

The Games Children Play

Nancy Padak, Timothy Rasinski

Which outdoor games were your childhood favorites? Did you play organized sports or invent games with neighborhood children? These games probably gave you lots of practice in large motor activities—running or throwing, for example. And what about inside games? Did you learn some math from Monopoly, some spelling from Scrabble, and some problem-solving strategies from both?

Did you think to yourself, “I really need to brush up on my spelling. Let’s play Scrabble!” Of course not; you played these games to have fun with family and friends. The skill development was an important by-product, however. Likewise, word games are fun opportunities for parents and children to spend time together and for children to learn a good deal about sounds and words.

In this column, we describe 12 easy-to-implement word games that parents and their children can play (Hoyt, 1999; Padak & Rasinski, 2005; Rasinski, Padak, Newton, & Newton, 2008). The descriptions are ready for you to duplicate and share with parents. The column concludes with a brief discussion of the research-based benefits of word games.

Games With Sounds

These games focus on phonemic awareness and decoding. You can share the generic descriptions of the games all at one time and then send brief notes home suggesting the words to use with the games. When you introduce the games to parents, stress two points: the atmosphere should be light and enjoyable, and the child should never be frustrated. Parents should provide whatever support is necessary for this to happen.

Talking Like Turtles

Stretching words out, or talking slowly like a turtle might, can help children learn that words are made of sounds. Select four or five words from something you have read to your child. Then say each word very slowly, doing your best to say each sound, and ask your child to figure out which word you have said. Next, you can ask your child to say words “like a turtle,” and you can guess the words.

Presto Chango

This game focuses on word families. A child who knows the word *cat* and the word family /-at/, for example, can figure out many related words: *bat*, *hat*, *mat*, *pat*, and so on. Select a word family, and think of several words that belong to it. Now, using *cat* as an example, say to your child, “Let’s start with *cat*. If we take the /c/ off, we have /-at/. Now add /m/ and PRESTO CHANGO, what do we have?”

Word Ladders

An extension of Presto Chango, Word Ladders (Rasinski, 2005a, 2005b) involves having children move from one word to another, adding, subtracting, or changing a letter at a time. The last word in the ladder is connected to the first word in some way. Teachers can duplicate ready-made word ladders (see Rasinski, 2005a, 2005b) or make their own ladders to send home for parents and children to complete. Teacher-made word ladders include the beginning word and the clues for subsequent words. Here is an example:

read (change a letter; this is a small, rounded piece of glass often used in jewelry)
bead (subtract a letter; this is the opposite of good)

bad (add a letter; this means having no hair)
bald (change a letter; this is a round toy)
ball (change a letter; this is the opposite of short)
tall (change a letter; you pay this when you drive)
toll (change a letter; a screwdriver or hammer is one of these)
tool (change a letter; Yesterday we ____ a test.)
took (change a letter; this is what you read)
book

Which One Doesn't Belong?

This activity, sometimes called Odd Word Out (Rasinski et al., 2008), is a variation of the *Sesame Street* sketch that asks viewers to decide which three of these things belong together. To play it, assemble sets of three words, two of which share a feature. For example, with beginning sounds, you could select *cat*, *cake*, and *tree*. With word families, you could select *pin*, *tin*, and *tip*. Say each set of words to your child and ask, "Which one doesn't belong? Why?"

Riddles

This game asks children to solve a riddle by figuring out a word that matches clues. To play, select four or five words. These can be words from a text you have read to your child or words related to a word family. Then develop a brief riddle for each. For example, using the word *fish*, you could say, "I am a living creature. I live in the water. I rhyme with *dish*. What am I?"

Clapping Words

This game helps children understand the concept of syllables. Children do not need to know lots of syllable rules, but it is helpful for them to realize that long words have "chunks." To play the game, start with a short poem or song (or other text that your child knows). Then invite your child to read the text along with you and to clap the syllables in the text while reading. To add variety, you and your child could march to the text, taking a step for each syllable.

Games With Words

These games focus on words. For the last four, parents will need word cards, which you can prepare and send home or which they can easily prepare themselves. The games are useful for developing sight vocabulary, providing additional practice with new vocabulary words and, of course, having fun!

Word Sketches

This game is based on Pictionary. To play it, first select several words from a text your child has read. Put each word on a small slip of paper, and put the slips of paper in a cup. Then play the game like Pictionary. You and your child each select a word and make a sketch that shows its meaning. You might want to set a timer for perhaps one minute for sketching. Then trade sketches and each of you can guess the other's word. This is a fun game for the whole family to play.

Word Theater

This game is based on Charades. To play it, first select several words from a text your child has read. Put each word on a small slip of paper, and put the slips of paper in a cup. Then play the game like Charades. Ask your child to select a word and act it out (no words allowed!) while you guess the word. Then you take a turn. This is also a fun game for the whole family to play.

20 Questions

Select a word from a text you have read to your child. (It is helpful to have the text available for your child to see.) Tell your child to guess the word you have in mind by asking up to 20 yes-or-no questions.

Concentration

Use about 10 pairs of word cards (20 words all together). These can be the same word on two cards, a word paired with a word family or definition, pairs of words from the same word family, synonyms, or some other logical pairing of words. Shuffle the cards and lay them upside down in a rectangle. Now you and your child can take turns turning up two cards at a time. If the cards match, you keep them. If they do not match, turn them back over. The winner is the one with the most cards when all cards are matched.

Go Fish

Assemble sets of word cards, 9–12 cards per player. Each set should be related somehow (e.g., by word family [*down*, *town*, *brown*], by root [*look*, *looks*, *looking*]). Deal seven cards to each player. Put the rest upside down in the center of the playing area.

Players first look for matches in the cards they were dealt, which are laid face up. Then the game is played like Go Fish. Players take turns asking others for cards they need to make matches, e.g., “Do you have a word from the /-own/ word family?” “Do you have a *look* word?” If the other person has such a word, it is given to the player who asked. If not, the player is told to “Go Fish,” and the next player asks for cards. Play continues until someone is out of cards.

Word-Part Rummy

Cards for this game should be word parts (prefixes, suffixes, roots) that can go together to form words. Prepare about 10 cards per player, shuffle, deal five to each player, and place the remaining cards face down in a stack. Players look for cards that create words and place them face up on the table. Then they take turns drawing cards from the pile. If the drawn card does not make a match, the player discards a card, which the next player may take. Play continues until someone has matched all of his or her cards.

Word War

This game is played like the card game War. All words cards are dealt to players. Each player turns a card over and says the word on it. The player whose word is longest (alternatively, first in alphabetical order) wins the cards. In cases of ties, another card is turned over. Play continues until all cards have been turned over, and the player with the most cards wins.

Why Games?

Our own research (Padak & Rasinski, 2005) has demonstrated the benefits of parent–child practice with

short texts accompanied by a few minutes of word play. Children who engage in these activities at home outperformed in reading achievement and reading-related skill development those classmates whose parents did not engage in these games. A recent meta-analysis (Sénéchal, 2006) found a moderately large effect size (0.68) of parental involvement on young children’s reading acquisition. Moreover, the effects of parents “teaching skills” (or playing games like those described in this column) were found to be twice as effective as parents listening to children read and six times more effective than parents simply reading to their children. Word play is “motivating...; calls on students to reflect metacognitively on words, word parts, and context; [and] requires students to be active learners” (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2004, p. 220). Let the games begin!

References

- Blachowicz, C.L.Z., & Fisher, P. (2004). Keep the “fun” in fundamental: Encouraging word awareness and incidental word learning in the classroom through word play. In J.F. Baumann & E.J. Kame’enui (Eds.), *Vocabulary instruction: Research to practice* (pp. 218–237). New York: Guilford.
- Hoyt, L. (1999). *Revisit, reflect, retell: Strategies for improving reading comprehension*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Padak, N., & Rasinski, T. (2005). *Fast start for early readers*. New York: Scholastic.
- Rasinski, T. (2005a). *Daily word ladders: Grades 2–3*. New York: Scholastic.
- Rasinski, T. (2005b). *Daily word ladders: Grades 4–6*. New York: Scholastic.
- Rasinski, T., Padak, N., Newton, R., & Newton, E. (2008). *Greek and Latin roots: Keys to building vocabulary*. Huntington Beach, CA: Shell Education.
- Sénéchal, M. (2006). *The effect of family literacy interventions on children’s acquisition of reading*. Washington, DC: National Institute for Literacy. Retrieved May 31, 2008, from www.nifl.gov/partnershipforreading/publications/pdf/lit_interventions.pdf

The department editors welcome reader comments. Padak teaches at Kent State University, Kent, Ohio, USA; e-mail npadak@literacy.kent.edu. Rasinski also teaches at Kent State University; e-mail trasinsk@kent.edu.

Copyright of Reading Teacher is the property of International Reading Association and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.