

Learning how to tease and be teased

For young people, learning about teasing is a development necessity

Young people spend hours teasing each other and being teased. Sometimes it's called 'banter', usually prefixed with the adjective 'harmless', as in "Don't take it personally! It's only harmless banter!" But teasing is never harmless. It's always a mixture of the friendly and the hostile, the affectionate and the cruel. Close friends tease each other, lovers tease each other, and they do so because there are times when they can't help having mixed feelings about each other. Teasing is familiar and intimate, even as it's hostile and distancing.

It's also an expression of anxiety. Freud wrote a whole book about the way jokes express our anxieties. He didn't write about our reaction to the jokes made at our expense, and yet the way we receive a joke matters. There are dictators, for example, who hate being teased. Sometimes they react by banning teasing and imprisoning the people responsible for the teasing, presumably because the truth of the tease hurts too much: the truth that they, the dictators, are flawed creatures, powerful for sure, but no better or worse than anyone else.

Perhaps dictators are people who never learned about teasing when they were growing up. Teasing, after all, begins early. In games of peek-a-boo, the adult hides his face behind his hands for a couple of seconds before re-appearing with a cry of 'Boo!' The baby gets used to this, gradually understanding that the adult hasn't really gone away – no need to panic – but will re-appear in a moment. As the baby relaxes and becomes confident, peek-a-boo becomes fun. The adult begins to hide for a little longer each time while the baby waits, eventually screaming with delight when the adult re-appears.

The adult is essentially *teasing* the baby, developing its ability to tolerate the otherness of other people, to tolerate separation: now you see me, now you don't; now we're together, now we're apart. Peek-a-boo is a developmental building block, the baby gradually becoming accustomed to the idea of other people as variable (here one minute, gone the next), of people playing with relationships, playing with the baby's feelings.

Young people have to get used to being teased by family members, by friends and by their peers. They have to get used to the fact that other people will feel close to them and distant, fond of them and critical, appreciative of them and hostile. They have to get used to the fact that they're bound to arouse these mixed feelings in other people. So when they're teased, as they inevitably will be, will they fly off the handle and demand that all jokes be banned, or will they understand teasing as an ambivalent but potentially pleasurable, playful communication?

The skill is in judging another person's readiness to be teased. If the adult hides for too long, the baby panics and becomes distressed. But if the adult judges well, the baby doesn't panic, enjoys the game and eventually reciprocates, hiding its own face behind its own hands, confident enough now to start teasing the adult.

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Of course, young people aren't always good judges of when and how much to tease. Sometimes they pile on so much that the recipient of the tease eventually lashes out with fists or dissolves into tears. But young people only learn how far to go and when to stop by copying adults. If, as a matter of principle, adults never tease young people, then young people never learn to bear teasing and never learn when teasing needs to stop. Alternatively, if adults relentlessly tease young people and refuse ever to be teased themselves, then teasing becomes merely another kind of bullying.

It's a delicate balance. A vital one.