



31 Smart Ways to Train Your Brain: Fun Learning Activities for Families

The “summer slide” or what we can now refer to as the “corona slide” for the next six weeks or so could be an opportunity for you to help keep your kids in the swing of learning while on hiatus from school so that teachers can jump right back in when they return. Historically, the “summer slide” is a phenomenon teachers are all too familiar with and refers to the loss of knowledge and ability that occurs when formal education stops during summer months. In between sessions of school packets and work, take time to try new activities, play brain games and make learning fun. Games can be excellent learning tools.

For example, did you know that in a typical summer break ...

- According to research, the average student loses more than 2.6 months of math computation skills or 2 months of reading skills over the 12 week summer vacation?
- Research shows that ALL young people experience learning losses if they don't engage in educational activities during the summer?
- Most teachers have to spend 4 to 6 weeks re-teaching or reviewing material that students have forgotten over summer break?

In many ways, the brain is like a muscle, and information or skills can atrophy when we don't use them. (It's not an unfamiliar concept: after all, the muscles in our arms and legs do the same thing if we stop using them, too!)

Here are some tips to help your kids hang on to their hard-won knowledge or mental skills even through the next six weeks and beyond.

In addition, there are simple, easy and fun activities that can help you keep your kids off the “corona slide” and possibly even make school easier for them when they go back to the classroom. These exercises keep the brain energized while building cognitive skills, the underlying mental abilities needed to learn. When playing games with kids, parents should focus on seven major learning skills: attention, working memory, processing speed, long-term memory, logic and reasoning, auditory processing, and visual processing. Some are perfect games to play in the car, and some are a great alternative to a video game when your child is not able to play outside.

10 LOW-COST, STORE BOUGHT BRAIN GAMES

Simon: The original echo game, "Simon," is great for auditory processing, memory and processing speed.

Mastermind for Kids: This new version of a classic improves logic and reasoning.

Stratego, Chess and Checkers: For older kids, games like Stratego, Chess and Checkers develop planning, memory, comprehension and focus.

Phonics Flashcards: For very young kids, phonics flashcards can be a great springboard to early reading skills.

Bop-It Extreme: This is a fun way to build skills such as auditory processing, logic and reasoning, processing speed, planning, and selective attention.

Legos: They're not exactly cheap, but chances are you already have some! Legos are excellent for deductive reasoning, planning, and problem solving.

Slapjack: This age-old card game helps with divided attention, processing speed, short-term memory and visual processing.

Tangoes: This competitive tangrams game has varying levels of difficulty. People can race against the clock or each other. Tangrams help with visualization, memory, attention, and logic and reasoning.

Speed Cards: Ask your child to separate a deck of cards into two piles (red and black) or four piles (spades, hearts, clubs, diamonds). Time her, and as she gets faster, distract her or give her math problems to solve as she's working. This will improve processing speed, divided attention, selective attention and visual processing.

Blink: This fast paced two minute blitz is action packed to strengthen processing speed, sensory motor integration, visual processing and working memory.

Many store-bought games can improve a variety of cognitive skills. You may already own many of these games and not realize how beneficial they can be for the brain.



6 NO-COST, HOMEMADE BRAIN GAMES AND ACTIVITIES

Plenty of free games can also increase cognitive abilities and keep kids off the “corona slide”. The trick is to find several that are age-appropriate and that your kids find fun!

Here are a few favorites:

Paperless Tic-Tac-Toe: Take the classic game of tic-tac-toe and assign each box a number. Have your child visualize this grid in her mind and call off the box number in which she wants to place her mark. Or, try playing tic-tac-toe by drawing the grid in the air and pointing to the box where you want to place your mark. The game is over when someone wins with three in a row, or when someone loses by taking an occupied spot. What it helps: Memory, visualization, planning, focus, problem solving

20 Questions: Think of a person or object and give your child 20 chances to narrow down what you’re thinking of by asking yes or no questions. To help them improve their logic and reasoning, teach them to strategize by using questions that will significantly narrow down the categories, such as “Are they alive?” or “Do we have one at our house?” What it helps: Logic, reasoning, memory

Rhyme Time: Have your child choose four rhyming words and use them to create a poem. For younger kids, simply say a word, then take turns coming up with words that rhyme with it. What it helps: Auditory analysis, verbal rhythm, memory

Make a Mental Movie: Start with a subject like a puppy and then have your child help create what the puppy looks like; his size, shape, color, etc. Have your child talk about where the puppy is; next to a doghouse, in the forest, etc. Then have your child add other details such as the weather or what the dog is saying. By developing pictures with color, size, perception, sound, and background, kids learn how to develop a more complete picture. What it helps: Comprehension, memory

The Twinkle, Twinkle Song: Have your child replace the words to “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star” with state capitals. Want a twist for older kids? Have them include a rhyme at the end of each sentence. “Montpelier is the capital of Vermont state, and I think Phoenix, Arizona is great...” What it helps: Mnemonics, memory, strategy, rhyming

Needle in a Haystack: Take a page from a magazine or newspaper and time your child as she circles all occurrences of a specific letter. Identify which sound symbols are more easily found than others and focus on increasing both accuracy and speed. What it helps: Visual processing speed, sustained attention



11 BRAIN-FRIENDLY COMPUTER GAMES



Here are some free brain-building online games that entertain and help strengthen cognitive skills at the same time. This list has something that is fun, interesting, and for every age group!

Primary Games – www.primarygames.com
A gold mine of fun games including sliders, swappers, tangrams and strategy puzzles, plus a key to let you know which games work best for which ages.

Games for the Brain – www.gamesforthebrain.com
If your kid loves games, this is one of the best sites on the Web. A wide variety includes Mahjongg Solitaire, Chinese Checkers, trivia games and even crime scene scenarios.

Fun Brain – www.funbrain.com
This colorful site lets you search games by grade or browse by subject. Web books and comics, movies, classic fun brain games (grammar, math, reading), and bold graphics and popular cartoon characters keep kids interested.

LearningRx – www.learningrx.com/free-articles/brain-games/
This site for LearningRx, the national brain training franchise system, offers various resources and links to free materials to take on the road or use at home.

The Kidz Page – www.thekidzpage.com/freekidsgames/
You can find clip art, puzzles and games for kids of all ages, including strategy, word, sports and memory games, board games, card games and more.

Math.com – www.math.com/students/puzzles/puzzleapps.html
This is touted as “a world of math online.” Games like Peg Solitaire, a maze generator, and other math-based games are free, but registration is required.

Educational Freeware - www.educational-freeware.com/
Reviews of some of the best free educational learning games, software and websites.

K12reader.com - www.k12reader.com/
Reading worksheets, spelling, grammar, comprehension, lesson plans

Kids Math Games On-line - www.kidsmathgamesonline.com
Enjoy a wide range of free math games, interactive learning activities and fun educational resources that will engage students while they learn mathematics. Find cool math games, interesting facts, printable worksheets, quizzes, videos and so much more!

Adapted Mind - [www://www.adaptedmind.com](http://www.adaptedmind.com)
K-6 curriculum is research-based, common core aligned, and comprehensive - with over 300,000 math problems and explanations. Students feel like they're playing a game.

Artistic Support - Art Lessons by Grade: www.isfdn.org/art-docent-lessons-by-grade/
Issaquah School Foundation's Artistic Support Program provides a wide variety of ideas for art traditionally provided by Art Docents in the classroom setting.

4 PHYSICAL EXERCISES THAT ENERGIZE THE MIND AND BODY

You can incorporate brain training into every day activities! These exercises require a trip to the great outdoors, or at least a move off the couch. These were created by LearningRx, the brain training experts. Give them a try, and then come up with your own variations.



Counting Counts: Encourage your child to count by 2's, 3's, 4's, 5's etc. when they go up or down stairs. He should say the next number aloud every time his foot hits the floor. This also works while dribbling a basketball (next number every time the ball hits the floor), while swinging on a swing set (next number every time on the forward peak), and while jumping rope (new sum every time the rope hits the ground). This helps with math fluency, divided attention, and memory. Doing it on-beat to an activity will build processing speed as it forces the brain to quickly come up with the answer. Another version involving lists creates endless possibilities. On beat to an activity, name 15 words that start with "B", nine types of sports, seven kinds of candy, etc.

Trampoline Time: Use this time to work on math facts, states and capitals or opposites. This should be rapid-fire. Every time your child bounces they provide an answer, then you immediately give the next prompt, which they have to answer on the following bounce. For example, you say "Montana", they respond "Helena" on the next bounce. Then you say "Alaska", and they respond "Juneau" on the next bounce. This builds the mental skills of divided attention and processing speed. To add a memory aspect, quickly give your child five states in a row, and they give the five capitals in order on their next five bounces. For a math variation, give a constant number to add, such as five. You say three, she says eight. You say one, she says six. This works well with multiplication too.

Jacks: This brain-building playground game originated hundreds of years ago and is still a winner. The old-fashioned version with a rubber ball and 10 spiked "jacks" will help build visual processing skills, processing speed and attention. To work on divided attention, have your child count, recite a poem, or give directions while taking her turn. To build selective attention, try to distract your child with silly questions, funny faces or obnoxious noises while she is playing.

Abstract Storytelling: Have your child demonstrate a story, such as "Humpty Dumpty," by using objects from around the house like paper clips, cups, pillows, chairs, etc. to represent items and thoughts from the story. For older kids, make this more difficult by having your child demonstrate more abstract thoughts. Adages, clichés, or famous quotes work well, such as "Don't count your chickens before they hatch." or "No news is good news." This helps with executive thinking, comprehension, and visual processing.



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