

MODIFYING GAMES FOR CHILDREN

My dad could be fiercely competitive when he played games with other adults. But when he played with children, the challenge for him changed from winning to figuring out the best way to teach the game.

Dad was a genius at modifying games to help us learn how to play well at each of his children's level of development and ability. We used to have back yard touch football games that included everybody in the neighborhood who wanted to play, from my teen-age brother and his friends to my 3-year-old brother Lee.

Normally teens would be expected to refuse to play touch football with a baby on their side, but Dad changed their attitude. He invented a new rule: Any time Lee's team managed to get the ball into his hands, Lee got an automatic touchdown.

That rule transformed Lee from a team nuisance to a team asset, and it motivated his team to encourage him. As his skills improved, Dad kept on adjusting the rules to keep the game a challenge for him and fun for everyone else, too.

Games provide a wealth of opportunity for children to develop essential learning skills.

For example, Uno, Old Maid, and other card games teach preschoolers matching. Monopoly provides incentive and practice for school age children to figure out basic math problems. Authors and Clue help children learn to reason and deduct. Outdoor sports like softball and soccer help children develop motor skills and hand-eye coordination.

Parents and older siblings can encourage younger children to play games well with a few simple strategies:

- **Introduce rules and strategies with practice games.**

With older children, play a game or two with the cards face up, explaining as you play. Play with the cards face up all the time with preschoolers.

- **Avoid intense competition.**

For young children, competition can be “too fierce and emotionally distressing to be enjoyable,” said Lincoln Stein, author of *Family Games*. “If you shout, ‘Hooray! We’ve used up all the cards,’ instead of, ‘Tough luck, you lose,’ 3-year-olds will be delighted,” he said. “Keeping early play relatively pointless will avoid both the bitter repercussions of letting children win on purpose and the violent feelings that emerge when a family plays too competitively.”

- **Simplify.**

Choose the simplest games for preschoolers, Stein suggested, and doctor the deck of cards, leaving only the Aces, 2’s, 3’s, 4’s and 5’s. “Add cards when children are able to recognize names and numbers, to hold more cards in their hands, or their increased skill calls for more complicated games.”

Stein also suggested that instead of shuffling the cards, children can lay them all on the floor face down and pick them back up in random order. If children can’t hold all the cards in their hands, he said, use fewer cards. Or place a pillow in front of a child and lean the cards against it. Another solution is to let children hold the cards as a deck and look through it card by card.

- **Invent handicap rules.**

Modify the game the way my dad did with our neighborhood touch football games.

- **Turn a competitive game into a cooperative game.**

Let younger children play with parents or older siblings as cooperative partners. A preschooler can sit on someone’s lap during a game of Uno, for example, and help choose which cards to play.

When families play games flexibly this way, they can accommodate not only the younger children, but also other family