



Playing Games with Your Child

Playing games is a great way for you to bond with your child! It also provides opportunities for your child to develop his or her thinking, organizational, motor, language, and social skills. Each of these skills is important to a child's future and can be taught through play! For example, select an active game to help promote your child's physical health or choose a puzzle to help him or her learn problem-solving skills. The following tips will help you get the most out of playing games with your child.



Choose Carefully

Games come in a variety of styles, and it is important to select games that are appropriate for your child's age, development, and skill level — as well as one that your child will enjoy! Include your child in the decision-making process when selecting games to play.

Be Flexible

Sometimes, modifications may need to be made in order to play a particular game with your child. For example, if it rains when you are hoping to set up an obstacle course outside, set one up inside instead. Or, if your child really wants to play a particular board game that may be too advanced, change the rules so you both can play.

Mix It Up

Play a variety of games with your child. Playing different games will provide more opportunities to enhance different skills and abilities. Don't hesitate to switch to a new game if your child's interest appears to be waning. Keep in mind, however, some children may want to play the same game multiple times. Be sure to play the game, but stress that you would also like to play a new game.

Check for Understanding

Games have rules or procedures that need to be followed. As you explain those rules or procedures to your child, take a few minutes to make sure he or she understands. You could also provide a quick demonstration of the rules or procedures to help your child understand what he or she is supposed to do. Try not to start the game until you are confident your child understands how the game works. This can help prevent confusion or frustration and make the game more enjoyable.

Be a Role Model

Games can teach children valuable social skills such as teamwork, taking turns, following directions, regulating emotions, and losing (or winning) gracefully. Children learn a lot from observation, so it is important that parents model appropriate, pro-social behaviors for them. As you interact with your child during the game, make sure you demonstrate these skills.





Look for Teachable Moments

In addition to being a positive role model, take note of your child's behavior and discuss it with them. Children may struggle with social skills when they are focused on "winning." Talk about the importance of teamwork, taking turns, following directions, regulating emotions, and losing (or winning) gracefully. Your child can benefit from a loving and supportive conversation about these behaviors. Ask questions that will help your child process his or her behaviors and arrive at his or her own conclusions; avoid simply telling your child what to do or believe.

Be Intentional

Make time to play with your child. You do not have to block out hours of your schedule to play a game with your child; sometimes, all you need is 10 or 15 minutes. It is unlikely that game playing will occur if you are not intentional about it. If you are hesitant because of time issues or other commitments, let your child know your time limits before playing. For example, you might say, "I really want to play with you, but I have to cook dinner. Let's agree to play for 30 minutes, and then I will start dinner." In addition, game play does not have to be structured. For example, if you notice that your child is playing with Legos, take a few minutes and join in, but remember to let him or her lead the play activity.



Downplay Competition

Most games will inevitably have a winner and a loser; this aspect of game play should be deemphasized as it can promote emotions or behaviors that detract from enjoyment and learning. If you notice that your child is focused on competition, gently remind him or her that it is just a game and it is more important to enjoy spending time together with friends and family. You could also try praising and encouraging your child's effort to help take the focus off performance. Remember to tell your child specifically what he or she is doing right — even if your child is losing! For example, "I really liked the way you kept your cool even when we were losing. It was so fun playing with you!" If your child becomes too fixated on winning and repeatedly displays inappropriate behavior, take a time out from the game to give your child a chance to calm down and refocus.

Have Fun

The most important part of any game is having fun! Create an environment in which you focus on love, laughter, and learning. Be supportive, keep the tone light, and interject humor.



Additional resources, skills, and strategies for parents are available at no cost through the online Thrive Initiative programming. Visit the Thrive website <https://thrive.psu.edu>, and sign up today!