

Playing games as a family can be lots of fun, but it can also be challenging and at times frustrating. Try to use some of the following strategies when playing games with your children, and maybe, after a bit of practice playing games will come to be a fun way to spend time together.

Playing games can teach social skills: Whether you choose to play competitive or cooperative games as a family, games can be opportunities to teach children how to:

- Be good winners and losers
- Take turns
- Cope with the stress of things not going your way
- Negotiate rules
- Play fair.

Playing games can build family cohesion: Playing games can feel like building a community. When people play games together, in a way they are creating a mini-universe with agreed upon rules, “in-jokes”, and sometimes even new languages! If you play the same game regularly, chances are you will develop your own special ways of doing things—your own family rituals. This, in turn, can help your family get along better.

Coach Good Behavior And Give Praise:

Let’s say you are playing a game with your ten-year-old daughter, and she wins the game. She might say, “*I beat you! Ha-ha! I beat you!*”

Your response could be something like:

Sarah, I had lots of fun playing with you, but when you brag about winning, it makes me not want to play again. It makes me feel bad. A winner’s job is to say, “Thanks for a fun game!” The person who loses—their job is to say, “Congratulations, thanks for the fun game!”

Remember to praise your children who do express themselves in positive ways.

“Jane, I really appreciate how you showed your brother graceful winning. You didn’t brag or make him feel bad. Great job with that!”

Negotiate And Review Rules Every Time You Play

Keep in mind the ages of children playing a particular game; rule negotiation is integral to the experience for certain ages. The way you negotiate the rules can tell you a lot about your family. For instance:

- Do you have to follow the rules written in the formal instructions exactly as they are written, or can you be flexible and make up your own family rules?
- Can there be different rules depending on the ages of children playing?
- What happens if someone breaks a rule? Are there consequences? Are there second chances?
- Can you re-negotiate a rule in the middle of the game? How is this done?
- How do you make decisions as a family? Is it majority rules? Does everyone need to

be in agreement? Can you trade off who gets the deciding vote?

Often, children in the 7-12 year old range will spend most of time negotiating the rules of a game, and only a few minutes playing before they get bored and move on to something else! This is fine! That is entirely appropriate for this age group.

Review the basic rules before the game starts, and then you can ask:

“Does anyone have any special rules or ways of playing that they’d like to add before we begin?”

This is a great way to teach following the rules, while still being flexible and open to your children’s ideas.

Look for Warning Signals

For children with low levels of tolerance for stress, competitive games can cause anxiety. Parents need to pay attention to warning signals from children that things aren’t going well. Things to watch out for:

- Children who start banging their game pieces down on the board
 - Children who make even slight motions towards destroying game pieces (even only pretending to tear playing cards, for example).
 - Cheating
- ✓ Intervene early! These behaviors are your child’s non-verbal way of saying, *“Please help me deal with this stress of not winning, or I’ll have no choice but to pick up the game and throw it across the room! I’ve exhausted all the options I know! Help me get out safely before I do something we’ll both regret!”*
- ✓ Reflect back to your child what you’re observing, then give them permission, and the words, to exit gracefully. For example: *“Johnny, you banged that playing piece very hard during your turn. Are you getting frustrated with the game? It’s okay to take a break for a while; we can come back and play later.”* This begins to help Johnny identify bodily sensations of frustration, and gives him the tools to respond to his feelings before they overwhelm him.
- ✓ Tag-team approach for siblings. This is especially good for games that take a while to complete. For example: *“Sam, Johnny is going to take a break from playing Masterpiece for awhile. Do you want to be his partner and play for his turn while he’s gone? (only do this after getting Johnny’s permission first!)”*
- ✓ Play with partners. If there are enough children and adults, playing in teams or with partners can help buffer the stress and also allow for one member to take a break without his team missing out on the game. It’s probably best to partner adults with children, and not siblings together.



Family Fun: Strategies For Having Fun

Role Model: Playing a game gives you a great opportunity to teach about being a good winner and good loser. You can role model for your children how to say things like: “Thanks for playing with me, that was fun!” or, “It’s fun to play a game with you whether I win or lose!”

Use The Open Hand Method: The "open hand" method is usually used for teaching card games, but it can be used to teach any game. “Open Hand” simply means that the first round you play, after you explain the rules, is played with all players able to see what’s in each other’s hand. You talk out loud your thought process when making decisions about what cards to play or move to make.

Choose games appropriately: Pay attention to the age range on the game box.

What games should my family avoid?

Try to be aware of what games are taboo in your family. It doesn’t matter how great a parent you are, or how terrific your kids are, there is always some game that brings out the worst in someone!

For more tips, or if you need more information or would like to talk to someone:

In Washington State: Call the Family Help Line at 1-800-932-HOPE

Outside of Washington State: contact your local Circle of Parents agency at

www.circleofparents.org