

# MIND in the Making

The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

## PRESCRIPTIONS FOR LEARNING

### Learning and Video Games

Promoting the Life Skill of Focus and Self Control in School Age Children

Four Strategies That Work in Moving from Managing Children's Behavior to Promoting Life Skills

**Question:** My seven-year-old son LOVES his video games. I am not opposed to him playing them since I believe that 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 is also developing his mind. Any suggestions?

**Michael Posner and his colleagues at the University of Oregon designed several video games for four and six year olds to promote focus and self control. One game involves a cartoon cat and mud. The children are given a joystick to move this cartoon cat around on a computer screen. At first, the cat is surrounded by grass, but patches of mud begin to appear on the screen. The task is to keep the cat away from the mud. In another game called Chase, the task is to control a cartoon umbrella to keep the cat dry. To be successful in these games, the children need to pay attention to what is happening, remember the rules for moving the object or character, respond to changing situations and use self control, so they don't go on automatic. The results? Even with brief training, the children had less trouble with self control. Not surprisingly, the six year olds learned more than the four year olds. The researchers also found that when children's ability to pay attention improved, their reasoning and thinking skills also improved.**

So, computer or video games can be helpful. Here are some tips for ensuring that they promote learning and life skills.

**1. Select games that promote life skills.** When choosing video games for or with your child, look for games that promote the 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:

- use a variation of the classic "shell game," where a small object is hidden beneath one of three cups that are then moved repeatedly;
- require children to control the speed or movement of a character;
- involve counting or sorting the objects amid many distractions;
- promote the use of self control; and
- help children learn to anticipate and be ready for what is going to happen next.

Consider whether the games improve thinking skills rather than rote drills of academic skills.

**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, categorizing people as good guys and bad guys.*

**2. Avoid games that include violence.** Video games can promote destruction and violence or they can promote amazing thinking skills. Many electronic games available promote aggressive behavior and are not appropriate for young 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 your child improve his thinking skills in constructive ways? For reviews of children's media, you can check out Common Sense Media: <https://www.commonsensemedia.org>.

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

**3. Provide many opportunities for physical activity.** While technology is an integral part of life today, it is essential to balance sedentary 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.** Gil Gordon, an expert on telecommuting, calls for having times when you are unplugged—turning off the TV, not answering the phone, turning off the computer. When you “unplug,” you are modeling to your child the importance of taking breaks and the value of giving your full attention. According to writer Maggie Jackson, when you take the time to give your full attention, you are giving a gift to yourself and others.

**These four strategies will promote the life skill of Focus and Self Control and move from managing children's behaviors to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways.**

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

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**Mind in the Making (MITM)**, at The Bezos Family Foundation, is an unprecedented effort to share the science of children's learning with the general public, families and professionals who work with them. Based on *Mind in the Making: The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs* (HarperCollins, 2010) by Ellen Galinsky, Chief Science Officer at The Bezos Family Foundation, its mission is to promote Executive Function life skills in adults and through them in children in order to keep the fire for learning burning brightly in all of us.

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