

Pass the Smile

With a Sprinkling of Improv Games

Zach, a buzz cut boy of four, smiles.
He smiles his smile unbowed with anything like regret.
Smiles his happiness, nothing dimming him, nothing lost, his only pain
the boy pain of spilt milk and mama mad, smiles his unadorned smile, this
beautiful cherub child, mama milk smile and the room lights up and now
everyone taking Zach's cue, we begin to pass the smile.

The elders, or the Grandpas and Grandmas, as they are referred to in the community of Beneville in Surprise, Arizona, pass Zach's smile to each other and it becomes their smile, their lifetime smile, their seen-it-all smile, their been-there-done-that toothy grin, their jack-o-lantern spooky smile, their kooky laugh-at-it-all smile, and we are laughing, we are all smiling.



Smiling is contagious, and even if it starts artificially, starts forced after a few smiles, the sunny feeling catches on and we are passing around real smiles, eye-crinkling-at-the-corners smiles, and big sweetheart smiles.

Pass the smile, also known as pass the face or pass the look of shock, is an improv theater game that I learned from Jennie Smith-Peers, executive director of Elder Share the Arts (ESTA) (<http://www.estanyc.org/>). Smith-Peers is a leader and kindred spirit in the field of dementia arts. Under her direction, ESTA has developed a class using improv at the New York Memory Center (<http://nymemorycenter.org/about-us/nymc-in-the-news/>).

Recipe

COUSIN JENNIE'S STEAMING HOT PASS THE SMILE PIE

INGREDIENTS:

2 or more faces (Works best with groups, but you can also be silly and just pass the look back and forth between two people.)

PERFORMANCE TIPS:

If possible, get in a circle or close to a circle. Then one person passes a facial expression to the next person. They repeat it and then pass it off to the next person and so on. When it gets back to the original person, he or she chooses a new facial expression to pass. The object of the game is to build community and trust among the participants.

When working with a group of people living with memory loss, the session leader may need to move around the room as the "face" is passed around, repeating the directions and helping to guide the exercise by demonstrating the gestures.

It is also helpful to reinforce what you are asking them to do: "Bob, now turn to Cathy and smile at her, pass the smile to her." It is natural to compliment the participants on a good smile, and the exercise will often generate a lot of laughter.