

In today's world, it seems as though many people wish to maximize personal improvement with minimal effort. You may be familiar with a number of online brain-training programs, such as Lumosity, that advertise the ability to strengthen your intellectual abilities in just minutes a day! As it happens, many of these training activities are based on concepts found in neuropsychological testing. Many of these concepts, such as visual perception, working memory, language skills, and executive functioning, are very much present in some classic games that you may already have in the home. With summer on the horizon, many families may find more opportunities to have family fun with the added benefit of building on these skills.

Concepts like visual perception and processing speed play a large role throughout one's life; from a child's ability to read the chalkboard and rapidly and accurately take notes, to having to quickly and accurately recognize and respond to changing traffic signals as an adult. The ability to accurately perceive and quickly form connections in the mind accounts for a significant portion of both neuropsychological testing and IQ testing. There are a number of ways to improve visual skills and processing skills through the use of puzzles, board games and card based games. Board-based puzzle games such as [Rush Hour](#) and [Blokus](#) require visual perception, strategic planning, and logic in order to succeed. Card based games such as Uno Attack and [Set](#) can often be played by the entire family and require urgent visual perception, rewarding (and reinforcing) visual skills and information processing skills. In fact, Harvard University's [Center on the Developing Child](#) outlines what sorts of games can be the most developmentally pertinent based on a child's age and stage of development.

"Executive functioning" is a psychological term used to describe someone's cognitive abilities, such as working memory, reasoning, planning, and problem solving. Such skills provide critical supports for learning and development, and while we aren't born with these skills, we are born with the potential to develop them through interactions and practice. An important aspect of someone's "executive functioning" is the concept of cognitive flexibility. Cognitive Flexibility refers to the ability to shift avenues of thought and action in order to perceive, process, and respond to situations in different ways. It is an essential requirement for regulating one's behavior. Games like [Clue](#), [Stratego](#), and timeless classics like Risk and Chess emphasize strategic thinking, the ability to view problems from multiple perspectives, weigh costs and benefits, and enact a plan with an ultimate goal in mind. These abilities, when practiced regularly, can transcend the game board and find use in everyday life. Such are the benefits of these games that Mensa International, the international High IQ society, annually ranks the board games that they find to be the most useful in applying intellectual skills. This annual top ten list is included at the end of this document.

Finally, less structured tabletop role playing games like Dungeons and Dragons or Pathfinder can have a number of other benefits, both social and psychological. Such games reward critical thinking, arithmetical aptitude, and creative problem solving. They have the additional benefit of requiring (and have the potential to strengthen) social and interpersonal skills, self-advocacy skills, active frustration tolerance, and coordination of teamwork strategies (as everyone must work cooperatively to succeed.) Of course, these games require a greater amount of time to play, and also a game "leader" with an understanding of how to use the game to develop these social and psychological skills.

In summary, many family-friendly table top games have significant functional benefit beyond simple amusement. Regular play of assorted games can prime an individual to think in certain ways, utilize

different skills, and learn to cope appropriately when things don't go their way. The next time you face a rainy afternoon, consider dusting off the old Monopoly or Chess board and giving your brain a workout!

The 2013 Mensa Top Ten List of Board Games includes:

1. Chess
2. Scrabble®
3. Monopoly
4. Trivial Pursuit™
5. Backgammon
6. Checkers
7. Apples to Apples®
8. Clue
9. Risk
10. Battleship™

Sources:

http://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/tools_and_guides/enhancing_and_practicing_executive_function_skills_with_children/

<http://www.us.mensa.org/newsroom/american-mensae28099s-top-10-list-of-board-games/>

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