

BRAIN-BUILDING THROUGH PLAY

6 Playful Activities for Kids (8-12 years)

Play supports learning and development at all ages. For kids between 8 and 12 years old, play can help them strengthen **executive function and self-regulation skills**, practice their budding **social skills**, and promote their **physical health**.

The sample activities below help kids challenge their minds and bodies, learn to get along with others, and make new friends. To hold their interest, suggest increasingly complex activities. **Encourage kids to focus on having fun and learning new things, rather than on winning or losing.** (Although it's also important to practice being a good sport whether you win or lose.) Note each child's unique interests and talents as they take shape!

1



Puzzles and Brain Teasers

Puzzles challenge kids to remember letters, words, and numbers and think about how they can fit together. Some great options are *crossword puzzles*, *Sudoku*, *word finds*, and *mazes*. You can find these in activity books, newspapers, apps, or online. Physical puzzles like a *Rubik's Cube* or *jigsaw puzzles* promote mental flexibility because kids must consider spatial information as they come up with potential solutions.

2



Strategy and Fantasy Games

In strategy games like chess, *Go*, *Battleship*, or *Clue*, kids build memory skills by keeping complicated moves in mind while planning their next moves. They learn mental flexibility by adapting their plans in response to their opponent's actions. Fantasy games like *Minecraft* and *Dungeons & Dragons* also build these skills, as kids set goals and remember rules about how characters and materials can be used. (Tip: Many libraries have games available to borrow for free!)

3



Organized Sports

Many kids get interested in playing sports—whether through school, community groups, or local recreation departments. In addition to physical health benefits, team sports like soccer, basketball, and field hockey require coordination, which can help build kids' attention skills.

4



Informal Physical Activities

If kids aren't into organized sports, there are many other ways to get exercise and have fun with peers. Frisbee, hide-and-seek, tag, and pick-up basketball are examples of games that kids can play almost anywhere. Jump rope games can be played on the sidewalk or the playground. Encourage kids to make up their own games, too!

5



Musical Instruments and Singing

When kids learn to sing or play a musical instrument, they exercise memory skills as they hold a piece of music in mind. They learn to focus attention as they follow rhythmic patterns or sing in rounds. There is even evidence that the two-handed coordination involved in playing an instrument strengthens executive function skills. Enrolling in music classes or joining a community music group or church choir are also opportunities for social interaction and making new friends.

6



Dancing

Coordinating movements to music through dance challenges kids' brains and bodies. In addition to providing physical exercise, dancing helps kids focus their attention and build memory skills as they keep music and steps in mind at the same time. The best part? Dancing can happen anytime and anywhere. What's more fun than a spontaneous dance party with friends or in the kitchen at home?



To see more brain-building play ideas for kids of all ages, visit:

<https://developingchild.harvard.edu/brainbuildingthroughplay>

Center on the Developing Child  HARVARD UNIVERSITY