

# 3

## The Birth of Laughter:

### *From Three to Six Months*

His chief enjoyment was flipping backward on to the bed.

•  
She loved to be dropped and caught again.

•  
When one parent was worn out, he loved to do it all over with the other.



By the end of three months we have a real person on our hands. Now babies really look you in the eye. In technical terms their eyes converge on yours. Their looking patterns and yours work together. That is, when they look, you look; when they look away, you look away, etc. Looking at each other is a higher level of communicating. Put another way, after the first three months babies become increasingly directed to the world outside of themselves.

#### GAMES AND OTHER THINGS TO DO

It is possible that you will not have had much success with the games of the previous chapter—gurgling, diaper push, poking out your tongue, dancing, biting mother's finger, pinky pulling, and pulling your hand from the lion's mouth—until this period. These games usually become more frequent at this time. It is also true that if you have not tried very much to establish such communications during the earlier period, you may not get them very easily now either. But since many parents do begin these gamelike communications in the second and third months, we have listed them there.

Still, from the end of the third to the sixth month is the time when most parents will really begin to have *fun* with their babies, and that is what this chapter is about.

#### *Making Baby Laugh*

Babies smile at or soon after birth, but it does not have much to do with you at that time. The smile is just like other

forms of restlessness or movement. By about two months babies smile at the objects and the people they recognize. The pictures on the crib and the people in their families will get most of the smiles. Smiling seems to express recognition. Increasingly after three months, however, smiling is done only for people. It has been turned into a social form of behavior. Then comes laughter.

Somewhere between the third and the fourth month you sometimes can get at least a chuckle and, if you are lucky, full-scale laughter by various assaults on the baby's person. What seems to work best is a sudden incongruity or puzzlement for the baby, just as theorists of humor have said. For example, when you are leaning over the baby to look at him or to adjust him in the crib, if you change direction and gently put your head on his stomach instead of looking at him face to face, you can sometimes produce a smile. If you do this again several times, he may laugh.

The principle is that any regular behavior, if varied, can cause laughter. Remember, however, we mean that this happens if it is varied in the familiar situation by familiar and trusted adults. Play and games are a delicate part of life, and they exist well only when we can trust the other players, when we are comfortable in the surroundings and at home with the situation.

The interesting thing for the adult to do is to invent other ways of making the baby laugh. In all cases, again, the principle is simple, to vary your regular behavior with the baby at a time when the baby is very comfortable with you.

You might also try the following: While she is lying on her back being diapered or whatever, pick her up and lower her, bouncing her up and down on the bed a few times. Pick her up by the legs, upside down (gently the first time), and move her up and down. Holding her carefully over the bed and close to it (in case you are not much of a catcher), toss her into the air just an inch or two.

Try sounding out nonsense to him. Babble at him (bobo bo bo bo bo) on a rising crescendo. Make your cheek pop with your finger, if you have the skill. Blow raspberries on his neck or cheeks while he holds your head or hair. Find new places to tickle. For example, when washing him, you may find that the corner of the washcloth tickles the inside of his hand or that it tickles him under the chin.

If you want to think of these things as games in a typical way, keep score on how many different ways you have found to make the baby laugh. But keep it gentle to begin with. As the baby participates and reacts, what you do can be done in larger proportions, louder or faster or with a wilder face. You should always keep an eye on babies, however, to make sure they are not becoming upset.

Look for *surprise* on your baby's face. If she does not act surprised, it may not be striking her as all that funny. It is interesting to watch babies just after you have done one of these unusual things. Sometimes they will watch you alertly, see you smiling, and then smile themselves. At other times their faces may crumple suddenly, and they may look upset. That is the time for a hug and a cuddle and the reestablishment that all is OK. They may not be ready for games today. Perhaps you began too rapidly or too boisterously. Actually, most of these warnings are not necessary. Most parents know their babies well enough to be able to gauge their readiness for more arousal, more or less excitement.

By six months babies' social lives are now sufficiently advanced that if you laugh, they may well laugh with you; if you smile, they may well smile with you. So even without tickles laughter can do the trick by itself. Such laughter on your part may evoke squeals of delight. Babies can also tell what is funny just by looking. They expect to see one thing but see something else. Thus, you can produce a laugh by throwing things or by falling over, as long as these are ac-

companied by smiles. This means you have moved to laughter that is provoked solely visually.

Although we have been using the license of calling all these activities with infants "games," because that is most often what they are, making the baby laugh is really more like a drama. There is usually a plot to these things. The first time we put our head on their stomachs, they are surprised. The second time, they burst out laughing. And then the next time, as you wag your head around above them, their anticipation builds to the climax. These pieces of theater may be brief, and they involve audience participation (this audience gets directly tickled), but they are drama. In drama the great thing is anticipation and mounting excitement. There is a lot of this in play with babies.

#### *Knee Games*

At four months babies can sit up with support, although if you are not very careful, they will flip back and hit their heads on the floor. So you sit them up in pillows, or you buy a jumper chair that holds them up, or you dig a hole in the sand and put their bottoms in it (they are always bottom heavy with diapers anyway), or you sit them cradled in your legs. From that we get the game of knee bouncing. Sitting on your knee, they now spontaneously rock a little back and forth. This produces the possibility, once again, of your imitating them and their imitating you. They rock a little, then you bump your knees up and down (simply lifting the heels up while keeping the toes in place), then they rock a little. This is an alternation type game, in which each takes a turn (as in hopscotch or jacks at a later age).

There are traditional knee games—for example, "Ride a Cock Horse." In this game you cross one knee over the other

and perch the baby on your free foot. Hold his hands and jerk your free leg upward and downward rhythmically while you sing the words:

Ride a cock horse to Danbury Cross,  
To see a fine lady upon a white horse,  
With rings on her fingers and bells on her toes,  
She shall have music wherever she goes.

The baby's eyes will rarely leave your face. He will smile broadly at the end, then jiggle himself up and down, signaling that he wants you to do it again. Oblige him; it is a good exercise for you.

There is a whole category of knee games, because sitting babies on your knee is the most convenient place for doing things together. You can dangle things in front of them, such as a rattle, and have them lunge for the objects. They grab and, of course, suck. Here you can tantalize a little, keeping the rattle out of reach until the best lunge and then letting them have it.

We should warn here, and everywhere throughout this book, that although teasing may be fun to you, it is often plain hostility to somebody else. "I'm just having fun with him," says the mother as she pushes the three-year-old into the sea. "Got to make a man out of him," she explains, while he screams his head off. It is very clear that aggression and hostility toward children are very widespread and that many people disguise this from themselves by saying that they are having fun. Since we have emphasized that everyone have fun, it is important that we dissociate our notion of a game from one-sided teasing of that sort.

This point cannot be stressed often enough. One of the major sources of gratification for many of us, in and out of games, is venting aggression at someone else's expense. And there are indeed places and times for that sort of thing; there

are cocktail parties and there are games of football. We would not for a moment take them from those who enjoy them. But it is so easy for that kind of real fun to stray into relationships with children and become justified (in the parent's eyes), because it is so much fun for the parent.

An amusing lap toy is the *mirror*. You hold it, they gaze at it and paw it. We are not sure how early children come to recognize themselves in the mirror, but current research seems to suggest that it is during the first year. Their own picture is much less of a stranger to them anyway than are the faces of other strangers.

From knee games we go to "pretend" standing. You hold babies by their hands, and they stiffen their legs to stand up, with a great effort. Next there is "pretend" walking. You hold their hands and they make "steps" along the floor without going anywhere. As an even more exciting form of gymnastics you hold their arms and let them bounce up and down on the bed with stiffened legs, which is a first form of trampoline.

### *Blowing Bubbles*

By the age of four or five months our infants are waking up in the morning and, instead of crying first thing for milk, they are cooing or babbling to themselves, having their own morning talk period. Out of this play they develop a considerable versatility with sound making.

The game of blowing bubbles is not really very different from the first game of gurgle or snuffling at babies. But now you do not have to wait for them to make the sound before you copy them. If you lean over them and make a "raspberry" sound or blowing-bubbles sounds, babies will look at you intently, even perhaps smile. They will then try to make some sound of their own. You can get their attention with these



sounds if they are not watching. What they are doing is answering your sounds with their own. Thus the roles are reversed. They are imitating you, rather than you imitating them. By the time they are six months old, you and they can even take turns blowing raspberries on each other's cheeks.

### *Hair Pulling*

From four to six months babies learn to coordinate their eyes, their hands, and external objects. That is, they begin to reach for things when they see them and begin to grasp them. Before that these three abilities—to look, to grasp, and to reach—did not work together. Babies did not reach for what they could see. They did not look at what they grasped in their hands. Now they close in on things with both hands swinging together like Frankenstein. Thus when you lean over and your hair hangs down, they grab at it and pull it. Then, if you are not too busy with the diaper, or perhaps because you are, you pull away, they pull again, you pull away, etc.

Their strong grip, which is good for such games, is good for other things too. When they sit on your lap and take hold of the tablecloth, their strong grip can pull it right off the table. When you are leaning over, they can take your hair or your nose in a very strong grip and, particularly if their fingernails have not been cut recently, give you a healthy scratch.

### *Singing*

Your lullabies or singing or chanting of "commercials," which previously have been woven into your day-to-day routine with the baby, now have a separate and distinctive role. Again, they are not games, but they are a good precursor

for spectator behavior. As they reach six months of age, babies may watch you intently throughout the song. As a part of their new interest in the external world and of their increasing interest in you they may follow your singing quite devoutly with their eyes and then, if you are very lucky, toward the end of this period they may even participate. Their sounds have now moved more to the front of the mouth and have a higher pitch. Sometimes while you are singing, they produce some of these sounds, and you sense that they are joining in. Like the dancing mentioned earlier, these sounds are quite slight, but they may be reckoned the earliest form of choir singing.

### *Social Games*

We come now to the great *social* games of this age period. By five and six months babies are sufficiently social people that they get annoyed when you put them to bed. They even cry with rage. They know their mothers or closest caretakers and are more friendly and relaxed with them than with strangers. By the end of this age period we can say that their social world is well established. They gaze at people appropriately. They play games with their friends, and they distinguish friends from strangers.

One game that nearly every set of parents has played with their babies at some time is "This Little Pig." What this game does is to institutionalize the innumerable ways in which *anticipation* by the baby has become the name of the game of having fun. There are several ways of inducing crescendoes in order to produce fun and laughter in babies. You kiss them on the hand, on the wrist, on the elbow, on the arm, and finally on the cheek to the accompaniment of chuckles and laughter. In "This Little Pig" you tweak each little toe or finger in turn, while the old rhyme is chanted:

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This little pig went to market  
 This little pig stayed home  
 This little pig had roast beef [or  
     Kentucky fried chicken]  
 This little pig had none.  
 This little pig went wee, wee, wee,  
 All the way home.

At "wee wee wee" the tickling fingers run up the child's arm or leg, terminating with a big tickle under the chin or on the stomach. There is an enuretic connotation in the adult's fun here, not that the infant knows much about that.

Another game along similar lines, using the baby's hand, is "There Was a Little Mouse." Open the baby's hand and with your forefinger make circles in her palm while you say the words to the rhyme:

There was a little mouse,  
 And he had a little house,  
 And he lived—  
 Up—  
 Here!

At "here!" your hand travels up her arm and tickles her under her chin or arm. You can spin out the suspense in "up—here!" by lengthening the words and raising the tone of your voice. This is good for waiting rooms and the like, because you do not need props or bare feet, and although she gurgles and laughs, she does not get too hysterical.

In "Pat-a-Cake" you take hold of the baby's hands and, singing the rhyme, you pat his hands together. What is important is the keeping of rhythm in time with the rhyme. If there is any game here, it is often that the baby takes a delight in pulling his hands away, while you put them together. One set of words is:

*The Birth of Laughter*

Pat-a-cake, pat-a-cake, baker's man,  
 Bake me a cake as fast as you can.

When this rhyme was first introduced in Friedrich Fröbel's book called *Mother's Songs, Games and Rhymes*, the illustration showed the mother taking her baby into the bakery to see the baker at work, which is hardly likely to apply today. The more familiar version of the rhyme follows:

Pat-a-cake, pat-a-cake, baker's man,  
 Bake me a cake as fast as you can.  
 Prick it and pat it and mark it with E,  
 And put it in the oven for Emily and me!

The rhyme says "mark it with B, and put it in the oven for baby and me," but it is nicer to use your baby's name if it fits the rhyme. At "baby" (or "Emily") release the baby's hands and gently poke him in the stomach.

What happens after a few repetitions is that babies come to anticipate this last piece of drama and show excitement and laughter on the way to it. But not until about the end of the first year will they be playing this with you, independently clapping their own hands in time with yours.

You might as well enjoy the fact that babies are for eating and that this is what this rhyme is probably all about, hopefully all unbeknown to the baby. Perhaps the word "eating" is too specific. Parents sometimes feel they would like to "hug their babies to death," to assimilate them because they are so pleasurable. Old rhymes of this sort do not always mean just what they appear to represent. They may speak to the more complex feelings of the parents.

In "Rock-a-Bye Baby" the baby is rocked from side to side and then finally dropped and caught again. The side to side swinging leads up to the end effect. We know this is about the age, four to six months, when babies appreciate

that they are creating some effect outside of themselves; for example, listening to the sounds they make as they scratch the sides of their cribs. In this game we have a much more powerful illustration of the relationship of one behavior leading to another—that is, of putting behavior together in chains.

Rock-a-bye baby, on the tree top,  
When the wind blows, the cradle will rock.  
When the bough breaks, the cradle will fall  
And down will come baby, cradle, and all.

Clearly the baby knows nothing of the mumbo jumbo of babies and cradles and the wind in the trees nor of mothers who might sometimes fear that their babies would be dropped (and occasionally wish they could be), but both parties know they have a tiger by the tail, insofar as there is excitement to come once the series gets started.

Perhaps here, for the purists, we should say that this item and the previous one are more minor dramas than games. There is no opposition here, only a plot and an expected sequence. They share with games the importance of excitement. At this age they are probably more exciting than games can afford to be, because games have more uncertainty in them (for example, will she bite my finger or not?). The familiarity of the parent and the repetitive nature of the plot are, in a sense, the guarantee of the baby's security. They both share the same outcome.

#### THE BABY'S OWN PLAY

It is not as hard for babies to handle their food now, so they engage in *food play*. They "play" with their cereal with relaxed manipulation of it by mouths and hands. They spurt

the cereal out of their mouths, showing some satisfaction in seeing it spatter all over. They can be obstinate in spitting out the food you are spooning into them. Most mothers keep their babies' hands out of the way while feeding them, but if they are left to themselves, their hands, fingers, and blowing all mix together, and you can tell from the smiles on their faces that this is the "pleasurable digressive activity" that we call play.

When the urgent phases of feeding are over, *nipple play* begins. Babies play with the nipple, using their fingers and thumbs in opposition, pinching it in either hand. They also push the nipple in and out of their mouths with strong little tongues. They put the nipple on one side of their mouths and chew on it. Although breast feeding may be favored for other reasons, it is fairly obvious that a rubber nipple on a bottle is more fun for babies to play with.

Babies smile at familiar faces a lot now. The enjoyment of looking at familiar faces is, for a time, almost a form of play, as if they are enjoying looking at things well known and perhaps seeing if they can see something different about the dearly familiar faces. They are certainly quick to spy earrings on their mothers and just as quick to pull them off.

A great deal of time is also spent staring and smiling at familiar objects. A jar of flowers or the animals on the crib border might seem to be old friends. The role of just looking and looking has probably been underestimated. Just as friendly faces are distinguished from strange faces, so do other faces, such as those of dolls, become more exciting. There is a place for dolls, which are all head for the six-month-old. Do not worry about bodies. They do not know those yet. A series of heads with different kinds of faces, shapes, and sizes of noses, ears, eyes, and mouths is what is called for in this period. They should also be suckable of course. We could also make quite a case for *hand* toys. What fascinates three- to six-month-olds are their own hands, but

we will return to that later, because their own hands are, in a sense, always the most available toy. All of this looking enjoyment might be called *recognition play*.

Such play is like *spectator play*. This is hard to understand but is noticeable in babies who have mobiles that they have grown accustomed to and that move. There are clearly times when babies seem completely aroused by the movements. For example, some parents may want to cut a small shape like a hand out of cardboard. Babies have spent so much time looking at their own hands over the prior four months that this seems a most appropriate object to look at. Watching it move can cause babies little spasms of excitement and cries that seem almost to indicate an intoxication of interest. They open their eyes wide and may open and close them as the hand swings with crib movement or air currents. The nearest equivalent to such excitement in adulthood seems to be spectator sports.

Babies are more comfortable with the things they know well. They are less tense or stiff. They breathe regularly, their pulse rates are normal, their faces do not appear flushed, and they babble normally. When these signs of relaxation are present, we may assume that their dabbling with objects in and out of their mouths and hands is a play for variability that is within their easy control. This is *object play*.

Their main toy is their *hand*. They play with different fingers, pushing them in and out of their mouths, chomping on them, pulling them out, babbling with them endlessly. Occasionally, they almost choke themselves. Sometimes, the constant weaving, twisting, and intertwining of their fingers and hands in front of their faces have an almost balletlike character. It is like the endless ruminative mouth play of the first three months. Their hands have taken their mouths' place as the major ruminator. They also like to examine *your* hand, hold it in front of their heads, and move it slowly

toward them. A hand mobile would be as effective now as a nipple mobile would be earlier.

They get wildly excited when their own movements cause their mobile to move or when they pull at their cradle gym and get everything ringing. Apparently they are becoming aware (four months plus) that *they* are causing things to happen. This is *causal play*. Their mobile swings around wildly as a result of their pulling it. They open and shut their eyes in surprise and delight. They get more and more ecstatic. These self-initiated jags are about as exciting as making them laugh. This is fiesta time in their miniworld, if wild excitement and delight can be so described.

To sum it up, by six months we have had the following peaks of excitement: feeding in months one and two, eye-love in months two to four, laughter in months three to five, and making things happen in months four to six.