



Wee Learn

Wee Experts
(5 – 6 years):
Family Game Night is
More Than Just Fun



With TV and video games competing for our family's attention, board games have been relegated to the dark recesses of our memories, as something we did with our parents when we didn't have cool high-tech gadgets and satellite television. But dusting off these games can lead to a family bonding experience that is not only fun, but can improve kids' mental and emotional development, helping them perform better in school and social settings.

Toronto mom of three, Robin Hicks, has enjoyed playing board games since she was a child and loves sharing her favourite pastime with her kids, Joseph, 7, Helen, 4 and Georgia, 2. With more than 40 board games in their game closet, family game night is a regular occurrence in the Hicks' household. "We usually play board games together once a week," says Robin. As a paramedic, Robin's shiftwork hours don't allow her to spend as much time as she would like with her kids, making face-to-face playtime even more meaningful. In addition to facilitating family bonding, Robin says board games are a useful learning tool for her young brood. Good sportsmanship, following rules and taking turns are important social skills Robin hopes to reinforce in her children through playing board games.

Jennifer Kolari, child psychologist and author of *Connected Parenting*, says playing, as a family is a great way for parents to assess how well children have developed certain social skills. "We let our true emotions out more with family than with others," says Jennifer. The ability of board games to reinforce important social skills make them a unique developmental tool. "Kids learn so much about sharing and being a good sport and getting along with each other through board game playing."

Practise good sportsmanship. Nothing sours family game night faster than a sore loser. Temper tantrums can quickly cause games to be locked in the closet for the rest of eternity. That's a shame, says Jennifer, who argues board games can be an excellent forum for teaching good sportsmanship. "Part of a game is winning and losing, and being happy for other people when things go well for them in the game, and learning to be a good winner if it's you that wins," says Jennifer. Robin says talking to her kids about winning and losing before playing can help set the stage for a tantrum-free game night.

Follow the rules. While no parent likes to transform into the role of traffic cop during family fun time, Jennifer says controlling cheating is a good way to teach kids the importance of following rules, a skill that will last them well into adulthood. "The tendency as a parent is either to come down on them and say 'no one's going to play with you if you do that' or just let them do it because you want family game night to go well," she says. Talk about the rules of the game before playing and stress the importance of being honest.





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Learn to win and lose gracefully: Losing a game can bring on the waterworks in many kids, but Jennifer says learning to lose gracefully is an important skill all kids need to hone to succeed in life. Jennifer herself has faced the dreaded game night tears. "My son was the biggest sore loser and every time we played a game, he would end up in tears," she says. In response, the family decided there would be two winners. "The winner who won the game and the winner who handled losing the best," she says. Don't forget to control your own emotions, too, demonstrating to kids how to handle themselves when things don't go their way in the game.

Encourage behavioural changes: "Everything that happens in board games can be applicable to life," says Jennifer. Robin agrees, saying she has witnessed behavioural changes in her children that she attributes to the board games they've played as a family. "Since we've been playing board games together, they've been getting along better and can work through their differences," she says. One notable difference is improved sharing and negotiation skills. "They all really like books and if one of them is looking at a book that the other one wants, they'll go get a different book and say, 'here, I'll trade you'," says Robin.

Choosing a board game: With thousands of board games to choose from, selecting the right one for your family can be a challenge. Follow these pointers to ensure your family game night starts with the right move.

- **Focus on skills:** Select a game that will reinforce the specific skills that you want to focus on. Some games are educational and aim to reinforce cognitive skills such as reading, logical reasoning or spelling; others are effective at teaching the value of co-operation, sharing or trading. Jennifer recommends finding a toy store where staff can walk you through the advantages of different games.
- **Know your kid:** Choose a game that's not only age-appropriate, but that also suits the temperament of your child. Chance games such as Snakes and Ladders, where winning or losing is purely based on the roll of the dice, can be hard on kids who don't handle losing well. "Although they're simple games, when you're sent all the way back to the start of the game when you were at the end can be really devastating," says Jennifer. While she doesn't advocate eliminating chance games all together since adversity is also an important skill to learn, switching it up with memory games or cooperative games that encourage teamwork and sharing can help make family game night not only about winning and losing, but simply about having fun.

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