

A close-up, shallow depth-of-field photograph of a family playing a board game. The game board is dark blue with a landscape theme, featuring green hills, blue water, and various terrain pieces. The terrain pieces include yellow conical trees, black and white cow figurines, and black and white buildings. A hand in the upper right is placing a green terrain piece. In the background, a child's hand is visible, and a man's face is partially seen, looking down at the game. The overall atmosphere is warm and focused.

FAMILY GAME PLAY

BY ZANE KATHRYNE SCHWAIGER



Our children are growing up in a “golden age of board games” – a revolution in game-design enabled by the magic of community, collaboration, and cross-pollination in the online world. We now have access to thousands of creative games with sophisticated mechanics and high-quality components created and sold around the world.

There is an incredible diversity of games available to our families today: games that take 10 minutes and games that last for days; single-player games and 20-player party games; bluffing games that can be played anywhere and games with hundreds of pieces that cover the entire dining room table. There are board games about bamboo-eating pandas, mushroom hunters, escaping cursed temples, exploring caves, quilt making, sushi eating, space exploration, train travel, building castles, and painting frescos.

The game world has exploded over the past fifteen years.

Kids learn all sorts of things when they play games: strategic thinking, face-to-face social skills, and how to win and lose gracefully. Kids and parents alike learn how to adjust and rethink strategy, manage resources, and stay organized. And games are a fantastic way for all ages to engage in the same activity. Some of our most memorable evenings are spent with friends and family from ages 5 to 70, sitting around the table, playing together.

As homeschoolers, we can take advantage of well-designed, sophisticated games that everyone in the family can learn from and enjoy. But with so many choices, it can be overwhelming to know where to begin. In search of games for our family, my husband, Jeffrey, has become our resident game expert. And we are all reaping the benefits, especially during long winter homeschooling days. Thanks to his research (and, umm, slight game addiction), we have tried dozens of games over the past couple of years, and discovered many family favorites.

But before we tantalize you with colorful descriptions and you spend your life savings on games, we have a quick but important note. There are thousands of games available today, and different families are drawn to different themes and types of play. We encourage you to “try before you buy” — that is, try games at your library, local game shop, or with friends.



There are also great online resources for watching game videos and learning the mechanics of different games (WatchitPlayed.com and Rahdo Runs Through are two great places to start). Take time to explore which games you and your children love before you invest, or at least pass on the games that you don't like and keep looking for those that click for your family.

Our family tends to like games that are beautifully designed, relatively fast moving, and engaging for most ages. We also lean toward games in which all players are involved in each round or all players can potentially benefit on a single player's turn. The following eight games are just some of our recent favorites — all tested and enjoyed by our family and friends (ranging in age from 5 to 70). Enjoy!





MACHI KORO

2-4 players

Recommended age 10+ (but our 8-year-old loves it)

30 minutes

Machi Koro is a short, city building, dice rolling card game. All players can potentially benefit on a single player's roll, which keeps the game exciting and unpredictable. Players must keep a keen awareness of everyone's progress and developing strategies. Both strategy and luck are involved, so players of a wide age range can remain competitive.

TAKINOKO

2-4 players

Recommended age 8+ (but our daughter has been playing, with help, since she was 6)

45 minutes

Takinoko is one of our favorite family games. We love the panda theme and complex game design, which involves balancing multiple objectives. All players can benefit from a single player's turn and a good mix of strategy and luck keeps the game engaging. Plus we love watching the unique bamboo garden form in every game!



SUSHI GO/SUSHI GO PARTY

2-5 players (up to 8 players in the Sushi Go Party version)

Recommended 8+ (but we've played with children as young as 5)

20 minutes

Sushi Go is a fast-moving game in which all players are active on each turn. Cards are flipped and passed as the game progresses around in a circle. Quick decision-making and strategy, a bit of luck, and cute sushi graphics make this game fun and lighthearted for many ages. We really like the numerous menu additions in the party edition.



SLEEPING QUEENS

2-5 players

Recommended age 8+ (but our girls have taught it to friends as young as 5)

15 minutes

Sleeping Queens is a quick card game that reinforces simple math (addition and subtraction) with a good mix of strategy and chance. It is a simple game that a range of ages can learn and enjoy. I remember when our girls first learned to play on their own and grew confident enough to teach their cousins!



PRIME CLIMB

2-4 players

Recommended age 10+
(but our daughter has been
playing since she was 7)

30-40 minutes

Prime Climb is a beautiful, colorful mathematics game, excellent for learning and practicing addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division. The intelligent graphic design allows younger players to be involved and learn quickly, even if they are not yet fluent with multiplication.



JAIPUR

2 players

Recommended age 12+
(but I play with our 8-year-old
and she beats me!)

30 minutes

Jaipur is a fast-moving card game that involves trading and collecting goods (and camels!) and gathering coins. Because it is a two-player game, Jaipur is good for developing quick decision making and honing strategy. Beautifully designed cards and tokens add to the enjoyment of this game.





CARCASSONNE

2-5 players

Recommended age 8+ (but our daughter has been playing it, with help, since age 6)

45 minutes

Carcassonne is a tile-laying game in which players build and claim cities, roads, cloisters, and farms. The landscape emerges and grows as players develop strategy and spatial awareness.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Zane Kathryn Schwaiger lives on a hill overlooking Lake Michigan with her husband and three children. Together they care for a wild plot of land, a large garden, and a small flock of chickens. Zane has a long-standing interest in organic gardening and farming and she loves to tell stories through both photographs and words. You can find her in the garden, exploring wild places, creating little things, reading and writing poetry, making a meal for family and friends, and taking photographs of beautiful family life. See more of her homeschooling journey at zanekathryne.com.

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