

CHAPTER ONE



Spontaneous Games for All Ages

Children are awake around 12 hours a day, more or less. That's 84 hours a week or 4,368 hours a year that their brains are open and available for learning—and parents are a child's best teacher. However, we caregivers are busy 5,000 hours a year with the demands of work, children, and home. Having to play a game with our child can feel like a lot to ask, even when we know it matters.

One solution is spontaneous games. Games can teach, and they also can change the mood. When our child is a baby, we learn that distraction works. Our child is fussy, and we reach in our pocket and pull out our keys or anything novel to play with and voilà, the child is content and busy.

Preschool kids can be distracted too. For example, I played “Can You Do What I Do? Can You Say What I Say?” with my twin five-year-old grandsons when they were hot and grouchy. They took a moment to warm to the idea, but they got into it and had silly fun coming up with their own variations. Hot and grouchy changed into light and fun. Emotional alchemy!

There are lots of games in this chapter that take a short amount of time and can provide the perfect distraction from a potentially hard moment, such as when standing in a long line, waiting for food to be served at a restaurant, or walking a long distance to get back to the car or bus—or even when children are cleaning their room. There are also silly games to start off the day with a giggle.

The best part of spontaneous games is that they require no materials, or only what is probably lying around. The even better part is that they give parents easy teachable moments, and give children real experience in practicing skills.

Waiting Games for Airports, Restaurants, and Doctor's Offices

Waiting is not easy. Whether waiting for our turn in the dentist's chair or in the grocery line, waiting can bring up angst. As adults, we can get caught up in unhelpful thoughts, such as *I picked the wrong line (again!)—that one is faster!* Young kids might not entertain themselves with these annoying thoughts, they just want to leave! And they can't. So at this point, to keep us all sane, we can bring in the clowns, as it were, and come up with a game.

What Would Mary Poppins Do?

I wanted to be more like Mary Poppins. Instead of screeching at my children, like the Wicked Witch of the West, to clean up yet another big mess they'd made, I wanted to burst into song and, with that "spoonful of sugar," watch the work get done.

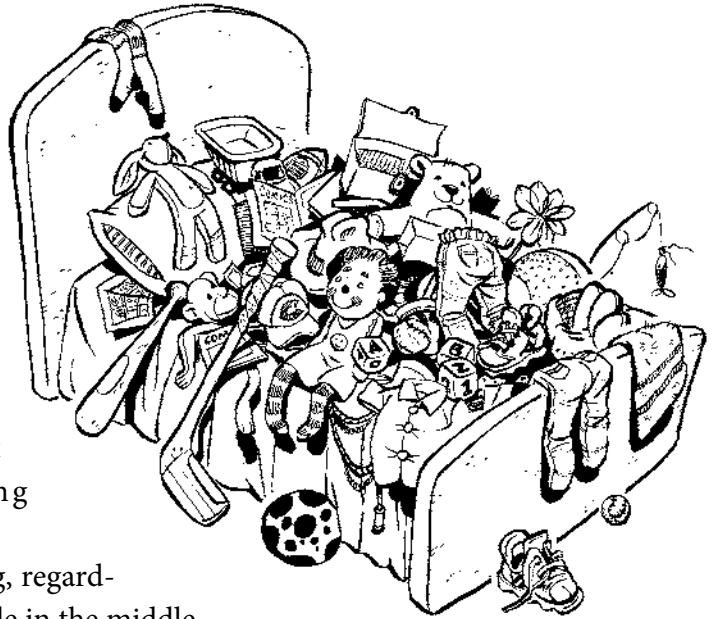
I wanted to be Poppins-esque not only because it would make me feel better about my mothering but also because I know how important play is. As a pediatric occupational therapist, I know that fun makes everything go down more easily, and that fun play is how children learn.

So, over the years, I have devised some games that I have used with my own and other children to make the things we have to do more enjoyable. I don't use games every time, but whenever I do, a potentially bad moment is turned into a fun one.

Play and humor and laughter release a hormonal natural high. It's organic, it's free, and it's an all-natural joy jumper—and best of all, it gets the job done.

I came up with this lighthearted way of clearing up a mess when I'd returned from an out-of-town workshop. My young daughters had been left in the company of their loving but not particularly tidy father. I came home to two very happy, healthy girls, but to get to

them I had to wade through five days of strewn clothes, game pieces, stale slices of toast, and other flotsam and jetsam. I was delighted to be home, and, fresh from a workshop on singing games for children, I wanted to keep my good mood, practice what I'd learned—and get this overwhelming cleaning job done.



I decided to throw everything, regardless of what it was, into one big pile in the middle of the room, and then sort it all out. To the tune of “The Bear Went over the Mountain,” I began tossing everything into the pile while singing:

Put everything in a pi-ile
 Put everything in a pi-ile
 Put everything in a pi-IIIILE
 In the middle of the room!
 The middle of the room
 The middle of the room
 Put everything in a pi-IIIILE
 In the middle of the room

My then five-year-old was immediately suspicious that this might be work, but I reminded her that it had to get done no matter what, so we might as well have some fun. She understood, and she and her sister and I tossed everything that was out of

place onto the pile, singing and giggling as we made long shots and high tosses. The rooms were quickly cleared of debris, except for the big mound in the middle of the living room. We sat around it as if it were a campfire. I held up each item and, in rhythmic singsong, said, “A sock, a sock, where does it go?” Someone would answer, “The laundry basket!” We did this for each item, and soon the big pile had been separated into smaller piles of books, blankets, laundry, toys, and so on. Everyone was then assigned some piles to put away while I swept the floor. (If you try this game, you can organize the “putting away” aspect according to your child’s skill level. A mobile child who can sort will be able to put objects in the correct drawer or shelf. Another child who is not easily mobile might need to have the toy basket put near her chair, with her job being to toss the toys in the basket.) Within a relatively short time, the house was habitable again and we were all still in a good mood.

We used this method often, whenever my daughters’ bedrooms—or mine—got in that state of overwhelming messiness. At those times we piled everything on the bed so that the floor and all other areas were clear. Once that was done, the project felt doable—only one pile on the bed needed sorting, instead of the entire room.

I didn’t have a song for this bed-piling work, but having an uncluttered house again and all of us helping in our own way sure made me feel like singing.

Game 1: Guess the Winning Number

Waiting for someone to arrive, whether that person is coming in a car to pick you up or getting off the plane, can be anxiety provoking or just plain boring. In this game, you can turn such a moment into a fun contest of who guesses the right number.

Whoever is right gets the satisfaction of being right, while everyone gets the fun of focused attention and counting together in sync, and the relief of being distracted from waiting.

GOALS

Learning to calm anxiety
Diverting attention

DIRECTIONS

You and your child or children each make a guess as to how many cars will pass before the right one stops, or how many people will get off the plane or come down to the baggage claim until the right one arrives. Everyone who has made a guess watches and counts, each hoping that he or she has the winning number.

VARIATION

If everyone's number has passed and still the car or person hasn't shown, no problem: just make new guesses ("It wasn't the sixth car, so now I'm guessing it's the fifteenth").



Game 2: Toothpick Art

GOALS

Creativity
Fine motor skills

MATERIALS

A few toothpicks (often available at restaurants)

DIRECTIONS

Make designs together or for each other with toothpicks.

VARIATIONS

1. You can make specific things, such as shapes, squares, rectangles, triangles, and so on, or letters that work well with straight lines, such as *E* and *F* and *M*.
2. You can also just make a design. Cooperative designs are fun, with each person in turn adding a toothpick to make an interesting pattern or until the food finally arrives!

Game 3: Penny Flick

GOALS

Following rules
Fine motor skills

MATERIALS

Pennies or other coins and a table

SETUP

Give each player at the table a penny with the flat side on the table.

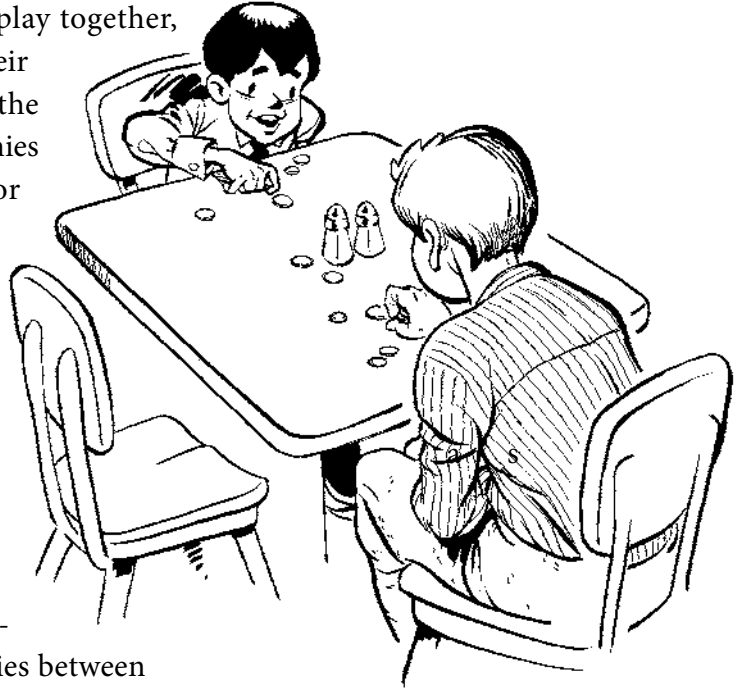
DIRECTIONS

Each person moves the penny along the table by flicking with an index finger and thumb or pushing it with just an index finger or the side of the thumb. The method doesn't matter.

VARIATIONS

1. Partners sitting across from each other flick their pennies toward each other. The goal is to see if they can get their pennies to meet and collide in the middle.

2. If more than two want to play together, have all the players flick their pennies into the center of the table and try to get the pennies to bump into each other or hit a specified object, such as the saltshaker. If more than three players, players could form teams of two.



3. Set up two objects, such two cups or just two other pennies, a short distance away from the penny flickers as “goal posts.” The players have to flick their pennies between the two objects. Keep making the goal posts closer together to increase the challenge.
4. Using a straw or spoon handle for a hockey stick, call the penny a “puck” and bat the puck back and forth between the players.
5. Make a line of pennies with at least an inch of space between them and have a player try to flick his penny through each of the spaces. Or have the player try to hit each penny and knock it out of line.

Game 4: Which Cup Is It Under?

A classic carnival trick is to capture someone’s attention (and make money). Use this tried-and-true method by hiding a coin under a cup. If the player guesses which cup it’s under, the money is hers!

GOALS

Focusing
Paying close attention

MATERIALS

Three cups and a coin

SETUP

Place the three cups upside down on the table.

DIRECTIONS

Ask your child (or children) to look away, and hide a coin under one of the cups—or do it in full view of the child (depending on age and skill). Then move the cups around quickly so it's not clear where the coin is hidden.

If there is more than one child playing, have them take turns guessing.

VARIATIONS

1. Use more than three cups to enlarge choices, or only two to reduce choices.
2. Let the child have a turn being the “carnival barker,” and you have to guess.
3. For the young child or new learner, use different colored cups—the child has to notice if the coin is under, say, the red cup or the blue cup.

Game 5: Whose Hand Is on Top?

GOALS

Following directions
Timing
Physically interacting with others

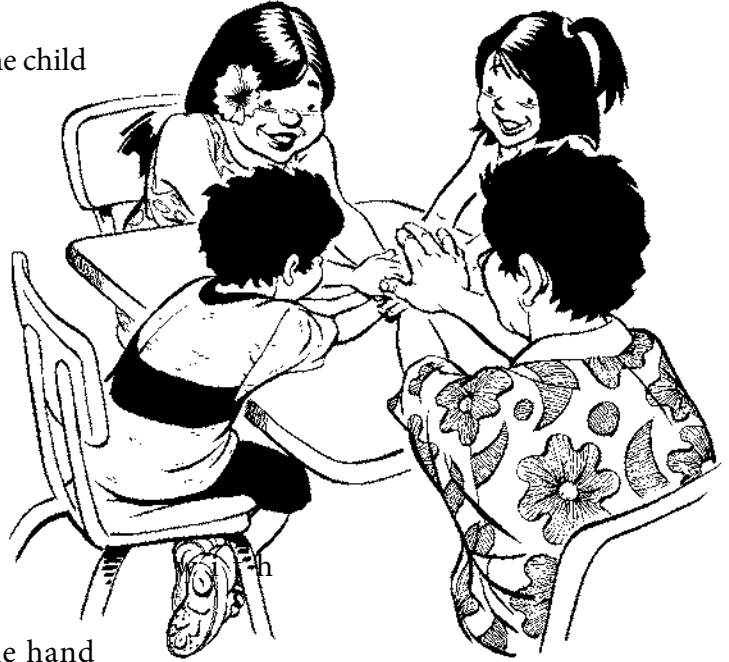
SETUP

Sit at a table close enough so you and the child can touch hands.

DIRECTIONS

Put your hand on the table and ask your child to put one of her hands on top of yours. Then put your other hand on top of her hand and ask her to put her other hand on the top of the hand pile. Then you pull your first hand out from under the pile of hands and put it back on top. Encourage her to do the same her hand that is now on the bottom.

Keep repeating this pattern, with the hand on the bottom of the pile moving to the top. Start very slowly at first until she gets the idea, and then begin to speed up the action.

**VARIATION**

Got three or more pairs of hands wanting to play? Silliness ahead!

Game 6: Feely Games

GOALS

Interpreting tactile information
Social interaction

M A T E R I A L S

Small objects that are safe to touch

S E T U P

Have the objects ready in your purse or pocket.

D I R E C T I O N S

The child has to guess without peeking and only feeling what is in your purse or coat pocket. Tell your child to close her eyes and reach into your purse or pocket, take out something, and guess what it is without looking. Keep playing until you run out of things, or, if appropriate, let your child find things in the room for you to touch and guess!

V A R I A T I O N

If you run out of objects, change it to a seeing texture game, such as I Spy, and take turns having the other player guess what you are looking at with only clues. Clues can work on different concepts, such as color or category as well as texture. For example, “I see something soft and red” (pillow) or “I see something hard that is used for eating” (spoon).



Game 7: Making a Wiggly Worm

G O A L S

Focusing
Experimenting

M A T E R I A L S

A wrapped straw and a glass of water

D I R E C T I O N S

You can turn a straw wrapper into a surprising creature. Get a straw, and instead of pulling off the paper cover, squish it off so that it forms accordion pleats.

Then, put the straw into a glass of water. Put your finger on the top of the straw so it traps a little water in it. Hold the straw over the squished straw wrapper and pick up your finger so a few drops fall from the straw onto the wrapper. The wrapper will almost magically move like a wiggly worm. After you have demonstrated, let the child try doing it himself. She will discover by experimenting that a little water makes the worm move, and too much water drowns it. This discovery will make her more aware of how much water he is trapping and what to do to get more or less water in the straw (also good for another ten minutes of quiet).

VARIATION

If you find you're starting to feel guilty because your child is overly enthusiastic about this game and using too many of the restaurant's straws, change the activity. See if your child can take water from one glass and fill up another using his newly learned straw-filling skill.

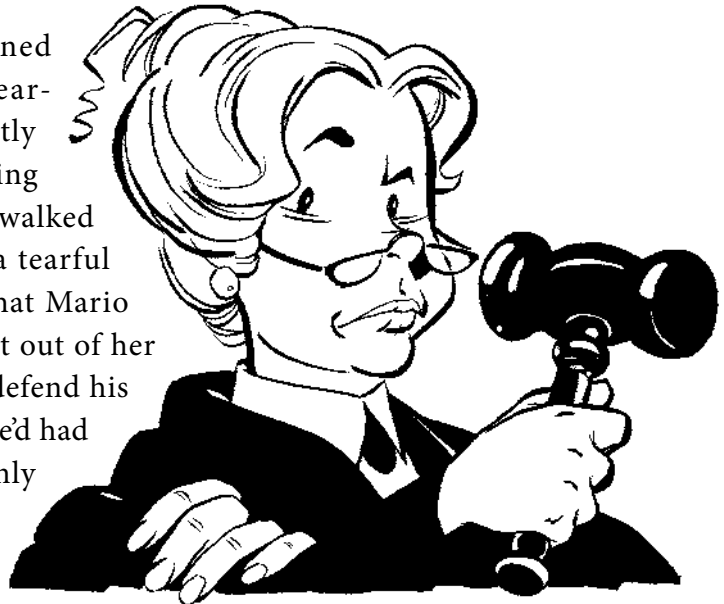


Clarifying Judge

It is often very difficult to see things from another's point of view—and for children the task is even more difficult, so egocentric is their viewpoint. When two children are fighting over the same toy, the other person's viewpoint is not even considered.

As caregivers and teachers, we are often called on to be judges. In this lofty position, we can use the dictatorial approach (“Becky, give Laurel the doll this instant”) or the laissez-faire approach (“It’s your problem. You work it out”). Either way can work . . . sometimes. But sometimes it’s time for the “Clarifying Judge.” A Clarifying Judge explains to both injured parties what exactly is going on with each of them.

A case in point happened between the then four-year-old Roxanne and her slightly older cousin, Mario. Hearing some screams and cries, I walked into the room and found a tearful Roxanne, who protested that Mario had grabbed a whistle right out of her hand. Mario was quick to defend his actions by explaining that he'd had the whistle first and had only put it down for a second when Roxanne took it and wouldn't give it back. He had to grab it.



I listened thoughtfully to both sides, having not the slightest idea as to who was right or wrong. I decided instead to play it back for them.

“My, this is a problem,” I began, “let’s see if I understand. Mario, you had the whistle first and weren’t done playing with it, but you put it down for a second when Roxanne picked it up. You felt like it was still your turn and asked her for it back, but she wouldn’t give it to you, so you got angry and took it.” Mario nodded his head slowly, obviously feeling pity for the abused boy I had described.

Roxanne began to protest, and I gestured for her to wait. “Roxanne,” I continued, “you had been waiting for your turn with the whistle, and when you saw Mario lay it down, you figured your turn had come. And then when he wanted it back after you’d had it for just a second or so, you felt it was unfair. It seemed like he was getting two turns in a row and you had none. Right?”

Roxanne nodded her head and cast a quick look at Mario.

“What a problem,” I continued to empathize. “There is only one whistle, and you both want it. If only there were some way you both could be happy.”

I stopped talking and pretended to be lost in thought pondering this weighty problem. Then Mario, who always was a sweet kid, said earnestly, "I know what. Roxanne could go ahead and have her turn and then give it to me." And he placed the whistle beside Roxanne. Roxanne, who has her moments, turned her back and said in that singsongy voice children sometimes use, "Well now I don't want it." But after a moment's pause, she slyly smiled, pick up the whistle, blew a few notes, and then handed it to Mario. "It's your turn," she said. They smiled at each other.

Sometimes it helps to have a Clarifying Judge.

Game 8: Art for Two

GOALS

Creativity
Fine motor skills

MATERIALS

Paper and pencils, markers, or crayons

DIRECTIONS

Draw a picture together. One person starts off making a shape on paper, any shape. The other player then adds a line or any mark he wants. There is no right or wrong, just continue to take turns creating a design until you both decide you are done. Even if you have zero drawing skills, as long as you are willing to do whatever you can, your child learns that it's okay to start from whatever level he is at.

VARIATIONS

1. With a slightly older child, experiment with drawing people or scenes. Start by drawing a person together. You draw a circle for the head and ask your co-artist to add a body. You add arms, he adds legs, you add fingers, he adds toes, and so on. You can get lots of details in there when you add clothes. Do they have polka dots? Stripes? What is the background? Is there a tree? A house? The sun?
2. You could play this game with more than two people.

Game 9: Secret Writing

Writing invisible letters on a child's back or palm is a fun way to convey a secret message and requires connecting the sense of touch with cognition.

GOALS

Attention
Letter recognition
Tactile awareness

DIRECTIONS

Using your finger, "draw" a letter on your child's back or palm. Keep writing, letter by letter, until you've written a whole message. Take turns so you both get to experience what it feels like.

VARIATIONS

1. If you write on the child's back, have him, at the same time, draw on paper what he thinks is being drawn on his back.
2. For an older child, write words, one letter at a time. For a younger child, do single shapes, numbers, or letters. Have an older child play this game with a younger sibling as a fun way to help him learn his letters and grow his brain.

Game 10: Can You Do What I Do? Can You Say What I Say?

GOALS

- Imitation
- Coordination
- Creativity

SETUP

Sit facing each other. If there are more than two players, sit in view of each other.

DIRECTIONS

Start this game with the words, “Can you do what I do? Can you say what I say?” (Repeat until you have everyone’s attention.) Say it in a singsongy voice and clap your thighs or hands to add emphasis and rhythm. This introduction gets everyone ready to play.

Then do one hand movement accompanied by a sound and have them imitate you. What movement you do depends on the age of the children, but silly is almost always good, such as darting your tongue in and out like a snake while making a humming sound or whatever tickles your fancy. After everyone has done the movement-sound combination for a rhythmic amount, such as five times, you return to the original chant, “Can you do what I do? Can you say what I say?” while doing another movement and sound. You can stay the leader in this, but it’s fun to take turns and see what everyone comes up with.

VARIATION

If you are playing this game at home, you aren’t limited to stationary movements. If it feels right, stand up and do large muscle moves, such as jumping, and do a 180-degree turn too—or any judo or dance move.

Who Are We Today?

It's not always easy to get children to want to go for a walk, even if it's a beautiful day.

One Saturday morning, I was trying to convince my daughters to take a walk with me. They preferred watching Saturday morning cartoons. Because I was going to walk the paths in the woods behind our house, I tried this ploy: "I'm going to start walking, and when you're ready, see if you can find me." Children perk up when there is a challenge involved.

Because my daughters knew our woods, I took a fork on the path that they knew about but wasn't my usual walk. I wanted to increase the challenge. After a short while, I began to hear some odd sounds behind me and was soon delighted to see that they not only had found me but also had dressed up like Native American scouts looking for me. When they caught up with me, they danced in a circle around me, hooping, hollering, and chanting. I was thrilled.



From that experience, I learned that having a theme will sometimes be the ticket to get kids to walk with me, whether they are grandchildren, neighbor children, or children with special needs.

Possible themes are as follows:

- ◆ Shall we be Explorers going down a new street or path and see what we see?
- ◆ Shall we be Spies on the lookout for something special, like lost pennies?

- ◆ Shall we be Royalty and inspect the neighborhood to see if everything meets with our approval?
- ◆ Shall we be Birders and see how many birds we can see?

The possibilities are endless.

Maybe the real reason for the game is to get the kids out and moving, because we know that matters for their physical and mental health. But by adding pretend play, we are also encouraging imagination, creativity, and, best of all, a sense that we are adventure-mates together! Let the good times begin.

Walking Outside Games

Walking is a lovely way to spend time together. But sometimes you find your walking partner does not want to enjoy the moment. He complains about being hungry or tired or bored, and yet you still have a ways to go before you get home or back to the car. You need a game!

Game 1: How Many Ways to Walk?

GOALS

Coordination
Imagination
Imitation
Moving in sync

DIRECTIONS

Rather than walk like a regular person, move like someone or something else, such as a giant, mouse, or kangaroo.

VARIATION

Choreograph a movement, such as a repeated pattern—three jumps, ten gallops, and so on. Keep adding different ways to move, such as sliding sideways, walking backward, hopping, jumping, and leaping. Or just hold hands and skip!



Game 2: Stop and Go

GOALS

- Motor control
- Rhythm
- Attention

DIRECTIONS

As you are walking, whether with one child or many, explain that you will suddenly say “Stop!” and everyone, including you, should stop instantly as if frozen (if necessary, show them an example of what “stop” looks like). Then you will say “Go,” and everyone should go forward. They won’t know when you will suddenly say “Stop” again because you will do it irregularly. Sometimes there will be a long walk between stops, sometimes it will happen almost right away. The fun, for the children, is not knowing when it will come. The fun for you is knowing that you are painlessly getting to where you want to go.

VARIATION

Alternate walking with a big stride (giant steps) or with a little shuffle (baby steps), or combine them. You can decide ahead of time how many steps to

take, such as ten giant steps and then ten baby steps, and then repeat that pattern.



Game 3: Glued Together

GOAL

- Motor control
- Being in sync with another

DIRECTIONS

Pretend you are putting imaginary glue on the child's back and your front—so you are stuck together. Place your hands on your child's shoulders to give you control. Then walk forward, and he walks with you. You can go quite a way with this one.

VARIATION

Try being glued just on your hips for older kids so that you are both facing forward and walking as if one person.



Game 4: Guess the Number of Steps

GOALS

- Estimating
- Getting the thrill of guessing correctly
- Learning from wrong guesses

DIRECTIONS

Guess the number of steps you will take to the next corner, signpost, traffic light, or tree. How far ahead depends on the age of the child. See who was closer to the correct number.

VARIATION

Guess how many seconds or minutes it takes to go to the next spot.



Game 5: Whose Head Is in the Clouds?

Once you have reached your destination, it's time to chill and play this game.

GOALS

- Shared attention
- Creativity
- Imagination

MATERIALS

A sky with a few puffy clouds

DIRECTIONS

This is like I Spy, except players spy different creatures in the clouds and others see if they can see them too. Point out the different parts so all can see the creature (for example, "That trailing part is the tail").

VARIATION

Make up a story about the cloud creatures and what they are doing up there together!

The Benefits of Pretend Play

Playing house and all its variations, like playing store and playing school, are games children take to like ducks to water. There is nothing like a good game of pretend to get everyone in a pleasant mood, me included.

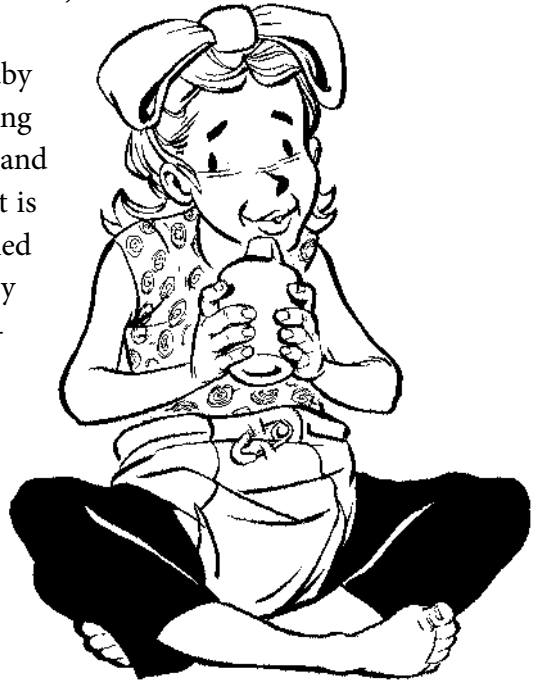
In the game of “house,” I like to take the baby role and let them be the parents. There is something about lying back saying, “Goo goo, I want water,” and having them scurry around waiting on me that is very satisfying. I sometimes suspect that they tried to set a good example because when I got very unreasonable (I had their other examples to imitate) and said things like “I want my covers on; no, I want them off. I want water. No, yuck, not *that* cup,” they patiently complied with each request, cooing softly and gently until they finally outlasted me.

I also liked playing the role of the family dog, Doggy Daisy. Dogs lie around a lot.

When things get chaotic or irritations are on the rise, I strongly suggest giving everyone a break from reality and saying, “Let’s play pretend!” Then, come up with a scenario that might entice your child. Once you begin playing, try and stay in character and talk and act the way you imagine the person or animal you are pretending to be would.

“Let’s pretend that you are a magical wizard and can transform things, and I will be your assistant.” Then follow the child’s imagination. Maybe he’ll want to change the couch into an elephant, and you can both pretend to be riding it.

“Let’s pretend that you are a movie star and I am your makeup person.” Then have fun with a bunch of makeup, being appropriately obsequious and fawning.



“Let’s pretend that you are Batman and I am Robin, and we can go for a ride in our special-equipped Batmobile looking for crime. What kinds of gadgets would our car have?”

There are so many variations to play. When a child gets a minor scrape, it’s a great time to pretend to be a doctor and rush her to the “hospital” (which is your couch). Lay her down and do all sorts of doctor-like things with your imaginary stethoscope and tongue depressor. Use real medicated salve and bandages, if needed or even if not needed. Kids will, I’ve noticed, be far better patients when I pretend I am a “doctor tending to their ‘boo-boos.’” I guess it must be something about having more confidence in a professional.

When you are serving dinner, pretend sometime that the room is a fancy restaurant and you are a snotty waiter. Even more fun for me was to pretend I was Thelma from Sloppy Joe’s eatery—“Don’t be asking for anything not on the menu.” My kids didn’t try that with Thelma. They knew that with her you can “like it or lump it.”

Imagination is the key to creativity. Pretending is a safe way to try out ideas. It also gives children the opportunity to try on different personas and different attitudes and understand the nuances of different personalities. Better than learning how to “read social cues” is to try them on yourself!

Games Just for Little Ones (Ages Two to Seven)

Game 1: A, You’re Adorable

When my children were little, I would sing “A, You’re Adorable,” a song from my own childhood that was popular in the late 1940s. It starts with A (“you’re adorable”) and goes on to Z describing how wonderful the person is. It was a way for my children to learn the alphabet and a way for me to tell them how much they meant to me. You don’t need to use the alphabet to inspire you to

sing a love song to the special child in your life. Take any song with a name and insert your child's name instead, changing the words to fit her personality. My daughters liked hearing "their" songs, and I had fun making them up.

GOAL

Teaching by example that it is possible to make up your own songs

DIRECTIONS

Pick a song you like that has an easy tune. My song mind may be stuck in the 1940s, so I come up with "Rose Marie" and "Daisy, Daisy," but any song will do. Then just insert your own words. Don't worry if your words don't rhyme. Believe me, little ones don't care about that, they just love that you are singing about them! For example, if the tune is "Daisy, Daisy," and the child's name is Julien:

Julien, Julien, here are my words so true
 I'm so happy to be so close to you
 I love the way you smile
 You're smart as you can be
 And every day, in every way
 You mean so much to me

Game 2: I Love You Because

GOALS

- Self-esteem
- Feedback on one's self
- Learning about the qualities others admire

DIRECTIONS

Say these words to the child of your heart: "Do you know why I love you? I love you because ____." Fill in the blank with anything about the child you especially appreciate. You can be general or specific, as in "You are kind," or "You hugged your classmate when you saw she was upset."

VARIATION

Let your child know he merits love just by being himself by saying, “I love you because you are _____ (child’s name).”



Game 3: Secretary to the Writer

Many children love to make up stories. They also delight in having stories read to them. So imagine the thrill when the story they hear is their own.

GOALS

- Self-esteem
- Organizing thoughts

MATERIALS

A pen and paper or a computer, and a stapler and staples

DIRECTIONS

Get out your pen or word processor and let your budding writer know that you are interested in writing his story. You could arrange to have a writing session ahead of time or suggest it after he tells you about something that happened in his life. Stories could also be something he totally makes up, something he wishes would happen, or anything else.

Write all the words down, even if they don’t make logical sense to you. Children’s stories, like dreams, often have impossible things happen. To help him along, you could also ask such questions as “And then what happens?” “How did he feel about that?” “Was anyone else there?” “Where else would

you like to go?” or “What did the other person say then?” Add a cover and staple the pages together down one side so it opens like a book. Read the story together many times.

VARIATION

Draw illustrations to go with the story. Make it a secret flap book by pasting sticky notes on top of the illustrations.



Game 4: Guess How Old

GOALS

Noticing visual and physical cues about people
Social and environmental awareness

DIRECTIONS

Ask your child to guess the ages of people, animals, and objects in her life. Include the people in the neighborhood or people on television or even characters in books. How old are the Cat in the Hat, Big Bird, and Barney anyway? Does anybody really know? How old are the nearby trees?

VARIATION

Give clues that help tell a person's age or information, like that some butterflies only live for a day whereas trees can live for hundreds of years. If you have a tree stump nearby, show how to count the rings to learn the age of the tree.

Game 5: Making Faces

GOALS

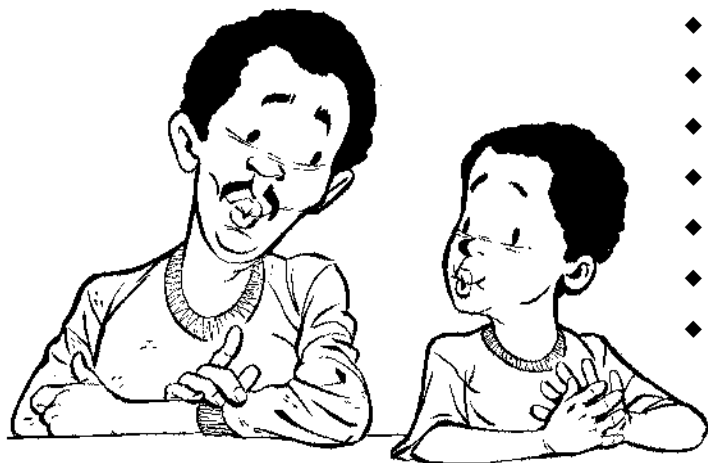
Imitation
Imagination
Controlling motor movement
Creativity

SETUP

Sit facing each other.

DIRECTIONS

Start with this question: “Can you do this with your face?” Then, for example, wink one eye and then the other. See if the child can do what you do. Take turns trying out different possibilities, such as



- ◆ Wiggling your ears
- ◆ Curling your tongue
- ◆ Raising one eyebrow
- ◆ Touching your tongue to your nose
- ◆ Crossing your eyes
- ◆ Bobbing your Adam's apple
- ◆ Making a raspberry sound with your lips

VARIATION

Make faces associated with different emotions, such as sad, tragic, happy, elated, frustrated, and furious. Make animal faces, such as a fish face. What would a turtle face look like? Take turns making any grotesque or silly face and imitating each other.

Game 6: Pony Boy

GOALS

- Awareness of body and movement in space
- Control of the muscles of the upper body
- Increased sense of balance

SETUP

Sit down and place your child on your knees, facing you.

DIRECTIONS

Start gently bouncing your knees up and down while you sing or chant:

“Pony boy, pony boy, won’t you be my pony boy?”

Then change the motions by swinging your knees from side to side while singing:

“Don’t say no, here we go.”

Then, holding the child’s arms, slowly lean him backward so his head is hanging upside down while you sing:

“Ride away with me.”

VARIATION

You can modify the amount of movement with your child depending on how vigorously he likes to be tossed about. Some children really adore being tossed to and fro, whereas others like more gentle motion. You can always start slowly and then increase the amount of energy depending on the child’s desire for action.

Game 7: Having a Disney Day

GOALS

- Empathy
- Appreciation for all the things that make up one’s world

DIRECTIONS

Walt Disney knew how to capture children's attention by making inanimate things talk. Spend part of a day pretending everything is alive. Start the morning off in a fun way by saying, for example, "Hello, Mr. Coffee Pot. Thank you for making my morning brew for me." Encourage your cutie to ask the cereal bowl if she would mind holding some cereal and milk.

VARIATION

Go outside and talk to bugs. What do ants do for fun? Thank a tree for its shade.



Game 8: Knocking Game

GOALS

- Listening
- Focusing
- Paying close attention
- Learning auditory categories, such as "things that are metal sound like this"

MATERIALS

Objects to tap on that make different sounds, and a spoon (optional)

DIRECTIONS

With a child, listen to and identify the different sounds that objects make when you knock on them. Ask the child to close her eyes or turn her back to you. Then see if she can guess the object you are knocking on with your fist (or a spoon).

VARIATION

Take turns identifying the objects.

Game 9: Playing with Pebbles

GOALS

- Learning about shapes
- Experimenting with design
- Fine motor skills

MATERIALS

Pebbles you find outside or the glass kind that you can buy at craft shops and dollar stores

DIRECTIONS

Put the pebbles in a large pile and use them to make different things, such as

- ◆ One large square
- ◆ Two small circles
- ◆ Two intersecting circles
- ◆ A triangle
- ◆ Two intersecting triangles, forming a star
- ◆ A body with arms and legs
- ◆ A road for a truck

VARIATIONS

1. There are many possibilities for this game, and kids will come up with some we haven't thought of. Take a photo, if you want, of the final results. Its beauty may surprise you.
2. If one of the variations your child eventually chooses involves



throwing, provide a bucket or plastic-lined wastebasket to throw into. She can practice her aiming and throwing skills, and you get the pebbles put away at the same time.

Game 10: How Many Hand Lengths?

GOALS

Estimating
Educated guessing

MATERIALS

Objects to measure

DIRECTIONS

Look at an object and have one child or a group of children guess how many hand lengths long it is using one child's hand size for the standard. Then have the child measure the length by placing her hand on the object and counting how many hands fit (measuring from a fingertip to the heel of her hand). Approximate fractions of a hand length, like a half or a quarter of a hand.

VARIATION

Use a foot as a measuring tool instead: "How many foot lengths long is it from the living room to the kitchen?"

Game 11: Edible Play-Doh

GOALS

Finger strengthening
Fine motor skills

MATERIALS

2 cups peanut butter, 2 cups powdered milk, and 1 cup honey; *or*
2 cups oatmeal, 1 cup flour, and ½ cup water

DIRECTIONS

All too often children want to eat Play-Doh, it looks that good. Rather than spend your energy trying to prevent this, make up a Play-Doh that you won't mind them eating, made from peanut butter or oatmeal.

Fun things for beginners to make with their Play-Doh are snakes (in which a slit is made in one end for a mouth), snowmen, and animals.

VARIATION

Try using "finger paint" that is safe to eat, such as ketchup, mayonnaise, prepared mustard, thickened gravy, and so on.

Count for Cooperation

You might not believe that such a simple approach as this one could be so effective, but I promise it works well. I have tried it with two-year-olds, four-year-olds, eight-year-olds, and twelve-year-olds with equal success.

It goes like this: "Let's see if you can run upstairs, get your shoes, and be back downstairs before I get to the number seven. Ready, go! One . . . two . . . three, four . . . five . . . six . . . good! You made it by six!"

Please note that this approach is quite the opposite from the old "I'll give you to ten to get those shoes, or you know what!" This is a game of challenge and speed that you could sometimes use for fun purposes. For example, "Let's see how long it takes you to run around the tree and touch the rock and come back. Ready, go!"

I have also used a timer: "Let's see if you can get your toys put away before the bell rings!" Although if the job is overwhelming, I might have to say instead, "Let's see how fast WE can . . ." and enter into the spirit of it.

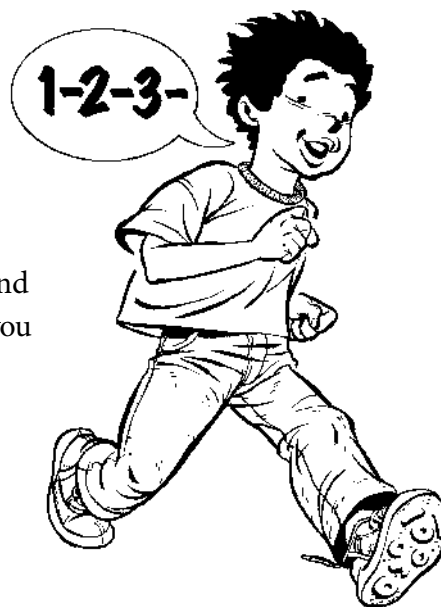
I've had the tables turned on me. Once, my youngest said, "Can you run downstairs and bring me a glass of water before I count to ten and a half? One . . . two . . ." I took off.

It was fun to meet the challenge, and I noticed that it raised my energy level.

A stopwatch can be another fascinating touch. This technique has the added advantage for the older kids of actually teaching mathematical concepts, such as which number is bigger: “Look, you got the floor swept great, and you did it in two minutes and 49.6 seconds. That’s 12 seconds less than yesterday, and you still did a good job. Oh, I’m lucky to have a helper as good as you!”

You might find, as I did, that children use this game idea on you to calm you down rather than speed you up. One day I was driving home from a long trip. It was rainy and dark, and the road was long and winding. The children had been cranky and fussy for a long while, and I wasn’t feeling much better myself. I finally blew up at them to “Be quiet!”

The oldest child, then five years old, said serenely to me, “Do you think you could calm down by the time I count to seven? She began counting, “One . . . two . . .” When I realized what she was doing and my lips curled up in amusement, she said, “Good job! You did it by six!”



Games for Older Kids (Ages Seven to Fourteen)

Game 1: How Would You Describe Me?

GOALS

- Feedback for self-awareness
- Seeing others from a different perspective

MATERIALS

A pencil and paper

SETUP

Copy the following list of human characteristics, or write your own, and make a few copies: kind, patient, understanding, open minded, cheerful, optimistic, cute, lovely, loving, warm, loyal, thoughtful, generous, honest, wise, gentle, fair, funny, handsome, polite, respectful, sweet, silly, compassionate, sympathetic, intelligent, hard worker, peaceful, assertive, cooperative, beautiful, good athlete, dancer, artist, musician, careful, intelligent, charming, forceful, sensitive, good company, helpful, witty, good sense of humor.

DIRECTIONS

You and your partner have to circle the characteristic that best describes someone you both know. Do this with a number of people, and see if you pick the same characteristics. Talk about the choices made and why.

VARIATION

You each make a list about each other from the choices of characteristics and see how your choices match up by telling each other which characteristics were chosen. “You think I’m optimistic—why?” “You think I’m compassionate—awwwwww.”



Game 2: Five Good Moments

GOALS

Developing a growing awareness of feeling
Knowing the kinds of things one enjoys

DIRECTIONS

Pick a day when you and your child will be apart for some of the day. Suggest that throughout the day you both look for five moments that make you feel good. The moment can be an interaction with someone, or something

lovely that you saw or heard. What it is doesn't matter. What matters is that for at least a moment it made you feel good. Discuss all of your moments with your child.

VARIATIONS

1. Do it in the moment. Both look around and see or think of something that makes you feel good at that moment, no matter how mundane and ordinary or far-fetched and fantastical.
2. You can do this game with all the members of your family at the end of the day. Remind everyone in the morning. You could place a sticker on each person's hand as a reminder of the day's plan.

Game 3: Self-Portraits

GOALS

Noticing visual details
Fine motor skills

MATERIALS

A mirror, a felt marker, and a chair (optional)

SETUP

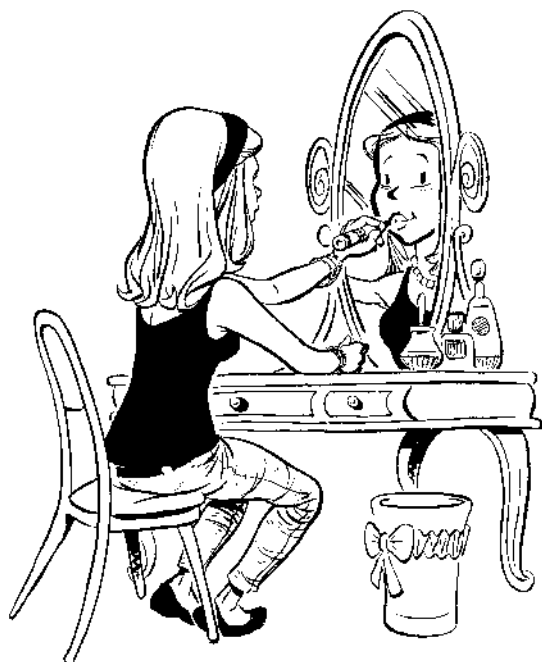
Sit or stand in front of a mirror.

DIRECTIONS

Have your child look in the mirror and, using a felt marker, draw exactly what she sees.

VARIATION

Sit across from one another and draw each other's faces on paper.



Game 4: People Report

GOAL

Noticing visual details and social cues

SETUP

Play this game at a store.

DIRECTIONS

Ask your child to look around at other people who are waiting in line near you at the store and silently notice as many details as he can. Tell him you will do the same. What are they wearing? What do you think their attitude is—are they patiently waiting, fidgety, distracted? Why do you think that? Report to each other once you are out of the store. It's fun to see how we focus in on different details coming from our own unique perspective.

VARIATIONS

1. If there are two people together, guess what their relationship is to each other and maybe even how they are getting along with each other.
2. Pretend there is someone in the line who is a spy, and you each have to figure out who it is. Later, outside the store, see if you both picked the same person.

Game 5: Which Line Is Best?

GOAL

Social awareness

SETUP

Play this game when you are in a line or about to get into a line.

DIRECTIONS

When picking a line at the grocery store, ease the frustration by betting on who picked the fastest line. You can be in the same line with your child, but keep an eye on where you would have been in another line and see which line reaches the checkout first. Notice details. Would the line with the older person or the woman with children be faster or slower?

VARIATION

Bet on the slowest line!



Game 6: Shadow Games

GOALS

- Eye-foot coordination
- Speed
- Timing

SETUP

Play this game outside at dusk when you can see your shadows. This game can be played with two or more people.

DIRECTIONS

Have good fun romping by trying to step on each other's shadows.

VARIATION

Choose a specific part of the shadow to step on, such as the head or leg.



Game 7: Toe Stepping

GOALS

- Concentration
- Focusing
- Practicing kindness
- Empathy
- Coordination

SETUP

Two people, either barefoot or wearing stockings, hold hands facing each other.

DIRECTIONS

Players try to step on the other's toes while at the same time keeping their toes from being stepped on. Remind players to step lightly. Golden rule: "Step on others as you would want to be stepped on."

VARIATION

Try it with three people!

Game 8: Stone Painting

GOALS

- Experimenting with different designs
- Creativity
- Focusing

MATERIALS

Small rocks, paintbrushes, and water

DIRECTIONS

Painting lines on rocks with water can make anything look like elegant Japanese calligraphy. Use several rocks and experiment with different designs. No one has to worry about making a mistake because when it dries, it disappears!

VARIATION

If you don't want them to disappear, paint over the watermarks with paint.

Traveling Games



Game 1: Postcard Diaries

GOAL

Recording memories

MATERIALS

Postcards from different destinations, and pens, pencils, or crayons (or any other writing implements)

DIRECTIONS

When you take a trip with your child or even go somewhere in your own town, let your child select a postcard for that day or at each destination. She can write on the back of the postcard what she did on that day, and collect the postcards.

VARIATION

She can mail the postcards to herself and get a nice reminder, and then make a hole in one corner of each postcard and string them together.

Game 2: Travel Collections

GOALS

Noticing details
Memory recall
Writing

MATERIALS

A bag to hold memorabilia and a scrapbook

DIRECTIONS

Have your child collect small memorabilia during a trip, such as the wrapper from some exotic candy or the tickets to an interesting show. These can be pasted in a scrapbook when you get back home.

VARIATION

Have the child write a note about the meaning of each item of memorabilia and why it mattered or stood out to her.

The Honorable Head Garbage Taker-Outer

Here's a way to get a job done while making everyone feel important, necessary, and appreciated. I discovered it one day when I was hoping that my kids and their visitors might help me with a garden project of planting peas. I thought for sure they'd enjoy it, and was surprised when they seemed reluctant to join me in poking holes in the earth, dropping in the little round pea seeds, covering them, and pressing down the soil over them.

Then I remembered when it seemed like suddenly everyone in the workplace got new titles. The custodian became the maintenance engineer, and secretaries were assistant

managers, and so on. . . . Same work, different titles. Yet the new titles were more respectful of the labor done. Janitors *do* maintain, and secretaries *do* manage.

I announced the positions available: “Let’s see . . . for this work, I need an Honorable Hole Putter-Inner, a Gracious Seed Depositor, a Superior Soil Cover-Upper, and a Princely Press-It-Downer.” I was delighted—and astonished—when everyone claimed a title and burst into activity.

Now, instead of asking someone, “Would you grate the potatoes?” I say, “You can be the Great Grater.”

At a Head Start classroom I know, the teacher must also know this trick, because he gives out similar titles. The person who heads the line leading everyone to recess is the “Line Header.” But the person who is even more important, the one who gets to say “Line up!” and watch the kids scurrying to follow his order by lining up in front of him, has a title too. He’s the “Line Ender”!

