

Bonding Thru Board Games: Developing Soft Skills

Elizabeth Brunscheen-Cartagena, Family Life and Resource Management Agent, Sedgwick County, K-State Research and Extension

Introduction

Grade school has traditionally focused on an individual's letter grade, overlooking interpersonal or "soft" skills — skills that are actually far more predictive of outcomes into adulthood than early academics. As the workplace modernizes globally, many employers recognized a lack of soft skills in applicants who were needed to fill available positions.

The Bonding thru Board Games program is a tool to help families expose their children to five vital "soft skills": self-control, positive self-concept, social and communication skills, and executive function. These skills contribute to success in school and the future workplace.

In addition, family bonding time paves the path and builds a solid foundation for socio-emotional growth among family members. One subtle way to expose children to vital soft skills is through the use of Euro-style board games. A Euro-style game is designed to create a shared space around your tabletop that is creative, developmental, competitive, and innovative. Euro-style games provide the opportunities to develop the soft skills needed for school, for work, for life.

At the conclusion of this lesson about socio-emotional skills or "soft skills" development through board games, participants will be able to:

- Identify five vital school and workplace socio-emotional or soft skills.
- Understand the purpose of Euro-games in developing vital school/workplace soft skills.
- Apply social-emotional skills while playing board games.



A family plays a board game during a Bonding Thru Board Games event.

- Build shared memories through a common, enjoyable experience.

Soft Skills versus Hard Skills

While hard skills can be taught from books, schools, and training, it is much more difficult to teach someone soft skills. Those skills are learned through lived experience. Soft skills require emotional intelligence (sometimes measured as EQ), while hard skills are more based on standardized testing, grades, or assessments such as the intelligence quotient (IQ). Hard skills are usually related to the left brain, the logic center, while soft skills are more often associated with the right brain, the seat of the emotions. Hard skills are mostly unchanged, like academics or trade skills, while soft skills are malleable or adjustable. Both sets of skills are crucial to performance.

What is the need for soft skills in the education system?

Research indicates that schools are the primary settings where children learn not only traditional

core subjects, but also how to navigate social relationships with peers from diverse backgrounds and build essential skills that allow them to be productive members of society. Success in life depends on personality traits that are not well captured by measuring how much students know. As Jeff Wagenheim said in his article, “There’s Nothing Soft about These Skills,” “socio-emotional learning is not a detour from pursuit of academics. It’s an on-ramp.” Soft skills also have a significant association between measured socio-emotional skills in childhood and key young adult outcomes on education, employment, criminal activity, substance abuse, and mental health. For instance, research has shown that self-control in childhood predicts outcomes ranging from physical health (obesity), to crimes (violence), to substance abuse.

Schools have a lack of financial resources, time, standardized academic assessments, and other challenges while building environments that address socio-emotional and physical wellbeing needs.

What is the need for soft skills in the workforce?

According to the Committee for Children (cfchildren.org) (Figure 1), U.S. competitiveness in the global economy depends on a workforce that has acquired both technical knowledge needed for specific occupations and the “employability skills required for all jobs” or “soft skills.” The Job Outlook 2019 Survey from the National Association of College and Employers (NACE), shows that far too many young

people are inadequately prepared to be successful in the workplace.

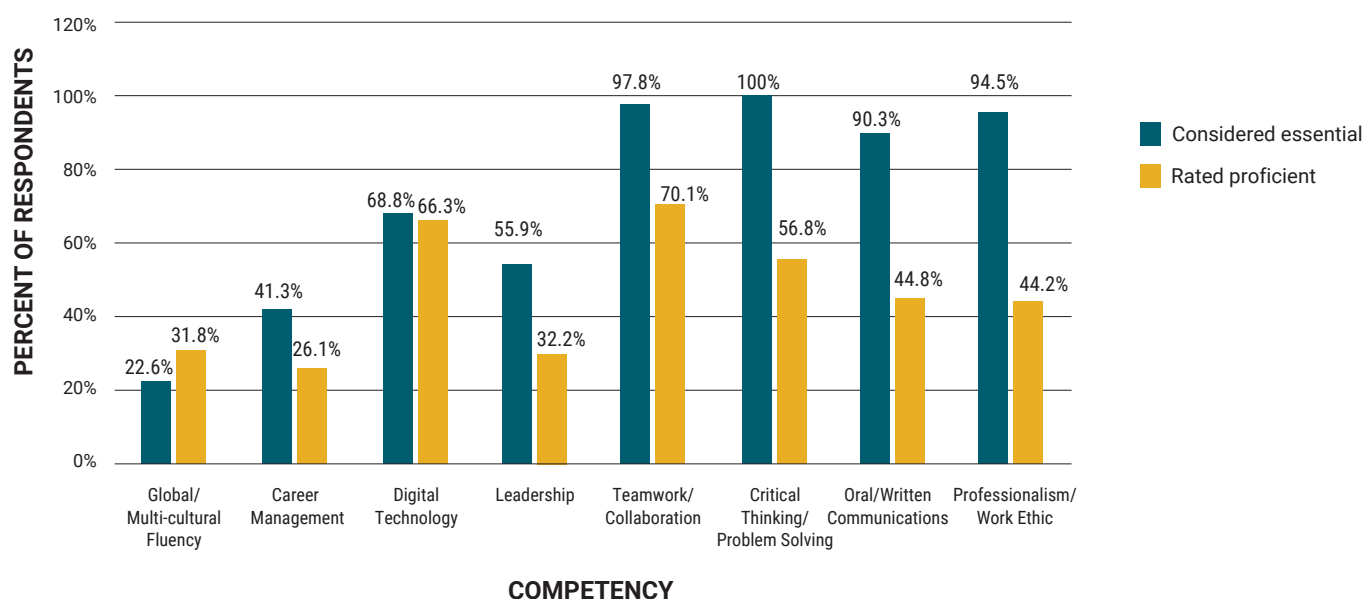
Numerous surveys of employers indicate applicants may be technically proficient, but they don’t have the skills needed to be productive members of the organization.

While different companies require specific job skills (engineer, accountant, etc.), a comprehensive research report from childtrends.org identified five vital soft skills. These skills are most likely to increase odds of success in ages 15 to 29 across all outcomes: social skills, communication skills, and higher-order thinking skills supported by the intrapersonal skills of self-control and positive self-concept.

How can board games help develop soft skills?

The benefits of board games go beyond turn taking and good sportsmanship. Board games are an innovative teaching method, a perfect tool to introduce soft skills. Marelisa Fabrega, who promotes lifelong learning, said “the most effective way to learn is through an immediate and authentic experience that leaves one wanting more. Game playing is the perfect example of such an experience — it is entertaining, engaging, and exciting and therefore stimulates eager involvement. It provides the fertile ground for the training and application of thinking abilities and life skills.” This is important for kids and adults who struggle with these skills — learning them can be real work. It is important to make learning these skills meaningful, interactive, hands-on, and fun.

Figure 1. Need vs. Proficiency on Career Readiness Competencies, by Percent of Respondents



How can board games prepare children for school and the workplace?

Parents, guardians, and teachers have a huge responsibility in this developmental crisis. Board games offer perfect ground to develop soft skills in a practical, protected environment.

1. Self-control: Refers to one's ability to delay gratification, control impulses, direct and focus attention, to manage emotions, and regulate behaviors.

Getting a “bad roll of the dice” can seem unfair. Dealing with roadblocks can be more easily overcome in the context of a motivating game quest. Games involve constant change performed by other players and new thoughts are needed to persevere. Being OK with changes and rolling with the punches provides multiple opportunities for positive practice on resiliency. Board games are perfect terrain to develop patience. Patience is needed to focus on the game, to pay attention to other players, to work through challenges, and to achieve long-term goals.

2a. Positive Self-concept: self-confidence, self-worth, self-esteem, pride, motivation, resiliency. Tabletop games put players on equal footing at the beginning of the game and provide paths for players to gain additional abilities of their choice. Self-motivation is a key component to achieve goals and feel a sense of accomplishment. Players must put forward effort, perseverance, and determination to reach the goal. Even when making a strong effort but still falling short, players concentrate on the hard work, not on the winning/losing. Players are encouraged to keep trying until it is mastered. Failure teaches empathy and the ability to bounce back from adversity.

2b. Mental Health: emotional, psychological, and social well-being. Your mental health affects how you think, feel, and act as you cope with life. Soft skills are mental coping skills.

Board games help reduce isolation. They are designed to be played with a group of people or at least with another person. Playing board games will help stave off loneliness and build positive relationships with others. Although it can be difficult to step out and make new friends, board games offer a structured way to meet others. Having a game as a frame of the activity allows friendships to build slowly in a less formal or pressure-filled way. A study indicated individuals with adequate social relationships have a 50% greater likelihood of survival compared to those with poor

or insufficient social relationships. The magnitude of this benefit is comparable with quitting smoking and it exceeds many well-known risk factors for mortality (e.g., being overweight, physical inactivity).

Board games help family or friends develop cohesiveness. Face-to-face interaction is a big component of playing board games and supports mental health. It is necessary to build good rapport with others. Veterans Affairs researchers, who studied online versus face-to-face interactions, say, “The foundation to good mental health starts with promoting good old-fashioned social connections. In-person interactions are what seems to protect against psychiatric problems.” Board games are designed to be enjoyed by adults and children alike. Enjoyable activities create an emotional bond for the family or friends and foster better communication.

Board games reduce stress. According to an online survey by RealNetworks, Inc., 64% of the respondents said they play games to unwind and relax and 53% play to relieve stress. Board games offer escapism, a chance to leave your daily worries behind for a while and do something different. Playing board games removes stress by putting you in a flow state, shifting your brain away from daily stressors and making you a champion of whatever happens. All games involve a certain degree of unpredictability. Players learn to stay calm when the inevitable Jenga tower falls. Laughter is nature's stressbuster, reducing heart rate and blood pressure in the short term and increasing your wellbeing in the long term.

Board games keep your brain younger. A study shows the possible benefits of board game playing on the reduction of dementia. Participants in elder care showed less cognitive decline and less depression in elderly board game players.

3. Social Skills: to get along, respect others, context-appropriate behavior, and practice resolving conflict.

Board games bring all kinds of people together and allow opportunities to sharpen interactions with others. Players learn social cues, social speech filtering, and practice empathy. Players learn to consider and understand that others' feelings may be different from their own. Games help individuals become emotionally self-aware. In cooperative games, players work as a team and have to be willing to accept input and help from others, team members begin to recognize specific skill sets, and together make decisions that advance the whole.

4. Communication: non-verbal, verbal, written and active listening skills.

Communication contributes to social skills and impacts the depth of relationships. Board games create a structure which allows an individual to step out of their shell and into a world of communication. Good communication conveys meaning, making it critical for the message to be understood. The body, the facial expressions, and the tone of the sender and real time response of the receiver make real world communication and conversation a more natural and less awkward process.

a. Nonverbal: Communicating with your eyes and body is a big component of board games. Sly smiles, shifting eye contact as well as hand gestures and body positioning can communicate purpose or keep players guessing.

b. Verbal: Board games are a platform to create conversations. Players begin sharing their feelings when unsure what to do when an opponent blocks a move, or to be a good sport when losing or winning. Some games require players to make deals and alliances in order to move forward. Players have to communicate well in order to negotiate convincingly.

c. Written: Written communication is all over board games, whether it's written instructions on the cards for the next clue, drawing crazy pictures to describe a word or sentence, recognizing numbers on the dice, or reading symbols. When reading sentences, players are exposed to meaning interpretation through grammar, syntax, punctuation, word choice, and style.

d. Active listening: Figuring out other people's intentions or what is behind what they say, will give a player extra information needed to see the bigger picture. In negotiations or teamwork, active listening is vital to analyzing the situation and to foresee possible outcomes.

5. Higher-order Thinking (Mental Ability) or Executive Function (Mental Capacity): Problem solving, critical thinking and decision making. Ability to identify an issue and take information from multiple sources to evaluate options in order to reach a reasonable conclusion.

a. Working Memory: The ability to retain and manipulate distinct pieces of information over short periods of time. To focus on patterns of occurrence and behaviors to be able to predict. Retaining the instructions, understanding the game and planning. Concentration and visualization on the board, player's moves, and opponents' moves. Attention to details.

b. Mental Flexibility: The ability to sustain or shift attention in response to different demands or to apply different rules in different settings. Players will anticipate what other players will do and use that to weigh the next move. Players will juggle multiple tasks successfully. They think in different ways to tackle a problem, creating strategies, thinking out of the box, creating resiliency and bouncing back quickly when adversity strikes, and diversifying in the event one choice does not turn out as anticipated. They take a concept and apply it creatively in different scenarios. Some games have a timer and players are encouraged to make creative decisions under pressure.

Conclusion

Many children lack soft skills that are needed in the workplace and daily living. Not recognizing the lack of soft skills in early childhood has created a disconnection between school and workplace success. Parents and other caregivers can help children gain these vital skills by creating board game nights in the home or attending community board game events. Playing board games is a safe platform for soft skills to be developed and practiced.

Reviewers

Bradford Wiles, Ph.D., Associate Professor and Extension Specialist, School of Family Studies and Human Services, K-State Research and Extension

Rebecca McFarland, District Agent, Family and Child Development, Frontier Extension District, Ottawa Office, K-State Research and Extension

Chiquita Miller Ph.D, LMAC, CFLE, Family and Consumer Sciences Agent, Wyandotte County, K-State Research and Extension

Publications from Kansas State University are available at:
bookstore.ksre.ksu.edu

Brand names appearing in this publication are for product identification purposes only. No endorsement is intended, nor is criticism implied of similar products not mentioned.

Contents of this publication may be freely reproduced for educational purposes. All other rights reserved. In each case, credit Elizabeth Brunscheen-Cartagena, *Bonding Through Board Games: Developing Soft Skills, Fact Sheet*, Kansas State University, June 2020.

Kansas State University Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension Service

K-State Research and Extension is an equal opportunity provider and employer. Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension Work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, as amended. Kansas State University, County Extension Councils, Extension Districts, and United States Department of Agriculture Cooperating, J. Ernest Minton, Director.