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The use of humor in regulating the subjective experience of danger by younger schoolchildren

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Abstract

Context and relevance. The comic is an object of interdisciplinary research, which introduced the idea of the comic into psychology as a unity of cognitive and regulatory characteristics that allow the subject to perceive and understand contradictions in a situation of social interaction. **Objective.** To study the regulation of the subjective experience of danger by younger schoolchildren in a situation of violation of cultural norms through comic. **Hypothesis.** We assume that the comic, its formation in ontogenesis, allows us to judge the success of mastering a child of primary school age by his own mental activity. **Methods and materials.** The sample included 223 primary school students aged 7–11 years ($M = 9,01$; $SD = 0,93$): 112 boys and 111 girls. The empirical study used content analysis of funny stories of younger schoolchildren, diagnostic tools for assessing the comic in younger schoolchildren “Sometimes it happens” (Certificate of state registration No. 2025611158 Russian Federation). **Results.** The study revealed that the number of rules of social interaction specified by younger schoolchildren depends on the degree of regulation of activities. Younger schoolchildren were more likely to offer comical options in less regulated activities, in situations of extracurricular interaction. **Conclusions.** Younger schoolchildren assessed the degree of danger of violating cultural norms: the realization that violating norms could lead to injury and punishment from an adult did not allow them to perceive the situation as comical. Following the cultural norm in the child’s mind guarantees them a certain safety in situations of interaction with adults and peers in situations of violation of the cultural norm in the comic.

Keywords: the comic, humor, regulatory function, regulation, self-regulation, experience, danger, safety, cultural norms, the rules of conduct, younger schoolchild

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Использование юмора в регуляции субъективного переживания опасности младшими школьниками

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Резюме

Контекст и актуальность. Комическое есть предмет межпредметных исследований, привнесший в психологию идею комического как единства когнитивных и регулятивных характеристик, позволяющих субъекту воспринимать и понимать противоречия в ситуации социального взаимодействия. **Цель.** Выявить особенности регуляции субъективного переживания опасности младшими школьниками в ситуации нарушения культурной нормы посредством комического. **Гипотеза.** Становление комического в онтогенезе позволяет судить об успешности овладения ребенком младшего школьного возраста своей собственной психической деятельностью. **Методы и материалы.** Выборку составили 223 школьника в возрасте 7–11 лет ($M = 9,01$, $SD = 0,93$): 112 мальчиков и 111 девочек. В исследовании были использованы: контент-анализ забавных историй младших школьников, а также диагностический инструментарий по оценке комического у младших школьников «Иногда так случается» (Свидетельство о государственной регистрации № 2025611158 Российской Федерации). **Результаты.** Выявлено, что количество выделяемых младшими школьниками правил социального взаимодействия, способность составить комичные варианты развертывания событий в ситуации нарушения культурной нормы зависят от степени регламентированности деятельности: в менее регламентированной деятельности показатели выше. **Выводы.** Младшие школьники при составлении комичных историй и выборе комичных вариантов развертывания событий оценивали степень опасности нарушения культурной нормы. Осознание, что нарушение нормы может привести к травме, наказанию со стороны взрослого, не позволяло воспринимать ситуацию как комичную. Следование норме в представлении ребенка гарантировало ему определенную безопасность в ситуации нарушения культурной нормы в комическом.

Ключевые слова: комическое, юмор, регулятивная функция, регуляция, саморегуляция, переживание, опасность, безопасность, культурные нормы, правила поведения, младший школьник

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Introduction

The development of the comic in ontogenesis remains a relatively under-explored area in psychological science. Existing research highlights a crucial prerequisite for the emergence of humor: the perception of the comic as safe — devoid of real or imagined threat to the narrator or audience. Laughter facilitates a detached, external perspective on reality, transforming events into something perceived as “safe and amusing.” According to L.V. Karasev, this transformation can be achieved through a reinterpretation of meaning, which neutralizes potential malevolence and converts it into its opposite (Karasev, 1996, p. 31). Understanding humor requires a specific cognitive reframing, where a situation is perceived as humorous only when it does not compromise the individual’s sense of security (Dzemidok, 1974). A safe context thus provides the necessary foundation for the humorous perception of incongruity (Borodenko, 1995).

O.A. Shiyan argues that the cognitive mechanism enabling children to transform frightening characters into non-threatening ones in narratives is rooted in dialectical thinking — the ability to manipulate opposing concepts (Shiyan, 2022). N.E. Veraksa emphasizes the importance of studying laughter within the framework of children’s subculture and views culture as a system of normative situations (Veraksa, Bayanova, Artemyeva, 2023). A.K. Pashchenko notes that children “interact with others within normative situations that constitute a unit of an individual’s lived space” (Pashchenko, 2010, p. 78). Laughter can thus be

seen as a unique form of cathartic experience, often arising from the playful transgression of cultural norms (Romanova, 2014). In the context of self-regulation, the integration of affect and cognition becomes critical, with experience serving as the fundamental unit of a child’s psychological development (Veraksa & Dyachenko, 1996).

Children’s peer interactions and their ability to satisfy personal needs while maintaining positive social relationships are essential for the development of regulatory functions (Veraksa, 2014). Upon entering school, a child becomes part of a structured social environment where fulfilling specific roles and adhering to established norms are crucial (Bayanova et al., 2016). Primary school children develop within the frameworks of “student–educational activity,” “student–teacher,” and “student–student” relationships, necessitating the cultivation of context-appropriate behaviors. Adult attitudes, particularly those of teachers, significantly mediate a child’s relationships with authority figures (Elkonin, 1971, p. 15). In her study of educational environments, P.I. Belyaeva identified the absence of anxiety and the presence of subjective well-being as key indicators of psychological safety among primary school students (Belyaeva, 2013). The ability to transform negative emotions into positive ones is vital for preserving a child’s “individual self,” a process influenced by personal experiences, imagination, environment, and individual characteristics (Zakharova, 2017).

International research underscores humor’s role in primary education, dem-

onstrating its effectiveness in capturing students' attention, increasing engagement, and reducing anxiety (Ger, Daum, Manfredi, 2024; Emery et al., 2024; Yalçıntaş & Kartal, 2023; Zhou & Lee, 2024). Humor also fosters creative thinking and innovation (Akben & Coskun, 2024; Eskidemir & Koçer, 2023; Gaete, 2024; Kellner & Benedek, 2017). As cognitive functions mature during the primary school years, children increasingly comprehend complex forms of humor, including violations of cultural, logical, and linguistic norms (Piaget, 2003; McGhee, 2014; Zajęczkowska & Abbot-Smith, 2020).

A pressing challenge in the study of humor among younger schoolchildren is the development of diagnostic tools that assess both cognitive and regulatory aspects of humor. Recent reviews have examined existing instruments for evaluating humor in preschool and early school-aged children (Shatskaya et al., 2024). Other methods focus on humor styles (James & Fox, 2016; Yılmaz, Karaca, & Enol, 2024), irony, laughter frequency in social contexts (Martin, 2009), and the presence of comedic elements in narratives (Romanova, 2014).

However, psychological research has not yet fully explored the regulatory function of humor in younger children as they develop cognitive abilities and manage fears and emotional experiences. To address this gap, the present study employs the author-developed methodology "Sometimes It Happens," which enables children to identify cultural norms, recognize potential norm violations, and construct a subjectively safe social real-

ity through humor in response to such violations.

Materials and methods

The study involved 223 primary school students aged 7 to 11 years ($M = 9,01$, $SD = 0,93$) from Kazan, Russia.

In the first phase, 174 children aged 9 to 11 years ($M = 9,42$, $SD = 0,82$; 92 boys, 82 girls) were asked to create and record a humorous story to explore their understanding of comedy.

In the second phase, an empirical investigation into humor was conducted using the author's diagnostic methodology "Sometimes It Happens." This method examines children's perception and creation of humor in contexts involving violations of cultural norms. It includes six scenarios: educational ("in class," "during recess"), extracurricular ("in the park," "while walking"), and family-based ("at breakfast," "at the zoo").

The methodology demonstrates strong psychometric reliability: test-retest correlations are $r = 0,789$ for "identifying rules in interaction situations," $r = 0,637$ for "creating comical event scenarios," and $r = 0,702$ for "selecting adaptive or maladaptive comical scenarios." Construct validity is supported by significant correlations between the methodology's indicators and L.F. Bayanova's measure of cultural congruence.

An additional sample of 49 children aged 7 to 10 years ($M = 8,75$, $SD = 1,05$; 20 boys, 29 girls) participated in individual diagnostic sessions. Parental consent was obtained. A psychologist administered the methodology and recorded responses.

Procedure: Each child was shown a card depicting one of six scenarios. They were first asked to describe appropriate behavior and identify relevant rules in the depicted context. This assessed their ability to recognize social norms in academic, extracurricular, and family settings.

Next, children were informed that rule-breaking could sometimes lead to humorous outcomes. They were encouraged to recall or imagine such situations from personal experience. This assessed their capacity to conceptualize norm violations and generate comical narratives.

Finally, children were presented with two humorous scenarios — one adaptive (harmless rule-breaking, e.g., playful use of chopsticks) and one maladaptive (potentially harmful, e.g., pushing a peer or stealing from an animal) — and asked to choose the funnier one and explain their choice. Each selection was scored 1 point (Artemyeva, 2025).

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and Spearman’s correlation analysis via IBM SPSS Statistics 23.

Results

The content analysis of humorous stories

A total of 170 humorous stories were analyzed. Children frequently

drew on personal experiences involving norm violations in school, such as mischievous interactions with teachers or peers. Recurring themes included falling objects or people, unexpected behaviors, object transformations, and joyful interactions involving friendship, games, or animals.

Perception and creation of humor in younger schoolchildren

Identifying rules (norms) in interaction situations

The number of rules articulated by each child was recorded. Responses were scored: 1 point for a complete rule (e.g., “don’t shout during class”), 0,5 points for partial articulation (e.g., “be careful”). A statistical analysis of the rules and norms identified by younger schoolchildren in interaction situations is presented in Table 1.

- Family contexts: 195 responses yielded 17 distinct rules (e.g., “don’t play at the table,” “obey parents”).
- Educational contexts: 188 responses identified 16 rules (e.g., “raise your hand,” “complete assignments”).
- Extracurricular contexts: 150 responses revealed 21 rules (e.g., “don’t bully others,” “clean up after yourself”).

Table 1

Norms identified by younger students in situations of interaction

Indicator	Situations	Frequency			Maximum			Average			Standard deviation		
		В	М	Д	В	М	Д	В	М	Д	В	М	Д
Identifying rules and regulations	Curricular	188,00	75,00	113,00	9,00	6,00	9,00	3,83	3,75	3,89	2,06	1,74	2,28
	Extracurricular	150,00	65,00	87,00	6,00	6,00	6,00	3,06	3,25	3,01	1,99	2,22	1,76
	Family	195,00	75,00	120,00	9,00	9,00	8,00	3,97	3,75	4,13	2,16	2,63	1,80

Note: В: the whole sample (n = 49); М: boys (n = 20); Д: girls (n = 29).

Developing Comical Scenarios

Children were assessed on their ability to generate humorous narratives involving norm violations. Scoring criteria:

- 1 point: continuation of the scenario (e.g., “the kids go sledding”).
- 2 points: labeling the situation as “funny” without elaboration (e.g., “someone says something funny”).
- 3 points: explicit norm violation creating humor (e.g., “a student gives a wrong answer, and everyone laughs — it’s ridiculous”). The results of this task performed by the younger students are shown in Table 2.

Total scores:

- Extracurricular: 175 points (highest)
- Family: 124 points
- Educational: 118 points (lowest).

3. Choosing adaptive or maladaptive scenarios

Children selected between adaptive (harmless) and maladaptive (harmful) humorous outcomes. Adaptive scenarios received 197 points; maladaptive ones, 48 points.

Qualitative analysis revealed children’s awareness of danger:

- “No, it’s not funny — he falls and gets hurt.”

- “She could break her back — it’s not amusing.”
- “That’s not funny; you could cut your hand on glass.”
- The boy will get scolded — the ball is torn.”

These responses indicate that potential harm or punishment inhibits the perception of humor.

Spearman’s Correlation Analysis revealed significant relationships (see Table 3):

- Positive correlations between rule identification across contexts (educational, extracurricular, family).
 - Positive correlations in creating humorous scenarios across domains.
 - Positive correlation in selecting adaptive scenarios across all contexts.
 - Negative correlation between adaptive and maladaptive scenario choices in extracurricular and family settings.
- Notably:
- A negative correlation existed between identifying rules in educational settings and choosing adaptive humorous outcomes.
 - A positive correlation was found between recognizing rules in extracurricular

Table 2

Comical scenarios for the development of events in various situations of interaction, proposed by younger students

Indicator	Situations	Total points			Maximum			Average			Standard deviation		
		B	M	Д	B	M	Д	B	M	Д	B	M	Д
Comical scenarios of events	Curricular	118,00	35,00	83,00	9,00	6,00	9,00	2,40	1,75	2,86	2,48	2,04	2,68
	Extracurricular	175,00	72,00	103,00	8,00	8,00	6,00	3,57	3,60	3,55	2,34	2,60	2,19
	Family	124,00	44,00	80,00	6,00	6,00	6,00	2,53	2,20	2,75	2,55	2,66	2,50

Note: B: the whole sample (n = 49); M: boys (n = 20); Д: girls (n = 29).

Table 3

The relationship between the indicators of the “Sometimes it happens” methodology (N = 49)

Indicator	Identifying rules and regulations		Comical scenarios of events		The choice of comical adaptive or maladaptive options					
	Внеуч	Сем	Внеуч	Сем	АдЮ			ДезЮ		
					Уч	Внеуч	Сем	Уч	Внеуч	Сем
ПР Уч	0,562**	0,584**			−0,529**		−0,315*			
ПР Внеуч		0,639**							0,412**	
ПР Сем					−0,321*					
СКИ Уч			0,443**	0,539**						
СКИ Внеуч				0,685**					0,334*	
СКИ Сем									0,339*	0,366**
АдЮ Уч						0,366**	0,330*	−0,484**		
АдЮ Внеуч							0,659**		−0,593**	−0,423**
АдЮ Сем									−0,449**	−0,625**
ДезЮ Уч									0,285*	0,315*
ДезЮ Внеуч.										0,672**

Note: the correlation is significant at the level of: * — $p < 0,05$; ** — $p < 0,01$; ПР — identifying rules and regulations; СКИ — comical scenarios of events; АдЮ, ДезЮ — the choice of comical adaptive or maladaptive options; Уч — curricular; Внеуч — extracurricular; Сем — family.

settings and selecting maladaptive options.

- A positive correlation linked maladaptive choices in family and extracurricular contexts with the ability to generate humorous narratives.

Discussion

The literature indicates that international research primarily focuses on children’s cognitive capacity to understand humor, irony, and teasing (McGhee, 2014), while Russian studies emphasize that cognitive development alone does not guarantee full comprehension of

humor (Romanova, 2014). A key factor is contextual safety. Humor serves as a tool for emotional regulation and cognitive mastery (Borodenko, 1995).

This study, grounded in N.E. Veraksa’s framework, treats humor as embedded in systems of normative situations (Veraksa, Bayanova, Artemyeva, 2023). It examines children’s ability to identify social norms and creatively reinterpret norm violations in a humorous way.

Findings align with L.F. Bayanova’s research on cultural congruence (Bayanova et al., 2016): children’s identified

rules reflect dimensions such as “social interaction,” “academic competence,” “obedience,” and “self-regulation.” The results confirm that younger children are aware of the need for behavioral regulation in various contexts.

The negative correlation between rule identification in educational settings and choosing adaptive humorous outcomes — alongside the positive link between rule recognition in extracurricular settings and maladaptive choices — suggests a maturing regulatory function. As children develop, they can mentally distance themselves from threatening norm violations, perceiving them as subjectively safe. This supports Romanova’s (2014) observation that children who cannot emotionally distance themselves from frightening situations fail to enjoy humor.

Scholars from both Russian and international traditions (Veraksa et al., 2023; Martin, 2009) view humor as a cultural phenomenon allowing temporary, playful transgression of norms. The positive correlation between maladaptive scenario selection and humorous narrative generation indicates that children use humor to regulate emotional experiences, distance themselves from threat, and construct a safe social reality amid norm violations.

Conclusions

The subjective experience of danger refers to the psychological states that arise in children when facing potentially threatening situations. Psychological safety — defined as a child’s subjective confidence in the absence of danger during social interactions — is

essential for emotional stability, especially when cultural norms are violated. In this context, experience functions as an internal mechanism supporting adaptive behavior.

Key findings include:

1. The less regulated an activity, the more rules children articulated.
2. Extracurricular contexts yielded the highest number of identified rules; educational contexts, the fewest.
3. Children recognize humor as involving norm violations, but adherence to norms provides them with a sense of safety.
4. Humor is understood as a deviation from expected behavioral patterns.
5. The quantity of humorous narratives was highest in less regulated (extracurricular) contexts and lowest in structured (educational) ones.
6. Children avoided humor in situations where norm violations could lead to injury or punishment.
7. Competence in identifying rules or creating humorous scenarios in one context predicted similar abilities in others.
8. Cultural norms were violated to varying degrees in chosen scenarios.
9. Children preferred adaptive humor (minimal harm), avoiding maladaptive scenarios that risk health or reputation.
10. Children skilled in creating humor were more likely to choose maladaptive options, indicating reduced fear of norm violation.
11. The negative correlation between rule identification and adaptive choices, and the positive link with maladaptive choices, suggests that increased regulatory capacity allows children to perceive

even “dangerous” norm violations as safe through humor.

12. Developed self-regulation enables children to use humor to transform threatening situations into safe, enjoyable experiences. Conversely, poor regulation prevents humorous perception and enjoyment.

Limitations. The study was conducted in Kazan, Republic of Tatarstan,

limiting generalizability. Given humor’s cultural specificity and Russia’s multi-ethnic composition, future research should explore ethnocultural differences in children’s humor perception and creation.

Future Directions. Promising areas include examining humor in boys and girls, and among children with varying levels of school-related anxiety, in both safe and potentially dangerous situations.

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Ethics Statement

Written informed consent to participate in this study was provided by the immediate family members of the younger school children.

Декларация об этике

Письменное информированное согласие на участие в этом исследовании было предоставлено ближайшими родственниками младших школьников.

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