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Humour in studies with children and its effects on the child-perspective research process

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The purpose of this study is to investigate how humour affects the qualitative research process in studies of children's perspectives. In this study, six researchers re-analyse data from five different studies from the perspective of humour using abductive content analysis. The data consist of transcribed audio and video recordings from children's interviews and researchers' field notes. The data have been collected with children (N = 48) aged 2–14 in Finland and Belgium between 2016–2022. We conclude that enabling humour in research relieves tension between children and the researcher, promotes confidential interaction, and encourages children to share more of their views.

Keywords: Humour, interdisciplinarity, participatory methods, researcher-participant interaction, studies of children's perspectives

Introduction

We hatched the research idea to study humour in the research process with children after one of us (TS) completed her research project on young children's humour. It made the rest of us consider the prevalence of humour in our own data. Author 1 (LO) was writing a reflection on her own study and began to examine how humour had affected the process and results of her research. She raised the issue in our research group, and a shared desire was born to explore the phenomenon further. After reviewing previous research, we found that the prevalence and effects of humour in childhood studies had not been studied so far. In this article, we will consider the effects of humour on our own research processes through interdisciplinary dialogue, as the authors represent the fields of nursing, comprehensive education, and early childhood education.

Children's humour has been studied for decades, and researchers have identified characteristics of children's humour that deviate from adult humour (Stenius, 2023). It is known that the atmosphere of the research situation and the trust between the researcher and the child affect children's narration (Piipponen & Karlsson, 2019; Stenius et al., 2022; Ortju et al., 2024a); however, the effects of humour on research situations with children have not been studied. The aim of this study is to describe what effects humour has on the research process. The study is multidisciplinary and takes place in the field of childhood studies. The research question is:

> How does humour affect the research process when using participatory methods with children?

This article is the outcome of interdisciplinary dialogue between six researchers who re-examined selected data from five previous studies with children. We conducted our original studies in four contexts: children's homes, nursing, early childhood education, and comprehensive education. These five studies fall under studies of children's perspectives, which use participatory methods that enable children to participate in knowledge construction in their own way, and where the researcher adapts her role to integrate into the community being researched (see Karlsson, 2021). Analyzing the data again through a common research question and using abductive analysis together with all authors created an in-depth understanding of the role of humour when doing research with children.

Background and conceptual frameworks

This interdisciplinary study contributes to methodological concerns when adult researchers conduct qualitative research with child participants. The following sections describe our theoretical positions within childhood studies, on research of children's humour, and how interaction in the research process influences the researcher-participant relationship.

Studies of children's perspectives

All the original studies used in this research are conducted by following the principles of studies of children's perspectives, which fall under the umbrella of childhood studies. The approach aims to go beyond child-centred research, where the research subjects are children, to multimethod research that create spaces for children to express their ideas and knowledge in ways that come naturally to them, thus capturing their unique perspectives (Karlsson, 2021). Children's knowledge is seen as valuable, because it helps adults to understand what is important in children's lives. However, researchers should still recognise that even though a multimethod approach expands children's power, the research context and choice of methods still limit or influence what children choose to share (Honkanen et al., 2018; Punch, 2022). In this study, we have focused on the following parts of these principles according to Karlsson (2021) and Christensen and Prout (2022): highlighting the children's views in the analysis and considering the benefits of this research for children.

Our main objective as researchers is to understand, value and bring forward children's views. Prior research has shown that it is important to view children as knowledgeable, active participants, as children gain agency when they notice they can influence things (Weckström et al., 2021). As the principles of studies of children's perspectives state, maintaining dialogic interaction throughout the research process is important for studying children's views (Karlsson, 2021). As humour is a natural part of children's interaction (Stenius et al., 2022), we consider it necessary to examine it in the research process. It is particularly interesting to look at humour between an adult researcher and children, as ways of interacting and communicating between children and adults are known to differ (Punch, 2002).

Characteristics of children's humour

Humour is seen throughout human life, lightening it. Humour usually occurs when the mind perceives something inconsistent in situations, events, or behaviours (Martin, 2011). Laughter is often seen as a measure of humour. Laughter has been found to have health effects on humans, and it is known that children laugh more than adults (Manninen, 2019; Singer, 2019). However, a person can laugh without knowing the reason because laughter sticks. Yet, one can experience the pleasure of humour without showing it with laughter (Smuts, 2016; Kuipers, 2015).

Humour with children refers to an experience in which producing or receiving humour leads to facial expressions, gestures, or actions that express smiles, laughter, or a positive attitude (Stenius, 2023). Sense of humour can be a hereditary trait, but the environment has been found to play a major role in its development (Franzini, 2002; Martin, 2011). Humour skills can be learned. They are needed in group activities, which, according to McGhee (1994), include enjoying humour, the ability to laugh, verbal use of humour, finding humour in everyday life, laughing at oneself, and using humour to cope with stress. A study by Stenius (2023) showed that young children in early childhood education were proficient in all these areas. Several studies have found that humour benefits a child from the perspectives of self-awareness, creativity, problem solving, making friends, learning, social interaction and participation (Hoicka & Martin, 2016; Martin & Dobbin, 1988; Wanzer et al., 1996; Weckström et al., 2022). Humour can also be used to behave socially incorrectly or directly to bully (Martin et al. 2003); however, no negative use of humour was found in this study.

The humour of young children is a combination of imagination, creativity and play (Loizou, 2005) and manifests bodily through sounds, gestures, and movements, as well as through wordplay (Hoicka & Akhtar, 2012; Stenius, 2022). Typical of children's humour is hyperfun, which manifests itself in exaggerations, repetitions, and loud merrymaking (Stenius, 2022). A similar type is carnivalesque humour, which is expressed as having fun among children, but it can also involve challenging everyday norms (Tallant, 2019). Children may use humour in waiting situations, queuing up, and during long group moments in early childhood education and care centres (Stenius, 2022).

According to Reddy (2001), even children under one year of age tend to make others laugh. Fun is made by some absurd thing (Loizou, 2007), which means that to

understand humour, a child needs to have prior experiences of the situations and concepts that are the object of the humour. According to McGhee's (2002) stage theory of humour development, at first the child notices some inconsistency, for example, dad puts a pot on his head instead of a hat. As language develops, humour shifts to verbal fun, and at school age, with cognitive development, the child begins to understand ambiguity, when humour also begins to resemble adult humour (McGhee, 2002).

Humour between children and adults

Children use humour in different kinds of interaction situations. Children's humour may appear in resistance to the adult. According to Loizou (2007), playful opposition to an adult empowers children. For example, a child may do something forbidden and at the same time look at an adult playfully. Scatological or toilet humour is also associated with these situations, and children easily notice what upsets adults. On the other hand, when an adult accepts this type of humour, it is possible very soon to have a connection between the child and the adult (Stenius, 2023).

Jokes and humour styles vary between different cultures; however, across all cultures, the child seeks connection with humour (Reddy, 2019). If adults do not understand the importance of humour to children, it may be seen as bad behaviour (Olli et al., 2021; Tallant, 2015). Especially children who use humour more than others are seen as troublemakers in the group. Stenius and Aerila (2022) call these children "funmakers" and state that they can bring joy and communality to the whole group. Even though people may differ in what they find funny, usually it is possible to interpret children's initiatives as humorous based on their expressions, tone of voice, gestures and what is expected behaviour in a given context. Researchers suggest that the best way to appreciate children's humour is to go along with it and be dialogic (Nordstörm, 2023; Olli et al., 2021; Reddy, 2019; Stenius, 2022).

We can understand some manifestations of children's humour through research in early childhood education and care (ECEC) contexts. The atmosphere and culture in an ECEC centre influences how much humour is used (Weckström et al., 2022). According to Stenius (2023), large groups and adult-led activities contribute to the lack of spontaneous humour. On the other hand, in a culture of participation and under confidentiality, children are ready for making contact and using humour even with

strangers (Vuorisalo, 2013; Arnkil, 2019; Stenius, 2023; Ortju et al., 2024a). This also applies to researchers working with children.

Interaction in the research process

In studies of children's perspectives, children are consulted and heard throughout the research process (Mayall, 2000). Researchers must value every child as an individual and be able to use different communication methods depending on the child's needs and will (Ortju et al., 2024a). Open communication and interaction are related to children's experiences of inclusion (Ortju et al., 2024b). Ways of interacting other than spoken language are more natural to children (Karlsson, 2021) and the researcher should allow different modes of expression (Ortju et al., 2024a; Weckström et al., 2022).

Researchers must be aware of the effects of adult-led cultures on children's behaviour in research situations. Power relations are often a challenge in doing research with children (Bakhtiar et al., 2023). Children are used to answering questions to please the adult (Punch, 2002; Karlsson, 2013). Building trust is essential for gaining access to children's views (Piipponen & Karlsson, 2019; Stenius et al., 2022; Ortju et al., 2024a; Weckström et al., 2022). Researchers' traditional practices with adult participants, such as remaining distant and neutral during interviews, do not work very well when doing research with children and other researcher participants. Children should be encouraged to express their views, and praising and validating children's answers can lead to more diverse research data (Ponizovsky-Bergelson et al., 2019). Creating a relaxed atmosphere, giving children power, and enabling laughter and jokes will help children to tell their authentic views (Ortju et al., 2024a).

Methods

Participants and research data

The present study builds upon data from five different studies conducted by the authors. These studies are previously reported in four research publications (Ortju, 2025; Piipponen, 2023; Stenius, 2023; Weckström, 2021) and one unpublished manuscript (Peltola et al., 2025). In this study, the selected research data have been reanalysed from the perspective of the research question and by using abductive content analysis as a common method. The sixth author (JK) participated in the research process to strengthen

the trustworthiness and coherence of the interpretation of the data and findings. Data collection methods and participants in the original studies are reported in Table 1.

Study number	Aim of the original research	Selected data extracts	Participants in these data extracts	Data collection methods in these data extracts	Place and time of data collection
I	To describe children's views about child health clinics and to analyze factors behind child participation in nursing	30 transcribed data extracts	Children aged 5–6 (n = 6)	Videotaped stimulated recall interviews including painting	Early childhood education and care centre in Finland 2022
II	To investigate how students perceived their learning from an intercultural encountering project after 3–4 years	20 transcribed data extracts	Children aged 13–14 (n = 3)	Audio-recorded retrospective semi-structured interview	Library's meeting room at an international school in Belgium 2020
III	To describe the humour of 1–6-year olds in early childhood education and care	7 transcribed data extracts	Children aged 2–6 (n = 31)	Ethnographic observation and video recording	Early childhood education and care centre in Finland 2019
IV	To investigate children's experiences of their local community	10 transcribed data extracts	Children aged 5–7 (n = 2)	Free conversation, familiarisation, audio-recorded	Home environment in Finland 2022
V	To explore how a socially sustainable culture of participation is constructed in daily ECEC practices	4 transcribed data extracts	Children aged 2–3 (n = 6)	Video recording	Gym space at an early childhood education and care centre in Finland 2016

Table 1. Original studies.

Sample selection

In this study, humour was defined as an action that caused laughter or a smile and was interpreted as funny. Enjoyment or fun were not by themselves sufficient indicators of humour. Purposive sampling was used following the principle of maximum variation (Boeije, 2010). Each researcher first identified sections in her own data set which included features of humour, such as lightheartedness, laughter, smiles and playful language. Humour was identified as verbal or nonverbal interactions where one or more of the participants made an initiative which was intended to make oneself or others laugh or smile. The interpretation of humour was based on the researcher's contextual understanding of the situation and the interpretation of children's facial expressions, body language and tone of voice. Some data extracts were also included because they included children's views about humour.

The sixth author (JK) read through all the selected data extracts to enable researcher triangulation and confirm the extracts included humour. If there were data transcriptions with insufficient information to confirm them as humorous, she asked the respective authors to add further contextual information for clarification. After this phase, all the extracts were read again by all authors. Following shared discussion, 71 data extracts were mutually accepted for analysis.

Laughter is also not always a sign of amusement or joy. This was considered in the study in such a way that the data excerpts chosen for the analysis had to show amusement and that laughter alone was not enough to define humour. The analysis also identified that laughter may mask failure or uncertainty. Laughter is therefore one of the manifestations of humour, but its interpretation must be context-sensitive.

Ethical considerations

We have followed the relevant ethical guidelines of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK, 2012; 2019) in all the original studies at the time. Both research consents and privacy statements consider the possibilities of using research data for further research purposes. Since all participants have been children, informed consent has been obtained from their guardians (TENK, 2012; 2019). Children have been informed and their assent to participation has been asked by using appropriate methods (see example in the methodological article: Ortju et al., 2024a).

The children's names in the citations are pseudonyms. These have been used all the time in researcher triangulation as the raw data and personal data of participants are known only to the researcher who conducted the study in question. Data is stored on a password-protected hard drive as EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR; EU 2016/679) requires.

Analysis process

The analysis process was abductive, which involves moving between theory-driven and data-driven analysis at different stages of the process to produce a good fit between data and theory (Kolko, 2010; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). We also used researcher triangulation (Rothbauer et al., 2018; Carter et al., 2014) in our analysis process to strengthen the trustworthiness of the researchers' interpretations. Figure 1 presents an overview of the analysis process.

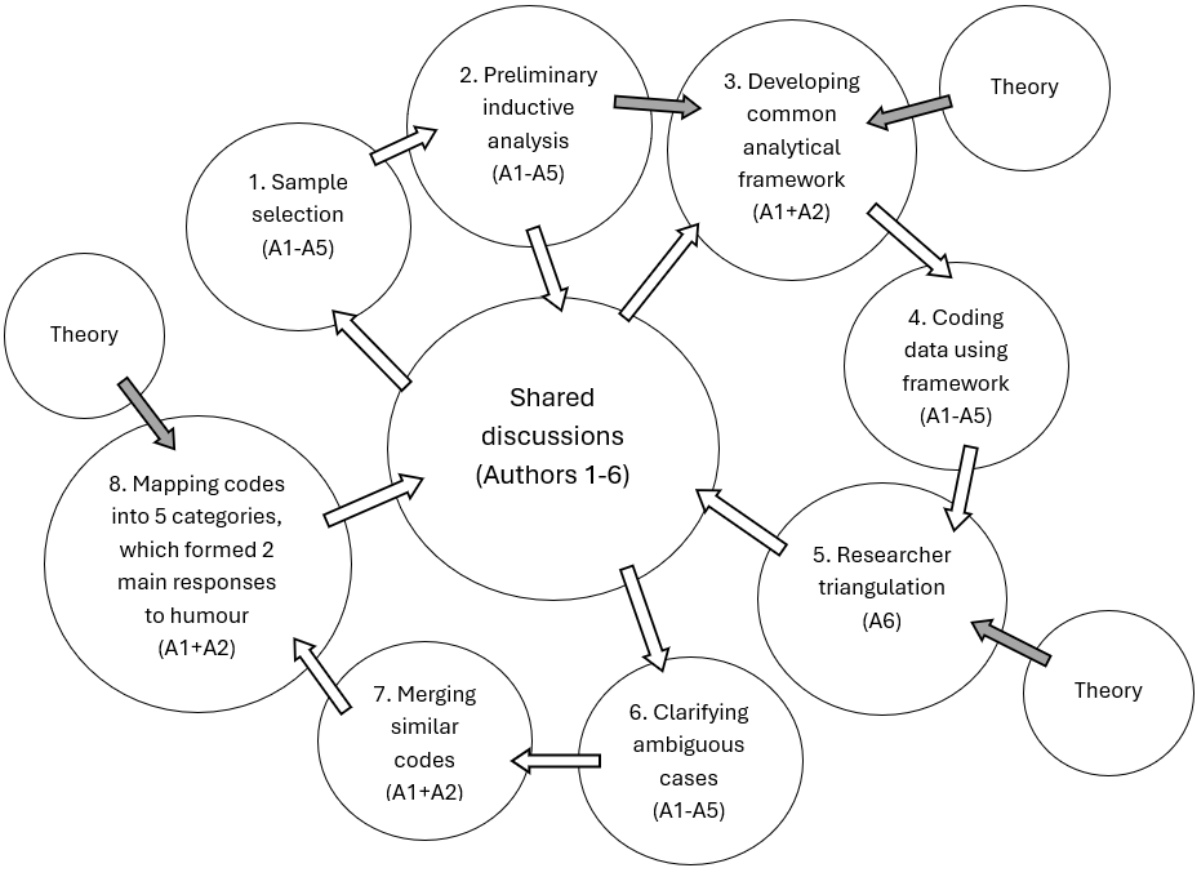

Figure 1. An overview of the analysis process.

First, we selected 71 data extracts from our previous studies and imported them to Microsoft Excel. Each researcher did a preliminary analysis by recording what they interpreted as humour in each extract. We noticed that different modes of expression were used when initiating humour, such as facial and bodily expression, tone of voice, making sounds, interacting with objects, telling jokes, or sharing humorous memories. Because not all the original studies were designed with researching humour in mind, the transcribed data did not always include necessary contextual information to answer our research question. To mitigate this challenge, the first and second authors created a common analytical framework based on the preliminary inductive analysis and by using previous research on young children's humour (Hoicka & Akhtar, 2012; Loizou, 2005; Stenius 2022, 2023; Tallant, 2019) to make each researcher's assumptions and interpretations based on contextual information visible to the others. The framework looked at who was involved in the humour situation, who took the initiative and who responded to it, what mode(s) of expression were involved, and what were the consequences of using humour. Each researcher then reviewed their data through the analysis framework (see Table 2).

Data extract	*Leevi: Here are someone's legs [looks at the researcher].* *Researcher: [walks towards Leevi, spreads her hands and looks amazed] Just legs!* *Leevi: What on earth?* *Researcher: What else do we need? A shirt?* *Linnea: Uh...* *Researcher: Hmm...* *Leevi: What on earth, a man with only legs! Hoo, hoo, hoo!* *Researcher: The shirt would be good too.* *Leevi: Well, but it does not have a face either.* *Researcher: What kind of clothes do nurses have at a child health clinic?*
Context	The children paint, the researcher watches
Participants	One researcher, three children
Ages of children	5, 6 and 6 years
Place	ECEC centre's art room

Mode of expression	Narrative
Who made the humour initiative	A child
Who responds to the initiative and how	The researcher gets involved in the humour and then leads the discussion to the research phenomenon. The other child responds with sounds.
The researcher's interpretation	The child invents a funny thing, which amuses the researcher. The child shows humour with his facial expressions and gestures but does not laugh out loud.
What emotions are involved	Shared joy
Consequences	The discussion that started with the child's funny story leads to a discussion about the research phenomenon: the nurses' clothing. All children participate in the conversation and the positive atmosphere continues throughout the conversation and beyond. The data accumulates.

Table 2. Example of coding data extracts with common analytical framework.

After that, the sixth author (JK) reviewed the analysis, and multidisciplinary researcher triangulation was performed in a common meeting. Two extracts were discarded on the basis that they did not include humour. In the next phase, first (LO) and second (OP) authors categorised the codes that reflected the consequences of humour in a mind map. They formed 29 codes (after merging similar codes), 5 categories and 2 main responses to humour. An example of code categorisation is presented in Table 3. Finally, the authors checked the code mapping together and further clarified the category names.

Identified consequences	Codes	Categories
Detecting common interests, establishing a connection with the exchange class	Encourages interaction	Supports familiariz-ation and builds trust
The child enjoys and is happy; the data creation continues		
The children became agitated and made even more contact with the researcher.		
The conversation begins		

Community spirit, lightening the mood, entertaining friends	Reduces tension	
The child begins to free herself from the initial tension		
Humour does not continue, but the tense atmosphere of the beginning is released, and the children relax: moving more boldly in the space and speaking in a more audible voice		
The atmosphere is relaxed as the visit progresses		

Table 3. Example of forming categories.

Findings

In our studies, usually children initiated humour, but also some of the researchers did so. Humour included narrative, bodily and facial expression, vocalization, and sometimes the use of objects. In general, the smaller the children were, the more bodily the humour was. Most often, the researcher and other children responded to humour either verbally, by smiling or laughing. The analysis also identified situations where the researcher did not respond to the initiative. It was then interpreted that the researcher either did not notice or understand the child's humour or did not find it funny.

The opportunities for humour were influenced by the varied research contexts and methods. For example, in Study V, the children were playing freely in the gym of the ECEC centre, so they could physically move in the space; by contrast, in Studies II and IV the discussion format influenced the kind of humour that was possible. The research stage also impacted on what role humour had in interaction. Study III data focused on the researcher familiarizing with the children at the beginning of the data production, so the function of the humour was to build trust between the researcher and the children.

The study's findings show that humour has several positive effects on the research situation when humour is shared between children and the researcher, whereas denial or lack of understanding of humour leads to negative effects. We identified 22 codes relating to positive outcomes, which were organized into three categories: 1) supports familiarization and builds trust, 2) promotes interaction and furthers research, and 3) enables children's perspectives in the research process (see Figure 2). Seven codes

relating to negative outcomes were grouped into two categories: 1) inhibits interaction and 2) reduces narration (see Figure 3).

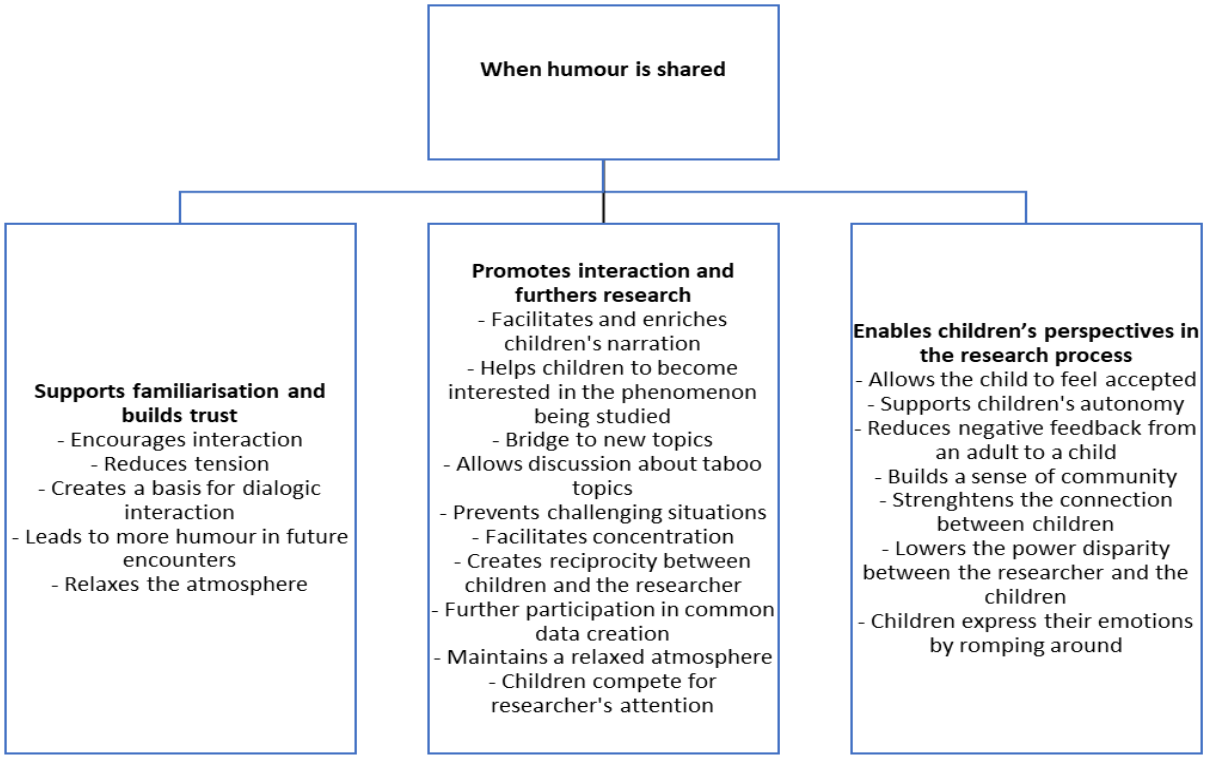

Figure 2. The effects of shared humour on the research process.

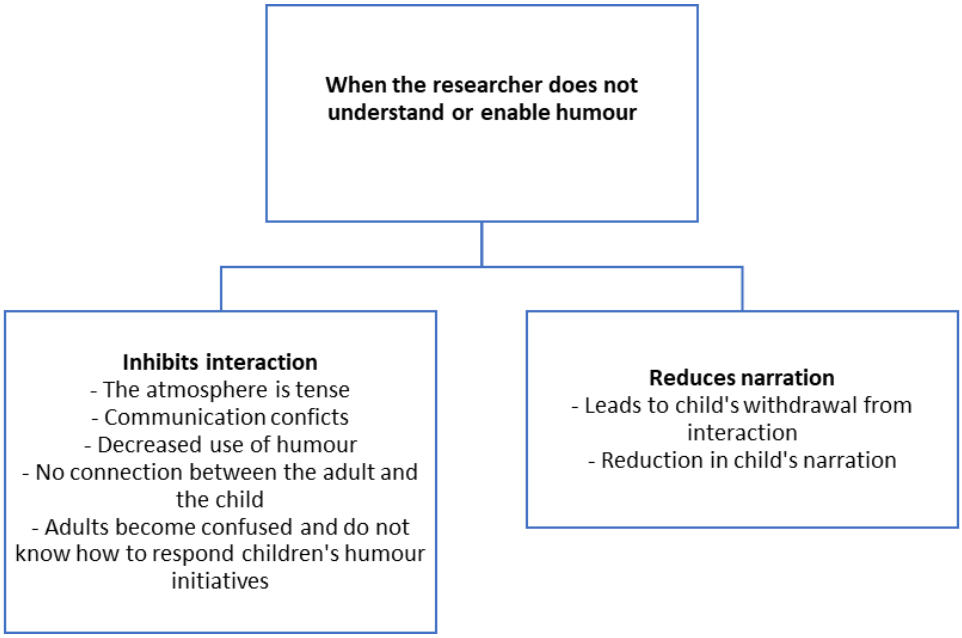

Figure 3. The effects of humour on the research process when the researcher does not understand or enable humour.

Humour supports familiarisation and builds trust

Humour was found to relax the atmosphere as well as reduce tension in introductory situations. Humour supported children to make contact with the researcher. In those studies where humour was abundant in the introductory situations, it was also more prevalent as the study progressed. In familiarization situations, children tended to engage in shared humour, with the researcher neither participating nor limiting it.

In a data excerpt from Study I, the researcher (LO) and three children (aged 5, 6 and 6) prepare for painting by wearing coats in an ECEC centre's art room. Leevi initiates scatological humour, which amuses Linnea. The researcher is not amused by the humour but does not limit it.

> LO: Yes, with these paints you need [a coat], otherwise these will make a mess indeed.
> Leevi: Otherwise will mess up everything that are on a beginning poo!
> [Linnea laughs]
> Leevi: [laughs and returns to his place with the coat] It's not a nice thing at that point anymore.
> [Linnea giggles and is putting on the coat]

By not scolding Leevi and allowing the children to continue engaging in humorous exchange, the researcher allows the atmosphere to become excitedly cheerful. The children grow comfortable with each other and the researcher.

Children can also familiarize themselves with the researcher through humour that is expressed in a bodily form. In the following example from Study V, 2-year-old Simo and other children are playing in the ECEC centre's gym while the researcher (EW) sits behind a video recorder.

> Simo stops, seriously looks at the researcher's video recorder and starts walking towards the researcher. At the same time, his face breaks into a broad smile and Simo falls onto the researcher's lap.
> Simo: I fell here. (Simo and the researcher laugh)

The researcher correctly interprets Simo's movements and facial expression as a humorous bid for connection. Physical proximity and feeling accepted build trust between the child and the researcher.

Humour promotes interaction and furthers research

The analysis acknowledged several positive effects of humour for promoting interaction in the research situation. Using and allowing humour during the data production facilitated and enriched children's narration and bridged the discussion to new topics related to the research phenomenon. Humour helped children to become interested in the phenomenon being studied and to talk confidentially even about difficult issues, such as pain or their social relationships. Humour was found to develop a positive group dynamic, as well as encouraged also quieter children to participate in discussion and data production. In addition, humour was found to calm the situation after an opportunity to diffuse the energy and excitement in a comfortable way.

In Study III, the researcher (TS) is crossing the yard with a group of 6-year-old children, as they are going to have a snack in a different building. In this example from observation notes, the researcher engages in humorous wordplay, which the children continue.

> Adult at the front: Come quickly!
> Researcher: Oh, today's meal is quick leak?
> Children laugh and eye each other.
> Someone says "quick cereal"
> Laughter while walking
> "quick soup"
> "Doesn't sound good"

In Study IV, the researcher (AP) responds to Grete's (aged 7) wordplay, affirming the relaxed atmosphere during the interview.

> I ask whether these paper dolls have blutac on them. Grete says that they do, even though it is yellow, it is blutac so yellowtac. I laugh. It is yellow, so it is yellowtac. Marta wants me to help, shows how to make paper dolls.

Although these kinds of short episodes may not be directly relevant to the research aims, they are important for building relationships with the child participants and keeping the children interested in the research task.

There were also examples in which the child who initiated the humour did not even expect an answer but used the humour to support concentration or to entertain him- or herself. In these cases, there was no harm in the researcher's lack of responsiveness, but it was helpful that the researcher did not restrict the use of humour.

The analysis further identified situations where humour had been able to prevent the child from becoming frustrated or harmed. In Study I, the researcher's ability to turn harm (e.g., a paint jar overturning) into fun, or the child's ability to joke about a serious matter (such as vaccination) led to confidential discussions and a rich accumulation of data.

In another example from Study II, the researcher (OP) created a confidential atmosphere, where participating youths were allowed to have humorous exchanges. Dennis (aged 14) and his friends laughed and joked frequently while participating in the retrospective interview. Towards the end of the interview, Dennis chose to tell about an experience where he behaved in a "toxic" way towards other online players.

> OP: Did you have another one [personal experience] that you had in mind as well?
> Dennis: Oh yeah. Not so proud of that. (...) It's on the X-Box [video game console]. (Giggles gently, sound of Luke breathing out, also laughing silently) (...) I played Siege [online tactical shooter video game] I think in sixth grade, I got it in sixth grade. My friend Oliver, err, encouraged me to get it. I got it and I played it and that's when I realised the Siege community is super toxic. (...) I got kind of normal [sic] used to it and —
> (sound of silent giggling)
> Dennis: umm, like, kind of made me who I am today. I'm quite toxic online —
> (sound of silent giggling again)

Dennis: — if I meet some random people.

Giggling allows the teens to keep the atmosphere light and to show they are feeling a little self-conscious. Humour thus enables children to bring up non-normative or taboo topics while saving face.

Humour enables children's perspectives in the research process

The analysis identified that humour enables children's perspectives to emerge in the research process. Researchers who value children's perspectives show acceptance and support equality in their interactions. Humour lowered the power hierarchy between the researcher and the children and made children's participation possible. Humour was found to have a communal and enjoyable effect. On the other hand, permissiveness led to occasional "hyperfun" and an increase in the duration of the research process.

In the next example from Study III, the atmosphere has been accepting of children's humour, so some 6-year-olds feel comfortable joking with the researcher's name:

> When I am leaving, I say in the hallway that now *Tuula-täti* [in Finnish Aunt Tuula] is leaving. "Oh, *tuuletin* [fan]?" Laughter. "Fan me." I fan each [child's] hair and everyone laughs.

The joking leads to increased excitement and shared fun, which is important for children in their relationships. Joking with an adult researcher's name also shows the lower power hierarchy between the researcher and children.

In the following example from Study V, 2-year-old Eero comes towards the researcher as the other children are doing tricks in the background. He has a need to be seen and so seeks to amuse the researcher.

> Eero runs laughing with a monkey soft toy and bounces the monkey.
> EW: Are we having just monkey exercise today? (In a happy voice)
> Eero repeats: Monkey exercise.
> EW: So how does the monkey exercise?

Eero starts running with the monkey and keeps looking at the researcher all the time as if to ensure that the researcher is watching.

Eero: The monkey runs like this. (Eero and the researcher laugh)

The researcher responds to Eero's humorous initiative in a positive way, so acceptance and shared amusement follows.

The children also wanted to tell many stories about humorous events in their lives. This shows that children value and remember situations that they perceive as funny. For example, in Study IV, Grete recounts funny stories of the family's cats, and in Study II, Luke is amused when he retells an old story of his brother falling into the toilet.

Non-response to humour inhibits interaction

In our analysis we acknowledged that researchers do not always understand children's humour initiatives. We analyzed also the effects of these situations and realized that misunderstanding, ignoring or denying children's humour initiatives leads to inhibition of interactions. If humour is not shared, it leads to a tense atmosphere, decreased use of humour in the research process and even to communication conflicts.

In the following example from Study IV, the researcher (AP) is not quite sure whether Marta's (age 5) story is meant to be funny or about a conflict, so she asks a question for clarification and the appropriate reaction (laughter) to the story is delayed.

AP: Or who do you like to play with in daycare?

Marta: Em... err me?

AP: Yeah.

Marta: I don't... well... There are like nice friends and one—today when I was in daycare then... then—then when errm... then when we were making a tower. [Grete sings]

AP: Mm.

Marta: With mattresses.

AP: Oh!

> Marta: And tree—and with a seat. Then when when [name] carried one item around that then I was like... You fool! She was you are! You are! You are! And then... if mum came then there is... then is... was was [unclear] you are you are you are you are you are! [laughter]
> AP: Okay! Was it like a joke or were you having an argument? [pause] Or was it more like fun?
> Marta: It was in th—in our opinion fun! [laughs]
> AP: It was in your opinion fun!
> Marta: Nice.
> AP: Okay... [laughs briefly]

The opportunity to laugh together at Marta's funny story is missed.

In another example, the researcher (TS) tried to use humour in an initial encounter with three children (aged 4, 5 and 6) in an ECEC centre:

> Child: Where did you come from?
> TS: I came through that door.

The children did not respond to the researcher's humorous attempt to deliberately misunderstand the question, as the question was asked in earnest. Either the children missed the subtlety of the pun, or they did not find it funny.

Non-response to humour reduces children's narration

Our findings show that when humour is misunderstood, ignored or denied, children share their views less and are terser in their interactions. In the following example from Study I, the atmosphere is tense at the beginning of the session.

> The children sit by the easels; each one has a soft toy with them. The researcher is setting up the video recorder.
> Linnea: But I went so that you can't see! [grins from behind the easel]
> LO: No, no need to see, no need. [walks in the space and arranges things; does not look at the child]

The researcher (LO) does not seem to understand Linnea's attempt to lighten the mood with an attempted prank (hiding behind the easel).

Discussion

This study provides researchers using qualitative methods with ways to enhance their interaction with child research participants and to provide children with more agency to bring forth their views in research settings. This study reinforces that researcher-participant interactions matter when doing qualitative research with children (Bakhtiar et al., 2023; Kirk, 2007; Punch, 2002). If a researcher understands, allows and responds to children's humour, as well as initiates humorous interaction, this can improve children's position in research processes, enable better experiences for children participating in research, and improve the trustworthiness of results.

At the beginning of the research process, humour helps in getting to know each other and it creates trust. This study reconfirms the importance of building trust when working with children in research (Piipponen & Karlsson, 2019; Stenius et al., 2022; Ortju et al., 2024a; Weckström et al., 2022). According to Beauchamp and Childress (2001), confidentiality between the researcher and participants is an important part of ethical research. The results of this study indicate that accepting children's humour that breaks or challenges norms shows that a trusting relationship is forming. As in Stenius's (2023) research, this study shows that accepting scatological humour deepened the relationship between researchers and child participants. With developing trust, children may share thoughts with the researcher about sensitive or taboo topics. This improves the credibility of the findings (Shenton, 2004).

As the research process progresses, humour helps to promote continued interaction and the accumulation of data, as children may sometimes give very short replies. Prior research has shown that it is important to encourage and praise children during research (Ponizovsky-Bergelson et al., 2019). Using humour is a bid for interaction. It is not necessary for the researcher to be a charismatic humorist; instead, it is enough to accept and respond to children's humour initiatives. Even a smile may be enough to recognize a child's humorous initiative and express warmth. Allowing and using humour requires courage from the researcher to embrace the unfolding situation.

The researcher must accept the uncertainty of the schedule and have the patience to lead the research situation at the pace of children. When using humour, it may feel to the researcher that data production may be veering off topic, but we argue that as humour can make the child participants feel more comfortable, more data will accumulate overall.

A safe and playful atmosphere promotes the use of humour, and humour maintains a positive, carefree atmosphere. Prior research has shown that an institution's participatory culture promotes children's engagement in producing research data (Weckström et al., 2022). A researcher can support a participatory culture by organizing data production in a space with less hierarchical connotations. For example, Study II was organized in the school library rather than a classroom. Children also initiated humour in interaction with different objects, drawings, toys, or cameras, so letting children play with the research materials may also be a good way to release tension in a data production situation.

If the researcher does not understand humour or restricts it, this can cause confusion and communication conflicts, hindering the confidentiality of the research situation. Non-response to humour initiatives was most common in introductory situations. This may have been because the researcher and the children did not yet know each other well enough to recognize or understand each other's humour. The data did not contain any situations where a researcher restricts or scolds the child for using humour, as adults often do (cf. Olli et al., 2021; Tallant, 2015). This is likely because all the included studies were framed as studies of children's perspectives, so the researchers strived to enable the children to express themselves freely. At the same time, it should be noted that none of the participating children abused this freedom to use humour to bully others. Nikkola, Reunamo and Ruokonen (2024) have noted that frequently adults prohibit the use of children's normal (lively) movement and sound because they feel it may cause chaos; however, empirical research shows that the majority of children's humorous initiatives are intended as prosocial and have a positive effect on the group dynamics (Stenius & Aerila, 2022).

All the researchers were experienced in working with children and thus felt comfortable letting children become more energetic without the fear of total chaos ensuing. There were no examples in the data where children's humour created problems for the research process. However, a researcher with less experience in working with

children may desire to stay in control (Bakhtiar et al., 2023). Nikkola and colleagues (2024) suggest that looser structures and a dialogic orientation may create more fertile ground for children's creativity. Being dialogic means occasionally allowing children to use their bodies and voices in more chaotic ways. Young children especially benefit from being able to use movement as it is a natural way for them to express themselves (Torrance, 1981) as seen in Studies I and V.

Positioning oneself as a researcher of children's perspectives promotes the acceptance of children's humour (Stenius, 2023). Acceptance of children's humour does not necessarily mean that the researcher needs to understand it or find it funny. Understanding the nature and meaning of humour can promote the reliability of research and improve the child's position in the process. Especially young children's humour is not usually jokes or clever linguistic turns of phrase; instead, it can be, for example, funny actions, sounds, words, unexpected use of words, objects or surprising behaviour (Stenius, 2023). Literary forms of humour such as pun and irony are common forms of humour for adults, but less used or understood by young children (Aguert, 2022), as seen in Study III.

According to Loizou (2007), children can resist adults by using humour, and this was seen in Study I: a child resisted the researcher by painting in a different way than was tasked, grinning mischievously. When the researcher did not scold the child, trust was strengthened. In hierarchical settings, children may use carnivalesque humour as a way to resist existing power structures (Tallant, 2015). This is one way for children to communicate to the adults in power that the environment is too controlling. However, adults often do not tolerate children's carnivalesque humour and may see it as misbehaviour (Jennings-Tallant, 2019). In an atmosphere that allows for humour, power is shared more equally, and children can have a greater influence on how the research process progresses. Similar results have been obtained from research in other contexts (Hoicka & Martin, 2016; Martin & Dobbin, 1988; Wanzer et al., 1996; Weckström et al., 2022).

In Studies II and IV, there was sometimes a tendency for the researchers to redirect the discussion and ask supporting questions rather than to respond to children's initiatives. A researcher's goal-directed approach therefore hindered dialogical exchange. We argue that adhering too strongly to an interview schedule may stifle children's

willingness and ability to share their thoughts. This challenge has been identified in previous research as well: there is a danger of imposing the researcher's own perceptions when working with children (Punch, 2002), and sometimes practical implications (like limited timeframes for interviews) override best methodological practices (Bakhtiar et al., 2023). Overall, inductive approaches to researching children's perspectives provide more leeway for children's initiatives than theory-guided approaches, where the researcher tends to be more directive.

The research methods created the boundaries for the kinds of humour that were available for the children. For example, the discussions between the researcher and children in Studies II and IV were opportune for verbal forms of humour, whereas the participatory ethnographic methods in Studies III and V and the free play situations that were observed in the same allowed more bodily forms of humorous expression. All the original studies took the children's age into account when choosing appropriate research methods, and typically a multimethod approach was favoured, although not all the data sets have been included in the present study.

Because humour supports children's perspectives in the research process, it also promotes the ethics of research. Children's feelings of well-being and inclusion, as well as finding joy in participating in research, support ethical principles in research, a general sense of morality, and the protection of children's rights. Humour also relieves tension and can help children to deal with unpleasant feelings, such as fear of failure or disappointment. According to Kirk (2007), power relations are a particular ethical issue when doing research with children. Using humour helps to lower the traditional adult-child hierarchies.

Strengths and limitations

The greatest strength of the research was the continuous interdisciplinary dialogue and the exposure of researchers' interpretations to researcher triangulation. Another strength was the children's perspectives of the original studies and the researchers' ability to understand humour as part of children's normal communication and life.

One of the researchers (TS) has studied the humour of young children and brought trustworthiness to the interpretation of the material with her expertise. The contribution of one researcher (JK) was fully focused on researcher triangulation and allowed the data

and interpretations to be critically examined by an outsider to the data. By triangulation, we were able to find broader perspectives in our analysis and findings (Rothbauer et al., 2018; Carter et al., 2014).

Given that the original data were not produced with this study in mind, there were some challenges in the secondary analysis and researcher triangulation. Transcriptions tended to focus on verbal communication, so sometimes it was difficult to ascertain whether something was intended as humour, as it was not possible to ask this from the research participants. In these cases, the researcher of the original study returned to check the situation from the raw data, where possible. It is unfortunate that the research permissions did not allow raw data to be shared with the other authors; however, we have shown that even in this limited way it is possible to reuse research data whilst upholding research integrity. Reusing and creatively combining existing data sets was also a strength, because it shows that humorous exchanges are quite common when using participatory methods with children, and we were able to study exchanges that naturally arose in authentic research situations.

The variety of the research settings, methods and ages of the participants selected for this study was a strength, as it shows that humour can be used effectively in many different types of studies with children. The broad age range of the participants can be seen as both enriching as well as a challenge. Especially with very young children, we had many discussions about the difference between humour, fun and enjoyment, as not all situations that are fun and enjoyable contain humour.

Recommendations for further research

This study focused on the effect of humour on the research process with children. Further methodological investigations regarding the role of humour in research could be conducted with children or adults in vulnerable circumstances, with disabilities, or belonging to language and other minorities.

Children could be involved in studying humour as co-researchers, as we were not able to use member-checking in the secondary analysis of the data, and sometimes it was a challenge to ascertain whether a child's initiative was intended humorously or not. Future research should also include video data of the researcher's interactions to help

with interpretation and increase trustworthiness. Often humorous intent can be observed through the researcher's or participant's nonverbal cues.

The findings hinted that the research setting influenced what kind of atmosphere was produced during the data production. Further research could investigate ways to construct fruitful research spaces.

Conclusions

This study examined how using humour affected the research process when doing research with children. Data was analysed from five previous studies, and the findings show that humour is used for familiarisation and building trust between researcher and child participants, it contributes to data production, and it enables children's perspectives in the research process. There were also examples in the data where the researcher ignores children's humour, which can lead to inhibition of interaction and a reduction in children's narration. We conclude that humour is beneficial to use in research with all, but especially with children. It promotes the trustworthiness of the research and contributes to children's wellbeing during research. It can also support children in bringing up sensitive issues by hiding behind humour in a safe environment. Children are a special group in research, as the power relations with adults differ significantly. With children, as with other people in a subordinate position, such as people with intellectual disabilities or prisoners, the importance of using humour in creating dialogue and mutual trust is emphasised. However, we recommend using humour and a humour-permissive attitude for research with all kinds of people.

This study is significant because it provides a new perspective on how researchers can influence the atmosphere of a research setting so that children can better participate in research processes. Both adults and children use humour primarily to connect and build trust with others. This study has unpacked misconceptions around using humour in research situations: allowing humour does not usually lead to chaos, and children's humour is very rarely mean. Humour can be used to build relationships quickly with child research participants. Conversely, taking a normative researcher role, where the researcher remains distant, can lead to the inhibition of interaction. We hope to encourage researchers to construct a research setting that encourages and enables children to participate on their own terms, and to share their thoughts with researchers. Researchers

do not have to be great humourists themselves; instead, it is enough to allow and respond positively to children's humour.

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