

Parent *pages*



Resources for Christian parents in the 21st Century

Vol. 6 No. 8 • April 2007

The Lost Art of Visual Spatial Skills

Visual spatial skills are a description of how our brains understand, manipulate, interpret, and use the things we see. It's about how we use mental pictures to understand abstract concepts.

For example, in science we understand earthquakes by picturing large plates in the earth bumping against each other. In math we understand fractions by visualizing a circle cut into pie shapes. And in reading we make a mental map of the story and its characters.

Children who have difficulties with visual spatial skills have difficulties in many areas of learning and working. Design work is difficult because a picture of the final project cannot be imagined. Computer work is affected because computer skills require more than what is on the screen. Projects like dioramas or science fair experiments can be a challenge because they require prediction and planning. Even verbal and literary skills depend on strong visual spatial skills.

The advantages of good visual spatial skills are many. Children are more able to draw, complete puzzles and mazes, notice detail, and recognize patterns. Being able to predict, plan, mentally imagine, reason logically, and feel comfortable with directions are skills that make for better students in nearly every subject.

God created us to be three-dimensional beings active in our world. Our society, however, has become increasingly dependent on the two-dimensional television, video, and computer screen. Interestingly enough, these tools require good visual spatial skills but there is little evidence to suggest they strengthen these skills. Our children need to move, work and play to develop their brains in this important area.

Here are some family activities that will not only create stronger relationships but also develop visual spatial skills.

Sports and Dance: Any sports activity will use and encourage visual spatial skills. Encourage playing for health and enjoyment and deemphasize winning, and the benefits will be even stronger. Team sports may be a bit much for very young children, but consider the martial arts or dance. These two activities focus on coordination, balance, and moving your body through space.

Blocks and other Manipulatives: The good, old wood blocks we remember from kindergarten are wonderful tools for developing visual analogies (this is a bridge and this is a ramp). The

plastic building blocks are great when small motor skills have developed. The plainer the building set, the better. These blocks, rather than those pre-formed toys that can only be built into one thing, work more areas of the brain and hold the child's interest longer.

Arts and Crafts: For children not as interested in

constructing with blocks, art projects provide opportunities to promote development of the same skills. Art classes and kits are nice but most children I know are just as happy with a table full of paper, glue, tape and markers. Don't throw away cardboard until it has been recycled through an arts and crafts table.

My church worker family moved quite a bit when I was growing up. For each move, the thought of empty boxes to build with was a source of excitement to my sister and brother and I.

Deconstruction: If building things is good, than taking them apart is good medicine too. A couple of kids can have a blast with safety glasses, screwdrivers, and a hopelessly broken clock radio. This type of play should be supervised by an adult. Take care not to let your



children de-construct an appliance with a static charge or dangerous chemicals, such as microwaves, televisions, or computer monitors.

Strategy Games and Puzzles:

Everything from chess to checkers to tic-tac-toe are great strategy games that can be part of a family game night. The great thing about these games is they cross over age groups. Many board games are also good. They reinforce counting, planning, and pattern recognition.

Jigsaw puzzles are an excellent family activity. Different ages working together will discover that the puzzle is more easily completed. Young children notice details that escape older family members and older children can more easily see the big picture to encourage the younger participants.

Music Lessons: Voice or instrumental lessons are an excellent investment. If that is not a possibility, look into what is available at your church. Many congregations sponsor bell choirs and/or children's choir. You can also help your child get the most out of his or her music education at school by making sure your family supports practice and concerts. Attend other music events and listen to music at home.

Cooking and Baking: Besides the other obvious benefits of food to eat, kitchen activities give good practice in visual spatial skills, especially those of planning and attention to detail.

Here is the best news for parents, family chores such as laundry, vacuuming, loading the dishwasher, and mowing the lawn are also good visual spatial practice as they involve planning, strategy and movement. While I cannot promise an increase in IQ or SAT scores, science can definitely verify that doing family chores does not hurt. With teenagers in my house, I have discovered the best benefit of teaching my children to bake is coming home at the end of a



long day to the smell of brownies.

“Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it”

Prov. 22:6.

Anything we as parents can do to help our children reach their learning potential will also help them serve God. Visual spatial skills will help your child to understand and live Scripture. In this way, the Spirit encourages us to follow the directive of Proverbs. I am encouraged to understand how beautifully God created family in order to make the healthy development of His children possible. When we answer His call to “train” or “dedicate” our children in the way they should go we have a small hand in creating the next generation of pastors, teachers, church building architects, church treasurers, liturgical artists, musicians, missionaries, and more.

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future.”

Jer. 29:11.

God knows the plans He has for your children. Plans for them to find rewarding work and service, as well as plans for them to be able to provide for their families and to support the work of His church. It is a blessing to be a part of God's plan for our children. He has also blessed you with a church and school that can help you in this most important of endeavors.

“Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, and when you lie down and when you get up”

Deut. 11:19.

This verse is directed at parents, not at teachers or principals. God's design of a healthy family encourages learning that develops a child in faith as well as other areas. Praise God for His love, care, planning, and support in the awesome job of raising children!

For discussion

1. What activities from your childhood helped to develop visual spatial skills?
2. What activities do you do as a family to enhance your child's development in this area?
3. What activities could you easily add that would be enjoyable as well as beneficial?
4. How does the study of Scripture enhance your child's learning in other areas?

For further study:

■ www.childparenting.about.com

“Parent Pages” is published by LCMS District and Congregational Services—School Ministry

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1333 S. Kirkwood Road, St. Louis, MO 63122-7295; 1-800-248-1930; www.lcms.org

Kim Marxhausen, Lincoln, Neb., Writer • Frank Kohn, Editor and Layout

Vol. 6, No. 8 • April 2007