

SKILL BUILDING OPPORTUNITIES

Cheating and Games

Question: Our four-year-old son tends to cheat when he plays games. What should we do?

You can address the issue of cheating and games with your child while also promoting the life skill of Making Connections.

Making Connections is at the heart of learning—figuring out what's the same and what's different, and sorting these things into categories. Making unusual connections is at the core of creativity. In a world where people can Google for information, it is the people who can see connections who are able to go beyond knowing information to using this information well.

1

Be aware of your child's development.

Making Connections is a life skill that involves the Executive Functions of the brain. These are the skills used to manage our attention, our emotions, and our behavior in order to reach our goals. Phil Zelazo of the University of Minnesota has found that this higher level of thinking becomes possible with children during the preschool years and older.

The part of the brain dedicated to Executive Function does not really start to mature until children are preschoolers. This means that your child is still working on developing his understanding of rules. It's important not to push children beyond their developmental capacities in game playing, while you work on helping your child understand the rules. This could make the experience frustrating instead of fun. Games should be fun to be most effective!

The American Academy of Pediatrics suggests that children tend to cheat, or set their own rules, when they are engaged in games that are too complex for them to handle.

2

Ask questions to help your child connect his feelings to the game and help him reflect on the rules.

It is important to take the time to see and understand the connections your child is making. Your child may be seeing the game differently, using his imagination or misunderstanding the rules. To help your child begin to make connections between his thoughts, feelings and actions, ask questions like:

- "I noticed you spun the wheel and got a four, but you moved ahead three spaces. I wonder why you did that?"
- "I wonder how you feel when you roll a small number."

Phil Zelazo has also found that it is important to help children “reflect on the rules,” by repeating them and giving them feedback.

You can remind your child of the rules:

- “Remember, in this game, the rule is to move the piece ahead the number of spaces that it says on the spinner.”

It isn't helpful to call your child a “cheater”—which can trigger bad feelings about himself. Continuing to help your child reflect on the rules is what matters. Having these conversations can help him figure out the difference between the rules and what he wants and/or his interpretation of rules.

Games are often based on promoting math ideas. Susan Levine of the University of Chicago emphasizes the importance of talking about number and quantity in everyday ways beyond playing games. Her studies have shown that using the “language of mathematics” or adult use of math talk in everyday, real-life conversations and situations makes a big difference in children's learning.

3

Talk about math ideas in everyday life.

There are so many opportunities to reinforce the ideas behind games in everyday life, such as:

- “Let's count to see how many people will be here for dinner so we know how many forks to get.”
- “Can you guess how many steps there are to the corner of the street?”
- “When we put away the laundry, let's find the socks that match each other.”

By asking these questions, you are helping your child make connections between the ideas in the games and what is happening all around him.

4

Practice winning and losing when you play games.

When you play board games with your preschooler you can also practice social skills:

- Help him to practice valuable skills of social learning, like how to take turns.
- Model what it means to be a “good loser” and a “good winner” by saying things like, “Oh well, maybe I'll win next time” and “It was fun to play together.”
- Show your child strategies for counting and keeping track of his place. For example, “I rolled a six. Now I'm going to touch each space on the board as I count.”