta-comment on the sense of humour per se. The interviewee’s daughter does not just fail to understand and appreciate a particular joke (in line with psychologists’ findings that more difficult humorous stimuli provide less mirth for children, see Pinderhughes & Zigler 1985); she denies that she has a sense of humour in general, thus rejecting to be included into the family humorous banter. The parents, on the other side, are explicitly stating that the presumed lack of sense of humour is a relevant target for teasing. Given the positive connotation of possessing the sense of humour in contemporary society (Wickberg 1998) such a discussion acquires an important meaning in family communication. Moreover, this interaction shows that the parents and the child have a different understanding of the borderlines between benevolent teasing and serious offence, and of what can belong to the realm of humour in general. This borderline between benevolent and aggressive humour is generally fluid and context-dependent (Cann & Zapata & Davis 2009: 456), but it becomes especially crucial in the intergenerational communication between adults and children (Krogh 1985: 295–296). Moreover, different generations might have different and even conflicting ideas about what constitutes “good humour”; humour is sometimes even mentioned alongside other generational identity markers (Zeng & Abidin 2021: 2459).

The example above also illustrates that even if parents do not intend to tease their children, their interactions with children can generate humour unintentionally. In some cases humour might stem from the parents’ desire to comfort their children:

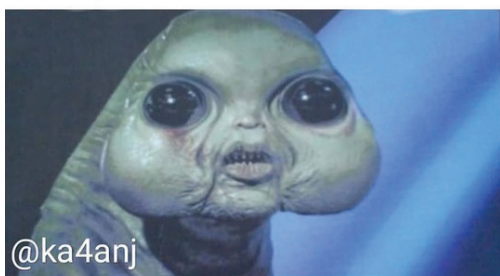
*When I was a child, I always used to look forward to my birthday. And knowing how much I adored this holiday, my parents would tell me that it was my birthday whenever I felt sad. Imagine how surprised I was when I realized I was not 29 years old during my birthday celebration when I was studying in the first grade! (Female, 18 years old, survey)*

Teasing children in family interactions may perform different functions depending on the context of the particular communicative situation – it can be a tool of controlling children’s behaviour, or it can be done just for the purpose of

entertainment – but in any case, it instils the feeling of uncertainty in children (Eisenberg 1986). On the other hand, it also initiates children into the adult world of intimate communication which does not always take into account the literal meaning of words, and where insults can in fact signal affection and closeness (Oring 1984).

Not only the funny utterances, behaviour or mistakes of their own children become a part of family's humorous lore and a source of humour at children's expense; some of my interviewees and survey respondents mentioned that they share humorous photos and video clips featuring children that they do not know personally. However, these photos and videos are often connected to the family's personal experiences. For example, one of my survey respondents (female, 42 years old) uploaded a link to a funny video featuring a stubborn and curious toddler continuously trying to reach kitchen appliances despite her grandmother's efforts to stop her. The survey respondent noted that she had shared this link with her family members, and commented that her own child behaved in a similar way when she was small. Another survey respondent (female, 44 years old) uploaded a meme (Fig. 1) and noted that it described their whole life with children:

**Когда родители орут на тебя,  
что ты безответственный,  
пока везут в школу**



**А ты ждёшь момент, чтобы  
сказать что забыл рюкзак**

*Figure 1. Source: received via the online survey on 21 May 2019. Upper caption: When parents are yelling at you that you are irresponsible while they are driving you to school. Lower caption: And you are waiting for the [suitable] moment to say that you have forgotten your backpack.*

However, not everyone supported the idea that generic (internet) humour can be used as a suitable reference to a particular family's experiences. One of my survey respondents expressed the following opinion on this matter:

*I think that every joke is connected to a certain social group. So the humour that revolves around family members will be understood and appreciated only by the members of this family and the friends who know this family. I find a lot of situations that involve my children funny, but similarly funny behaviour of other children rarely evokes my smile. (Female, 29 years old, survey)*

The different levels of abstraction and generalisation that people are willing to adopt in their humour appreciation might signal both the differences in humour tastes (Kuipers 2006) and the idiosyncratic preferences regarding the settings of humour performance. Whereas some people enjoy “canned” jokes and other humour genres aimed at general audiences, others prefer sharing jokes on more personal topics. Similarly, humorous performances in front of large and mostly unfamiliar audiences (for example, stand-up routines or satirical TV shows) may seem appealing to some, while others feel they are too impersonal to resonate with them. Children are thus just one of the variables in this continuum of humour appreciation; but given the prominent role of the family communication – including its humorous side – in people’s daily life, and the prominent role of children in family communication, the ways people produce and perceive humour at children’s expense are, to a large extent, indicative of their general humorous preferences.

## **CHILDREN AS A POINT OF REFERENCE IN HUMOUR**

Whereas the categories described above focus on the actual children and their role – whether active or passive – in family’s humorous interactions, there can also be a less direct way to incorporate children into the realm of family jokelore. For example, adults may tease each other by comparing each other to children:

*She [the interviewee’s wife] says: “Cook your meals yourself, why would I cook for you – are you a small kid? My third son?” (Male, 31 years old, interview)*

In the example above, the interviewee’s wife not only evokes the general notion of children – through the reference to her husband’s inability to cook which is presumably acceptable only for children, but not for adults – but also embeds this reference in the particular context of the family communication as she indirectly mentions their two sons. However, teasing in the form of comparing

each other to children can occur also in the families who do not have their own children, such as the family in the example below:

*I have a hoodie with ears and quite a lot of toys; that's why my husband always tells me that I'm still a child. And when he starts playing his [video] games, I tell him that it looks like he's still a child too. And he replies: "We are a perfect match." (Female, 25 years old, interview)*

Whereas in the first example of this chapter the reference to children was clearly used to underscore the husband's inferiority, in the example above the attitude towards childishness is less straightforward. The fact that the wife has a funny hoodie and toys seems incongruous for the husband, and so does the husband's interest in video games for the wife. But as they both display such childish features, these features may contribute to the harmonious family relationship rather than just serve as an apt target for teasing.

Moreover, comparing each other to children may also be a way to highlight the positive attitude towards life. In a comment on a funny picture uploaded via the survey (Fig. 2), a 28-year-old female respondent wrote that it suits her husband's "childlike humorous" attitude towards life.



**Figure 2.** Source: the link to the image was received via the online survey on May 19, 2021 ([https://vk.com/wall-26307864\\_613219?z=photo-26307864\\_456284204%2Falbum-26307864\\_00%2Frev](https://vk.com/wall-26307864_613219?z=photo-26307864_456284204%2Falbum-26307864_00%2Frev)). Caption: Today I found a swordfish. Alyosha, 33 years old. The image shows a brand of cookies that was especially popular among Belarusian children in the 1990s (at the time of survey respondent's childhood). The cookie with a long nose (a swordfish) is, however, anomalous and thus provokes humorous reflection. The original text (in Russian) contains the word 'godikov' to refer to Alyosha's age: such a diminutive form is typically used only when referring to young children's age. Alyosha is also a diminutive form of the name Alexey. The use of diminutives alludes to the childlike behaviour of an adult who playfully explores the cookies instead of merely eating them.

Children appear to be an easily recognizable and powerful metaphor in communication. Folk imagination has a certain generalized image of a child – a somewhat naïve and helpless little human whose main concern is play rather than work. This image can have both positive and negative connotations depending on the context; playfulness is a particularly ambiguous feature that can either allude to the lack of seriousness and responsibility or be associated with light-heartedness and cheerfulness. Humorousness does not manifest itself very prominently in this idealized image: while humour is closely linked to playfulness (see, for example, Bateson & Martin 2013: 103–109), when children are referred to metaphorically, they rarely become a symbol of humour. As the example above illustrates, children can become a reference to a particular kind of humour (naïve and non-threatening), but not the sense of humour *per se*.

## **DISCUSSION**

By analysing the different ways how children become a part of family's humorous communication – either as humour (co-)creators or its targets or merely its metaphorical references – it is possible to outline the main functions such humour performs in family communication.

Firstly, humour can be used as a didactic tool. In some cases, making a joke, telling a funny story or sharing a humorous meme can be a form of (mild) criticizing, but there are also situations when parents' use of humour is aimed at the development of their children's sense of humour. Due to its entertaining value and attractiveness, humour does not provoke such an adverse reaction as more serious and straightforward methods that parents use to educate their children and influence their behaviour.

Secondly, children's and parents' use of humour helps to establish intimacy in the family. It is particularly evident when humour is co-created by parents and children. By recurrently sharing different forms of humour among themselves, family members contribute to breaching the gap in intergenerational communication as humour can offer alternative ways of communication between generations. If parents and children laugh at the same jokes, this enhances their feeling to belonging to the same in-group, and therefore strengthens the family bonds. While these jokes can be a part of a broader cultural code – such as internet memes or canned jokes – families often endow them with personal significance and use them to refer to their idiosyncratic experiences (cf. Oring 1984: 22–23).

Thirdly, humorous interactions can also result in renegotiating or even reversing the power dynamics in the family. With the help of witty remarks or

humorous behaviour patterns children can have an impact on adult family members. Even if this impact appears negligible and does not bring long-term consequences, it is still essential for the development of family relations. Family humour can thus be regarded as an important step in children's initiation to adult life. However, humour can also be used to reinforce the intergenerational power dynamics in a family (cf. Everts 2003). As parents ridicule their children's mistakes and make fun of their ignorance (often with didactic intentions, as the previous function has illustrated), they re-establish their own powerful position in the interaction. Even when humour is created by children themselves (for example, by pronouncing some words incorrectly or putting them in an incongruous context), it is their parents' reaction that attributes humorousness to the utterance. The power to decide what is funny and what is not is among the important ways of parents' control over their children, particularly when the latter are still very young. Such a seeming contradiction – that humour can both reinforce and subvert power dynamics – can be explained by the versatility and inherent ambiguity of humour and the possibility to activate its different sides in different communicative contexts.

Finally, family humour revolving around children also helps to maintain cultural metaphors and popular imagination about them. These metaphors transpire both in jokes involving actual children and in the ones that only allude to them. The process is recursive: not only children's (funny) words and deeds influence these metaphors and images, but also the metaphors and images have an impact on how adults perceive children and their humour. Powerless but subversive, naïve but creative, lacking the “adult” sense of humour but being a constant source of jokes – these features are endlessly reflected in many forms of humorous folklore that involves children.

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## **MANUSCRIPT SOURCES**

Interview and survey materials in possession of the author.



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