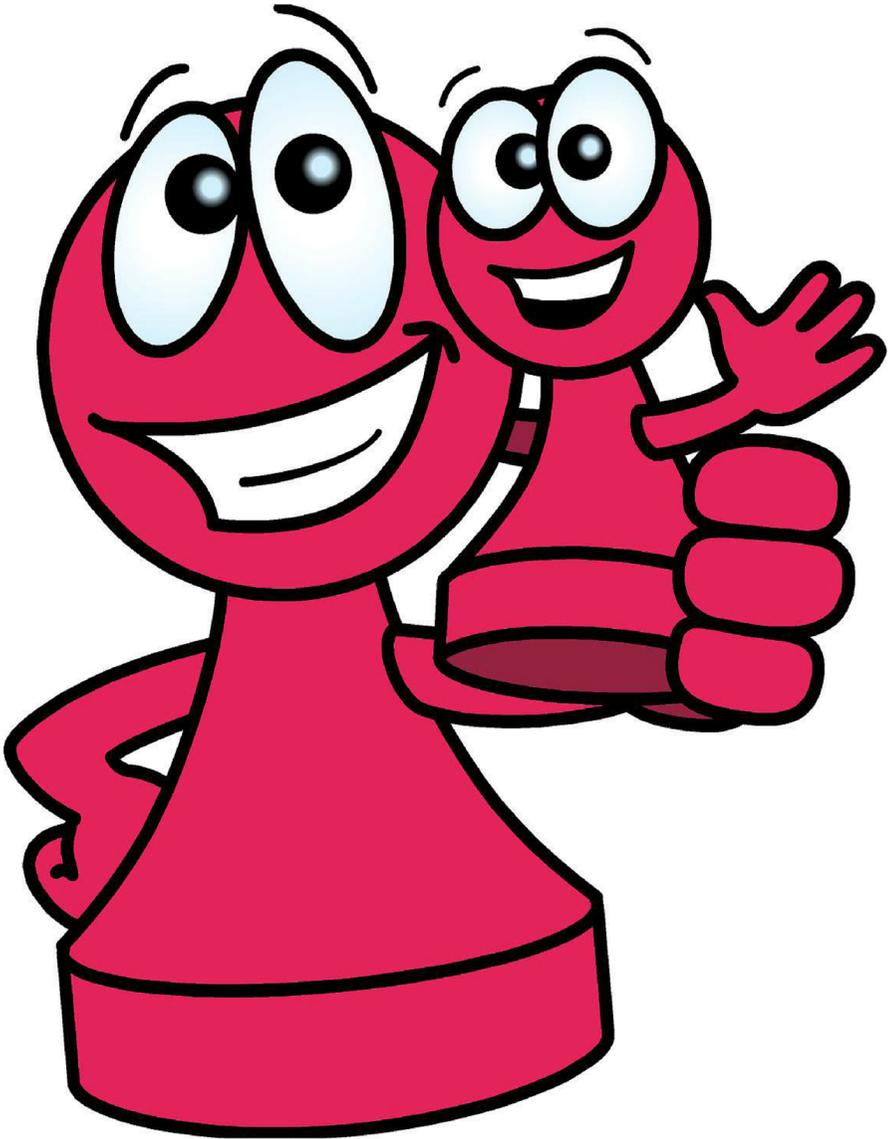


How to build communication and connection with your kids by playing board games. (Really!)



THE BEST OF

The Dad Game

*by John Kaufeld, M.A.
Bestselling "...For Dummies" author*

The Best of The Dad Game

How board games can help you build communication and connection with your kids

John Kaufeld, M.A.

This book is for sale at <http://leanpub.com/bestofthedadgame>

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Dedication

*To **Jenny**: You're the most amazing gluten-free friend, love, wife, and partner anyone could dream of finding. Twenty-eight years down; plenty more to go. I love you!*

*To **J.B., Pooz, and The Wonder**: Thank you for loving me, teaching me, playing with me, and being patient with me while I (slowly) learned how to be your dad. I love you all!!*

*To my friends and fellow **Communication M.A. students at Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne**: Thank you all for patiently surviving through three years of me talking about this stuff every time I could work it into an assignment. (Yes, I'm talking about it again, but not in APA style this time.)*

*To my friends and compatriots at the **Fort Wayne News-Sentinel**: Thanks for an opportunity to turn my vision and ideas into an every-other-week reality on your pages. Here's to the future!*

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In the Beginning...

Hi there! Come on in, grab a table, sit down, and make yourself at home.

Yes, of course your kids can join you. After all, they're the whole reason we're here.

As a parent, you want a solid relationship with your kids, right? Build a bond that's strong and flexible, that connects and carries you through the tweens, teens, and into adulthood?

Yup, me too.

Where the Trip Started

When I was a newly-minted dad, my parenting goals seemed simple: work with my wife to raise great kids, and build a closer, healthier relationship with them than I had with my own dad.

It turned out those to-do items were a lot harder than they sounded.

I had no clue what I was doing, so I screwed up a lot, especially when the kids entered their tween and teen years. Spending time together suddenly got harder. I can't count the number of times that "let's sit down and talk" ended with everybody angry and someone near tears (often me).

And Then There Were Games

Around that time, I made a fascinating discovery: my kids and I almost never fought when we played board games together. Instead, we breezily talked and joked with each other. The only

tears happened when we couldn't stop laughing together. Shocking, right?

Board games created a safe communication space for us. My kids and I could talk, interact, laugh, and enjoy each other without pain or frustration. Best of all, those benefits lasted well beyond the end of the game. The interactions we had wove into our relationships in the form of inside jokes, friendly jests, and shared memories. We connected at a whole new level.

Something amazing was happening, and it all started with with a struggling dad, a couple of frustrated kids, and some extraordinary board games.

Of course, doing pretty much any activity with your children makes a great step toward building better connections, because focused family time is the water that makes relationships grow.

Even so, there's still something particularly special about the kind of parent and child interaction that a board game creates.

Through my column in the Fort Wayne News-Sentinel – and now, this book – you and I get to explore the mysterious connection between parents, kids, communication, and board games. Believe me, there's a lot out there for us to talk about.

Why I Kept This Short

I debated for a long time about how long this book should be.

Long books automatically carry a certain gravity with them, primarily because of the number of pages. They also have an automatic air of authority, because one would assume that the author must've done a lot of research to fill all of those pages.

But long, weighty books also come with an automatic problem, too: they take forever to read. And, worse, a certain percentage of those many pages are just padding to, well, add pages.

On the other hand, a short book is fast to read, so if the goal is to get information out to people, then it seems that a short book would be the better solution. Of course, a reader might wonder if a short book really contained everything they needed to know about the subject. Didn't the author have enough material to make an epic tome on the subject?

Such are the worries that keep authors up at night.

After too much thought, I decided that the fast read was better than the massive tome. After all, if you bought the book because you don't have much time to spend with your kids, then you probably don't have enough time to read a big honking book on how to find the time to spend with your kids.

Even though the book is physically short, what you'll find in here is backed by a lot of research time. This stuff combines material from family communication theory, family leisure theory, psychology, and more. It represents 20 years of observing parents and children of all ages playing games together, as well as three years of serious academic research.

This is not some stuff I made up for fun. It's about a pretty cool set of outcomes available to you and your family, born from hours of observation and many night of frustration.

Let's Do This Thing

Join me in our quest to be better dads, moms, and parents. Let's go together and see what we can see along the way.

Welcome to The Dad Game. Are you in?

You're Not Doing It Right!

A man and a boy sit together on the floor, with a board game spread out between them. I'm the one on the left, the fellow with mostly-whole head of hair. The little guy I'm playing Candyland with is my oldest son, who's now 22. (Yes, this was a "few" years ago. Let's just leave it there and go on.)

Lean in. Look close. We're having fun, right? After all, we're playing together.

No, not exactly. My son is playing and having fun, but I'm busily getting annoyed. (Note the prune-shaped look of frustration slithering across my face.)

Oh, oh – here comes the part I wanted you to see. I'm about to utter a classic Awful Dad Line. You ready?

"No, no. Stop! You're not doing it right!"

Oh yeah, I said it.

In fact, I said it a lot. There I'd be, playing a game with my kids, listening to their laughter and enjoying their company. But was I focused on that? No! I was making sure they played the game "right" by the rules.

It turns out that things like following the rules and taking turns are hard ideas for little ones to grasp. Kids only start to understand that stuff when they're about six. Most younger kids simply can't process it. They don't have the thinking skills yet.

That's why my Awful Dad Line was so awful. I was focused on the wrong thing. I missed the magic of the moment.

Focus on fun

Playing games with younger kids – heck, with children of any age – is about spending time together doing something fun. It's about laughing and making memories. Yes, games teach kids all kinds of skills, but that happens over time in the natural course of playing together. You don't need to make that happen. It's automatic.

Don't get worked up if your little ones have trouble figuring out where to put their token next or if they suddenly jump from one side of the path to another. Gently help them and smile with them and laugh with them. Just play.

Here's the one rule you need remember, Dad: Fun always comes first. Everything else is details.

Change the rules. Ditch the rules. Forget the rules. You bought the game. It's yours now, and you can play it however you want to. So there.

Bottom line: If you're having fun with your kids, then you're doing it right.

So, ready to play?

Four secrets to finding a great family game

Everywhere I go, I talk with parents about their experiences with board games. Opinions are always mixed. Take Monopoly for example. Some people love it, others hate it, and a few were emotionally scarred by it.

There's obviously more at work here than simple likes and dislikes.

It turns out that most family game experiences come down to four specific points. If you know how to evaluate these four things for a board or card game, you'll quickly figure out whether it's the kind of game that works well with your family's temperament, interests, and skill levels.

So, what are the four mysterious keys to matching the right game with your family? In order of importance, they are: 1. type of competition 2. luck vs. strategy 3. playing time 4. player elimination

We'll start with the type of competition, because that's arguably the most important. Next week, we'll tackle another.

Type of competition

All board games are competitions, right? Well, sort of. Almost every game involve a competition of some kind, but competition itself comes in three specific flavors: direct, indirect, and cooperative.

Direct competition is the one most people know about because it's the easiest one to build into a game.

These games behave like a children's teeter-totter. If you're doing well in the game, then your end is up, which brings my end down.

If I help my position, then I hurt your position. The teeter-totter is always moving.

Indirect competition looks a little different. The players are still trying to win the game, but instead of being on a teeter-totter, it's more like a race. We're all running hard, but what each of us do doesn't directly impact the others. Several of us might even be winning – or losing – at the same time.

Finally, there are **cooperative games**. The last type of game turns the tables on traditional competitive games by putting everybody on the same team, and then throwing us all against a shared challenge.

The challenge we face is bigger than any of us can tackle alone, but if we work together, we might just win. Then again, even if we stay focused, organized, and helpful, there's still a very real chance the game might take us down.

The prospect of shared defeat is an interesting motivator in these games, and can turn otherwise competitive players into a wildly creative team. (It's awesome fun to watch the transformation, too.)

What's right for your family?

Every family has a unique dynamic when it comes to competition, but I never met a family that was entirely focused on one kind of competitive play.

Your family probably has a preference in one direction or another. Recognize that preference and feed it.

But at the same time, try something that runs against your main preference every now and then. When you do, watch how everyone interacts during the game. You'll probably see some new things happen!

Perhaps the kid who's usually quiet becomes a creative problem-solver when faced with a cooperative challenge. Or the go-for-the-

jugular competitive player finds a new joy in the individual race for the win.

And those are great discoveries to make, because they create stories that last through retelling after retelling.

What kind of competition fits your family the best? Has competition ever been a problem? Share your thoughts and challenges. I want to hear from you!