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# Young Children’s Humour in Play and Moments of Everyday Life in ECEC Centres

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of our study is to identify elements of young children’s shared humour by observing children’s own expressions in the everyday life of early childhood education and care (ECEC) centres aged 1–6 in three Finnish ECEC centres. Our analysis shows that young children’s humour plays an important role in routine transitions and play situations. Children’s shared humour is often seen as momentary twinkles, as a flowing current, as carnivalism or what we term “hyperfun.” The article highlights why humour should be more utilised as a pedagogical tool. This study attempts to enrich the discussion on young children’s shared humour in order to gain a deeper understanding of its nature and application in early childhood education and care.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## KEYWORDS

Humour; early childhood; studies of child perspective; communality; childhood study

## Introduction

“It makes me laugh when someone climbs and falls,” remarks three-year-old Mikko. “At least it makes me laugh if someone is fooling around,” proclaims Siiri, aged five (Data 31.10.18).<sup>1</sup>

We became interested in young children’s humour when we observed that children, but not adults, laughed when listening to stories told by children. Studies by Karlsson (2014) show that certain stories told by children make children in the audience laugh at every reading. Humour has interested researchers across various disciplines such as philosophy, psychology, social psychology and anthropology. Therefore, humour is a multi-faceted concept and can be difficult to define, as it is without a fixed nature (Hietalahti, 2016). Martin summarises humour to mean an immediate and jointly felt *joie de vivre*, and laughter is usually held as its measure.

First we will delineate the different ways that humour has been approached in research and literature. Humour is enjoyable and brings people together (Bahtin, 2002), and it emphasises the positive. The appreciation of humour has varied at different periods of history. Recently, many studies have concluded that humour may play a central role in subjective wellbeing, since it helps a person to relax and reduces negative emotions (e.g., Gremigni, 2012). According to Martin (2011), humour can also be a means of realising, creating or observing something new. Although theories abound, most researchers agree that humour is connected to some idea, image, text or event that is in some way incongruous, strange, unusual, unexpected or surprising. It can simply be an amusing stimulus, to which someone responds (Martin, 2011). Furthermore, laughter is linked to humour, but it is not

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the same thing. Laughter can be the result of humour, but not every humorous situation incites laughter (Kuipers, 2015; Smuts, 2016).

Classical humour theories attempt to describe the essential components of humour and how humorous situations unfold. These include the Theories of Superiority, Relief and Incongruity. According to the Superiority Theory, laughter is the result of a sudden feeling of superiority that follows someone's misfortune (Hietalahti, 2018). By contrast, Sigmund Freud's (1905) Relief Theory holds that laughter is the release of excess energy. Laughter yoga and the claim that laughter is healthy are based on this theory. Finally, according to the Incongruity Theory, humour arises when there is discord between expectations and reality (Martin, 2011).

Humour is a psychologically complex phenomenon comprising cognitive processes, play and emotions, social relationships and communication, as well as biological processes. All human beings engage in humour to some extent, and these psychological processes can already be present at birth, after which they develop further during childhood and adulthood (Martin, 2011). Earlier theories in psychology viewed humour as a defence mechanism, but positive psychology has redefined humour as a resource or as a form of resilience for the individual (Loizou & Reccia, 2019).

Research has investigated the hereditary and environmental aspects of humour. For example, in their study in the field of clinical psychology, Ruch and Hoffmann (2012) searched for a link between humour and temperament. They observed that a sense of humour is often connected to the personality trait of cheerfulness. Moreover, according to Martin (2011), active and sociable behaviour has been considered a temperament trait that enhances a sense of humour. Many studies have found that children who use humour tend to gain popularity within their group (Martin, 2011).

Humour is one form of expression for children, yet young children's humour continues to be under-investigated. According to researchers, small children remain at the margins of narrative research because their linguistic development is viewed as limited (Jennings-Tallant, 2019; Karjalainen & Puroila, 2016; Loizou, 2006; Tallant, 2015). Many researchers suggest that education should take advantage of humour as a form of children's expression, so it should be included in curricular documents (e.g., Chaniotakis & Papazoglou, 2019; James & Fox, 2019; Loizou & Reccia, 2019; McGhee, 2019). In Finland, humour is mentioned in the National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care as follows: "Children practise telling, explaining and taking turns while speaking. Additionally, roleplay, use of humour and learning good manners strengthen children's language skills" (Opetushallitus, 2016, p. 41). Moreover, while the National Core Curriculum for Pre-primary Education, (Opetushallitus, 2014) makes no explicit reference to humour, play and the joy of learning are mentioned. The documents discuss humour from the perspective of language learning. However, our data shows that as humour is clearly significant for children, it should be given far more attention in the planning and development of activities, as well as in guidance documents.

In summary, humour is often associated with joy and laughter. The research literature and empirical studies show that humour has a positive influence on both physical and psychological health. This is based on the premise that a sense of humour develops in encounters as well as through the interaction of genes and environment, and thus the early years of humour development are significant. Children have the right to express themselves through humour, but in this article, we also argue that we should recognise the meaning and uniqueness of young children's humour. In this qualitative study, based on children's perspectives and ethnography, we identify elements of young children's shared humour and in what situations humour is visible in the everyday life of ECEC centres. We scrutinise what is typical in children's shared humour and how it manifests in everyday encounters.

## Young Children in Humour Research

Humour has a long tradition of being studied from different perspectives. How then has the humour of 1–6-year-old children been researched? We review theories of humour from different

research disciplines in order to create a holistic picture of how children's humour has been conceptualised and studied. Many early studies of young children's humour have observed that laughter is exhibited when an infant notices inconsistencies in a safe and playful situation (Martin, 2011). An example of this is when a familiar person hides and reappears again. Already in his 1941 study, Roger Piret expressed an interest in the emergence of children's humour. As his data collection method, Piret asked children to draw pictures which would make others laugh (Piret, 1941).

According to Stern (1992), researcher of early childhood interactions, a child's smile brings him or her into the social world. At the end of their first year, children realise that they possess their own mind and thoughts, which can be shared with others. Through their mothers, children also learn how to manage their own emotions and learn whether to laugh or cry (Stern, 1992, p. 92). In turn, McGhee (1984, 2002) has attempted to describe the development of young children's humour in three stages using Piaget's cognitive development model. The first stage is play with objects, where objects are used in unexpected ways, such as using a banana as a phone. In the next stage, humour is language-based, while in the final stage humour is produced using conceptual thought (McGhee, 1984, 2002).

According to McGhee, children's humour is at its best when young, around age 3–5, when the child's imagination is strong. Children's books and TV programmes make use of this fact when things are turned upside-down and inconsistencies are playfully incorporated (McGhee, 2002). Funny and confusing inconsistencies are often associated with humans, animals or funny events that have a social dimension. Laughter is naturally social and is usually shared with others for enjoyment, but humour can also be used with close acquaintances to alleviate conflict situations (Martin, 2011).

Different humour theories can explain how infants use humour. According to the Theory of the Absurd, children produce humour through the inconsistencies that they notice (Loizou, 2008). Another theory that describes infants' humour is the Empowerment Theory, in which a young child notices what unsettles adults and uses this knowledge to confound their expectations. Under-two-year-old children can therefore produce their own humour or act humorously against an adult's expectations (Loizou, 2008). Moreover, when making drawings, 3–7-year-old children also act according to the Theory of the Absurd, but when telling stories, their humour aligns with the Empowerment Theory (Loizou & Kyriakou, 2016).

As mentioned earlier, humour research suggests that the stages of imaginary play influence the development of humour (see McGhee, 1984). According to Bariaud (1989), a child is able to think symbolically at around the age of one and a half. For example, if an object fails to exactly resemble a child's memory or symbolic representation of that object, that child will laugh upon noticing the differences. In turn, as children cognitively develop, their understanding of nonsense humour is claimed to grow (Bariaud, 1989). The development of a child's sense of humour thus depends on how that child appreciates his or her nonsense humour, which in turn creates the foundation for irrational behaviours becoming a part of play (Bariaud, 1989).

Many studies have observed that young children like to make fun using faeces and urine-themed stories. The functioning of the bowels and related areas are relatively common topics in interactions between young children and their parents (Van der Geest, 2016). For example, using informal words for excrement, such as "peepee" or "poop," at the lunch table causes strong reactions in adults and other children (Cunningham, 2004). Moreover, when school-aged children's drawings have been examined to study their humour, they have been found to contain toilet humour, clowning, exaggeration and slapstick humour (Aerila & Laes, 2017; Puroila et al., 2016).

In addition to humour, children's joy has been studied in ECEC settings. Aside from verbal interactions, children's joy has been observed in nonverbal and multisensory narration and clowning. Children's joy has no fixed boundaries, existing instead in a state of flux and reappearing in new situations. Adults, however, attempt to limit these situations (Karjalainen & Puroila, 2017). According to Karlsson (2014), humour is created in interactions between people. Thus, while an adult may ignore a child's humour, it nonetheless reaches other children (Karlsson, 2014). Moreover, what appears funny to a child may not be found amusing by an adult (Wolfenstein, 1978).

Laughter, as a measure of humour, has aroused interest since antiquity. For instance, when Bakhtin analysed laughter in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, he found that, in line with the Theory of Carnivalism, laughter was considered to produce positivity and creativity (Bahtin, 2002, p. 65). Tallant (2015) sees carnivalistic features in children's humour. In carnivalism, the quotidian and common sense are challenged. A carnivalist spirit may be kindled suddenly from a small stimulus. Furthermore, power is also an elemental part of carnivalist humour (Tallant, 2015).

Humour has been investigated from various perspectives of different academic disciplines, so a clear definition is necessary to guide our research. As we approach humour from the child perspective, the definition needs to encompass children's diverse ways of expressing themselves. Therefore, in this article, children's humour can be summarised as the attempt to make another laugh and/or observing an amusing stimulus and responding to it. Both children's non-verbal silly behaviour as well as witty verbal play are included within the scope of humour.

## Theoretical Framework

This article is based on the research approach and methodology of studies of the child's perspective combined with an ethnographic approach.

According to Karlsson (2020), studies of child perspective endeavour to give prominence to children's perspectives and knowledge (Karlsson, 2012, 2020). For that reason, children's messages are listened to in different ways, and children's manners of acting and expressing things, experiences and perspectives are analysed. Studies of child perspective thus includes the concept "children's perspectives," which emphasises "children's different experiences, conceptions and understanding of their world" (Sommer et al., 2010; cited in Karlsson, 2020). Children's perspectives are not viewed as stand-alone expressions. They are viewed in relation to other perspectives, that can be produced, for example, by adults, other children or communities. Children's perspectives are always relative, and are influenced by expectations, habitual practices, time, space, social, cultural, material and for example biological aspects. The outlook of studies of child perspective is holistic. It is connected to things that happen "in-between": in the relations between human and non-human (Prout, 2005), objects and different phenomena. Therefore, studies of child perspective are foundationally community-based. Children are also part of the research community and can participate in data production as well as act as co-researchers at different stages of the research process (Karlsson, 2020).

In terms of methodology and method, this qualitative study includes features of an ethnographic approach. By the term ethnographic approach, we mean a process-based approach to learning and understanding when interpreting children's verbal and nonverbal expressions. Ethnography is presence at the site of research. The subject of research is a specific context and its culture, and the researcher moves between participating and distancing him- or herself while analysing the social activity, striving simultaneously to understand the factors that are related to certain behaviours and situations (Sivenius & Friman, 2017; see Geertz, 1973).

The ethnographic approach is to make visible its site of study. Through fieldwork, it is possible to see, experience and interpret what is experienced. In ethnography, the researcher's gaze often focuses on a certain group of people and its cultural features. The ethnographer's research site exists as the concrete place where the research is implemented. It can exist, through the influence of the researcher's choices, as a relational environment, part of which includes the social reality of the site. In this study, the ethnographic fieldwork was characterised by the researcher entering the everyday life of the site and being present in its quotidian activities.

Ethnographic knowledge is formed hermeneutically. As a methodological resource and practice, the ethnographic approach produces knowledge about social reality. The process consists of interpretive and subtle knowledge production, continuous motion in a loop of understanding in which data collection, analysis and reporting entwine with each other (Sivenius & Friman, 2017, p. 28).

## Data Collection and Analysis

In Finland, the majority of children participate in early childhood education and care, so ECEC centres are an ideal environment for reaching children when doing research. There, it is possible to observe children in peer interaction and study children's shared humour. For example, in 2019, 76% of 1–6-year-olds participated in early years' education (THL, 2019), and children can spend between 4 and 9 h in an ECEC setting each day. Three different ECEC centres participated in this study, which comprised 85 child participants aged 1–6 and 17 educators. The groups consisted of children in whole-day provision (1–5-year-olds), and one group of pre-school children (6-year-olds).

The data has been produced by video-recording each group and keeping observation diaries. In this study, the situations when children arrive or leave were not video-recorded, and neither were situations when children were outside or resting. The researcher had access to one video camera. There were times when the camera was recording in one room and something interesting happened in another room without the knowledge of the researcher. The observation diaries complemented the video data, where incidents not recorded by the camera were written down.

Our analysis is theory-guided. It is not directly based on a theory, but theory has strengthened and reinforced our own interpretations. For example, alongside the developmental studies of humour, the studies of young children's humour in the 2000s bring new knowledge about the meaningfulness of humour to a child or groups of children. The data comprises seven hours of video-recorded activities in all the groups as well as the researcher's observation diaries covering over 15 h of sessions. The ethnographic fieldwork in the ECEC centres was performed between January and December 2018 over 13 days, usually between 9 and 12 am and 1 and 3 pm. The analysis focused on a variety of situations, such as organised activities, transition times, eating, free activity in the gym, a trip to the forest and free play in small groups. Following Denzin's (1978) stages of ethnographic research, first we observed the children's activity from the perspective of the subject (expression of humour), simultaneously maintaining a distinction between everyday and scientific conceptions. We identified events that describe humorous expressions. We organised the expressions of humour found in the video material into themes, which we analysed again. During the analysis, theory and the data alternated in guiding our thinking. The interpretation of the findings and the chosen approaches and viewpoints were directed by theoretical thinking, which followed the hermeneutic circle (Table 1).

During the fieldwork, the researcher endeavoured to collaborate with all the people at the ECEC centres. The research began by Tuula Stenius presenting the main aim of the study to the ECEC staff, which was to approach humour from the child's perspective through recording the child's day through video and observation. The researcher explained to the educators that she would not adopt an educator's role and would not resolve conflicts between the children. This would provide the children with the agency to refuse to participate in the research, as the researcher would not be in a position of power vis-a-vis the child. Corsaro (2003), who has performed ethnographic research in ECEC settings, states that conflict is a typical feature of children's peer culture. For an adult to enter into children's peer culture, Corsaro claims that it is necessary to observe the world close to the child. The fieldwork was undertaken with those principles in mind. The

**Table 1.** Participating ECEC centres, children and educators.

Centre 1	Full-day group 3–4-year-olds $n=12$	3 educators
	Full-day group 5–6-year-olds $n=16$	3 educators
Centre 2	Full-day group 1–5-year-olds $n=19$	3 educators
	Flexible care group 1–5-year-olds $n=23$	4 educators
Centre 3	Sibling group 1–6-year-olds $n=15$	4 educators
Total	Children altogether $N=85$ Groups $n=5$	17 educators altogether



researcher attempted to minimise her position of power towards the children as well as to show maximal interest in what children do and say in their environment. In this research, the child is conceptualised as an active agent and a full person who is capable of making decisions about matters that concern them.

Initially, the analysis process began with first author watching the video material several times and recording her observations. The first author then selected moments of humour for closer viewing. Next, all the authors of the article familiarised themselves with these selected video clips. In addition, observation notes on situations similar to the events in the video clips were sought from the researcher's diaries. Then, the first author transcribed expressions, gestures and discussions related to humorous situations, and the researcher group analysed them and chose the data extracts best suited to answering the research question. The situations recorded in the observation diaries were analysed in the same way, by searching for situations with humour and summarising them. The analysis of the data was performed in the researcher group through a process-based approach to understanding: to enrich understanding, the analysis was deepened through repeated examination of the fieldwork on the children's activities. Thus, the findings emerged through the contents, processes and moments where humour was created, thereby leading to a more precise description during the researcher triangulation. By triangulation, we mean using several informants in the study to achieve understanding (Denzin, 1978; Patton, 2002). In this study, it comprised the researchers' shared, process-based interpretations. Simultaneously, researcher triangulation strengthened as well as challenged the perspectives and themes arising from the interpretation process that were used to construct the description of humour.

### **The Study's Ethical Questions**

The study adhered to the central principles of responsible research: integrity, meticulousness, and accuracy at different stages of the research process. Moreover, the methodology and methods used, including data collection, research and evaluation methods, adhere to ethical standards (TENK, 2019). Informed consent was sought from the municipality, the ECEC leadership, the educators, as well as the parents and participating children. As research-ethics best practices dictate for child perspective studies, consent for the research, video recording and observation was secured from the children in several ways. For example, the family consent form included a section where the child could add his or her signature or some other mark. Indeed, two families announced that the child had not given consent although the parents had. In addition, the researcher always requested verbal consent again from all the children when she began filming. Here, again, a child would sometimes refuse consent, and consequently he or she was not filmed. In the final data set, the names of both the children and adults were replaced with pseudonyms. Moreover, the data is protected and is only available to the researchers in this study. It is stored on a password-protected computer, and relevant data without identifying features will later be transferred to a research data repository accessible to other researchers.

### **Results: Children's Shared Humour is Emergent and Surprising**

From the data, we identified elements of young children's shared humour by observing children's expressions in the everyday life of ECEC centres. We will describe the results from two perspectives. First we will describe how young children create shared humour. Then we will distinguish between different types of situations where humour can be found.

#### ***Children use Humour Continuously***

At first glance, there seemed to be little humour in the videos and observation diaries. However, this may have been due to our preconceived notions of humour, which is often seen as jokes or other



humorous productions. Adult researchers may also unwittingly focus on the situations that make them laugh. Nonetheless, when the video material was viewed multiple times, we observed that the children laughed a lot, they interacted together and invited each other to join in the fun. Therefore, what was found was a different kind of humour, which was composed of verbal and nonverbal fun, small deeds, words or sounds, which were easily left unnoticed. Occasionally these moments could last a long time as well. Here, having fun refers to brief moments of some kind of verbal or nonverbal humour. Thus, humour manifested itself as a continuous process in young children's everyday lives.

The video data also showed that in addition to free play, a day at an ECEC centre included lots of waiting time, such as during dressing or eating, when the children became active and initiated humour situations. Studies of Finnish early childhood education have observed that basic care activities form a large part of the everyday activities in ECEC settings. For instance, research by Reunamo and Salomaa (2014)—which examined children's everyday activities from the perspective of language—found that children had 98 min for free play in the mornings and 48 min for eating. In addition, basic care activities lasted for 33 min (for younger children even longer), and situations that required wandering around or waiting totalled 27 min. Thus, eating, basic care and waiting amounted to 108 min per morning, i.e., almost two hours (Reunamo & Salomaa, 2014).

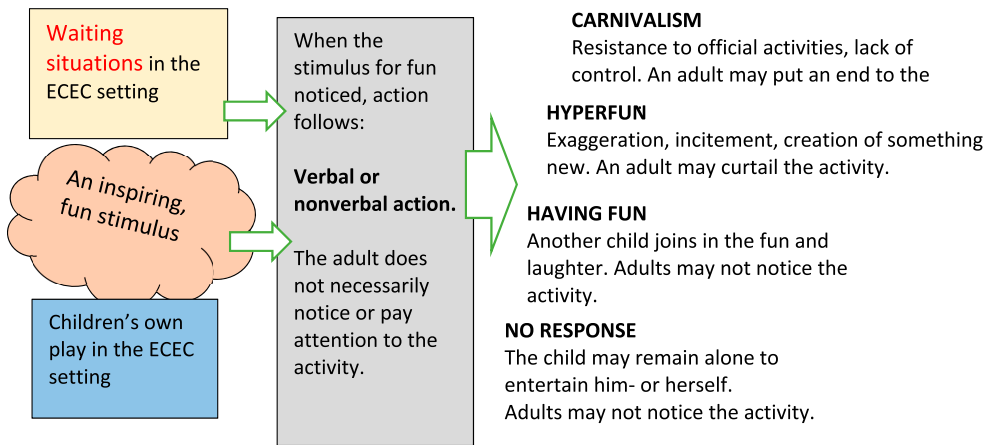
### ***Fun, Hyperfun and Carnivalism in Children's Shared Humour***

First, we will summarise what kinds of humour the children produced among themselves in the everyday life of ECEC settings. Then, using examples from the data, we will describe the different phenomena that were observed. Based on our data, it appears that young children use different types of humour in parallel, including nonverbal, verbal and conceptual expressions of humour (compare to McGhee, 1984, 2002).

Children's shared humour was revealed to be emergent, collective and surprising. Such situations of shared humour usually arise from an amusing everyday stimulus that is observed and can be used to generate fun, hyperfun and carnivalism. In our study, we observed that occasionally children acted carnivalistically in their play, so the play lacked control and its force and direction was unpredictable. Carnivalism appeared as similar to the kind that Bahtin (2002) describes when he analyses medieval humour and laughter, where laughter generates positivity and creativity. In children's shared play situations, moments of humour emerged where the focus was on producing shared fun, creativity and high-spirited foolery. In short episodes of play, humour came like a sudden gust of wind. Often, however, play continued in a serious manner without any element of humour. At other times, the children's play included "hyperfun," for which previous research has no term. Hyperfun consisted of exaggeration, repetition, goading, nonsense and physical excitement. It did not necessarily include resistance to the official everyday routines; rather, it was often manifested as a moment of foolery that quickly died down. In [Figure 1](#), we illustrate our interpretation of how humour emerged in an ECEC setting.

The children's day was composed of a flux of situations where children created shared humour. A situation often began from a fun stimulus, in other words a sudden kindling of excitement or a spark. A child initiated the situation by directing the stimulus to others, and another child noticed it. What followed was a verbal or nonverbal action that generated laughter. However, if the invitation failed to elicit a response, the child may remain alone, for example at the lunch table, to clown around. It appeared that the child did not experience the situation as undesirable, but rather was entertained by his or her foolery. Moreover, adults seldom payed attention to such behaviour; instead, it appeared to exist between the children. These situations were created at different points in the day as well as during everyday routines, waiting situations and free play. This is an example from mealtime, when first Otto entertained himself and later there was shared fun:

Otto, aged three and a half, drinks milk, looks around and begins to repeat, "Pam pam. Pam pam." He looks at the small child sitting next to him and waves his arms at his side. "Look at this!" he cries. Petteri, sitting



**Figure 1.** Emergence of regularly observed situations of children's shared humour in the everyday life of an ECEC centre.

opposite, has eaten, and he receives a piece of bread. Otto stands on his knees on the chair. He tries to take the bread, and exclaims, "Can't reach." One of the children takes their plate away from the table. Otto raises his hands above his head. He looks at the blueberry soup on his spoon, but he does not eat. He starts to beat his fist against his head and at the same time looks at little Elias next to him. Elias looks at Otto. Petteri notices the situation. Petteri: "Look, I'm hitting my head with a hammer. Ouch." He laughs. Otto does the same again and looks at Elias. Petteri also hits his forehead and makes noises. The little one laughs. Otto looks ahead and swings his legs. He does not eat. Otto is brought a piece of bread. He starts eating it. The adults pay no attention to this.

As we described above, humour created from a stimulus during mealtime was a relaxed form of having fun. When a humour situation escalates, it can expand into a shared moment of hyperfun where children incite each other, exaggerate and clown around together. Children's own stories contain examples of this, which make them a prime example of the phenomenon. The researcher in this study Storycrafted in two different groups with two girls and three boys. The children were asked to tell an amusing story. The girls' story contained similar toilet humour as that found in the following boys' story. While telling the story, the boys laughed and glanced at each other and sometimes at the researcher. They squirmed around and looked over at each other after each one's new sentence and laughed. At the end, the researcher asked, "Was this fun?" "Yeah." "What was fun about it?" "Because they are our funny things. Toilet words are funny!"

Poofart. Once there was what you said. Once there was a pussy. And a willy. And poo. And a bum. Fart. They climbed up a tree and farted. And then the poo climbed up a tree and pooped and farted. They bounced together farting. And once a pussy and an old gramps drove over it. It farted and pooped in its pants. Then it showed off its willy. Then they died.

Sometimes carnivalism arose, where children incited each other, used exaggeration and clowned around loudly. Additionally, carnivalism typically included some form of power struggle and/or resistance to norms. Often an adult ended this kind of situation which looked like children romping around to the adult. Carnivalism is visible in four-year-old Miki's and three-and-a-half-year-old Joonas's play. The children were alone in the play room. They spun around, fell over repeatedly and yelled to one another. Sometimes they looked at each other and laughed. The glance incited the other to do something even more daring, so the other knocked over the doll pram to the ground, to which the other reacted by laughing. They appeared to be communicating non-verbally and the shared idea was to do something funny and laugh afterwards. The episode ended in romping around and throwing things, at which point an adult came to put an end to the play and said: "Right, let's tidy up then! You cannot throw things."

## Results: Humour Occurred in Play and Waiting Situations

We observed in the data that children's shared humour was expressed in different ways in different kinds of situations. The humour in children's play was slightly different than for example in waiting situations, when children were in a kind of liminal space, on their way somewhere or waiting for something.

The children's daily routines included situations of play in pairs or larger groups. In play situations, humour emerged spontaneously and included creativity, silliness and the creation of something new. Play and humour include similar elements: both are enjoyable, have no serious purpose and occur in safe contexts with reliable people (see e.g., Martin, 2011, p. 234). There were no empty or idle moments in the children's day, although from an adult perspective, queuing and waiting might appear to be such instances. In basic care situations and free play, the children produced humour actively to entertain themselves and each other. In shared play, humour had the space to expand because the children had permission to play freely. Staying still or inaction is not natural for a child; play is natural. Children themselves have criticised the requirement to wait and be silent, which was also highlighted in Roos's (2015) study.

The video data also showed that in addition to free play, the typical day at an ECEC centre included a lot of waiting time, when children became active and initiated humour situations. Most humour situations occurred in daily communal routines such as eating, queuing, dressing and undressing, and generally waiting. Mealtime, for example, was not strictly regulated by adults, so children took control of the situation and started to develop their own programme. Thus, basic activities could be transformed into play and further into having fun. This observation confirms a similar finding in a study by Kettukangas (2017), where basic activities became a source of play if the adult's commitment to the situation was weak or if the child felt bored. Furthermore, the same study observed that children used humour for resisting norms. Moreover, in a study by Roos (2015), the children themselves criticised situations where they had to wait or be silent, as, in contrast to play, staying still or inactivity is unnatural for a child.

During the fieldwork, situations often arose that required waiting. According to Ahonen (2015), who has studied challenging educational situations, waiting and transition situations are often interrelated in an ECEC setting. When the whole group goes to eat or goes outside at the same time, children need to wait, and these situations frustrate them. Moreover, Köngäs (2018), in a study of children's emotional intelligence, found that children can use humour to ease such frustrating situations. Similarly, our data included several observations of tedious eating situations that led to a shared moment of fun. This can be explained by children's use of metacognitive signals, where they move to a different level of communication, such as playfulness, laughter and ritualistic repetitions and mimicry (Strandell, 1996). As in our study, Strandell (1996) describes the occurrence of such events at the lunch table, when the situation may spread and children begin to control the stage. In such cases, the staff usually bring the situation to an end.

In Table 2, we present situations of children's humour that occur in their play and everyday life. According to Vuorisalo et al. (2015), "spaces" are created in everyday interactions. This is based on

**Table 2.** Children's humour in children's own play situations and in waiting situations.

Having fun in children's own play situations:	Having fun in waiting situations:
<b>Spaces and places:</b>	<b>Spaces and places:</b>
Play at the table	Mealtimes
Physical play and romping	Dressing and undressing
Children's invented stories	Queuing
Shared play	Moments of instruction where the group assembles
<b>Characteristics of humour:</b> Emergent, focused on producing shared fun, creativity and high-spirited foolery	<b>Characteristics of humour:</b> Emergent twinkles of humour interweaved with other activities

Soja's (1996) and Bourdieu's (2000) analyses, that space is created relationally in everyday activities, where concrete objects, the physical environment, and culture are combined (Vuorisalo et al., 2015).

## Having Fun in Play Situations

Based on the data, we will describe children's own humour in while playing at a table, while romping around, in children's invented stories and in shared free play.

### *Play at the Table*

Moments of fun that received a response from others occurred around the table during shared activities. They strengthened friendships and created a sense of belonging. Such moments included drawing, playing games or other kinds of play while seated at the table. This finding is in line with that of Roos (2015), where children provided similar examples of shared moments of fun in the everyday life of an ECEC centre. In the Roos's study, humour and fun were particularly important for boys' friendships and for creating a sense of belonging. Friends would act silly together, laugh together and draw funny pictures (Roos, 2015). Children can also have "inside knowledge," which cannot be accessed by a passing listener, as in the following example.

Four six-year-old boys are drawing at a table. Two boys have their own notebooks, two draw on paper. At times they draw, at other times they speak. The boys laugh together. The atmosphere is relaxed.

Teppo laughs as he draws. "This one has a fat head," he laughs (snorting). Elias: "This one has a big nose as well." He swings his arms at his sides and laughs. Teppo: "My daddy has a slightly weird nose." Laughter. Antton: "Here's one teleport like this." Elias: "I'm still making a kite here." Teppo: "... where you pick your nose." He looks at the others and laughs. The drawing continues, and each comments on his own drawing in turn, laughing.

### *Physical Play and Romping*

A group of 3–5-year-olds were in the large gym, where they had the opportunity to play whatever they wanted. At first, everything looked chaotic, with some children running around by themselves or in pairs. This freedom and lack of boundaries encouraged the children to try everything. They rolled large balls and moved exercise mats into piles. Matias ran around the gym for half an hour pulling a jingling ball behind him. Was humour anywhere to be found? In this situation, the children rather seldom connected with each other. Nevertheless, it was an occasion for boundless fun. Similar situations occurred inside the ECEC centre, when three boys jumped off the sofa onto each other and in various positions. The boys tried to make each other laugh with new styles of jumping.

### *Children's Invented Stories*

The children's own stories contained exaggeration and bold words. During Storycrafting, an adult asks a child to tell a story and then transcribes it word for word (Karlsson, 2014). In Group Storycrafting, by contrast, children say a sentence each during their turn. In both cases, when the adult writes down the story without moralising, it can escalate into hilarity. Riihelä (2005), who has studied the stories of 1–4-year-old children, observes that children do not use a conventional structure in their stories. Thus, she criticises the fact that children's language is usually studied through adult criteria. Instead, children tell their own kinds of stories and anecdotes, which include children's humour that adults sometimes fail to understand. A typical child's story is concise, playful and unique (Riihelä, 2005, p. 191). In the two Storycrafting situations recorded in the data, the children told stories that included forbidden toilet vocabulary and boisterous incitement. The researcher wrote each story down without judgement and at the end read each one aloud, which caused nervous shared laughter.

### **Free Play Situations**

There were many free play situations observed in the ECEC centres during the fieldwork, where the children played in the entrance hall and playrooms in small and large groups. The play included objects and toys and sometimes occurred under a blanket thrown over a table. Twinkles of humour were observed in play, and occasionally it was the sole theme. A meta-analysis collected young children's humour from different studies, and found a strong sense of community in children's humour (Puroila et al., 2016). In the authors' view, joy and humour form an inseparable part of children's lives. The following example contains features of such carnivalism.

Six-year-old Roope and Antton go to play under a table after 25 min of circle time. They throw a small ball to each other and repeat over and over again some words they have invented, laughing all the time. This lasts rather loudly for 53 min. The other children play their own games without paying them much attention.

“Zoppokeppi pip [LAUGHTER] - zoppokeppi pippuraa naurua-zoppo poo taaruu [LAUGHTER] auuh auhh- [laughter] pazepoo- aaa- [laughter].” Occasionally they come out from under the table and throw the ball and repeat their words.

The adult, Anne: “Roope, please, not so loud.”

### **Having Fun in Waiting Situations**

In the following, we describe instances in our data of children having fun in the everyday life of an ECEC setting, such as during adult-led instructional activities, communal activities, transitions and waiting times. While waiting, children often attempted to make contact with each other through an action or a look, an invitation to have fun. Often the invitation for contact was physical and holistic. If nobody responded, the children regularly continued acting by themselves, entertaining themselves. However, if another child joined in, they began developing fun activities together. Sometimes more children joined in, and the topic of fun might either evaporate after a moment or continue and expand. This kind of fun is not typical for adults, who rarely entertain themselves alone or giggle by themselves.

### **Having Fun During an Adult-Led Activity**

In an adult-led morning gathering with several children, children were obliged to listen to each other one at a time as the adult directed the talking. The children also needed to know how to be silent. They followed the stages of the activity, with some able to focus the whole time, and some not. Those who could not focus began entertaining themselves. Sometimes, the children challenged the adult's activity and developed a shared moment of fun, which is what finally occurred in the following situation when presenting their toys. The researcher remained at the side and followed the gatherings. There were two boys in particular who squirmed around and indicated signs of discontent by communicating with each other through expressions, but the instructing adult did not pay any special attention to them. It appeared that these boys wanted to develop some shared fun from almost everything, as the situation continued.

Anni has a small toy dog, and the other children ask Anni questions: “What is it called?” “Laila.” “How old is it?” “I dunno.” Roope: “Well, it's been bought from the shop so you can't know. What does it eat?” Anni: “Hmm, well, something like shredded paper that I've made.” Laughter. Samuli takes a motorbike out of a box. “How fast does it go?” “Something like a thousand.” Laughter. “What does it eat?” Laughter. “Where does it sleep?” Laughter.

### **Having Fun During Communal Activities**

From a child's perspective, eating situations, for example, were part of the familiar daily schedule. They took part whether a child was hungry or not. In all the groups, the children habitually sat

down at the table, which had familiar rules. The children sat ready for interaction, each making eye contact with each other. At the beginning of snack time, the adults brought the younger children plates of bread, milk, bananas and pears, while the older children fetched their food themselves. This could involve long periods of waiting, and that time had to be filled somehow. The children eyed each other, and when the food came, they reacted to it. Few showed signs of dissatisfaction with the situation, quite the opposite: idle time was filled by children entertaining themselves and others. Those under-two-year-old children who were still unable to speak initiated humour at the micro level, through the nonverbal and physical interplay of expressions and gestures. For example, one child began having fun with an empty cup by putting it in his mouth, speaking into it and making noises. Another child started to entertain himself by moving around, making noises and playing by himself. In addition, older children engaged in word play and acted silly together. One child had the habit of inviting others to join her through eye contact, but if she received no response, she continued entertaining herself alone. When the children had finished eating, the same entertainment process reoccurred. Thus, the whole table group was often found sitting down after eating, sharing a moment of fun, and giggling. Very few attempted to leave the table, as it was clear that they were to remain there until an adult gave permission to leave. The examples of humour in Tallant's (2015) research on five-year-olds were, similarly, often from the snack table. In these examples, the educators avoided participating in the children's banter to prevent the children's behaviour from becoming uncontrollable (Tallant, 2015).

### ***Transitioning from One Place to the Next***

The children spent a lot of time in the entrance hall, which was where they dressed to go outside and undressed after coming inside. The same occurred when going to nap time. Dressing was slower for some, and the quickest waited around for the others. When the children did not feel like dressing, they began having fun.

Leevi, aged three and a half, sings, "Happy birthday to you, cake flies on your face ... ha-ha." Veikko, aged five, drives around with a car. The children are putting on their clothes. "Shall we show ... how ... fights?" Leevi and Veikko begin to play fight and laugh at the same time. The boys say, "Minions always fight like that." They show this again, both flailing their arms towards each other. They laugh at the same time.

### ***Waiting While Queuing***

Queuing to go out, queuing to come in, queuing to wash one's hands, queuing for food, queuing for the toilet. In these situations, the children also remained in queues instead of protesting about the situation. However, they began to entertain themselves and each other: pushing, having nonverbal fun, clowning around, and engaging in wordplay.

In the queue for washing their hands three six-year-old children stand on a low cabinet so that they can see themselves in the mirror. The basin is lower. The first one swings her arms at her sides, the others follow suit. All laugh and mimic each other. The first one leans against the mirror and counts at the same time, "One, two, three ..." Laughter. When their turn comes, each child descends from the cabinet and peacefully washes their hands.

## **Discussion**

The aim of our study was to identify elements of young children's humour by observing children's own expressions in the everyday life of three ECEC centres. The included research data was composed of video recordings and observation diaries. Based on these data and our theoretical reflections, young children's humour was expressed as emergent, collective and surprising. For children, using humour was not a discrete activity, but part of play and playfulness.



Our study shows that children's shared humour rarely involves single acts like telling jokes or, following the Theory of Superiority (Hietalahti, 2018), laughing at misfortunes. Instead, it is expressed as emergent and process-based twinkles, as a flowing current or escalating hyperfun and carnivalism. Children's approach to action and taking control of situations is augmented by humour and having fun. Rather than lapsing into boredom, children will often utilise humour to alter activities and make their existence meaningful. Thus, potentially tiresome adult-led waiting and queuing can become moments of shared fun. Children transform activities into meaningful and fun moments for themselves and others. In this way, children's humour emerges as a resource for both the individual (e.g., Loizou & Reccia, 2019) and the community.

During and after long periods of waiting, children often let out pent-up emotions and energy by having fun. However, while it may seem the message children send to adults, the intention is not necessarily to cause annoyance. Instead, their actions could be seen in a positive light as full of meaning: during idle moments, children invent things to do and ways to connect with others through humour. The use of humour may therefore be an indication to an adult that the waiting time has grown too long or that it is difficult to concentrate. It could also be a reminder that unpleasant queuing, transitioning and waiting situations can be mindfully relieved through shared humour. If adults were to react to children's humorous initiatives with compassion or humour, the atmosphere would remain supportive. Unfortunately, based on our data, adults often interpret these situations as disruptive or confrontational. Similar observations have also been made in the everyday lives of school-aged children. For example, Hohti (2016) identified small everyday events, such as humour, in primary students' own stories that were often ignored by adults but that may have carried significant meaning for the children themselves.

We identified a new form of children's humour: hyperfun. Hyperfun was created together: a moment of fun between children could develop into shared hyperfun, where children goaded each other, used exaggeration and clowning around together. This phenomenon, characteristic of especially young children, has received less attention and it is largely absent from adult humour. Hyperfun may also be related to the need to expend energy, and could thus be explained by the Theory of Relief, but our findings suggest that it does not necessarily constitute resistance to adult power.

At times, the children used carnivalism, which typically includes the use of power and/or resistance of norms. Carnivalism was devoid of control. Often adults curtailed carnivalism if it had not been jointly agreed upon. For example, a situation that ended in romping around and throwing things was brought to an end by an adult. Humour can also have negative features (e.g., Hietalahti, 2016), and although we searched for it in the data, we did not find cases of children's humour that were used for bullying, mocking or subjugation.

As Wolfenstein (1978) observed over 40 years ago, children ease their difficulties with humour, make the pointless fun, realise impossible dreams, transform an adult's power into the ridiculous, bring light to failure and parody their own frustrations. This study draws similar conclusions. The children invited each other to participate, shared experiences and funny observations and strengthened their sense of communality. Moreover, they could escalate their behaviour into exaggeration or outright carnivalism. In conclusion, it would be beneficial for adults to better understand the features of children's humour (e.g., Loizou & Reccia, 2019).

In summary, the message of humour research is that humour is a form of positive communication and a means of inviting others to participate in joint activity and merriment. ECEC centres are also the workplace of educators, and using humour with children adds to the wellbeing of educators as well. Moreover, a good sense of humour is an important social skill, which we typically admire in others, and humour increases a sense of belonging (Martin, 2011). Karjalainen and Purtila (2017) ask whether children's carnivalistic humour would lose its meaning if adults joined in. They question the value of bringing the worlds of children and adults together, as this could render children's joy at breaking boundaries meaningless. The findings of the present study nevertheless underline the importance of educators allowing and accepting the humour that is typical of children. Tallant (2015) asks, is children's humour a threat to adult supremacy? She suggests that



when children exhibit carnivalistic humour, adults could ignore the situation in a positive way, or close their eyes and allow children to have the space and freedom to communicate in their world. Children create and enjoy carnivalistic humour, so should we learn to understand its significance? (Jennings-Tallant, 2019).

Our findings set the stage for questioning how children can learn to use humour with adults. Moreover, adults' use of humour in stressful transition situations can strengthen children's resilience, i.e., their ability to be flexible in challenging situations. It is our assertion that the use of humour does represent a higher order skill, and therefore it should be cultivated deliberately in children's everyday lives. Understanding children's own humour and noticing its process-based nature is important for educators. Using humour in the pedagogy and everyday life of early childhood education and care increases a sense of community and brings all the members of an ECEC community closer together. It would be interesting to investigate children's interaction, wellbeing and learning in an ECEC centre where humour is regularly utilised. Consequently, there is a need for more research-based knowledge of the resources used by educators who often employ humour in everyday ECEC settings. Using humour in education is a skill, and that skill can be learned.

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