

Prediction Error Without Closure in Childhood

Florian Morin, Independent Researcher, France.

Preprint.

Corresponding author:

Florian Morin

Email: florianmorinind@gmail.com

Abstract

Many forms of children's engagement are difficult to study because they disappear under standard measurement. Experiences that rely on unresolved perceptual discrepancy are often collapsed by evaluative operations, such as asking for liking, preference, or emotional intensity, which force closure on otherwise open perceptual dynamics.

This paper targets a class of engagement that remains largely invisible to existing methods: sustained attention and quiet affect occurring in the presence of persistent perceptual violations without demand for explanation or judgment. The core methodological constraint is that conventional measures do not merely record such experiences but actively reorganize them by imposing evaluation.

We introduce a regime-preserving experimental design that treats measurement as an intervention to be minimized. The method relies on absurd cartoons as naturalistic probes and is defined primarily by what it does not do: no in-episode self-reports, no preference judgments, no performance framing, and no salient temporal cues. Engagement is indexed using low-intrusion indicators, including engagement continuity and recognition without preference.

By preserving permissive perceptual conditions, the method makes it possible to study regime-dependent forms of engagement that are otherwise eliminated by evaluative measurement.

Key Points

- Standard measures of children's engagement, such as liking, preference, or intensity ratings, impose evaluative closure and can disrupt experiences based on unresolved perceptual discrepancy.
- Absurd cartoons provide naturalistic stimuli for probing engagement that does not rely on humor comprehension, narrative resolution, or explicit affective reporting.
- The proposed method treats measurement as an intervention and prioritizes regime preservation over affect amplification.
- Engagement is operationalized using low-intrusion indicators, including engagement continuity and recognition without preference, rather than

self-report or choice.

- The method is designed to detect regime stability, not affective magnitude or emotional categories.
- This approach enables the study of forms of engagement that are systematically obscured by evaluative measurement in developmental and affective research.

Introduction

Cartoons are one of the most pervasive cultural artifacts of childhood. Across psychology, education, and media studies, children's engagement with cartoons is almost universally explained in terms of humor. Children are said to enjoy cartoons because they find them funny, silly, or amusing, and developmental progress is described as an increasing capacity to understand more complex forms of humor (e.g., Loizou, 2005, McGhee, 1979; Shultz, 1976).

Yet a close inspection of children's cartoons reveals a puzzle. Many cartoons that strongly engage young children contain no jokes, no verbal punchlines, and no clear narrative resolution. Instead, they rely heavily on violations of physical laws: characters stretch, flatten, explode, or reassemble; objects change size mid-motion; causal chains break without consequence. These events are not explained, justified, or framed as jokes (Bergen, 2009; Wells, 2009).

Many features of children's cartoons can be described as systematic violations of predictive models: proportions change abruptly, physical continuity is broken, causal

relations fail to hold, material properties are inconsistent (Clark, 2013, Friston, 2010;).

In most adult contexts, such violations trigger rapid corrective processes. The viewer explains them away as errors, classifies them as stylistic devices, or disengages: the system seeks closure (Clark, 2016, Gibson, 1979).

Humor explanations persist in part because adult observers project their own evaluative and interpretive frameworks onto children. When adults watch cartoons, they search for jokes, intent, or meaning. When they fail to find them, they assume children must be appreciating something analogous at a simpler level (James, 1890; Tomasello, 1999).

This projection obscures the possibility that children are not engaging in joke processing at all. They may simply be experiencing unresolved discrepancy without pressure to explain it (cf. predictive processing accounts of tolerance to error, Clark, 2018).

This study is not designed to estimate affective magnitude or to establish causal mechanisms. Its aim is diagnostic: to test whether certain forms of engagement are observable at all when evaluative closure is minimized.

Early loss of the causal role of joy may reflect normative narrative maturation rather than cumulative damage. As cognition becomes prospective and self-explanatory, joy ceases to function as an action-organizing variable. Cumulative load may later restrict access further, but the initial decoupling appears developmentally early.

What is remembered as lost childhood joy may therefore reflect the disappearance of permissive regimes under evaluation, not the disappearance of affect itself. Figure 1a

illustrates how developmental change alters the functional role of lock-in, without implying a loss of the underlying mechanism.

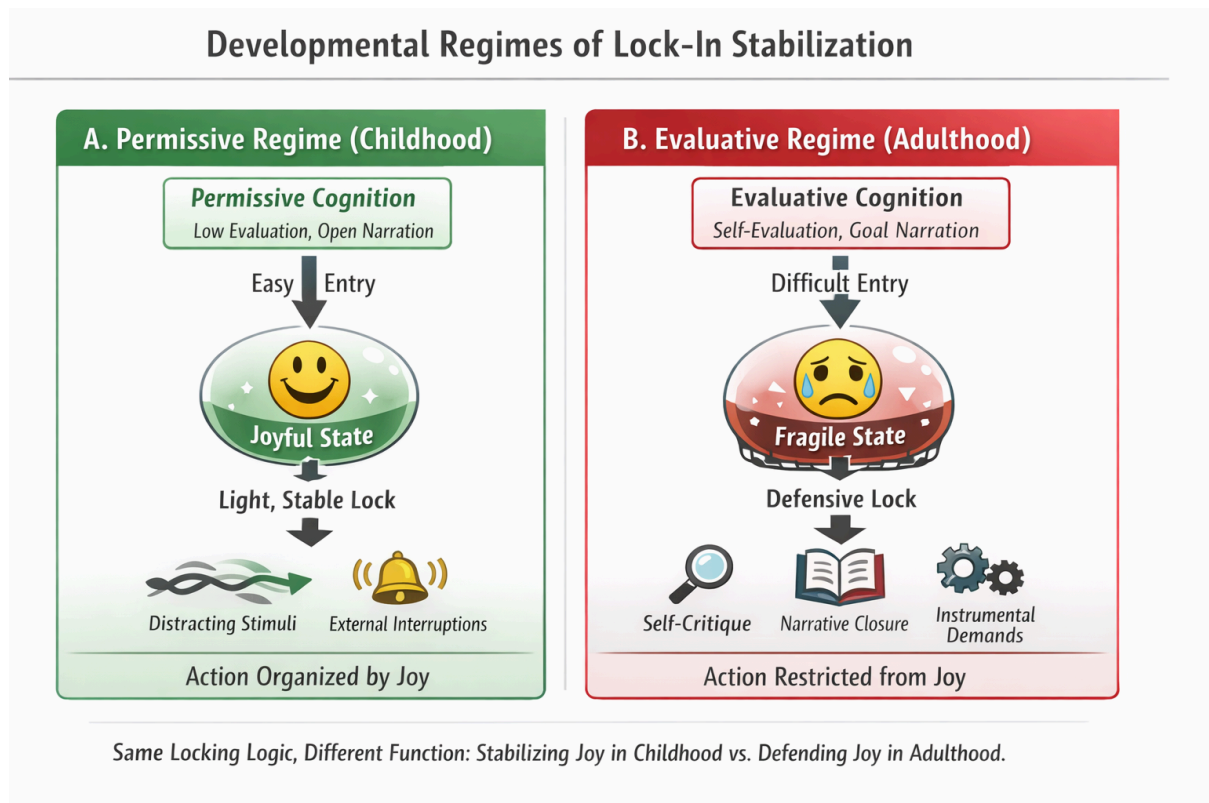


Fig 1a. Developmental regimes of lock-in stabilization. The same lock-in logic operates across development but serves different functions depending on the underlying cognitive regime. In childhood, where cognition is permissive and weakly evaluative, lock-in stabilizes an already open experiential state against attentional noise and external interruption. In adulthood, where cognition becomes evaluative, prospective, and self-narrative, lock-in instead functions defensively, protecting a fragile state against ongoing self-evaluation, narrative closure, and instrumental demands. The developmental shift therefore reflects a change in regime function rather than the disappearance of the locking mechanism itself.

A related control-level account develops the affective consequences of this regime distinction, describing ease as a threshold-dependent form of positive engagement that

emerges under reduced evaluative monitoring and collapses when rendered an object of deliberate assessment (Morin, 2025).

Scope

This paper advances a single regime-level account by integrating five lines of work. It analyzes absurd cartoons as cases of unresolved perceptual prediction error, shows that engagement can occur without reportable affective intensity, reframes child–adult differences as differences in evaluative capture, treats play as a downstream stabilizing organization, and demonstrates that standard evaluative measures can collapse the very regimes under study. Together, these strands support a unified claim: many phenomena typically studied in isolation depend on whether experience unfolds under a permissive or evaluative regime.

Limits of existing explanations

What Humor Theories Require

Most humor theories, despite their differences, share several core commitments.

Humor typically involves:

- an incongruity between expectations and outcomes,
- a resolution, reinterpretation, or reframing of that incongruity,
- and often a communicative or social dimension signaling that the incongruity is intentional.

Whether framed cognitively, socially, or linguistically, humor requires that the observer gets something. Even in theories that downplay explicit punchlines, humor

involves recognition that the violation is meaningful rather than arbitrary (McGhee, 1979 & Shultz, 1976).

Why Children's Cartoons Fail These Criteria

These requirements pose a problem for explaining children's cartoons. Much of the content lacks resolution, intent cues, or reinterpretive payoff. Violations persist without explanation, and nothing signals that the viewer is expected to "understand" them (Loizou, 2005).

Developmental humor theories, such as stage models describing progression from perceptual to conceptual humor, often classify children's enjoyment of absurd cartoons as early forms of humor. For example, what is sometimes labeled "conceptual humor" is said to involve delight in violations of conceptual categories or expectations. Humor becomes a convenient label for any content that adults cannot otherwise categorize (Bergen, 2009 & McGhee, 1979).

.From a perceptual perspective, many features of children's cartoons can be described as systematic violations of predictive models:

- proportions change abruptly,
- physical continuity is broken,
- causal relations fail to hold,
- material properties are inconsistent.

Absurd cartoons are effective because they generate prediction errors that are:

- salient,
- non-threatening,

- non-instrumental,
- **and difficult to resolve.**

This framework clarifies a long-standing but poorly explained observation: older, visually imperfect cartoons often outperform modern, technically polished animation for young children.

Older animations frequently contain:

- irregular frame timing,
- jitter and micro-instabilities,
- fluctuating proportions,
- inconsistent motion dynamics.

Modern animation, by contrast, is optimized for smoothness, continuity, and physical coherence. Prediction errors are minimized or rapidly corrected, even when fantastical events occur (Wells, 2009).

Children's engagement with absurd cartoons is not explained by humor comprehension or by heightened joy intensity. Many cartoons that reliably capture children's attention lack punchlines, narrative resolution, or communicative cues required by humor theories (Shultz, 1976; McGhee, 1979). Removing humor as an explanation leaves a structural question: why unresolved violations do not collapse engagement.

We propose that engagement reflects tolerance to unresolved perceptual prediction error, especially violations of proportion, causality, and physical continuity. In childhood, such discrepancies can remain present without triggering correction,

explanation, or disengagement. Engagement does not require resolution (Clark, 2013; Friston, 2010).

Importantly, this tolerance is regime-dependent rather than stimulus-dependent. The same content can elicit engagement or flatness depending on whether experience is allowed to unfold without evaluative closure. Evidence for this dissociation comes from recognition without preference, quiet bodily affect without amplification, and the contrast between old imperfect animation and modern optimized animation, where increased error closure reduces engagement (Clark, 2018).

Thus, absurd cartoons do not work because they are funnier or more intense. They work because they preserve a **permissive perceptual regime** in which prediction errors, affective signals, and engagement can occur without being forced into evaluation.

Hierarchical structure of the argument

This paper advances a single core claim and several downstream implications.

First, absurd children's cartoons are treated as *naturalistic probes* of how unresolved perceptual violations are handled.

Second, analysis of these probes motivates a regime-level construct: a *permissive perceptual regime*, defined by tolerance to unresolved discrepancy without evaluative closure.

Third, several phenomena commonly treated as independent, including quiet affect, play behavior, and child–adult differences, are reinterpreted as *downstream consequences* of whether experience unfolds under permissive or evaluative regimes.

The paper therefore does not advance multiple independent theses. Cartoons function as the empirical anchor, regime as the explanatory construct, and affective, developmental, and methodological observations as consequences of this structure.

What humor theories require

Across dominant humor theories, three requirements recur. Humor relies on incongruity with resolution, a violation must be detected and then cognitively, narratively, or socially resolved. It presupposes intent recognition, the audience must register that an agent is trying to be funny. It also depends on communicative framing, cues such as timing, escalation, or punchlines that mark content as a joke. Children's cartoons violate all three. Their perceptual violations persist without resolution, lack clear signals of humorous intent, and repeat without narrative or communicative payoff. They therefore fall outside the scope of humor theory and call for an alternative account (Attardo, 1994).

Humor presupposes that a violation is produced with the intention to amuse. For an event to be experienced as humorous, the perceiver must recognize this intent, that someone is trying to be funny rather than merely causing an odd or incorrect outcome.

Humor requires a communicative frame that marks an event as a joke. This frame is typically established through timing, exaggeration, repetition, or social cues. When such framing is absent, violations are not interpreted as humorous but remain ambiguous or simply absurd.

Why children's cartoons fail these criteria

Standard humor theories require incongruity followed by resolution, communicative intent, and escalation toward a payoff. Children's cartoons systematically violate these requirements.

First, **violations persist without payoff**. Proportion, causality, and physical continuity are repeatedly broken without explanation, correction, or narrative resolution. Characters stretch, flatten, or disintegrate and immediately continue as if nothing happened. The violation remains open rather than being resolved.

Second, there is **no cue to "get" the joke**. The cartoons lack signals of communicative intent such as punchlines, timing cues, or framing that would indicate a joke is being told. Nothing marks the violation as something to be interpreted, understood, or decoded.

Third, **repetition occurs without escalation**. The same violations recur without increasing complexity, contrast, or payoff. In humor, repetition typically builds toward a stronger resolution. In these cartoons, repetition maintains exposure to unresolved discrepancy instead.

Taken together, these features make children's cartoons structurally incompatible with humor-based explanations. Their effectiveness does not reflect simplified or immature humor processing. Instead, it reflects tolerance to unresolved perceptual violation, a regime in which prediction error can remain present without triggering closure.

Prediction Error Without Closure

Persistent Perceptual Violations

Children's engagement with absurd cartoons is characterized by the persistence of perceptual violations that are neither explained nor resolved. Events that contradict basic expectations about bodies, motion, or causality remain part of the experience without triggering repair or disengagement. We propose that this reflects a regime-level difference in how prediction error is handled.

Regime-Dependent Tolerance to Prediction Error

Across cartoons that reliably engage young children, three forms of violation dominate. Proportion violations are especially prevalent: characters stretch, flatten, inflate, or fragment in ways that contradict stable body schemas, often instantaneously and without consequence. These violations are visually salient and resist narrative or symbolic reinterpretation. Causality violations are also common: objects move without force, impacts lack effects, and causal chains break without repair. Finally, violations of physical continuity are pervasive: characters reconstitute after destruction, objects change material properties mid-motion, and spatial continuity is broken without transition. These features are not rare exceptions but recurring structural properties of the content.

In adult perception, persistent prediction error is typically unstable. Violations tend to be rapidly explained, reclassified, or dismissed; when closure fails, disengagement often follows. This pattern reflects an evaluative regime in which perceptual input is continuously assessed for coherence and meaning, and unresolved discrepancy is treated as a problem.

Absurd Cartoons as Probes of a Permissive Perceptual Regime

Definition of a Permissive Perceptual Regime

Children's responses suggest a different configuration. Prediction errors are detected but not obligatorily closed. Violations can remain present without triggering explanation, reinterpretation, or rejection. This does not imply a failure to notice impossibility, but the absence of a requirement to resolve it. Figure 1b contrasts older imperfect animation with modern optimized animation.

Older Imperfect vs Modern Optimized Animation.



Fig1b. Absurd cartoons as probes of unresolved prediction error.

Persistent perceptual violations generate prediction error that remains open under a permissive perceptual regime. Rather than being resolved cognitively or narratively, the discrepancy propagates as a weak embodied affective signal, resulting in quiet, localized positive experience without evaluative closure. Juxtaposed frames illustrating a persistent violation, not consecutive moments.

We define a permissive perceptual regime as one in which prediction errors are tolerated rather than closed. Under this regime, engagement does not depend on resolution, narrative payoff, or coherence. This tolerance explains why punchline-free absurdity remains engaging, why repetition does not rapidly collapse interest, and why perceptual optimization that removes residual error can reduce engagement. Absurd cartoons thus function as naturalistic probes of a permissive regime in which unresolved discrepancy can persist without undermining experience. Figure 1c provides a schematic illustration of how unresolved perceptual discrepancy, when not subjected to evaluative closure, can propagate beyond perception as a weak, embodied affective signal.

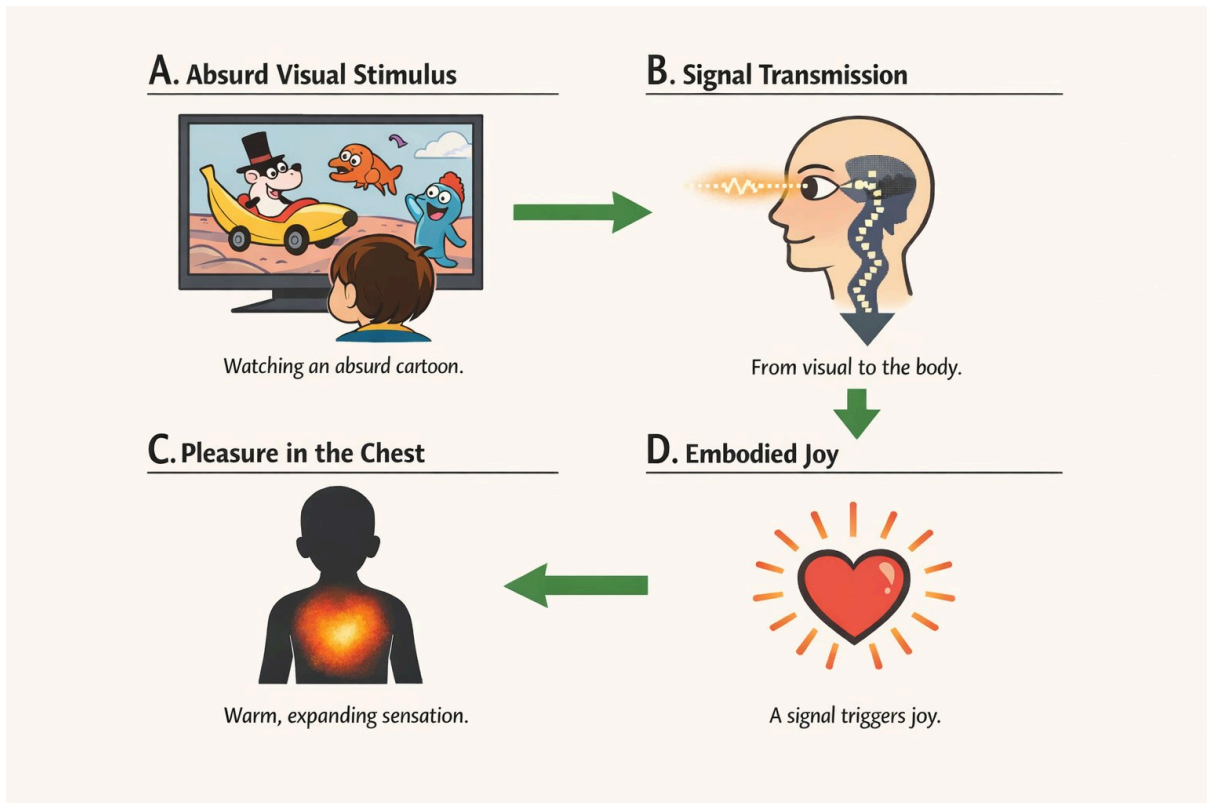


Figure 1c. From unresolved perceptual discrepancy to quiet embodied affect.

An absurd visual stimulus generates persistent perceptual discrepancy. Under a permissive perceptual regime, this discrepancy is not resolved or evaluated but propagates as a weak embodied affective signal, often localized in the chest, without consolidation into emotion categories or explicit judgment.

Older, visually imperfect cartoons often sustain children’s engagement more effectively than modern, technically optimized animation, even when content and pacing are matched. We argue that this contrast constitutes a natural experiment on perceptual error handling. Older animation preserves residual instability, including frame jitter, irregular timing, and proportion or motion inconsistencies, whereas modern pipelines aggressively minimize such deviations through smoothing and correction. Under a permissive perceptual regime, unresolved prediction error does

not require repair and can remain present without undermining engagement. Residual imperfection therefore supports continued attention, while optimization closes the discrepancy that permissive engagement depends on. This account explains why increases in visual fidelity do not reliably enhance engagement for young children and why optimized animation can feel flat despite technical excellence. The relevant variable is not animation quality, but whether perceptual error is preserved or closed.

Recognition Without Preference

Developmental research often assumes that recognizing a stimulus entails some degree of evaluation. Children who reliably recognize an object, image, or event are typically expected to express liking, preference, or choice. When such evaluative responses are weak, inconsistent, or absent, this is commonly interpreted as indecision, emotional immaturity, or incomplete valuation. We argue that this interpretation is structurally mistaken.

Recognition Does Not Imply Evaluation

Children frequently recognize stimuli without converting that recognition into preference or judgment. Familiarity does not automatically recruit comparison, ranking, or desirability. Recognition can operate descriptively, registering presence or recurrence, without functioning normatively as a basis for choice. This dissociation is not a transitional failure on the way to adult-like evaluation, but a stable property of a permissive regime in which experience is not required to close evaluatively.

Methodological Consequences of Forced Evaluation

Methodologically, this distinction is routinely obscured. Many developmental paradigms follow recognition questions immediately with liking or preference probes, implicitly enforcing an evaluative regime. Such questions are not neutral measurements. Asking “do you like this?” or “which one is better?” introduces comparison, justification, and outcome relevance, often reorganizing the experience it aims to assess. By contrast, recognition questions preserve permissivity by allowing experience to remain open.

This framework explains why children can reliably detect absurd perceptual violations in cartoons without treating them as problems to be resolved or judged. Recognition without preference allows perceptual discrepancy to remain present without triggering closure. More broadly, it clarifies why the absence of expressed liking should not be taken as evidence of weak engagement or low affect. What is missing is not experience, but the demand to evaluate it. The contribution is structural rather than anatomical.

Affective Quietude Under Permissive Regimes

Quiet Affect Is Not Weak Affect

Under permissive perceptual regimes, affective signals can remain bodily, transient, and weakly verbalized without consolidating into emotion categories. This pattern, referred to here as affective quietude, reflects a regime property rather than a property of affective magnitude or capacity. Affect does not fail to appear, it fails to be captured.

Children’s engagement with absurd cartoons is often accompanied by brief, localized bodily sensations that are weakly verbalizable and difficult to classify as emotions.

These events are transient, do not consolidate into moods, and are rarely narrated or evaluated. They appear as momentary registrations rather than reportable affective states.

Development Increases Capture, Not Intensity

Several features of childhood experience are consistent with affective quietude. Children often remain engaged without articulating enjoyment, display bodily or attentional markers without emotional labels, and move between states without consolidating them into narratives or preferences.

Developmental change, on this account, does not necessarily increase affective intensity. It increases affective capture. With age, affect becomes more labeled, narrated, compared, remembered, and socially displayed. These changes increase visibility and reportability, not magnitude.

This reframing avoids both romanticizing childhood and pathologizing adulthood. The difference lies in evaluability, not capacity.

Measurement Artifacts

Standard affective measures presuppose stabilization, comparison, and narration. Self-report scales, preference rankings, and intensity ratings therefore impose evaluative closure.

When applied to quiet regimes, these methods can eliminate the very conditions that allow affect to persist. Flat or inconsistent reports need not indicate weak affect. They may indicate regime collapse.

This explains why children can recognize stimuli reliably while failing to express liking or preference. Recognition without preference is not incomplete evaluation. It is recognition operating without obligation to close..

Regime Interpretation

Affective quietude reflects operation under a permissive regime, in contrast to evaluative regimes in which experience must justify itself. Under permissive regimes, affect can occur without becoming an object. Under evaluative regimes, affect is rapidly amplified, narrated, optimized, or suppressed. This distinction clarifies why childhood affect is often mischaracterized and why similar stimuli can support engagement in some contexts while feeling flat or exhausting in others.

The contribution here is minimal. No new emotion is proposed, and no new scale is introduced. The claim is structural: affect can exist without needing to be evaluated.

Play as Downstream Organization

As described in Section 6, affective signals under permissive regimes often remain quiet, bodily, and weakly articulated. Play does not generate these signals, but stabilizes the conditions under which such quiet affect can persist without evaluative capture.

Play as Stabilization, Not Source

Once permissivity is present, play functions as a secondary organization of experience. It stabilizes and extends affective engagement by introducing light structure without imposing evaluation.

Characteristic features of play follow from this role:

- rules are optional rather than binding
- errors are tolerated rather than penalized
- repetition occurs without optimization
- outcomes carry weak commitment

These features do not generate affect. They protect it. By preventing premature closure, play allows positive experience to persist and become shareable without collapsing into performance.

Why Play Correlates With Well-Being

Play reliably correlates with well-being because it tends to occur in environments that already support permissive regimes. Such environments reduce evaluative pressure, tolerate ambiguity, and allow experience to remain non-instrumental.

Play therefore functions as a marker of well-being-conducive conditions rather than their cause. When play emerges spontaneously, it signals that affective permissivity is already present.

This distinction explains why increasing play opportunities does not consistently increase well-being. Without permissivity, play loses its stabilizing function and becomes mere activity, obligation, or performance.

Methods: Probing Permissive Perceptual Regimes

Using Absurd Cartoons

Methodological principle: regime preservation

The method is built around a single constraint: measurement must not impose evaluative closure on the experience it seeks to observe. Many developmental and affective paradigms inadvertently collapse permissive regimes by asking participants to rate, choose, compare, or explain their experience. Such operations recruit evaluation and transform the phenomenon.

Accordingly, the present design avoids in-episode self-reports of emotion, liking, preference, or intensity. Probes are restricted to non-evaluative operations, primarily recognition and engagement continuity, which preserve the underlying regime. The aim is not to elicit stronger responses, but to allow affective and perceptual signals to remain present without being forced into judgment.

This principle treats questions and metrics as active interventions rather than neutral readouts, and prioritizes regime preservation over affect amplification.

Participants

Participants are children aged **5 to 10 years**, spanning early to middle childhood, a developmental window in which permissive perceptual regimes are expected to be robust yet variable. This age range allows examination of engagement with unresolved perceptual discrepancies without relying on adult-like evaluative reporting.

Inclusion criteria are minimal: normal or corrected-to-normal vision and no reported neurological or sensory conditions. Exclusion is limited to **prior familiarity with the specific cartoon clips**, assessed post-exposure using recognition probes rather than preference or liking judgments.

Participants were tested during a school vacation period. This criterion was used to reduce background evaluative pressure associated with school schedules, performance demands, and time-constrained routines, thereby increasing the likelihood that experience unfolded under a permissive perceptual regime.

This selection strategy is regime-focused rather than trait-focused. It avoids stratification by affective capacity or self-report ability and minimizes procedural elements that could introduce evaluative pressure or collapse permissive experience during the task.

Sleep-related exclusion.

Participants reporting markedly disrupted or insufficient sleep on the night preceding testing were excluded. This criterion was introduced to reduce baseline evaluative load and attentional instability that could artificially collapse permissive perceptual regimes independently of stimulus properties.

Stimuli

Two categories of cartoon stimuli are used to probe tolerance to unresolved perceptual discrepancy while holding narrative content constant.

Old / imperfect animation clips (30–60 s) are drawn from older cartoons characterized by visible frame jitter, irregular timing, proportion violations such as stretching or flattening, inconsistent motion dynamics, and physical impossibilities that remain unresolved. These features preserve residual perceptual prediction error rather than correcting it.

Modern / optimized animation clips are matched for characters, actions, and pacing but exhibit smooth motion interpolation, corrected proportions, stable causal continuity, and aggressive perceptual error minimization. Optimization is treated as a manipulation of error closure rather than content quality.

All clips are silent or minimally dialogued to avoid linguistic humor cues, and none rely on punchlines or narrative resolution. The contrast isolates perceptual error dynamics while minimizing confounds related to story, instruction, or evaluative framing.

Procedure

Participants are tested individually in a quiet, familiar setting. They are told only that they will watch short cartoon clips, with no mention of enjoyment, humor, correctness, or performance. No goals, tasks, or instructions beyond attending to the screen are provided.

Clips are presented sequentially, with brief neutral pauses between them. During viewing, no questions are asked and no behavioral feedback or observation cues are introduced. The experimenter remains unobtrusive to avoid inducing monitoring or evaluative pressure.

After each clip, participants are asked **non-evaluative probes only**, limited to recognition or simple descriptive prompts when needed (for example, whether they have seen the clip before). No questions about liking, fun, preference, or emotional intensity are included at any point.

The procedure is designed to preserve a permissive perceptual regime throughout exposure, treating the absence of interruption, sustained attention, and resistance to

disengagement as primary indicators of engagement rather than relying on self-report.

No temporal information was made salient during the session. Clocks, timers, and other time cues were not visible to participants, and no references to duration or remaining time were provided.

Outcome measures (low-intrusion)

Outcome measures are selected to index engagement and regime stability without requiring affect to be evaluated, compared, or verbalized. No self-reported ratings of emotion, liking, preference, or intensity are collected. Engagement continuity is treated here not as evidence of enjoyment, motivation, or preference, but as a conservative indicator that experience has not been reorganized or terminated by evaluative operations.

Primary measures focus on engagement continuity, including sustained attention during clip presentation and resistance to interruption or disengagement. These indicators are treated as signatures of a preserved permissive regime rather than as proxies for motivation or preference.

Secondary measures include recognition without preference, absence of evaluative narration, and spontaneous attentional or bodily markers observed during viewing. Recognition probes are used descriptively to assess familiarity, not desirability.

All measures are interpreted conservatively. Their role is not to quantify affective magnitude, but to detect whether perceptual and affective signals can remain present without being forced into evaluative closure.

Analytical strategy

The analysis is designed to detect regime differences rather than to estimate affective magnitude. No assumptions are made about discrete emotional states or subjective intensity. Instead, analyses focus on whether engagement remains stable under non-evaluative conditions.

Primary comparisons examine differences in engagement continuity and resistance to interruption across animation conditions (old / imperfect vs modern / optimized). Recognition responses are analyzed descriptively to verify familiarity without treating them as indicators of preference or enjoyment.

All indicators are interpreted conservatively. Evidence for a permissive perceptual regime is inferred from the persistence of engagement in the absence of evaluative demands, not from increases in reportable affect. The analytical goal is therefore to test tolerance to unresolved perceptual discrepancy, not to model emotion

What this method does and does not claim

This method is designed to detect regime-level differences in how perceptual and affective signals are handled, not to measure emotional states or affective intensity. It tests whether engagement can be sustained when perceptual discrepancies remain unresolved and experience is not required to justify itself.

The method does examine tolerance to open perceptual prediction error under non-evaluative conditions and allows affective signals to remain quiet, bodily, and weakly articulated. It treats stability of engagement as evidence of regime preservation rather than as a proxy for enjoyment or motivation.

The method does not claim to measure joy, diagnose emotional capacities, or propose interventions. It avoids categorizing internal states and refrains from inferring subjective magnitude. Its contribution is diagnostic and structural: identifying when a permissive perceptual regime is present and when it collapses

Box 1. Falsifiability and Scope of the Regime Account

The permissive perceptual regime account advances a constrained, testable claim. It does not assert that absurd cartoons necessarily produce enjoyment, nor that permissive regimes are always present in childhood. Instead, it specifies conditions under which engagement should or should not be observable if evaluative closure is the organizing variable.

The account would be challenged under four outcomes. First, if engagement collapses even when evaluative closure is minimized, that is, in the absence of in-episode questioning, preference judgments, performance framing, or salient temporal cues, permissive regimes would not be sufficient to sustain engagement. Second, if introducing evaluative operations does not reduce engagement for the same stimuli, evaluative closure would not be necessary. Third, if engagement continuity does not differ between stimuli that preserve unresolved perceptual violations and those that do not under identical regime-preserving conditions, tolerance to unresolved discrepancy would lose explanatory relevance. Fourth, if engagement continuity can be fully explained by non-regime factors such as novelty, passive capture, or sensory salience alone, the regime interpretation would be weakened.

These criteria delimit the scope of the claim. The regime account is diagnostic rather than causal, and structural rather than affective. It specifies when engagement can persist at all, not how strong it is or what emotion it represents.

Implications for Play Theory

Reframing play as downstream avoids two common errors. It does not romanticize play as a magical generator of joy, and it does not reduce play to a developmental exercise.

Instead, play is treated as an emergent organization that depends on prior conditions. This clarifies why play is both powerful and fragile, and why it disappears under monitoring, assessment, or outcome orientation even when behavior remains unchanged.

The central claim is minimal. Play matters not because it creates positive affect, but because it allows positive affect, once possible, to remain possible.

Development Reframed as Regime Shift

Child-Adult Differences Reflect Evaluability

The apparent decline of childhood affect can be understood as the loss of affective quietude (Section 6), as evaluative demands increasingly amplify, narrate, and capture affective signals.

Development Increases Capture, Not Affective Magnitude

Development does not necessarily increase the intensity of positive affect. It increases affective capture. With age, affective experience is more likely to be labeled, narrated, compared, remembered, and socially displayed.

These changes make affect more visible and reportable, but not stronger. What is gained in expressivity may be lost in permissivity. Affect becomes easier to measure but harder to sustain without evaluation.

This distinction clarifies why childhood affect is often retrospectively described as stronger. Quiet affect is reinterpreted, under adult evaluative standards, as absence or loss.

Reinterpreting Decline and Nostalgia Narratives

Narratives of emotional decline often assume that positive experience diminishes with development. From a regime perspective, such narratives reflect a change in how affect is handled rather than a reduction in affective capacity.

As evaluative demands increase, quiet affect becomes harder to detect and easier to disrupt. Experiences that once occurred without comment are now subject to monitoring and explanation. When these experiences disappear under evaluation, they are remembered as lost.

This reinterpretation does not deny developmental change. It relocates it. What changes is the availability of permissive regimes, not the ability to experience positive affect.

Regime as the Developmental Variable

Treating regime as a developmental variable dissolves several persistent puzzles. It explains why similar stimuli support engagement at one age and feel flat at another, why interventions succeed in some contexts and fail in others, and why child–adult contrasts often resist trait-based explanations.

The contribution is structural. Developmental differences in affect are better understood in terms of evaluability than intensity.

Many developmental and affective phenomena exist only under permissive regimes and are therefore vulnerable to standard measurement practices. Questions that require ratings, preferences, or explanations are not neutral probes, but impose evaluative demands that can shift the underlying regime and alter the experience being studied.

Flat or inconsistent self-reports, particularly in children, need not indicate weak affect, but may reflect collapse of the permissive conditions under which affect occurred. The dissociation between reliable recognition and absent preference illustrates that evaluation is not a necessary consequence of familiarity, but a regime-dependent operation.

These considerations suggest that many null or fragile findings reflect methodological regime shifts rather than absence of the target phenomenon. Preserving permissivity by prioritizing low-intrusion indicators, such as engagement continuity, resistance to interruption, and recognition without preference, may therefore be a prerequisite for observing certain forms of affect at all.

Play as Downstream Organization

Play is not the source of positive affect. It is a secondary organization that becomes possible **after** a permissive experiential regime is already in place. When perceptual and affective signals can occur without immediate evaluation or optimization, play can emerge as a way of stabilizing and extending that permissivity.

Under this account, the characteristic features of play are protective rather than generative. Optional rules, tolerance for error, repetition without optimization, and weak commitment to outcomes do not create affect. They prevent its premature closure. Play gives light structure to experience while keeping evaluative demands low enough for engagement to persist.

This reframing explains why play reliably correlates with well-being without causing it. Play tends to appear in environments that already reduce monitoring, comparison, and outcome pressure. In such contexts, play functions as a marker of permissive conditions, not as their mechanism. When evaluative demands remain high, introducing play does not restore affect. Instead, play collapses into performance, obligation, or mere activity.

Seen this way, play is best understood as a downstream solution to a structural problem: how to hold open an experiential space in which affect does not need to justify itself.

Development Reframed as Regime Shift

Developmental change is often described as a gain in emotional strength, regulation, or cognitive capacity. From the present perspective, this framing is misleading. The primary difference between childhood and adulthood is not the magnitude of affect, but the **degree to which experience is required to become evaluable**.

In childhood, perceptual and affective signals more often occur under permissive regimes. Engagement does not require justification, and recognition does not automatically trigger comparison or judgment. As a result, affect can remain quiet, bodily, and weakly narrated without being diminished. What appears as emotional immaturity or instability is better understood as low capture.

With development, experience becomes increasingly labeled, narrated, compared, and remembered. This shift increases reportability and control, but it also increases evaluative pressure. Affect becomes more visible and communicable, yet less able to remain open. What is gained in expressivity is not necessarily gained in intensity.

This reframing clarifies why childhood is often remembered as emotionally richer despite limited evidence of stronger affect. Nostalgia tracks the loss of permissive regimes, not a decline in affective capacity. Development is thus best understood as a **regime shift**, from permissive to evaluative, rather than as a simple trajectory of emotional growth.

Methodological Consequences

Failing to distinguish permissive and evaluative regimes leads to systematic methodological error. Many developmental and affective studies unintentionally impose evaluative demands through their measures, then conclude that the targeted experiences are weak, unstable, or absent.

Questions that ask participants to rate, compare, choose, or explain are not neutral. They actively reorganize experience by enforcing closure. In permissive regimes, such operations can eliminate the very phenomena under investigation, particularly quiet, bodily, or weakly narrated forms of affect.

Recognizing regime as a variable shifts methodological priorities. Instead of amplifying experience through measurement, studies must preserve the conditions under which it can occur. Indicators such as engagement continuity, resistance to interruption, and recognition without preference become more informative than intensity ratings or preference choices.

This perspective does not require new scales or instruments. It requires restraint. By treating measurement as intervention and regime as structure, many apparent inconsistencies in developmental and well-being research become intelligible rather than anomalous.

Broader Implications

The regime distinction scales beyond cartoons and childhood. Across domains, outcomes depend less on content than on whether experience must justify itself.

In **media design**, optimization and coherence can reduce engagement by prematurely closing perceptual error. Allowing controlled instability may better preserve attention.

In **education**, early evaluation can suppress exploratory engagement by enforcing closure before permissive learning can occur.

In **well-being research**, excessive measurement and self-monitoring can undermine positive experience by collapsing quiet affect.

In **institutions and performance contexts**, environments that minimize evaluability support recovery and engagement more reliably than those that maximize tracking.

The unifying implication is structural: experiences function differently depending on the regime under which they are encountered.

Discussion

The present paper is diagnostic by design, it identifies when a permissive perceptual regime is present, not how such regimes are entered, stabilized, or lost across development and adulthood. By treating cartoons as naturalistic probes rather than entertainment artifacts, the account explains why children engage with unresolved absurdity, why older imperfect animation can outperform optimized media, and why standard humor-based explanations fail.

The findings also clarify several persistent puzzles. Engagement without clear preference, quiet affect without expressive markers, and the fragility of play under observation are not deficits or immaturities. They are signatures of a regime in which experience is allowed to remain open, weakly evaluated, and non-instrumental. When evaluation is introduced, whether through optimization, questioning, or measurement, the regime collapses and the phenomena disappear.

Importantly, the contribution is structural rather than normative. The paper does not argue that permissive regimes are better in general, nor that evaluation is harmful per se. Instead, it shows that many phenomena only exist under specific regime conditions, and that failing to model regime leads to systematic misinterpretation (Clark, 2016).

More broadly, the work suggests that developmental change, media effectiveness, and well-being outcomes cannot be fully understood by focusing on stimuli, content,

or traits alone. The critical question is under what regime experience is allowed to occur. Recognizing this shifts explanation from what children enjoy to how experience is permitted to exist.

Conclusion

Absurd cartoons reveal a permissive perceptual regime in childhood in which perceptual violations, affective signals, and engagement can occur without evaluative closure. Children's engagement with such content does not require humor comprehension, narrative resolution, or heightened affective intensity. It reflects tolerance to unresolved discrepancy under specific regime conditions.

By introducing regime as a core variable, this paper clarifies why engagement can persist without preference, why affect can remain quiet without being weak, and why play correlates with well-being without causing it. Many developmental puzzles dissolve once we shift from asking what children feel to asking under what conditions experience is allowed to remain open.

The central claim is minimal but foundational: the same experience functions differently depending on whether it must be evaluated.

References

Attardo, S. (1994). *Linguistic theories of humor*. Mouton de Gruyter.

Bergen, D. (2009). Play as the learning medium for future scientists, mathematicians, and engineers. *American Journal of Play*, 1(4), 413–428.

Clark, A. (2013). Whatever next? Predictive brains, situated agents, and the future of cognitive science. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 36(3), 181–204.

<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X12000477>

Clark, A. (2016). *Surfing uncertainty: Prediction, action, and the embodied mind*. Oxford University Press.

Clark, A. (2018). A nice surprise? Predictive processing, emotion, and the active inference framework. *Topics in Cognitive Science*, 10(1), 1–19.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/tops.12330>

Dennett, D. C. (1987). *The intentional stance*. MIT Press.

Friston, K. (2010). The free-energy principle: A unified brain theory? *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*, 11(2), 127–138. <https://doi.org/10.1038/nrn2787>

Gibson, J. J. (1979). *The ecological approach to visual perception*. Houghton Mifflin.

James, W. (1890). *The principles of psychology* (Vols. 1–2). Henry Holt and Company.

Loizou, E. (2005). Infant humor: The theory of the absurd and the empowerment theory. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 13(1), 43–53.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760500048329>

McGhee, P. E. (1979). *Humor: Its origin and development*. W. H. Freeman.

Morin, F. (2025). *Ease: A threshold model of positive engagement in low-evaluation regimes*. Preprint. Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18224573>

Raskin, V. (1985). *Semantic mechanisms of humor*. D. Reidel.

Shultz, T. R. (1976). A cognitive-developmental analysis of humor. In A. J. Chapman & H. C. Foot (Eds.), *Humor and laughter: Theory, research, and applications* (pp. 11–36). Wiley.

Tomasello, M. (1999). *The cultural origins of human cognition*. Harvard University Press.

Wells, P. (2009). *The fundamentals of animation*. AVA Publishing.