

Chocolates With a Center of Attention

Picking Candy—and Playing Card and Board Games—Can Aid Test Skills

By EVELYN PORRECA VUKO
Special to The Washington Post

Abigail scrutinizes the box of chocolates. She plucks out the plumpest piece, sniffs it and scans it for weird spots, then gives it a good squeeze. Turning it over, she chips a chunk off the bottom and administers an investigative lick. She replaces it precisely and moves on to the next piece and does it all over again. Abby tests like a biochemist.

Teacher Says: Make the most of that talent. Test-taking strategies can be reinforced at home while Abigail pores over a box of chocolates. This doesn't mean abandoning test preparation courses, especially for the SAT. But for students in grades 3-8, who will now have annual standardized tests in reading and math, perfecting test-taking skills can and should be sweet.

To determine what skills Abby has and needs, watch her work. Simple activities are often the most revealing way to learn how kids process new information, recall and relate facts and complete tasks. Take, for example, her excellent work with a box of candy. Scanning the entire candy selection first

shows accurate focusing and eye-sweeping, as well as the ability to see the big picture—all essential visual and comprehension skills. The plucking, squeezing and turning indicates strong small-motor coordination for writing and filling in bubble-laden answer sheets. Examining each piece of candy for weird spots means she notices details, important for recall, spelling and math computation. This also demonstrates she can shift her focus from far to near, which she'll need for copying a math problem on scratch paper, or selecting the correct multiple-choice answer, then recording it on her answer sheet. Sniffing and licking means she's not afraid to use all her senses to solve a problem, an excellent skill for tests in any field. Repeating the sampling process means she's methodical, a critical trait for all aspiring biochemists.

Common activities such as card and board games are rich in test-skill activities, as are carefully crafted conversations. The following work well with kids 6 and older:

■ Card games like pinochle and bridge and board games like Rummikub and Sequence hinge on important testing skills, including calculating, comparing, contrasting, evaluating, eliminating and strategizing within a

RESOURCES

- Age 6 and above: Parent's guide to standardized tests at www.familyeducation.com.
- Grades 3-12: Chicago Public Schools site at www.intranet.cps.k12.il.us; click on Assessments.
- Hoyle's Rules of Games (Signet, \$6.99).

given time frame. Because card and board games are also social gatherings, they advance other talents: organizing, coordinating, predicting and convincing—which are also potent writing skills. And, just as with tests, card and board games are surrounded by a competitive and sometimes tense environment. If Abby learns to play a successful hand despite her father's constant moaning and forehead-slapping, a quiet testing room will be a snap.

■ Because Abby will need to read and summarize on all portions of her standardized tests, play a "chain game" whenever you have conversations about what she's seen, heard, attended or experienced. The theory behind this simple activity is that linking details helps kids form concepts, which spawn generalizations. This is a must for working the sentence-completion questions on the SAT.

After watching a movie or going to her father's model-airplane competition together, ask her detail-rich "who and what" questions first. Then probe the "why" ideas: "Why do you think Dad was able to do so much better this time than last?" Finally, ask her "would you, could you?" questions: "What did you learn about Dad's win today that you could use when you try out for the chess team?" Pointed personal inquiry encourages kids to synthesize their learning and apply it to oth-



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Competitive board games help students develop important test-taking skills such as calculating, evaluating, eliminating and strategizing within a given time frame.

er situations. Repeat the chain game until Abby does it without coaching. If she's visual, do it orally; if she's oral, have her write it down. The night before a big test, remind her to "make a chain" of ideas in all the word problems, paragraphs and short stories she

reads.

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LESSON PLAN

- Word-use, grammar, sentences: Tell "morphing" jokes in pairs or small groups. The first person tells a joke. The next person retells it changing the nouns. The next person changes the verbs, adjectives or adverbs.
- Comprehension: Close your eyes while watching TV. Envision and narrate the action you hear. Turn off the sound and make up your own script.
- Sequencing: Dance the tango, fox trot, bunny hop—any dance with steps in order. Memorize the phone numbers of everyone in your extended family or classroom. Hint: Phone tones provide a musical memory link.
- Problem-solving: Teach your aunt how to use the computer or your grandmother how to take a digital photo and print it. Teach your little brother anything.

For additional tips: "You're Smarter Than You Think," by Thomas Armstrong (Free Spirit Publishing, \$15.95).