Top Of The Table – Introducing Kids To RPGs

by [Matt Miller](#) on Jul 22, 2016 at 10:00 AM

Ask anyone who has played role-playing games with friends or family over the years; there are few better ways to build relationships, foster laughter, and have a great time than sitting together to create a story. For all of the fantastic worlds RPGs take us to, the opportunity to come together with other people is the best part of the experience. But what if you want to share that laughter and adventure with your daughter or son, niece or nephew, or even the kids you mentor in a club or school?

Playing role-playing games is a fantastic way to bring kids out of their shell, and give them power to shape a story as it comes into being, rather than always witnessing it from the outside like they might with a movie or book. It's also an amazing way to bring adults and kids together, and build trust through a shared experience.

If you're the adult, it's up to you to understand the game, and most of the time, to be the gamemaster who guides the story. But don't be intimidated. Follow the suggestions below to help ensure everybody has a great time. And if you're looking for great role-playing games to try with younger players, [flip over to the second page](#) for some RPGS specifically designed with kids in mind.

Start With Story

No matter the game, the starting point should always be characters and story – not rules. The less time spent at the outset talking about guidelines and mechanics, the better. There's a reason why kids (and adults, for that matter) gravitate to storytelling in picture books and TV shows – we're predisposed as people to enjoy sharing stories with one another.

Think of one or two sentences that describe the story and the game, and ask your young players if they want to join in. Rules can come later, and even then, it's probably best to keep most of the particulars to yourself. If dice need to be rolled, you can tell them which dice when the time comes. If a player wants to do something, you can describe how to do it. Keep the focus on the story moving forward, and make sure the players in your group feel like they're helping the story progress through the actions of their characters.

Make Character Creation Fun

Many RPGs involve making a character first before the story begins. A lot of the games that are targeted to young players, (like the ones on the next page) have advice for how to make character creation engaging. But here are a few tips to help you with the process, no matter the game.

First, like with the broader story, keep the rules light. Try to find out what makes each kid excited, and help him or her find their way to the character that matches that description. Especially for the youngest players, it's okay to guide them along a little bit; you probably know if your niece loves pirates, and if so, offer suggestions that let make an awesome swashbuckling hero.

If you've got an inquisitive kid on your hand, they may have questions about the numbers or words that go on their character sheet, and feel free to answer. Just don't get bogged down in the details.

One technique I've had good luck with is to build characters as part of the story. For instance, if you've got a team of wanna-be Harry Potters, maybe your game starts on a train headed to the magical school; you ask each kid to introduce themselves, and you can help fill in the blanks on their sheet as they talk.

Some children are going to be reticent to make a decision about their character. If so, promise them that they can change things later if they want.

Provide Options

The essence of a role-playing game is frequently a GM setting a scene, and the players being the chief instigators in how that scene unfolds.

Experienced role-players often bristle when given specific multiple choice options about how to proceed – they want absolute freedom, and wise GMs know when to give exactly that. But that same freedom is rarely the right choice with a new group of kids playing RPGs for the first time.

And who can blame them? It's hard to wrap your head around the idea of a game where you can do virtually anything you can imagine!

To get started, don't be afraid to provide some clear choices in any given situation. It's wonderful to visit a secret laboratory filled with friendly robots, but it might be hard to know what to do. If the kids know they can search for clues about the missing robotics builder, talk to one of the robots, or leave through the door at the other end of the room, then each player can decide what happens next.

Later on, experiment with more freeform encounters – you'll know when the kids in your group are ready to figure out their own options.

Photo: Playtest of Monte Cook Games' No Thank You, Evil!

Expect Chaos

A single factor unites virtually every experience I've had playing RPGs with young players; at some point, things are likely to devolve into chaos. And up to a point, that's okay.

Once a group of kids begins to realize role-playing games let them do whatever they want, that sense of power can be overwhelming. "You mean my knight can go punch the king? I'm doing THAT!"

Role-playing games are an ideal place to let kids express their feelings and get excited, and you should encourage that. But some things aren't alright.

Raucous laughter and occasional shouting is to be expected, but you need to set the limits. If things are getting too insane, explain that the story can't continue until everybody listens. You know what works with the kids you are playing with, so use that knowledge to guide the session.

Also, in an RPG with kids, it's never okay for one player's character to hurt another player's character. You are the GM – if one player is about to do something that is likely to lead to tears from someone else, you have any number of ways to stop that within the narrative of the game.

Say Yes

This goes along with the last suggestion a little bit, but it's one of the most important things to learn as a GM. Frankly, it's a trick that is equally important with more grown-up players.

If a player asks to do something, or wants to attempt a crazy feat, or would like to say something wild, then most of the time it's okay to just say yes.

Role-playing games frequently focus on situations and characters that probably won't arise in real life. So why fixate on what is possible or impossible? Let the player try whatever it is that is getting them so excited.

The trick here is to understand that trying isn't the same thing as succeeding. If your son wants to have his character jump over the building, it's probably not going to work (unless he's playing as a superhero). But give him the chance to try, and celebrate the fun of both success and failure. When he fails the roll to make that jump, he'll laugh as you describe what happens, and so will his friends, his sister, or whoever else is at the table.

Pay Attention To Your Players

The best GMs know a secret that is true for any gaming group, no matter their age. Pay attention to what your players like. Ultimately, your job is to facilitate a fun time for everyone, and a little bit of observation goes a long way. Watch what makes the kids in your group excited, and focus on that.

This is easier said than done, especially if you have several players in the group. Each of them might have different desires for the way the game should go. Some of them want to have their characters talk all the time. Some want to just be goofy all the time. Try to give everyone a moment to shine, and use your attention as the GM as a tool to draw individual players in. It might take some coaxing, but a shy player often really appreciates the chance to share their thoughts and plans, even if other players at the table are louder or seemingly more engaged.

Watch The Time

Adult gaming groups will sometimes play for many hours at a stretch, but that's probably not going to fly with a group of very young players. Keep sessions short, with simple goals that can be accomplished in a single session. Even if the kids in your group are eager to keep going, consider a brief break when the kids are getting restless.

On this final point, be willing to recognize that any amount of time might be too long. Some seven-year old kids are going to be rapt with attention for a role-playing game and its story, and another child the same age won't be able to sit still for more than five minutes. There's a simple answer here – wait and try again a few hours, days, weeks, or months later, and see if they want to try again. Just like with grown-ups, not every kid is going to love the hobby. But when they do, it's an amazing activity you can share with them.

Next Page: Check out some of the best role-playing games to try with kids

No Thank You, Evil!

One of the best new role-playing systems of the last decade is Monte Cook Games' Cypher System, which has been fleshed out through weird and wonderful games like Numenera and The Strange. No Thank You, Evil! is a brand-new project from the publisher, taking the core conceits of the Cypher System and adapting them for a younger audience.

Every character in the game is built around a sentence. The age of your players determines how complicated the sentence is. "I'm a Noun" works for young players, while "I'm an Adjective Noun who Verbs" is used by older, more advanced players. "I'm a Super Smart Princess Who Flies Through The Sky" is one example. In addition, players can have a companion, like a Clumsy Ghost, a Fast Car, or a Tiny T-Rex who helps out along the way. Each creation choice

adds elements to the way the character plays and what they can do, but without getting bogged down in details.

No Thank You, Evil! also distinguishes itself with its wonderful setting. Storia, the Land Next Door, is a place filled with all the imaginative sites of childhood, from knight-filled castles to rocket ships, to dinosaurs. Players reach Storia through gates in their own bedrooms – leading to areas like Behind the Bookshelf or Under the Bed – each with their own distinct style of adventures, from fairy tale forests to Halloween-esque ghost stories.

Adventures use a straightforward approach of actions fueled by character skills. Like all games based on the Cypher system, the focus is squarely on narrative, and the mechanics are mostly in the background. One of my favorite features of the game rules is the option for a player to shout the name of the game – No Thank You, Evil! – when something gets too scary or weird, and the bad situation gets swept away. It's a welcome option for player groups who may include young ones whose imaginations can get carried away.

No Thank You, Evil! comes in a beautiful box set that has everything you need to get started, including colorful character sheets, bright custom dice, and other accessories.


Mouse Guard

If you're looking for something a little deeper and more complex to play with older kids, might I recommend Mouse Guard? Linked to the comic of the same name, this elegant RPG may star forest rodents, but it's a deep and rewarding experience based on the award-winning Burning Wheel RPG, and should be an ideal fit for families or other groups looking for a rich and nuanced role-playing experience that is still accessible for new players.

My favorite aspect of Mouse Guard is its session structure, which has distinct sections to guide you through play, including a prologue, a designated mission, and goal setting. After the GM establishes the direction of story and its obstacles, the players gain tremendous control over how the narrative progresses. At the end of the session, time is set aside for everyone to discuss what happened, and determine whether goals were met, and rewards are even handed out for fulfilling particular roles – those rewards are points that can be used to aid your character in future sessions.

Mouse Guard has a wonderfully realized setting of specific locales, and a rich cast of characters, many of whom are drawn directly from the beautiful comic books. An enterprising family could have a lot of fun playing games set in the world while simultaneously reading the graphic novels together.
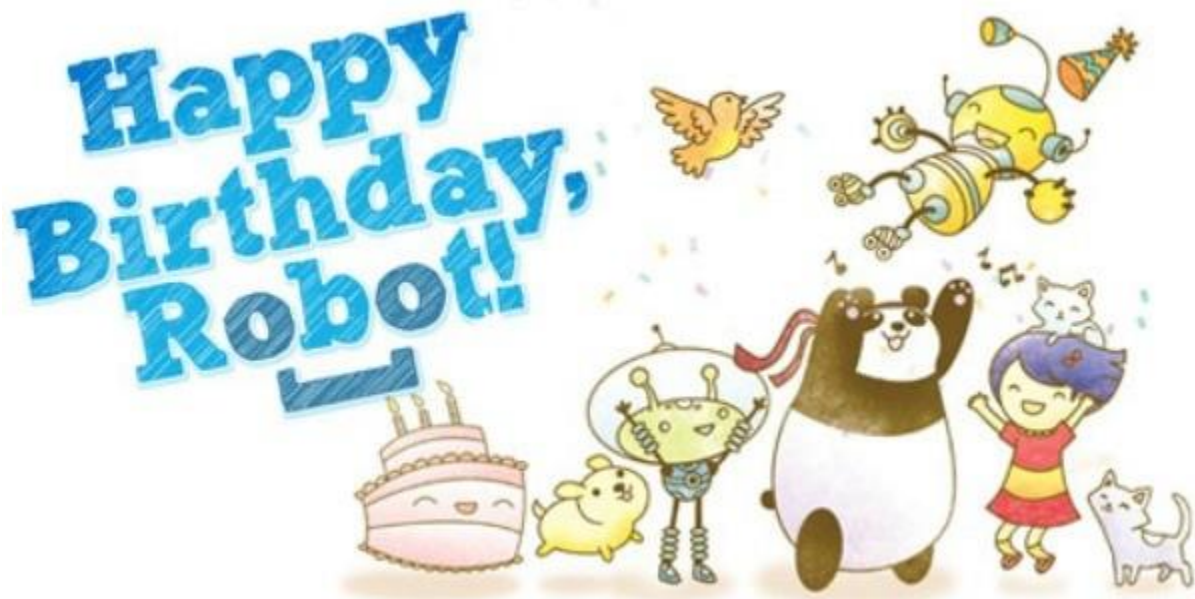
Happy Birthday Robot!

I love this simple and giggle-inducing game for lots of reasons, but I'm mentioning it here because of its ease of play and flexibility to players of any age group, even very young children.

This isn't an RPG in the traditional sense, but rather a communal storytelling project with a clear structure. Every story starts with the game's name: Happy Birthday, Robot!. The current storyteller rolls several dice that have one of three results – Blank, And, or But. Blank results indicate how many words that player gets to add to the story after opening. Your neighbors at the table on either side also get to add words – one person adds words from your And results (and can use the word "and" for free), and another player adds as many words as your But results (and can use the word "but" for free). Then play passes to a new storyteller. By the end of your play time, you've created a brand new and completely original story about Robot's adventures on his birthday.

Clear and simple rules are easy to teach as you go, and I've yet to encounter a game that so quickly gets a group into the action of story creation. A single game takes around half an hour, and has a clear end point indicated within the game's structure.

Happy Birthday, Robot! is very difficult to find in print, but publisher Evil Hat still sells a pdf version. For dice, you can either adapt your own normal six-sided dice with stickers, or purchase "Fate" dice made by the same publisher, which are used in its other more adult-oriented RPGs, but function perfectly well for telling a new story about Robot.

Little Wizards

Antoine Bauza is a familiar name to tabletop enthusiasts, thanks to wonderful board and card games like 7 Wonders, Takenoko, and Hanabi. His charming role-playing game for children, Little Wizards, may be lesser known, but it's a stellar game with a charming and magical setting.

Little Wizards unfolds in a whimsical land called Coinworld, a flat world with two sides – Heads and Tails. Each is filled with opportunities for adventure, weird places to visit, and friends to meet. The game has a simple class system – everyone plays either a Lil' Sorcerer (born with

magic) or a Lil' Mage (someone who learns magic). Each character has different types of magic they're good at casting, and a vivid sense of their appearance and personality.

An easy-to-understand dice-rolling mechanic governs success and failure, characters level up, and all the basic systems of a role-playing game are present, albeit in a simplified form.

Little Wizards is ideal if you have kids that are especially excited about magic as a concept, but also kids who really like weird and surprising characters. The game spends a good bit of time setting up each player's unique wizard, which won't be ideal for every player group, but for those that don't mind the extra minutes of investment, the system is engaging and fun. In addition, the game book includes a couple of "Tales" to get you started – adventures that flesh out the tone and humor of the game world.

Pathfinder and Dungeons & Dragons

I don't want to end this conversation without addressing the RPGs that are most familiar. The D&D game in recent years has branched into two distinct systems that are both born from the same source. Whether you embrace the 5th edition of Dungeons & Dragons, or you love the Pathfinder game, which is an advancement and evolution of the popular 3rd edition D&D rules, both have potential for play with kids.

Unlike the other games I'm recommending, both of these games are chock full of adult concepts, a frequent focus on fighting, and have complex rules systems. So, why recommend them here?

Quite simply, it's because you may already be familiar with the source material, and that can go a long way toward ease of play. Consider purchasing the Pathfinder: Beginner Box set or the

[Dungeons & Dragons Starter Set](#), depending on your preference. Both offer simplified rules for low-level play, and are an ideal way to get started if you've got some young players along for the ride.

When using either system, you may wish to scale back some of the rules to suit the age of the children in the group, and use your own judgment about what your players are ready to deal with in terms of violence and monsters. As a GM, expect that adapting D&D-based games for younger players may take some effort, but if you've played one of these systems for years, it might still be easier than teaching yourself something new.

What role-playing games have you tried playing with younger players? What tips do you have for those trying to do so for the first time? Share your thoughts in the comments below.

If you're looking for more tabletop coverage, check out our new [Top of the Table hub](#). And as always, email or tweet me and let me know what other board, card, miniature, and role-playing games you'd like to see covered next.