

BY CAROL KRUCOFF

The score is tied, sweat streams down my body, and my heart bangs against my rib cage as my opponent dribbles deftly around me, rushes to the basket, and prepares to sink his trademark left-handed hook shot.

"You're dead meat!" he jeers, and some primal, competitive urge prompts me to leap over and snag the ball,

tion for the Education of Young Children, in Washington, D.C. "But the flip side is that children must learn that they can't win all the time." The abilities to lose and win graciously are just two of the important skills children learn through competing.

Playing games also promotes qualities essential for success in life—such as risk taking, concentration, and

planning strategy—so it's important to remember that we are often teaching our kids significant lessons even while engaging in seemingly trivial games.

But when is a child ready to handle competition and games with formal rules? "It depends largely on his or her developmental stage," says Janet Sawyers, director of the child-development laboratories at Virginia Polytechnical Institute and State University, in Blacksburg.

"Many preschoolers show interest in games, but they are not usually ready to handle the 'real' rules," explains Sawyers. She advises parents to use a technique that psychologists call "scaffolding": breaking down the game into easier, smaller parts. For ex-

ample, a 4-year-old who is intrigued by Chinese checkers may enjoy simply taking turns arranging the marbles by color on the board. A child too young for "real" Candy Land might enjoy guessing what color will come up next in the deck, then identifying squares of that color on the board. A 3-year-old who has watched her older siblings play dominoes might like to see how many she can stack into a tower.

Change the rules to suit younger kids.

Starting around age 4 or 5, kids are capable of following simple rules, though many board games are still too complicated. Most children in this age range are not really able to strategize. "But you don't have to follow the rules on the box for a game to be enjoyable," says Willer. "You can tailor the game to

Winning and losing

Learning to do both with grace boosts kids' self-esteem.

race to the opposite basket, and score the winning layup. But there is no sweetness in my victory, because my opponent is my 9-year-old son.

"Mom!" Max cries, his face crumbling in disappointment. I feel a stab of guilt. What kind of mother would deliberately use her size and age advantage to defeat her own child? Could I really be the same woman who has taken a dive in countless games, from Candy Land to Go Fish? "Can't go," I'd shrug sadly during a hot round of Crazy Eights—even though I held the winning, solitary eight in my hand—because it seems wrong, even cruel, to beat my own child. Besides, like most parents, I want my child to be happy. And like most kids in America, my son is happiest when he wins.

"Winning contributes to a child's self-esteem," notes Barbara Willer, of the National Associa-



By the age of 5, kids should know that they can't win all the time.

fit your child's age and abilities." For example, when playing Chutes and Ladders, eliminate the Chutes, which tend to frustrate younger children.

By about age 7 or 8, most children are ready to play by the game's formal rules. But regardless of your child's age, "the most important part of playing with him is making the time together enjoyable," says Jeffrey Derevensky, Ph.D., a professor of child psychology at McGill University, in Montreal, and a consultant to several toy manufacturers. He recommends giving children undivided attention when you play a game together, choosing a game you have time to finish, and stopping if your child is not having fun.

Of course, children are most likely to enjoy the game if they win. Most experts believe it's okay to let children win sometimes. After all, if they never win, they'll lose

interest and won't want to compete. But be aware that kids who always beat Mom and Dad may have a tough time when they start playing games with friends. So it's important to teach children the art of losing, too.

Don't allow children to be sore losers.

Remember that your behavior—and that of older siblings—will serve as a model. If a big sister is allowed to kick the board when she's feeling frustrated, the younger child will learn to do the same.

"When your child is upset at losing, don't deny her feelings. Sympathize and acknowledge the disappointment. But don't put up with unacceptable behavior like throwing pieces or turning the board over in anger," says Derevensky.

"If you lose to your child, you might say, 'Boy, I'd liked to have won this time, but maybe I'll win next time,'"

Game plan for fun

Nearly any game can be adapted to even out the competition. This strategy comes in especially handy when you're playing with different-age siblings.

Checkers. Let younger players start the game with several kings.

Softball. No strikeouts for younger players. Let them swing until they

hit the ball. Move bases in closer.

Monopoly. Give younger players extra money or property at the start of the game.

Boggle. Older players can't use two- and three-letter words.

Scrabble. Restrict older players to words of five letters or more, or don't allow them

to use common letters like E or S.

Basketball. Kids not old enough to dribble comfortably can carry the ball to the basket to shoot.

Go Fish. Let younger players go down with two of a kind.

Soccer. Younger players get a larger goal than older players.

Derevensky suggests. "This will help teach her not to be a sore loser. Because by the age of 5, a child should begin to understand that she can't always win."

One way to de-emphasize winning is to focus on improving skills. Help your child set several personal, realistic goals within the game—for example, not making any foot faults in tennis or keeping a poker

face in Old Maid. This way, if she meets her goals, she wins, regardless of the outcome.

How to make competition even.

"As children grow older, they may feel ambivalent about being allowed to win," says sports psychologist Linda Bunker, coauthor of *Parenting Your Superstar* (Human Kinetics). "When parents obviously decrease their skill to make a child feel good, it can embarrass the child and make him feel incompetent."

Instead, Bunker suggests modifying the rules to make the competition more even and interesting for all players. For example, let a child start out with a 100-point lead in Rummy 500 or require adults to play

sports with their nondominant hand. Nearly any game can be handicapped to make it fun for players of various ages and abilities (see "Game Plan for Fun").

The older and more skilled children become, the less parents need to handicap. For example, I've let myself play basketball harder and harder as Max has grown taller and better.

But I hadn't realized how closely matched we'd become until that day he goaded me into snatching away his certain victory. With every cell of my being struggling just to keep up with Max, I was no longer a mother trying to avoid taking advantage of my child, but a competitor who had been jeered at in a most unsportsmanlike manner. What would Max have learned if I had let him make his shot? That it's okay to be cocky and obnoxious?

By not holding back, I showed Max that he had become good enough to deserve my best effort—in itself a milestone of success. But I also taught him the important lesson that baiting an opponent can backfire by igniting her competitive spirit. And, yes, I proved that old Mom's not dead meat yet. □

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Give kids an advantage at the start of the game so you can play harder throughout.

