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Playing to learn: Educational games help children develop important skills outside the classroom

Wednesday, December 5, 2012
By Samantha Rhodes

You don't have to be a parent to know that children love to play. Games begin as early as birth, with simple interactions such as "peek-a-boo" or "where is baby's nose." As a child grows, the games can become more involved, focusing on early learning and social skills.

Games can be fun, educational and involve the entire family. Stephanie Ellinger, parent educator with Cape Girardeau Public Schools, explains how games can affect a child's life.

"Games encourage conversation," she says. "Parents are a child's first play partner and teacher, and playing games with their child encourages necessary conversation skills for relationships with others later on."

Kim Newman, sixth grade teacher at Central Middle School and district coordinator of the mentor/protege program for Cape Public Schools, has been a teacher for 15 years. She has seen first-hand how educational games can impact children.

"The most important value that games bring to the home is that a child gets a clear message from parents and family that education is important," says Newman. "Games also reinforce the concepts that are being learned at school, like math and reading comprehension."

No matter what age your child may be, there are plenty of games to help enhance their education and develop social interaction with other individuals.

For children in the pre-K and kindergarten range, Ellinger recommends finding games that focus on conversation, memory and listening skills. Games like Hi-Ho Cherry-O, Chutes and Ladders and memory all focus on these skills. Other games such as Connect Four and Candy Land can help with motor development, math skills and learning to follow rules.

"Games don't have to be expensive," Ellinger says. "Parents can be frugal but still develop the same skills. Playing home-made games like tic-tac-toe, hop scotch or bean bag toss encourages both motor skills and social development."

These types of games can also help children learn social rules. Newman says that playing games at home help children learn to interact in school by introducing them to sharing, taking turns, following instructions and learning how to be a good sport when losing.

"There are also a ton of online educational games and phone applications that parents can get for children," she says. "Central Middle School has an updated list of games on it's website for parents to explore, but for parents not so tech-savvy age-appropriate board games are great educational tools."

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For children in grade school and middle school, games might focus on certain skills, such as math and reading. Teresa Givens, a pre-K teacher at Centenary Preschool, has been an educator for 20 years. Besides being a teacher, Givens is also a mother of four children, ages 5 through 13.

To help students at the elementary level learn spelling and word knowledge, Givens recommends games like Scrabble, Boggle or Hangman. For developing math skills, games like Yahtzee can be used. She also likes games that involve questioning and deduction skills such as Hedbanz.

"Games that get children to use questioning and deductive reasoning are great for children in elementary school," says Givens. "My husband and I play 20 questions with our own children during road trips. The kids have to think of questions to help narrow down possible answers. It's inexpensive, educational and fun. "

Flash cards, or even playing cards, are both wallet-friendly and very effective at helping children learn. Gloria Sauerbrunn, a fifth-grade teacher at Scott City Middle School, says she uses both of these for her students and for her own children.

"As a teacher, I like the fact that a game can be used to help a student study or learn skills without feeling like they are doing homework," explains Sauerbrunn. "For my fifth graders, I use playing cards to work on comparing and ordering large numbers and decimals, to memorize math facts and also to plot coordinates."

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Sauerbrunn also says that children in grade school still need to practice on skills introduced at the pre-K and Kindergarten level.

"Even students in upper elementary and middle school still need to practice taking turns, and games can provide that opportunity," says Sauerbrunn. "A teacher's first priority in the classroom is to teach academics, but students also need to learn to loose gracefully, encourage others and take 'no' for an answer. "

One thing agreed upon by these educators is the fact that getting parents involved in their child's education is a win-win situation for everyone.

"Parents can take away so much from the experience of playing educational games with their children," Newman says. "No. 1, the parent gets to spend time with his or her child, and number two, a parent adds to the quality of education their child receives."

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