

# Skill-Building Opportunities

## Learning and Video Games

**Question:** My son LOVES his video games. I'm not opposed to him playing them since knowing how to use electronics is important in today's world. I want to make sure that when he does play with video games, he's also developing his mind. Any suggestions?

We share your concern. It's a common struggle to balance children's interest in video games with other activities. Choosing the right type of game, and limiting the length of time your child plays, can help make it a learning opportunity and promote the Life Skill of Focus and Self Control.

**Focus and Self Control** involves paying attention, remembering the rules, thinking flexibly and exercising self-control (not going on automatic, but doing what's needed to pursue a goal). Children need this skill to achieve their goals, especially in a world filled with distractions and information overload.

**1**

### Select games that promote life skills.

When choosing video games for or with your child, look for games that promote life skills, such as Focus and Self Control. Games like these involve tasks that require paying attention and remembering rules while adapting to changing situations.

Examples include games that:

- require paying attention and remembering where things are;
- require children to control the speed or movement of a character and pay close attention;
- involve counting or sorting the objects even with many distractions;
- promote the use of self control and remembering the rules; and
- help children learn to anticipate and prepare for what will happen next.

Consider whether the games improve thinking skills rather than just memorization.

**2**

### Avoid games that include violence.

Daniel Anderson of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst studies the effects of television on children's attention. He says: "Watching aggression begets aggression. It's very clear that children, at young ages, will imitate aggressive acts that they see on television. It's also clear from a lot of research that children will learn the way of thinking that leads to violence—retaliation and categorizing people as good guys and bad guys."

Video games can promote destruction and violence, or they can promote amazing thinking skills. Many games promote aggressive behavior and are not appropriate for children.

Take a strong role in selecting video games—and television shows—that reflect the values you want your child to learn, and that help, not hinder, his growing ability to focus. When you select games for your child, review them carefully. Are they helping him improve his thinking skills in constructive ways? For reviews of children's media, visit Common Sense Media: <https://www.commonsensemedia.org>.

## 3

**Provide many opportunities for physical activity.**

The American Academy of Pediatrics suggests that, for every half-hour that your child watches TV or plays video games, match it with a half-hour of active play, and limit the amount of screen time.

While technology is an integral part of life, it's important to balance non-physical and physical activity for the mental and the physical benefits. Children learn Focus and Self Control by being active and playing games that require some degree of attention and flexible thinking.

The research of Megan McClelland of Oregon State University has found that children improve their skills and learning by playing such games as:

- Red Light, Green Light;
- Freeze Tag;
- I Spy; and
- Simon Says.

## 4

**Take time to unplug as a family.**

Unplugging is a good time to share physical activity with your child. Go for a walk, play tag or hide and seek, or do some exercises together. School-age children enjoy challenging their parents to beat them. Also, set “no-technology” times, including mealtime or bedtime.

Unplugging can become a fun family ritual and help you provide your full attention. Even a short amount of time of full attention makes a good connection.