

Laughing Or Crying

*The University of Pittsburgh
Office of Child Development*

Loretta was looking for a laugh.

She crept slowly up to her three-month-old son, smiling and whispering, “I’m going to get you,” until they were nose to nose. Then, she tickled him. He cried.

Mom was mortified. The same game won giggles when Loretta’s neighbor played it with her 10-month-old daughter. Why didn’t it work for Loretta?

The difference in the age of the two babies may be one reason. What provokes a laugh in a 10-month-old, may scare the diaper off a two-month-old. Babies also are different from one to the next. One doesn’t always laugh at the same kinds of games that other babies find riotous.

Also, as Loretta discovered, a fine line separates laughing from crying.

One theory is that smiling and laughter in babies occur when tension is built slowly, then suddenly released. The greater the tension and more sudden the release, the better chance of getting some giggles. But the result may be the opposite if there is too much tension or if it builds up too quickly.

What is too much or too fast will change as the baby grows older. As babies develop, the type of play that makes them laugh tends to change from vigorous stimulation to more subtle, social games. For 7- to 10-month old babies, the simple act of Mom shaking her hair in the baby’s face is one of the more sure-fire laugh-getters.

Playing games with your baby is important. It helps you get to know each other and have fun together. Experiment to see what works..

Practice building excitement slowly, then releasing it. Do something over and over again, and then change it.

Peek-a-boo is a standard. Hold up a handkerchief or other object that hides your face from your baby. Then lean around the handkerchief to the right and say, “peek-a-boo.” Slight changes on a familiar routine can also be entertaining. After peeking around the right side of the handkerchief several times, peek out from the left side. With an older infant, get close enough with the handkerchief and don’t peek at all. Will your baby reach to pull the cloth away to find you? Then say, “peek-a-boo.”

You may accidentally go too far too fast. Comfort your baby and stop for awhile. Return later to the tried and true. It’s all part of getting to know and love each other.

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