

NEUROBIOLOGY OF PEACEFUL PARENTING:

Laughter & Roughhousing

(Audio Transcript)

Hi, I'm Dr. Laura Markham, and I have a fun challenge for you today, the **Neurobiology of Laughter**. Laughter is simple and natural, but it's also a neurobiological powerhouse. Here's why.

Throughout the course of your child's day, every stressful experience that's not accompanied by a release builds up stress hormones: cortisol, adrenaline, norepinephrine. These stress hormones make kids cranky, demanding, even explosive.

Crying helps the body restore regulation. But when children can't quite get to tears, they get angry instead. These stress hormones that affect kids are the same ones that soar in your own body in a challenging traffic situation. And just as they affect you, they keep your child on edge. So the slightest disappointment can end up triggering a meltdown. These biochemicals stay in the body for hours. They can even prevent kids from falling asleep easily at night.

But there's a fantastic antidote to all this stress: Laughter. When humans laugh, our nervous systems change. It decreases the stress hormones, releases endorphins and serotonin, the feel-good chemicals that increase our overall sense of wellbeing. So it transforms bad moods and relaxes us.

Laughter is especially important for any person who has a tendency to anxiety. It's like nature's own stress relief mechanism.

But the magic doesn't stop there. Laughter also activates not only positive emotions, but also the release of oxytocin, the love hormone, so it strengthens the emotional bonds between us and our kids, creating security and trust. When you're laughing with someone, you're bonding. And we know that children need to feel secure and safe, or every demand on them gets perceived as a threat.

And when your child has more oxytocin circulating in their body, their nervous system creates more oxytocin receptors. That means for the rest of your child's life, they will have more capacity for warm connection, love, and intimacy with others. What an amazing gift to be give to your child for the rest of their life!

So how do you get your child laughing? Roughhousing. It's not really rough. It's just interactive physical play that's designed to get you both laughing. So maybe you chase your

children around the house, but you fail to catch them, of course, and you lament about how they're so fast and so smart and they keep getting away from you. Or if you're feeling low energy, you just plop down on top of your child on the couch and then marvel about how lumpy this couch is, and it seems to move under you and let your child struggle out to freedom.

Anything that gets your child laughing will shift their nervous system to a healthier state. And roughhousing is incredibly beneficial for reasons even beyond laughter. It stimulates the brain's prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for impulse control, emotional regulation, decision-making. So our children are learning to navigate boundaries and self-control even as they playfully wrestle and chase with us.

And finally, because kids work out their emotional struggles through play, roughhousing helps children work through big emotions and integrate emotional learning. Physical movement bypasses the rational mind. It helps the child express unconscious feelings that are otherwise stored in the body. So your goal is to help your child release pent-up anxiety – which is just another word for fear -- using laughter.

Often that means the child is facing something that scares them a little bit, just enough to let them master it. So maybe the parent is the bucking bronco and the child is screaming with laughter, and eventually you buck your child onto the bed. On some level, your child may be wondering, "Is Daddy going to drop me?" But because the child trusts Daddy and feels safe, the child is able to laugh. Obviously, if your child is screaming with fear, you're taking the game too far. This is about mastery, remember, not scaring your child.

I've seen in many families when your child is requesting only one parent at bedtime and the not-chosen parent roars, "*I won't let you get to mommy. You have to stay with me,*" but then the child is able to somehow dodge past you every time -- the child becomes convinced that nothing can keep them from getting to mommy. Mommy is always going to be there for them. And they start to think that maybe it would actually be fun to connect with daddy or with the other parent too, and they start requesting the other parent at bedtime also.

Or maybe you put up your hands and you tell your preteen that you're going to push them across the room, and then you let them push *you* across the room. And the whole time you're marveling at how big and strong they're becoming. Your child is reveling in the experience of feeling powerful, of winning.

And by the way, you don't have to stop roughhousing as your child gets older. Grabbing a pillow and starting a pillow fight with a teenager can be the fastest way to get to laughter and connection. Just be sure your child wins most of the time. In all of these games, you're ineffectual, you bluster, you ham it up, but you just can't catch your strong, fast child.

I understand that you want your child to win fair and square in games, but there's nothing fair about an adult playing against a child. Your child also suffers plenty of losses at the hands of their peers. They need to feel like a winner sometimes, which means they need to regularly

experience winning. Don't worry, you won't be letting your child win forever. As their confidence increases, they're going to suspiciously say something like, "*Are you really trying,*" and, "*Did you let me win?*" And you'll say, "*You don't think I'm trying? Okay, I'm going to try even harder. Watch me.*" And at that point, you try harder, and every once in a while you'll even start winning. And before you know it, the winning will be fair and square.

So to wrap up, playing together is one of the fastest ways to heal minor relationship stress, to help people drop grudges, and to bring siblings into sync. In fact, if you want to make one easy change in your family that will be transformational, **I challenge you to begin with 10 minutes of roughhousing and laughter every single day.**

This may sound like a lot of energy. We're all tired parents. But you'll find that it energizes you, because you'll be laughing and offloading those stress hormones that were making you tired. You don't need a lot of extra time. Just find ways to connect warmly and be as silly as you can as you go through your regular routine. And you'll notice that it makes your child want to cooperate with you, which also makes everything go more smoothly.

As parents, we have the incredible privilege of shaping our children's brains and hearts through these everyday interactions. Thank you for joining me on this challenge on the **Neurobiology of Laughter and Roughhousing**. Until next time, stay connected and enjoy these precious moments with your child.