



FOR HSLDA'S

# PRESCHOOL PARENTS

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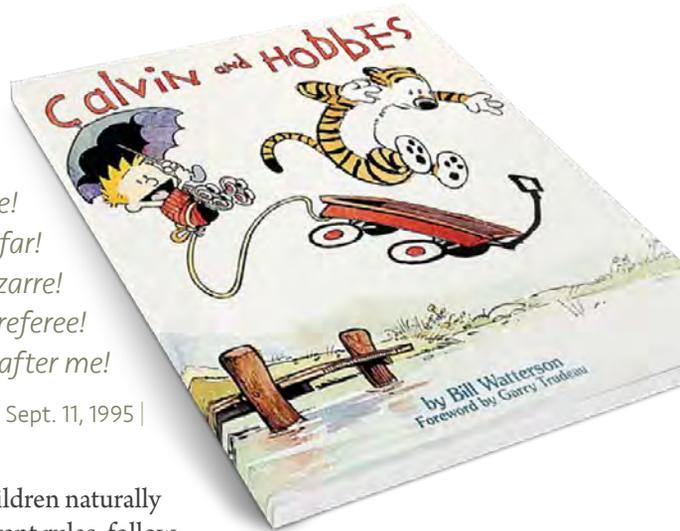


EXCLUSIVE ONLINE SUPPLEMENT

# Games with rules

*Other kids' games are all such a bore!  
They gotta have rules and they gotta keep score!  
Calvinball is better by far!  
It's never the same! It's always bizarre!  
You don't need a team or a referee!  
You know that it's great, 'cause it's named after me!*

| Bill Watterson, "Calvin & Hobbes," Sept. 11, 1995 |



**P**laying with a preschooler can feel a lot like Calvinball.

Calvinball is a game of wits. The players constantly invent new rules in order to thwart each other. As Calvin puts it, "The only permanent rule in Calvinball is that you can't play it the same way twice." Of course, when Calvin and his stuffed tiger Hobbes play together, Calvin always finds himself outwitted.

It's exactly as crazy and chaotic as it sounds.

Calvinball illustrates why we need stable, mutually recognizable rules—not just in games, but also in life. Without rules, we find ourselves in the Hobbesian "state of nature," where the strongest and cleverest hold permanent sway.<sup>1</sup>

(We don't want to wind up there.)

Human beings, including young children, prefer to live according to established habits and rules. When children play, they are learning to inhabit and order their little worlds, just like adults seek to bring order and harmony to the world we inhabit.

This doesn't happen all at once. Too much structured activity imposed on children at an early age can be harmful to the development of executive function—their ability to self-direct and make decisions.<sup>2</sup> But even when they don't have that kind of structure imposed on them,

children naturally invent rules, follow patterns, and enforce social norms in their play.

My 2-year-old daughter did this when she first figured out that words rhyme. She does this thing where she rattles off strings of rhyming words. This play has a simple, intuitive rule—say words that rhyme—and it's simple enough for her to understand. She is eager to repeat the same action with her parents over and over again, enjoying it not in spite of but *because* of the repetition.

We call this "unstructured" play. You see it in the



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way that young children interact with their toys and one another. Unstructured play doesn't have rules that are written down or explained up front, like *Go Fish* or *Monopoly*. Its rules are intuitive, evolving, complex, and negotiated. But it's not the chaos of Calvinball, either.

Unstructured play reflects important aspects of human life. As adults, we follow many implicit and complex rules that help us navigate life's daily situations, such as:

- ▶ When to say "please" and "thank you"
- ▶ How to give a gift to a friend
- ▶ When and how to express an opinion in different social settings

But "real life" has its formal rules too. Some are arbitrary but essential, like the traffic laws. Some are immutable, like the law of gravity or the Ten Commandments. And others, like the rules of baseball or the liturgy of a church service, help us enter into joyful and even sublime aspects of the human experience.

As children grow and learn, they can be introduced to more formal kinds of play—games with some fixed rules.

### ■ So what about games?

Games usually have some degree of structured activity, rules, and competitive elements. There doesn't need to

be a hard line between games and other forms of play. Even freeform play (or chores!) can be turned into a game by adding layers of structure.

If you sit down with your toddler to play *Chutes and Ladders*, it can be frustrating. You have to get them to sit down and pay attention. That takes a lot of mental and physical concentration. While they're doing that, they have to learn how to take turns (what are those?), how to count spaces (math already?), how *not* to flip over the game board or grab another child's token (she started it!).

So how do children transition from unstructured play to games with rules?

Games need to be appropriate to the developmental level of the child. They shouldn't be too frustrating to be fun.

That's where traditional playground games come in. These may seem repetitive and boring to adults or older kids—but they help young children develop mentally, socially, and physically, all while letting them have fun.

Consider "Simon Says." The rules are pretty simple: Respond to the leader's directions quickly, but *don't* respond unless Simon says. Players quickly start to develop a strategy. The leader will try to trip up players with tactics like giving a number of quick 'right' instructions, then quickly throwing in a 'wrong' one. This game helps preschoolers develop presence of mind and quick thinking—not to mention gross motor skills and spatial awareness.

"Duck, Duck, Goose" is another game that brings together quick thinking, physical coordination, and social strategy. The child who is "it" must try not to give away ahead of time who she is planning to tag, in

### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> I refer to the grumpy English philosopher Thomas Hobbes, not his cuddly tiger namesake.

<sup>2</sup> Ellen Wexler, "Study: Too many structured activities may hinder children's executive functioning." *Education Week Teacher* blog, July 2, 2014. [blogs.edweek.org](https://blogs.edweek.org)



"A **game** is a form of play in which children follow an agreed-upon set of rules, pre-determine an outcome, assign players specific roles, and assign sanctions for violations. . . . Dictionary definitions usually include the elements of rules, competition, and winning."

| Joan Packer Isenberg & Mary Renck Jalongo,  
*Creative Expression and Play in Early Childhood* (Prentice-Hall, 2001), 329. |

order to have the best head start possible to run around and steal his seat. The children in the ring must also be watching for social cues and practice rapid decision making to have the best chance of catching “it” if they are tagged.

your child starts to absorb these ideas, you can gradually introduce her to more complex games, like card and board games.

Some kids and families may get to complex games surprisingly quickly. For instance, my friends Darren and Sara enjoy roleplaying games around the table with their older kids. These are the type of freewheeling games where players invent characters and play as those characters in quests and adventures, limited only by their imagination. To their surprise, their 4-year-old daughter watched a few games and announced that she wanted to play too.

“She jumped in, pretending that she was a kitty who belonged to one of the characters,” Darren recalls. “She could already read, but rolling the dice gave her an opportunity to practice addition and subtraction.”

“At first, she would simply have her kitty roll up in times of danger,” he explains, “but after a couple years of playing, the kitty grew long silver claws and was a very

“. . . Play, when it does not degenerate into mere fooling about, quickly turns from being another world . . . to being a bit of the normal world with its own laws. . . . Children’s play seems in many ways a kind of anticipation of life, a rehearsal for later life, without its burdens and gravity.”

| Joseph Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (Ignatius Press, 2000), 14. |

These are both simple games. Young children can play them without getting frustrated. But in the process, they learn logic and order. They learn what a turn is. They learn about rules and how to follow them. As



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brave fighter. She also enjoyed pretending that her kitty went off exploring into areas that the other players were too big to fit into, which helped her develop an independent spirit.”

Most kids probably won't be joining you in complex games at age 4. But when you play hopscotch (or any

other game) with your kids, you aren't just goofing off. You're helping them develop, physically and mentally. You're showing them how the world works and helping them learn important life skills, like how to manage emotions and how to lose (and win) graciously. And it's fun!

That's a game worth playing. ■

## Preschool-level learning games

| Thanks to HSLDA Special Needs Consultant Krisa Winn and author Sara Jones for these suggestions. |

**Song games.** “Head and Shoulders, Knees and Toes” and “If You're Happy and You Know It” are well-known examples, but there are many, many others. These types of games are great for preschoolers because they build vocabulary, they are active, and they can teach comparative concepts like fast vs. slow or loud vs. soft. There's nothing better than singing “Head and Shoulders, Knees and Toes” very slowly and then super fast. Children love it, and it keeps them guessing about what's coming next.

**Acting out nursery rhymes.** Classic short rhymes like “Jack Be Nimble,” “Little Miss Muffet,” and “Humpty Dumpty” help children develop vocabulary (what does it mean to be ‘nimble?’) and discuss emotions (how did all the king's men feel when they couldn't put Humpty together again?). Engage their imagination even more by supplying props and having each family member take on a role.

**“Wiggle Worm.”** In a paper sack, put a few index cards with a wiggle worm drawn on them and other index cards with various learning concepts written on them—a shape, a letter of the alphabet, a number, etc. Each child pulls out a card. If it's a shape or letter, they name it. If it's a wiggle worm, everyone wiggles like crazy! A fun and simple way to review concepts.

**“20 Questions”** is pretty challenging for young children because they have to guess what you're thinking or what you've hidden from them by asking indirect questions about the potential attributes of something you might be hiding in a box or bag. This is a highly abstract activity for the preschool mind. However, playing 20 Questions with multiple ages of children or as a whole family game can allow your preschooler to build his own abstract thinking in a really engaging, organic way, by observing and imitating other people doing it. An easier approach to the guessing game for younger children could be **“I Spy Something \_\_\_\_\_.”** You provide your child with one or two attributes of an item that is in plain view (blue, round), and they have to identify the item you have in mind (Mom's coffee mug). You can offer additional clues as needed.

**Games that develop listening and self-management skills.** “Mother May I?” and “Simon Says” sharpen mental focus and auditory processing skills. When I have several

preschool children whom I need to be quiet or still while waiting, we play the **“Quiet Game”**: One child is chosen as “it” and observes everyone else to see who is being the most quiet and still. That person then becomes the next “it.”

**“Finding” games** are a great way to teach directions and thinking skills without having to get up off the couch much. Hide a stuffed animal and then call the child into the room. Use “hot” or “cold” directions to help the child locate the toy.

**“Treasure Hunt”** is a slightly more complicated variation on this game for preschoolers who are learning to read. Make three or four clue cards that lead to the toy's hiding place. Make the words easy, like “bed” or “door.” Help the child read the words and follow the clues.



Don't forget **classic games** like hopscotch, “hot potato,” “one potato, two potato,” “duck, duck, goose,” “tag,” and so on. If it's been a really long time since you played these games, it's really easy to find great tutorial videos on Youtube. Just search “how to play . . . .” Your public library also should have many helpful resources on age-appropriate games for children.

**Jumping games.** Mark out a line of squares with masking tape. Drop a stuffed animal on a square and then have the child figure out how many squares she has to jump to get to the animal. This is a very basic game. You can vary the game by adding more squares or even cards with extra numbers to add or subtract.

**Battle games.** With a six-sided die, you can make any object battle any other object. “My spoon challenges your rubber band!” Each roll the die. Highest roll wins. That's the basic game, but you can introduce all kinds of variations depending on how many dice you use, or how many sides the die has, whether you add or subtract anything, etc.

