

Schools

# Comedy At Hamptons School Helps Kids Bond, Cope Through Laughter

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Lisa Finn, Patch Staff

Posted Tue, Feb 8, 2022 at 1:41 pm ET



Elementary school students in Southampton took part in a four-week session last semester; the program will be offered again soon both virtually and in-person. (Courtesy Lois Beekman)

SOUTHAMPTON, NY — Even during the darkest days, the human spirit can find hope through laughter.

That's a life lesson third-graders at Southampton Elementary School learned at an early age last semester when they participated in a two-week program aimed at teaching both students and teachers "some tricks of the comedy trade." The program was especially critical at a time when children across the board are struggling with the mental health and emotional impacts of the pandemic, educators said.

The program, created by Dr. Bernie Fushpan, founder of the [New York Hysterical Society](#), and Lois Beekman, licensed prevention trainer, focuses on the physical and psychological benefits of laughter; why the adage, "Laughter is the best medicine," rings true; techniques for effective delivery; that comedy is meant to find humor in life situations — not to make fun of others; and how to do impersonations and animals doing "silly" things, they said.

The four-session program culminated with a "laugh-in," where each class and their teachers performed "bits" they developed and the whole group participated in impersonations.

"The intent is using comedy to help kids and teachers bond," Beekman said, adding that the program was matched to New York State social emotional learning, communications and career educational standards for grades 3 and 4.

Furshpan spoke about why bringing comedy to children was so deeply rewarding.

"I feel like I'm enlightening others with life skills to give them opportunities and choices that include positive outcomes and better social circumstances," he said.

Comedy, he added, allows children to creatively process their frustrations differently and show others how they cope with stressful situations.

Laughter also helps to improve relationships within families.

"Hopefully, their family members learn something from them as well — to make light of themselves and others and to cope with tense circumstances in a more creative way," he said.

We  
Love  
Laughter



Mrs. Henke

Mrs. Calarco

Sra. Rivera

Ms. Bauer

Classes



The program also benefits teachers, showing them that children are "inherently creative and funny and to handle them with less of a sharp edge— to help them bond with their kids using humor," Furshpan said.

Comedy helps children interact with their friends, helping them to realize that they are in control of their emotions and that they know how to have fun with all kinds of situations, he said.

The lessons taught about humor have far greater meaning than just improv or knock-knock jokes, Furshpan said. Comedy helps students to evolve as individuals and to understand and empathize with others' pain by acknowledging their own fears and frustrations, he said. Also, he added, comedy gives kids a way to express those emotions in a way that is not overwhelming but instead, is laced with the joy of humor.

Milena Sandoval, social worker at Southampton Elementary School, said the comedy class gave a platform to the students that enjoy jokes and laughter. "It also gave an outlet to those students that needed a place to relax and enjoy some structured humor," she said.

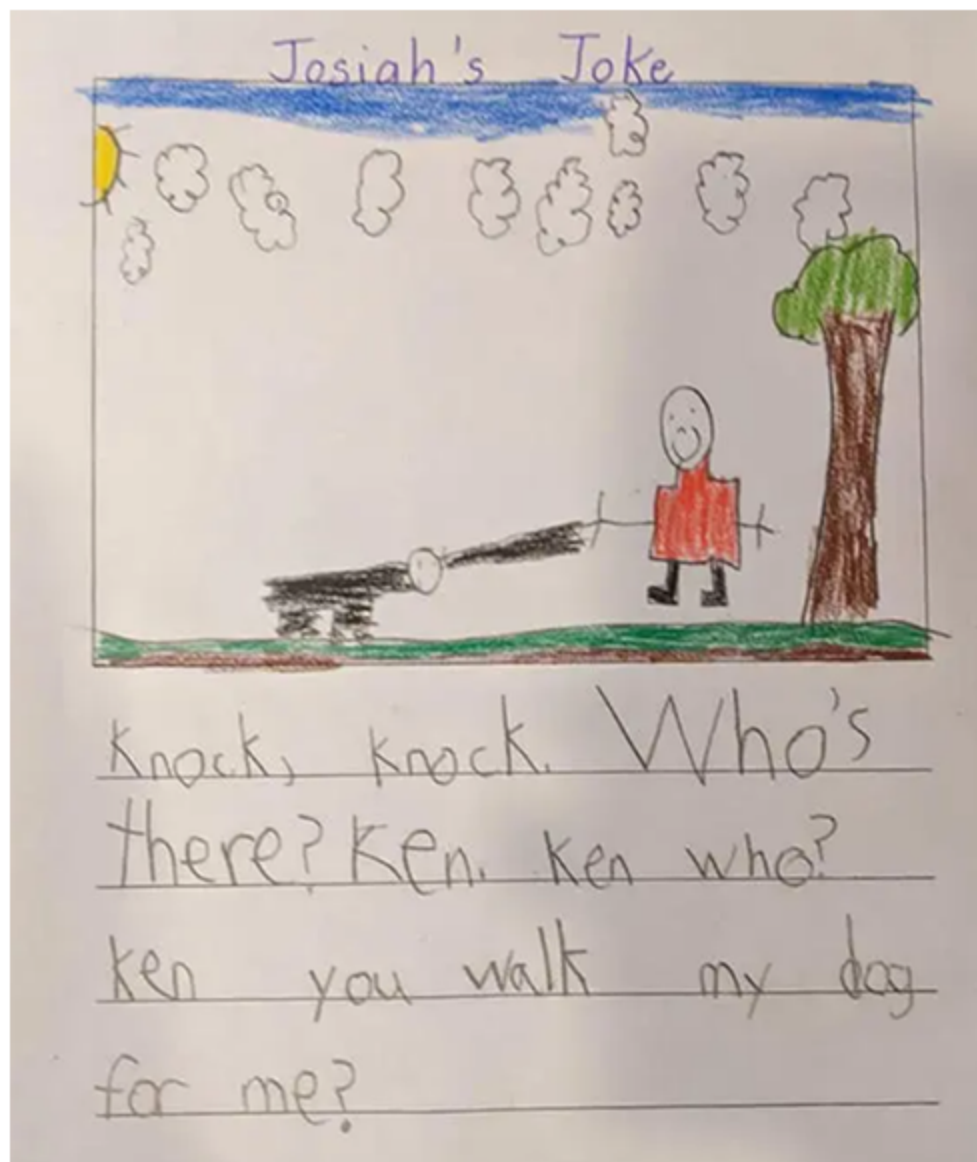
Added Lois Shapiro, former director of behavior services, New York State Office of Children and Family Services: "Humor helps to reduce stress, and can boost mood. This program teaches children how to use humor to connect to others in a positive and engaging way. Learning to present entertaining material in a public forum can foster creativity, promote a positive self-image, and help the youngster gain insight into everyday events and interactions," she said. "Kudos to the program developers, and congratulations to the lucky kids who get the program."

Kirsten Lonnie, executive director of the SCCC, said the organization piloted the kids' comedy classes with Furshpan and Lois Oliveira of the NY Hysterical Society. The classes, she said, align with the emphasis that SCC puts on offering quality education and programming related to performing arts to the community.

"We began offering the program to children in mid-2020, initially by Zoom and subsequently in person. The classes were developed to meet education standards for social emotional learning, communications, and career education. Research supports the statement that 'laughter is the best medicine,'" Lonnie said. "In a few weeks, children learn about comedy, develop their own jokes, practice speaking to an audience and learn how to use humor to reduce stress and tension with friends and at home with family."

Lonnie said SCCC has been lauded by mental health experts, teachers, families, and children for making the program available.

"Tuition is low and we offer full and partial scholarships for the program which suits students ages 8 to 13, and 14 to 17," she said.



Looking ahead, as a result of the success of the Southampton Elementary School program, Furshpan and Beekman, in coordination with SCCC, will be conducting biweekly Zoom class with kids who have taken the basic program working toward a series of live performances at community centers targeted to older adults and special needs groups to take place in late spring.

In addition, a three-week program will be offered at area schools this spring with kids and their teachers — and, two one-week summer comedy camps will be offered at SCC. One session will be aimed at kids 8 to 10 and a second, for kids 11 to 14; both will culminate in live and Zoom performances during the summer.

The lessons imbued are lifelong.

School counselor Gwendolen Leible-Arnzen said she has overheard children telling their parents all about "how" to tell a joke, what is funny — and more importantly, that they love that their teachers are learning with them.

"One parent told me that their child was aglow with excitement at the dinner table, sharing the details of the class that day. This has been such an amazing program given the mental health state for children today. To see the teachers participating with their students and laughing together is truly priceless," she said.



[shorturl.at/isBW2](https://shorturl.at/isBW2)

