

SKILL BUILDING OPPORTUNITIES

Expanding Interests

Question: All my kids want to do is play video games and watch television. It is a daily battle. How can I help my kids get interested in other things?

There are many things you can do to help encourage your children to expand their interests by promoting the life skill of Making Connections.

Making Connections is at the heart of learning—figuring out what's the same and what's different, and sorting these things into categories. Making unusual connections is at the core of creativity. In a world where people can Google for information, it is the people who can see connections who are able to go beyond knowing information to using this information well.

Patricia Kuhl, a scientist at the University of Washington, notes that:

As I've watched my own child grow, there are various things that light her up. As parents and caretakers of a whole generation of kids, we have to be tuned in to the engagement process.

1

Support your children to make new connections based on their interests.

Karen Wynn of Yale University finds that parents and caregivers support learning on the deepest level when they tap into children's enthusiasm, and building on it. What kinds of television and video games do your children like? Rather than fight against their interests, look for opportunities to expand your children's interests beyond TV and video games.

- Do your children prefer to play one-on-one or in a large group? Do they like games and shows with lots of activity, or do they prefer things to be more quiet and focused? Look for new activities that fit each child's personality.
- Introduce books about the topics in their games and shows. Are they interested in superheroes or aliens from outer space? Take a trip to the library and look for fiction and nonfiction books about the planets or heroes from the past. Encourage them to look at the similarities and differences between what they find in the books and what they have seen in their shows and games.

2

Limit time and get active.

The American Academy of Pediatrics suggests that parents try to limit their children's screen time—that means TV, video games and computer time—to no more than two hours per day.

- Give your children some time for playing video games and watching television. You want them to feel excited to explore new things, instead of just pressured to give up something they enjoy.
- Make sure that the games and shows the children watch are good quality. You can go to Common Sense Media <https://www.commonsensemedia.org/> for recommendations of media that will help your child learn in fun and exciting ways.
- In addition to screen time, give your children time for physical activities every day, like playing ball, exercising, running games, etc. One problem with screen time is that children are sitting, which needs to be balanced with time for active play.

3

Play other kinds of games that encourage Making Connections.

It seems like your children already love to play games. Try introducing other kinds of games that encourage your children to manage their attention and behavior in order to follow the game rules. And play with your children when you have time! When you join in their play, you support your children's exploration of new ideas and experiences and have fun together in the process.

- Start a family game night with games that involve counting, dice and spinners. You can also try card games, word games and memory games. They are all fun ways for your children to practice matching numbers, letters and colors while interacting with others and using critical thinking skills.
- Play "Imagine If..." games. Ask your children questions like: "If you could have any kind of job in the world, what would it be?" or "What would you ask for if you had three wishes?" Share your answers with your children, too. These discussions can inspire new ideas and help you see some of the things that your children are thinking about.

Larry Schweinhart, who recently retired from the HighScope Educational Research Foundation, talks about the importance of having children take increasing responsibility for their own learning:

The reason we want children to be involved as initiators is because it works better for their education and, in fact, makes them better citizens in the long run. The basic cornerstone of [goal-setting] is children making plans, then carrying out the plans, and then getting back together and reviewing the plans, under the guidance of the [adult].

4

Involve your children in setting goals and achieving them.

In order to avoid the daily battles, you can use a problem-solving process to set goals with your children. Have a discussion about the issue and then work together to come up with strategies for dealing with it.

- Address the dilemma with your children. Say something like: "I feel like we fight every day about the amount of time you spend playing video games or watching TV. I try to get you to do something else, and we end up yelling at each other. Playing video games and watching TV can be fun, but what other ideas can you come up with for other fun things to do?"
- See what your children suggest and share some of your own ideas. Encourage your children to consider all of the different points of view involved. For example, how will these solutions affect you, your children or other family members? One idea is to set aside a specific time to "unplug" as a family. Shut off the computer, don't answer the phone and turn off the television. Use this time to play games together, tell stories or read books.
- After choosing a solution, try it out. Come back together to talk about it with your children. Encourage them to take a step back and consider what is working and what isn't. Try something else if the first solution isn't working. Part of solving problems is making mistakes and trying lots of different things in order to find what works, rather than getting discouraged.

5

Recruit your children's friends and other family members.

Sometimes another person engaged in and passionate about an activity is the best motivation for someone else to join in. Ask the important people in your and your children's lives to invite your children to share in favorite hobbies and experiences.

Professor of learning research at MIT Mitch Resnick thinks that the ability to think creatively is fundamental to success.

I think that the ability to think and act creatively will be the key distinguishing quality that will allow people to succeed and be satisfied in their lives.

6

Encourage creativity and expression.

Making new connections is at the core of creativity. Give your children opportunities to explore different kinds of creative experiences like painting, drawing, writing and telling stories, singing, dancing and playing music. These activities can expose your children to new worlds of possibility.

- Suggest that your children write stories like the stories they like on television. They can put on a play and pretend that it is a show or even use your smartphone to film something that could be on TV.
- Have your children make up a game that could be a computer game.