

BRAIN-BUILDING THROUGH PLAY

6 Playful Activities for Teens (13-17 years)

Even teens need time to play. As with younger children, play helps support learning and development, particularly in building executive function and self-regulation skills—such as **setting goals and planning ahead, being adaptable and flexible, and controlling impulsive behavior.** These skills give youth a strong foundation for the adult years and help with managing increasing school-related responsibilities, like homework load and time commitments for sports and clubs.

The activities below are a few examples of how teens can challenge their minds and bodies, but also unwind and have fun. It's much too easy for teens' lives to become over scheduled and stressful. **Help them to have unstructured play time and down time for a healthy balance.** (They may resist adults' suggestions at first, but often the ideas sink in and they act on them later!)

1



Get Moving

Besides being a great form of exercise, organized sports allow youth to practice skills like teamwork, maintaining focus, making quick decisions, and responding to changes. But staying active can happen informally, too! Teens can do yoga, play frisbee, go biking or hiking, or have a pickup game of basketball with friends.

2



Enjoy Music

Playing a musical instrument, singing, dancing—all of these are good for the brain at any age. Learning a piece of music or choreography strengthens memory skills, focus, and flexibility, especially when there are multiple parts, sophisticated rhythms, and improvisation. But music doesn't always have to involve skill-building. Listening to a favorite playlist with friends can be fun for teens and might even inspire a dance off!

3



Be Dramatic

School and community theater groups provide many opportunities for building skills, whether a teen prefers to be backstage or in the spotlight. Everyone has to remember their jobs or lines, pay attention to timing, and manage their behavior. Theater is also a way to have fun, get creative, and experience being part of a team.

4



Try Something New

Teens can nurture their growing independence by exploring and taking risks safely. They could try a food they've never eaten or become a tourist in their own town and visit a site they've never been to before. Have teens invite their friends over to cook or bake something together. They'll probably make a mess, but they'll have fun and learn how to feed themselves when they're on their own later!

5



Be Silly

As much as teens want to be seen as grown up, they still have moments when they need to be kids. Show them that people can be silly at any age! Challenge them to a water balloon fight or play flashlight tag in the dark. With their friends, they could plan a scavenger hunt, have a contest to see who can create the craziest outfit from thrift store finds, or make a funny video.

6



Play (a Little Bit of) Video Games

Video games can help teens practice and build important skills, as long as sensible time limits are followed and adults monitor content. Games that require constant monitoring of the environment and fast reaction times challenge their ability to focus, evaluate a situation, and regulate their response. Adults and teens can research games with Common Sense Media, a non-partisan media information website and app that provides game reviews and suggests appropriate age ranges based on game subject matter.



To see more brain-building play ideas for kids of all ages, visit:
<https://developingchild.harvard.edu/brainbuildingthroughplay>

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