

# SKILL BUILDING OPPORTUNITIES

## Learning and Video Games

**Question:** My 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?

It is 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 to 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 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.

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:

- 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 be ready for what is going to happen next.

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

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, categorizing people as good guys and bad guys.*

Video games can promote destruction and violence or they can promote amazing thinking

skills. Many games available 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 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>.

### 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, he or she match it with a half-hour of active play and that you limit the amount of screen time.

While technology is an integral part of life today, it is 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.

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.

Unplugging is a good time to get physical activity in 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, like at meal time or before bed. Unplugging can become a fun family ritual and help you to give your child your full attention, even a short amount of time of full attention makes a good connection.