

Are We Having Fun Yet?

Finding time to play with my kids can be really hard!

Do not feel bad if you are not just THRILLED with the idea of FAMILY FUN TIME. Some parents HATE playing – that is just a fact. Other parents enjoy playing, but feel like they have 100 other things they should be doing. These are normal feelings – don't feel bad about them!

Why is playing with my children so important?

Family Fun Time can help your family to:

- Know each other better.
- Feel more connected to each other.
- Decrease stress in your home.

Children who feel like their parents really know them and like to spend time playing with them are more likely to:

- Make friends
- Do well in school
- Follow their parent's rules (most of the time).

Sounds good, yes?

How do I have fun with my family?

Make a list of activities that you both enjoy – or can at least tolerate.

Some parents hate board games, but love art activities. Some parents love playing catch but can't stand dancing. Find activities that you both enjoy. Think of what you loved doing as a kid and try to build on that.

Pick a time. Pick a few times a day that you spend listening to and playing with your child. Make it part of the routine.

Build up your time. Start with 3 minutes twice a day and slowly build up to a time that feels good to you.

Don't out-do your child. Sometimes when parents play with children, they completely take over the activity!!!! This can hard on children's self-esteem. Try to match what your child is doing. If your child is building a 3-block tower – you build a 3-block tower – not a castle. If your child is scribbling with a blue marker – you scribble with a purple marker.

Give warnings to let the child know when fun time is close to being over. Say, "We can build one more block tower and then I need to stop." Or "We can throw the ball 3 more times and then it is time to go in."

Stop while you are still having fun. Remember – it is better to play for 3 minutes and have a really good time and stop while you are still having fun. Stop BEFORE frustration or boredom sends the board game flying across the room!

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Grumbling is part of playtime. No child wants to stop having fun -- so don't be surprised if your child is angry or frustrated when play time is over. This can be hard on parents who are thinking, "Gosh, I just spent 15 minutes playing with this child and he isn't even grateful." Think of grumbling at the end of playtime as just part of the activity. Kids have to learn that good times end and how to move into another activity and you are coaching them on this skill.

Daily Reminder:

Make time to have fun with your children. It will pay off in a 100 different ways and is worth every minute.

Enjoying Your Child

Enjoying your child isn't always very easy.

Difficult behaviors, like whining and tantrums, can seem to outweigh the fun times. And when you feel overwhelmed, exhausted, and angry, things can get to the point where you just don't feel very positive about your child and may not want to spend time with them.

And yet--spending positive time with your child is an important part of their development.

It can increase:

- Self-esteem
- Confidence
- Sense of mastery
- Social competence

Many people also feel that the more shared, positive experiences you have with your child, the **easier** discipline becomes. Children can be more likely to follow directions and cooperate if they have established a strong, positive attachment with their parent. In fact, many child development experts feel that a positive attachment should be in place before trying a new discipline strategy.

Here are some suggestions to help you have a more positive connection when playing with your child:

Before playing with your child:

- Spend 5 minutes thinking about what you like about your child.
- Remember 3 fun times you've had in the past with your child.
- Accept that enjoying your children can take effort. Remember that the effort is worth it.

When playing with your child:

- **Enter the play without directing it.** Some parents don't like playing with their children because they find children's games boring to play. You can try a therapist's trick to help you get involved: instead of just watching your child play, enter the play, but stay on the sidelines. Do this by repeating back to your child what you just saw them do. Say things in a non-judgmental way. Say it like you were making a really good story from what you see. For example: "I see that you are rushing the fire truck to the fire. You are putting out that fire! The fireman just fell out of that truck. Now the truck runs over the fire man." You don't have to narrate every single minute. Do a few sentences. Then watch a bit. Then narrate again.
- **Don't turn play into school or work.** Although it may sometimes be appropriate to use a play situation to teach a lesson, the goal of this type of play is to have fun. So don't worry about the play needing to be educational. And only stop the play if there is something unsafe happening.
- **You are the adult.** Some parents get so caught up in playing that they forget that they are the adult. Remember your goal: to have fun with your child. Not to win a game, not to outsmart or outdo. To have fun is the end goal.
- **End it before it fails.** Whatever you are doing: free play, art, listening to the radio together—end it on a high note. Give your child 3 reminders, spaced 5 minutes apart. Let them know that you are having fun with them, but that you will need to finish the play soon. If they whine, cry or plead for more: simply validate their feelings. Say: "I know, I know, endings are hard. You are sad about this."
- **Thank your child** for the time you spent together. This will show your child that you value them, and think that they are worthy of your time and energy.

Playing Games: Strategies For Having Fun

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.

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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.

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!

Remembering The Good Times

Every parent has bad days when they feel like everyone is a better parent than they are.

- The kids won't stop fighting.
- Your 6-year-old says, "I hate you."
- No one will come to the dinner table.
- Your teenager's new friends give you the shivers.
- Your father says you need to have more strict discipline.
- Everyone seems to have an opinion about how you could be a better parent. On days like this you need to remember the good times.

Make a list of favorite parenting memories:

Write down several times when you felt like a good parent, when someone complimented you on your parenting, when your child's smiling face said you were the most-loved parent in the world. These can be very simple:

One mother wrote about the time she heard her 9-year-old daughter tell her friend: *"Let's ask my mom what to do at our party, she makes everything fun!"*

One father wrote about how his 6-year-old son missed him so much when he was working out of town, his son would fall asleep hugging one of his dad's t-shirts.

Add new things to your list every month! Discuss it with a friend!

Gather memories in a special place:

Pick a place where you can keep your List of Favorite Parenting Memories. Make a scrapbook. Or make a special box. Start to gather pictures, mementos, notes, letters, special event tickets. Anything that when you look at it or read it makes you feel like a good parent.

- One mother had a picture of taking all her son's friends sledding.
- Another mother kept a Mother's Day Card from her 3-year-old – covered with peanut butter and jelly prints!
- A father kept a card his wife sent him on father's day that listed all his wonderful qualities as a father.
- Another father kept the first barrettes he ever bought for his daughter to remind him that he learned how to fix his little girl's hair.

You can put anything in your box or scrapbook that reminds you of what a wonderful parent you can be. How can you make a special place for your favorite parenting memories? What items would you collect and put in the box? Discuss your ideas with a friend.