

Want to raise an empowered girl? Then let her be funny.

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Laurie Menser was a 7- or 8-year-old in Rockville, Md., when she wandered over to a neighbor's house one day, slipped a glass eye in her mouth and got the attention of the grown-ups in the room. Then she smacked the back of her head and stuck out her tongue — waiting for laughs.

“They were appalled,” she remembers. “They were like, ‘You need to go home right now and tell your dad what you did.’ ”

The neighbors didn't know that it was Menser's father who'd picked up the fake eye at a yard sale and taught his daughter the gag. Don't worry, he told her, “they just don't get the joke.”

Looking back, Menser wonders how the episode might have gone had one element been different: What if she were a boy? Would they have laughed then?

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Peter McGraw, director of the Humor Research Lab at the University of Colorado, thinks that, empirically speaking, women are just as funny as men.