



## Should You Let Kids Win at Games?

by Sarah W. Caron

One evening, over a fierce game of Memory, I made a conscious decision to not match two cards, knowing that my four-year-old son would turn them over. It wasn't enough to make him win the game (My husband was playing with us, too, and at full throttle, so there was no doubt who would win.), but the small gesture, masked by me "forgetting" where the second card was, let my son bask in the joy of making two more matches.

It didn't really matter who won. To my son, each matched pair was a win, even if he didn't have more pairs than my husband or I at the end. For me, seeing the smile on his face was better than winning any game.

### Playing to Win

While I might have gone easy on my son, other parents would never do the same. Laura Doth from New Mexico, a mom of three, says that she's never been one to let her kids win. "Losing gives you the opportunity and the motivation to improve your skills and get better. Then, when you do win, the satisfaction is real," says Doth.

Not letting children win at games can also teach a hard, but necessary lesson: In life, you don't always win. And it's important to know how to deal with it.

Expert Charlotte Reznick, a licensed educational psychologist and author of *The Power of Your Child's Imagination: How to Transform Stress and Anxiety into Joy and Success* (Perigee/Penguin, 2009) says that some children focus more on the game play and others zero in on the win. "When playing a game with your child, the question of whether or not to let them win depends on their age, temperament and social skill set." says Reznick.

Some children need to win so that they can learn to lose, she says. "Kids learn so much more from what you do than what you say. ... I often 'fake cry' when I keep losing and then reveal my thinking process in getting over it," says Reznick.

### Losing Gracefully

Playing games isn't all about winning and losing. For younger children, letting them have the glory of a win can be a good thing.

Life coach Susan T. Howson, a professor of early childhood education at Ryerson University in Toronto, says that it's OK to occasionally let kids win in their preschool years. "Younger children often have a harder time losing a game and (associate) losing a game with not being good at anything. As self-esteem and self-confidence are developing, losing might be a hard thing to swallow," says Howson. Howson suggests that

parents throw the game subtly, so their kid doesn't find out. "This will give you an opportunity to then model what it's like to lose and that it's okay. ... You are still a smart, capable magnificent person," says Howson.

### Reality of Losing

Some parents believe that teaching kids to lose gracefully is a crucial part of parenting. Jennifer Bondurant from Missouri is a mother of three kids ranging in age from 2 years to 9 years. She believes that letting her kids win would be a missed opportunity. "I want my kids to be challenged and understand that they should strive to do their best, but they don't have to always be the best. There are times when someone else is going to win," says Bondurant.

Stephanie Trifoglio Cazares of Maryland, a mom of two, says that in her opinion letting a child win is akin to cheating and that it teaches contradictory lessons about playing a game honestly and fairly. "(In Monopoly,) sometimes you spend all of your money on Broadway but the yellow properties turn the tide," explains Cazares. "So many analogies and philosophies can be taught while playing, but cheating negates the lessons."

### The Thrill of Victory

No matter the game, there always has to be a winner and a loser. For the winner, there's always excitement. It's only amplified when the player has tried their hardest, which some parents say is an important experience for their children.

Cazares says that she and her husband have never taken it easy in game play with their sons. Recently, her oldest son, who is now 20 and plays football at Dickinson College, beat her husband at arm-wrestling. "They both stood up, my husband and he shook hands and my husband congratulated him. Then my son came into the kitchen to me and said, 'I beat Daddy! I beat Daddy!' He was ecstatic because he knew that no one ever let him win - it was (won) fair and square and he had been trying for years" says Cazares.

### You Win Some, You Lose Some

Although I chose not to match those two cards in the Memory game with my son, I don't often let my son win. Usually, everyone in the family works hard to win. And sometimes, that means that my four-year-old takes the prize against my husband and I at Candyland, Chutes and Ladders and, yes, even Memory. As a once-in-a-blue-moon gesture, letting my son win didn't seem like such a big deal.

Virginia mom of two Sue Van Glanden admits that she sometimes lets her kids, ages 3 and 6, win. "The littler the kid, the more you let them win. Clearly a parent could beat a young child at almost any game requiring speed or skill, so a parent should let the child win as they begin learning the game to give the child confidence. ... As the child gets better at the game, a parent can win on occasion to show the child that they will not always win," says Van Glanden.

### Stick to the Rules

Whether you choose to go easy on your kids or not, sticking to the game rules is a must. Rules set parameters so everyone gets a fair shot. This is a lesson that translates to other parts of kids' lives, too, whether they're sharing their toys or competing for a spot on the swim team. You can alter the rules to make a game more appropriate for younger kids. Just make it known to everyone playing that you are using special family rules.

"I think playing by the rules is important from a young age, as long as the rules are age appropriate," says parenting consultant Rebecca Michi, who works with families to help them with parenting issues. "(Then) make the rules harder as the children get older."

Reznick also suggests a four-pronged approach to teaching good sportsmanship: "Listen. Understand. Remember. Have patience."

"Learning the art of flexibility in winning and losing takes time. If you come from your heart and follow 'Listen. Understand. Remember. Have patience,' your child can get there at his own pace. Let him know you believe in him," says Reznick.