



Having a successful game night requires a plan & commitment from every family member.

photo by Chris Fritchie

More Than Just Family Fun

By Debbie Vallejo

A STUDY in the January 2007 issue of *Pediatrics* examines the impact of play time on child development and parent-child relationships. The article specifically addresses the pressure today's parents feel when they are constantly bombarded with promises of childhood enrichment from extracurricular programs and athletic opportunities. Scheduling time together is increasingly difficult in the face of the overscheduled lifestyle that is becoming the cultural norm.

This lack of family time is causing increasing concern among counselors and child psychologists. In fact, play is regarded as such a key component of childhood development that, in 1989, the United Nations Commission for Human Rights officially recognized "play time" as a fundamental human right of every child.

Time spent building relationships and forging bonds is imperative in order for children to feel connected to their parents and siblings. Family Game Night is one of those classic tools for creating

family connections that never goes out of style. The games may have changed a little over the years, but the concept stays the same: spend decent, quality time together with no outside distractions. It's a time for everyone in the family, including mom and dad, to turn off cell phones, shut down computers and focus on just being together.

Monica Marterella is a family counselor in Plano. "Setting aside a night to spend quality time with the family promotes family cohesion," explains Ms. Marterella. "It also demonstrates to the kids how important spending time together is." Ann Marie Lindig is a mother of three children and director of a mother's day out program in Frisco. Between homework and hobbies, Ms. Lindig says everyone in her family is constantly going in different directions and it requires intentionality to be together. "We could all be in the same house in the evening and before we know it it's time for bed and we haven't spent any time together. Between homework,

TV, video games, phone calls, reading assignments and projects, everyone is always doing something different," explains Ms. Lindig.

WHY GAMES?

Research suggests that games actually help children develop the social skills necessary for dealing with competition, sharing with others and learning how to lose gracefully. Parents can utilize family game night to model good sportsmanship and fairness, and their kids pick up on the lessons. "Playing games together teaches kids about sacrifice and that you don't always get what you want," explains Ms. Marterella. Playing by the rules also teaches responsibility. Children who learn that everyone is more comfortable and safe when rules are followed, tend to have an easier transition through their school years where rules are a mainstay.

Accepting a loss is hard for anyone, let alone a young child. Parents tell their children to try their best, and then often

have to watch as the child discovers his best was not good enough to win. Teaching a child how to display a generous attitude during such times can be as taxing on the parents as it is on the child. However, the alternative is to allow them to grow up thinking that nothing good ever comes from losing; that winning is the most important part of competition, leading to self-centeredness and self-esteem that hinges on their ability to win. When a child learns to accept a loss graciously and congratulate the winner, they are on the road to becoming emotionally resilient in the face of disappointment.

All life lessons aside, there is still the fact that playing games together allows parents and children to build relationships in an environment that is appealing to kids. Children want to see their parents and siblings having fun and enjoying their time together. It can be difficult for busy parents with a lengthy to-do list to take the time to play games with their kids. But the long-term positive impact of such a commitment is huge. "One of the best ways to start conversations with kids is when you are having fun together as a family," says Ms. Marterella. "It's less threatening to the kids and it shows them that they matter enough for their parents to take the time to talk to them."

HOW TO START?

The idea of having a Family Game Night each week can be daunting. Visions of sibling disputes, crying jags and debates over rules of the game may cause parents with the best of intentions to have second thoughts about creating mandatory fam-



Time together is the point of game night – whether around a board game or choosing up sides for Nerf Wars.
photos by Chris Fritchie

ily time. The structure of the evening will influence how well everything turns out. Set the family up for success with a few simple start-up strategies.

First, it's probably a good idea for parents, not the kids, to choose the evening for family game night. As children get older there is always something coming up. Obviously, the larger the family, the higher the likelihood that at least one person will have an activity scheduled on any given night. Parents are better able to decide which day has the best chance for success without throwing off the family schedule. "It should definitely be up to the parents to set the boundaries for when the time

is going to happen," Ms. Marterella explains. "Everyone will learn that it is important to do things that are best for group, not just any one person in the family."

Frequency is another issue. How often will family night occur? Are there any "out" clauses? If so, lay the ground work ahead of time so that everyone in the family knows when it is permissible to ask for the date to change. Kathy Bean has three children, one boy and two girls. The Bean family is dedicated to having family game nights worked into their schedules. "We pick a night at the beginning of each semester or season that seems to have the least amount of scheduling issues," explains Ms. Bean. "We also rarely pick a weekend night. Most of the time weekends are just too crazy."

According to Ms. Marterella, parents also should be responsible for setting up the parameters for the games and for deciding how the evening will progress. The simple task of choosing what game to play can cause tension if

it is not addressed ahead of time. This can be especially challenging for families in which there are a wide variety of ages to consider. Even different genders can pose a problem; it may be hard for a 13-year-old boy to stomach playing *The Princess and the Pea* board game. The Bean family found a way around that issue. "We each take turns picking what we play or do," says Ms. Bean. "We don't really fight about what we do because everyone knows they eventually will get to pick the activity." While there is always a noticeable difference between what one sibling chooses compared to another, the kids never complain about

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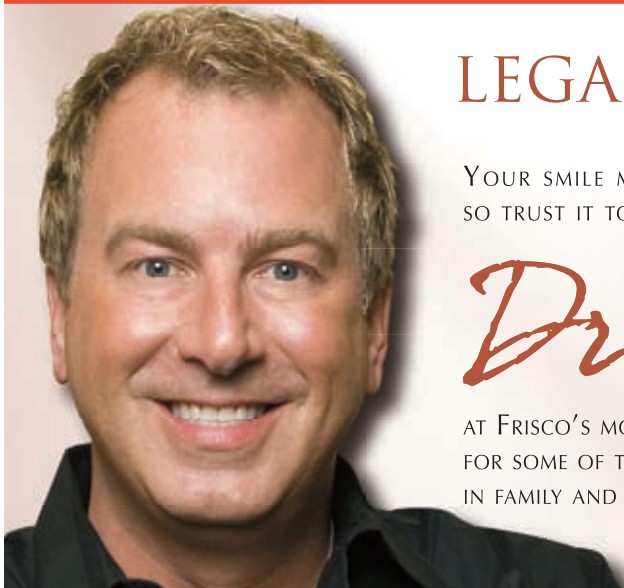


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Game night can occasionally incorporate learning along with family fun.

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having to take part in the chosen activity. “When it’s my son’s night to choose, we always end up playing Nerf gun wars. It’s his turn to plan the game and set the rules,” Ms. Bean explains. “When my youngest daughter picks, she always picks board games. If anyone complains, it’s usually me. I’m not a huge fan of Nerf gun wars, but I join in and always end up having fun.”

Ms. Marterella agrees that taking turns deciding what game to play is a great way to get around the different preferences of each person in the family. “Everyone in the family is not always going to be happy with the chosen activity,” she explains. “But they know their turn will come. It helps them understand how to do things for the good of the whole family.”

Compiling a list of games available to the family is a way to provide lots of options. It doesn’t have to be a board game either. “My oldest son was playing Duck, Duck, Goose until he was 13, because that’s what his younger sister wanted to play,” explains Ms. Lindig. “He was a great sport about it and he knew that he was going to decide what the family was going to play when it was his turn.” There are also plenty of card games that kids today love as much as their parents did when they were young. Go to a dollar store to find old favorites like Go Fish and Old Maid.

WHERE DOES THE TIME GO?

Having consistent family time scheduled is most assuredly a plus for any family, but what is the flip side? What are the negative effects for families who are not taking the time to do things together? “It definitely impacts communication in the family,” says Ms. Marterella. “It can create a lack of cohesion that causes parents to go into crisis management mode. All you are doing is moving from one crisis to another.”

Not spending time together can cause more discipline problems... When parents are busy there tends to be a lack of consistency.

Ms. Marterella says setting a foundation for communication and togetherness helps families work as a team when faced with tough decisions. It also allows parents to set boundaries so children understand expectations of proper behavior. “Not spending time together can actually cause more discipline problems,” explains Ms. Marterella. “When parents are busy there tends to be a lack of consistency in

discipline and kids don’t feel they can talk to their parents because everyone is going in a million different directions.”

Having the same night each week may not work for every family. Tailor family time for your specific situation. If there is a little “dry spell,” that’s okay, too, but be sure to pen that time back in as soon as possible. “We decided that if we could make time for soccer, then we can make time for our family to be together,” explains Ms. Bean. “But, there are also times it’s harder to manage it. Even though we usually don’t do weekends, we are currently changing the day to Sunday evening because of scheduling conflicts, but it’s the only night that works.”

In the end, it’s imperative to spend time together as a family, creating a comfortable environment that allows for open communication and lots of fun. “It’s important that kids understand that parents honestly want to spend time with them doing things they enjoy,” says Ms. Marterella. “Whatever the activity, it’s always worth the extra effort.” With all the positive aspects of holding a good old fashioned Family Game Night, it’s obvious the time is about more than family fun, it’s also about building solid relationships that last.

Debbie Vallejo is a frequent contributor to Frisco STYLE who lives in Frisco.