

Bonding Thru Board Games: Developing Soft Skills

FACT SHEET

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Introduction

Remarkable technological advancements and societal shifts, some due to the impact of Covid-19, have transformed the way people live, work, and connect, essentially creating a “new normal” across various aspects of their lives. Education once focused on grades and technical skills, but today’s workforce values soft skills more than ever. However, a growing gap between job demands and employees’ soft skills poses challenges for businesses and workers. While some schools have introduced Socio-Emotional Standards and Career Initiatives, much more is needed to fully prepare high school students for the future workplace.

The Bonding thru Board Games program is an evidence-based resource designed to help individuals expose others — whether friends, colleagues, or loved ones — to core vital “soft skills”: self-control, positive self-concept, social and communication skills, and executive function. These skills contribute to success at home, school, work, and everyday life.

Spending quality time together helps pave the way for socio-emotional growth and strengthens relationships. Euro-style board games are one subtle yet effective way to develop these essential skills. These games provide a creative, developmental, competitive, and innovative shared space around your tabletop, offering valuable opportunities to build those vital skills.

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

- Identify the five core soft skills needed for home, school, and work.
- Understand how Euro-style board games support skill development.
- Use these skills while playing games.
- Create happy memories by sharing a fun experience with others.



Students playing board games at a school STEM event.

Soft Skills versus Hard Skills

Soft and hard skills are incredibly valuable but are learned and applied differently. Both skills are learned through experience and education.

Soft skills come from personal traits and are called non-technical, human-centric skills, 21st-century skills, transferable skills, and power skills, and they are useful in any situation. They make it easier to form and maintain relationships, create trust and dependability, and develop leadership and creative thinking skills, among others. People with soft skills are able to handle whatever they encounter in this evolving world, even if it’s a hard skill they don’t yet know, all due to their resiliency, agility, and flexibility.

Hard skills are specific knowledge, abilities, and expertise on a particular subject. They are usually taught in school or through training and help individuals apply concepts and complete specific tasks. COVID-19 has permanently changed the workforce, and so are the hard skills needed to perform in it. It has sped up the changes organizations must make to adapt.

While hard skills are essential, they are susceptible to constant change; soft skills are steady and will be what can help set an individual apart. The importance of soft skills has shifted from “nice to have” to “must-have.”

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

Research indicates that schools are the primary settings where students learn traditional core subjects and how to navigate social relationships with peers from diverse backgrounds, building essential skills to be productive members of society. These skills are vital in 21st-century education and help students get ready for today's jobs. Many reports, including those from the World Economic Forum, suggest that by 2030, with Artificial Intelligence (AI)-human collaboration advances, most jobs will require strong soft skills, making them a critical factor in employment success. Empathy, creativity, collaboration, teamwork, interpersonal communication skills, adaptability, flexibility, cultural intelligence and diversity, ethical awareness, and leadership skills are human skills that machines and AI can't replace. Soft skills are now recognized as integral components for success in STEM fields and are key to doing well in a post-COVID world.

Students will inevitably work with technological advancements in the future, making preparation essential. Effective upskilling involves three stages: direct instruction to build technical and human-centric skills knowledge, simulations to apply both in context, and internships and shadowing to gain real-world experience.

Besides, in personal growth, soft skills are also significantly associated with 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.

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 the technical knowledge needed for specific occupations and the “employability skills required for all jobs” or “soft skills.” The Job Outlook 2024 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 different soft skills for 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. Intrapersonal skills such as self-control and positive self-concept can be considered the

foundation upon which many other soft skills — including social skills, communication skills, and higher-order thinking skills — are built, essentially acting as a base for effective interpersonal interactions and cognitive abilities. Other soft skills can be categorized under those five core human-centric or people skills. For instance, adaptability could be under self-control, which is the internal ability to adjust to changing situations and manage one's thoughts and emotions in response to new circumstances, or under executive function skills, which involves cognitive flexibility to adapt to new situations. Lifelong learning is under self-concept since self-motivation is generated from within.

How can board games help develop soft skills?

Board games offer more than just lessons in turn-taking and sportsmanship — they are a powerful teaching tool for developing soft skills. Lifelong learning advocate Marelisa Fabrega emphasizes that engaging, authentic experiences that spark curiosity are the best way to learn. Games create a safe, fertile, and engaging space to develop soft and hard skills, offering a fun, hands-on way to build essential life skills for all ages without being arduous.

The process of effective upskilling mentioned previously involves three stages: direct instruction to build knowledge, simulations to apply it in context, and internships or shadowing to gain real-world experience. Board games serve as a resource to create an effective post-learning activity simulation as the students may be able to discover the knowledge on its own in a non-threatening environment.

Soft skills must be practiced hands-on, not just by listening to lectures. By using board games, students are not only engaged in games that stimulate their learning interest but can even practice their soft skills during every game session through interactions with other students.

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

Parents, guardians, and teachers have some responsibility in this developmental crisis. According to Tasnim (2012), there is great potential for games and simulations in classrooms. She notes that games have the potential to contribute to “active learning pedagogy, breaking new grounds and creating momentous impact of the perception of gaming as credible pedagogical features in classrooms.”

Mastering these non-tactical skills doesn't happen overnight. It requires practice. Board games offer the perfect ground at school or home to develop soft skills in a practical, fun, and protected environment and eventually be ready for the workplace.

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. 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.

4. 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.

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

Closing the job skills gap requires teamwork among business leaders, policymakers, educators, and families. COVID-19 has reshaped the workplace, making soft skills essential for success. Board games are a powerful yet underused tool that enhances traditional education by developing critical people skills. By working together at home, in schools, and communities, we can create meaningful learning experiences that prepare individuals for success in family life, education, careers, and beyond.

This lesson was originally part of the 2021 Annual Series of family and consumer sciences publications.

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