

PlaySense

by Barbara Sher, MA, OTR,
The Games Lady

The Mary Poppins Cure

In my continual quest to be more like Mary Poppins and use a little bit of fun to get the chores done, I have also come up with games to include a little bit more joy on the emotional level when needed!

Mum's Gone Crazy

I'm always amazed by how quickly my daughters can break into an argument. It's just squabbling, but it can get on my nerves. This game is a showstopper way to distract fighting children and help them regain their sense of humor. It's a guaranteed bickering-buster.

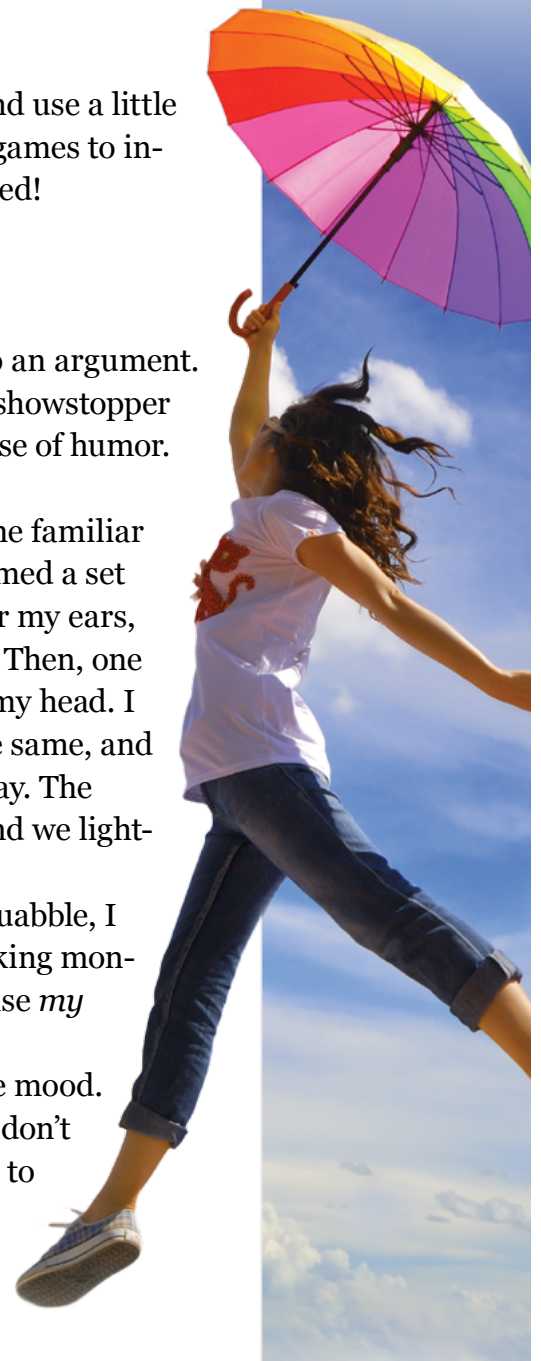
One day, while sorting laundry in the living room, I heard the familiar call and response of "Did not!" "Did too!" On an impulse, I jammed a set of my husband's clean underwear on my head, probably to cover my ears, and kept on sorting. From my daughters came stunned silence. Then, one of them pointed out that I was wearing Daddy's underwear on my head. I acted nonplussed, as if to say, "Who doesn't?" They then did the same, and soon we were parading around as if we were on a fashion runway. The show didn't last long, but it broke their argumentative mood, and we light-heartedly went on with our day.

Another day, inspired by the growing tensions of another squabble, I began to act like a gorilla, jumping around, scratching, and making monkey sounds—"EEEE!" At first, it probably helped only to release *my* tension, but soon all of us were monkeying around.

It was so silly that we couldn't help but laugh and lighten the mood.

All children can enjoy being monkeys in their own way. You don't need to be verbal or even be able to jump around. You just need to be able to scratch your trunk or pound your chest!

Mothers and kids can also turn into "tickle monsters" at a moment's notice, which is just when that moment is needed.



In Search of the Grumpy Bug

This game can lighten the moment and help jolly a child out of a bad mood. When a little one is grumpy, I sometimes act surprised:

“You’re grumpy? That doesn’t seem right—you’re usually in such a good mood. Ah, I know what’s happened—you’ve got a grumpy bug hiding on you. I’ll get rid of that for you.” I then proceed to search for the bug. I check ears and armpits, look down shirts and inside pockets and between toes, all the time acting exasperated and determined. “It’s *got* to be here somewhere. I just *know* it!” By the time I “find” the bug, the small one is giggling and often helping me look. Together, we toss the grumpy bug away.

But if we’re not careful where we toss it, the bug gets on someone else—and then we have to search him, too. Often, in a classroom, soon everyone is claiming to have the grumpy bug, and there’s a lot of searching and a lot of giggling.

I end the game quietly by looking for the “love bug.” We have to look in a lot of places: Maybe it’s in the flower pot. Maybe it’s in the soft blanket. When we “find” it, I ask the child to handle it gently and put it somewhere on her body,

in a pocket or right next to her heart.

“When ya got the love bug, everything’s gonna be all right.”

Wash That Mood Right Out of the Room

This game can get rid of a bad mood that is infecting kids and get the floor cleaned at the same time. You have to be in the mood for a bit of chaos, but it’s worth it—as my friend Jane, who home-schools her four kids, would tell you. I like the game because it involves water and spending time on the floor, and that means everyone, regardless of motor or sensory skills, can find something fun about Jane’s method.

On days when crankiness has been contagious—someone woke up on the wrong side of the bed and yelled at someone, who then snapped at someone else, who then passed the mood on, until everyone is grouchy—Jane fills a bucket with warm, sudsy water and starts spreading it across the floor. Nothing entices a kid more than water and bubbles—Jane’s kids grab the sponges (already conveniently laid out) and start spreading the water around, along with slipping and sliding and spinning in circles on their bottoms. Jane

knows, as I do, that all that erratic movement is good for developing coordination in young bodies. The vestibular system of the inner ear, which controls balance, is stimulated, reinforcing the children’s internal sense of which way is up—even if they take a few tumbles.

If it all gets too nutty, Jane brings in Step Two, the water for rinsing—and then Step Three, the towels. Everyone gets a big towel to dry the floor in whatever way they want, which might include riding the towel like a magic carpet across the floor. When, like any game, the toweling game gets old, Jane dries the parts of the floor that were missed, tosses the towels in the washing machine, and goes on with her day with a cleaner floor and a lighter heart. ♦

Barbara Sher, MA, OTR, is a pediatric occupational therapist who has published seven books on children’s games. You can find her titles and workshops in any online bookstore or on her site, www.gameslady.com. Comments and requests for presentations can be e-mailed to her at barbara.sher@gmail.com.