The use of Humour to Reduce Pediatric Pain

Many people have heard the expression “laughter is the best medicine.” It’s not just a phrase, it’s true! Although humour cannot cure everything that ails us, it can help relieve and/or reduce stress, lower blood pressure and boost our immune system. Many medical procedures produce some level of pain. Such procedures are difficult for all of us to get through, but they can be an especially large source of distress for children. Nervousness, fear, anxiety and pain all take energy but when humour is added, the energy can be channeled into a more positive force. Although humour itself is not a medical treatment, it works hand-in-hand with client’s treatments to keep them feeling well. The humour technique is most notably suitable for children, who seem to always be open to fun and laughs, no matter how they feel!

Humour has shown a large increase in its abilities to impact pain management. Therapeutic humour is any positive interaction that, when used constructively, will maintain, enhance or improve the physical and/or emotional well-being of an individual, especially children. How does humour act as an adjunctive therapy for managing pain? There are four hypothesized reasons;

- **Mental Distraction:** Humour can act as a very effective way to draw one’s attention away from the source of pain or discomfort. By creating a distance from the threatening aspects of pain, one can change their perspective of pain. The created distance may also help gain control of the situation and reduce negative emotions at the same time.

- **Release of Endorphins:** Humour may cause the release of endorphins or other endogenous opioids (natural pain killers) in the body and this provides an analgesic effect (reduced pain) for a period of time.

- **Muscle Relaxation:** The ability of laughter to reduce pain can be due to its reduction in muscle tension (e.g. “Full Belly Giggles”).

- **Activation of the Pleasure Centres in the Brain:** Humour may activate known pleasure or reward centres of the brain. The elevation of certain levels of humour may either directly or indirectly reduce the level of pain experienced.

Humour can be a particularly useful tool prior to painful procedures because it appears to have some lasting effects. Research has show that the thresholds for discomfort have been higher when participants listened to laughter tapes. The laughter proved to be more effective than other distractions, lasting for at least 10 minutes after the chuckling subsided.

Simple techniques such as sharing giggles with your child while blowing bubbles or telling jokes during painful procedures can be very effective. Videos or funny television shows watched prior to procedures can be an effective form of distraction during interventions. Your child is encouraged to use their personalized “Pain Free Box” that contains playful items to complement giggles and laughter as a new or continued approach to managing your child’s pain. We encourage all to take time each day for “fun time” or “play breaks” to have a few much needed giggles.