



# Parent *pages*

RESOURCES FOR CHRISTIAN PARENTS IN THE 21ST CENTURY



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## Make a game out of learning

What games did you play when you were growing up? Did your family enjoy the plotting involved in board games or perhaps fast-paced card games? Maybe you remember nights out on the driveway shooting baskets or passing the soccer ball in the back yard.

Children today have a seemingly endless list of activities to keep them busy, and most can be found on their computer or phone. I want to make a case for putting the hand-held game gadgets down and gathering the family together for a regular game night.

The first benefit of families playing games is that it represents time away from the various screens in a child's life. Health care providers remind us that there is a link between childhood obesity and the amount of time spent in front of a screen. Furthermore, playing with siblings instead of technology develops different parts of the brain. When family members play together, children interact and develop language and social skills, such as the ability to negotiate. When parents play with children, they have an opportunity to guide those negotiations.

Children who have learned social skills at home find it much easier to make and positively influence friends at school. Research shows us that children with good school social skills also perform better academically.

**Everything you do with your children provides an opportunity to share your faith and teach them about their God.**

Playing games develops math, reading and problem-solving skills. Even something as



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simple as moving a token down the path of a board game will increase a child's ability to count, add and subtract. Other games reinforce number patterns needed to learn multiplication or grammar patterns needed for reading comprehension.

Many games encourage spelling and vocabulary development, and almost all games give children the opportunity to practice problem solving. Even puzzles support reading and math by giving children practice at identifying detail and understanding how parts make a whole. It is not so much about the specific math facts or vocabulary learned; it is more about creating a pathway in the brain that helps your child to learn more later. It is like telling the brain: "This skill is important; create a space for it."

Besides the tangible benefits of math, reading, and language development, playing games offers other brain benefits. In

order to learn, children must have the ability to focus, the ability to remember several things at once, and the ability to change their thinking when the situation calls for it. These skills are known as inhibitive control, working memory and cognitive flexibility; they are all a part of executive function.

Executive function means the brain uses these skills to direct all other learning. When children play games, they learn how to sustain and direct focus. They also learn how to keep track of what they are doing and what others in the game are doing. Also, a good game encourages a child to practice strategy and the adjustment of that strategy when others in the game create changes. Just as counting with a token can lay groundwork for learning math facts, practicing executive function skills creates neural pathways that are available for developing other thinking skills. The same skills that help your child beat you in a game will help your child ace that test in school.



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Here are a list of game types and the kinds of skills they develop:

- Puzzles: detail identification, parts to whole thinking, self-control, working memory.
- Word games: reading, spelling, vocabulary, cognitive flexibility, working memory.
- Board games: counting, strategy, math, reading, working memory, self-control.
- Construction toys: science, planning, visual special skills, problem solving, cognitive flexibility.
- Creative toys: fine motor skills, problem solving, cognitive flexibility, working memory.
- Outdoor games: large motor skills, strategy, self-control, working memory.

Family game nights are not just about work; they are about fun and shared memories too. Many games offer a combination of luck and skill, so they work well to even the playing field for family members of all ages. This gives opportunity for families to regularly do something together that encourages story-telling, gentle teasing, words of encouragement and a sharing of values.

Young children, especially, can learn perspective through these times of family play. They learn that it's OK to lose, because you can learn and do better next time and that encouraging one another is an important skill. This is an effective way of learning how to be competitive, because they are learning how to deal with both failure and success in an environment where they feel unconditional love.

**“You shall teach them to your children, talking of them when you are sitting in your house, and when you are walking by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise”  
(Deut. 11:19).**

While the Bible does not mention play, we do know that God designed children to learn through play and to learn within a family setting. Everything you do with your children provides an opportunity to share your faith and teach them about their God.

A family game night is a win/win! It is time spent together. It is time spent developing skills that will transfer to other learning. It is time and opportunity to share God's love with each other.

## For further study:

Check out this book: “Funtastic Family Nights” from CPH  
<http://tinyurl.com/3qf38gn>

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