10 Games to Boost Executive Functions



Play is the work of children! Games with rules or a little structure have the added bonus of helping children practice [important executive function skills[1]](https://heartmindonline.org/resources/10-games-to-boost-attention-focus#resource-sources) such as [working memory[2]](https://heartmindonline.org/resources/10-games-to-boost-attention-focus#resource-sources), [inhibitory control[3]](https://heartmindonline.org/resources/10-games-to-boost-attention-focus#resource-sources), and [cognitive flexibility[4]](https://heartmindonline.org/resources/10-games-to-boost-attention-focus#resource-sources). Children need to listen and remember instructions, pay attention to the adult leading the game and, in some games, resist the natural inclinations to stop/go/run or shout out. [The key to successfully strengthening children’s ability to self-regulate[5]](https://heartmindonline.org/resources/10-games-to-boost-attention-focus#resource-sources) is to start the games in a simple way and then gradually build in complexity with rules, variations or extra challenges.

All of these games have a [physical activity component[6]](https://heartmindonline.org/resources/10-games-to-boost-attention-focus#resource-sources) and can be adapted for a classroom, a gymnasium or be played outside.

1. Red Light - Green Light

* An adult is the “traffic light” and stands at the opposite end of the room or field from the children.
* Hold up different colors to represent stop and go. Start with with known cues of red and green but then – to challenge thinking –try different colors, such as purple for “go” and orange for “stop”. Try the opposite (red means go) or switch to using shapes or sounds to represent the actions.
* When someone “goes” when they should stop, simply have them go back to the starting line.
* Give children a turn being the traffic light.

2.  Freeze!

* Everybody dance and when the music stops - freeze!
* Use a selection of both slow and fast songs and have children dance slowly to slow songs and quickly to fast songs.
* Challenge children by having them dance to opposite cues: dance quickly to the slow songs and slowly to the fast songs.

3.  Conducting an Orchestra.

* Every child uses a musical instrument (real or improvised) and the “orchestra leader” uses a conducting baton. When the baton is up and waving, the children play their instruments. When the conductor puts the baton down, children stop.
* Increase the complexity and attention required by having children play their instruments quickly when the baton moves quickly and slowly when the baton moves slowly. Try the opposite cues too.

4.  Elephant Stampede

* The teacher puts a hand to their ear and says "What's that I hear?" The children responds by saying "Elephant Stampede!" The teacher then says where are the elephants? I can barely hear them!" The class responds with "Far away!" and begins quietly stamping their feet on the floor to mimic the sound of elephants in the distance.
* The teacher repeats the process, adjusting for how close the elephants are, until the herd "arrives" in the classroom. Students now make elephant trumpeting sounds and stamp their feet as hard as they can until the teacher begins to quiet them down by saying "Oh good, they're going away!" The children respond by stamping their feet more softly. They continue to respond to the teacher until the elephant herd has left the building.
* Embrace a more complex cacophony by giving groups of students different animal sounds to make and giving different instructions to different animals at the same time. “The elephants are getting closer but the monkeys are going away.”

5.  Drum Beats

* Use drum beats to represent different actions that children can do while sitting (e.g. clapping or stomping) or while moving around the room (e.g. walking or dancing). For example, children walk quickly to fast drumming, slowly to slow drumming, and freeze when the drumming stops.
* Request children to respond to opposite cues (walk slowly to fast drum beats and quickly to slow drum beats). Or add in different actions with specific drum cues. For example, slow drumming means stomping feet and fast drumming means jumping jacks.

6.  Simon Says and Follow the Leader

* In either version of this game, a leader models different actions to be imitated. This builds impulse control, observation, imitation skills, and emotional regulation.
* With Simon Says, children must listening carefully because when Simon “does” an action but doesn’t say it, they shouldn’t follow!
* Up the ante by introducing actions that have multiple steps.
* Try having two groups going on at the same time, with two Simon’s or “leaders.” When a child gets mixed up with their actions, they simply join the other group and follow a new leader (instead of being “out”).

7.  Melting snowman

* The [Melting Snowman game[7]](https://heartmindonline.org/resources/10-games-to-boost-attention-focus#resource-sources) focuses on children’s self-awareness.
* Start by asking the children to stand tall like a snowman.
* Children then either relax or tense their bodies based on cues the adult provides. When the sun is coming out, children relax or begin to melt.  When the snow clouds roll back in and it gets cold, children tense or freeze.

8.  Go Bananas

* Children learn actions based on the Banana Chant.
* “Grow bananas, grow, grow bananas.” - Raise one arm slowly until overhead. Repeat the phrase and raise the other arm overhead.
* “Peel bananas, peel, peel bananas.” - Slowly lower 1 arm. Repeat the phrase and lower the other arm.
* “Mash bananas, mash, mash bananas.”  - Stomp on the floor and repeat.
* “Go bananas, go, go bananas!” - Jump up and down and go bananas! Repeat.
* Make the game more challenging by adding in speed elements (how quickly can we go?) and noise elements (how quietly can we “go bananas”?).

9.  Head-Shoulders-Knees-& Toes

* This classic activity requires children to work on their self-regulation skills by overriding automatic responses as the song is changed.
* Begin by having students point to their head, shoulders, knees and toes while singing the song.
* Challenge them by omitting body parts in the sequence and/or by asking students to point to incongruent body parts. For example, tell students “when I say to touch your head, touch your TOES!!" or "When I say touch your tummy, touch your EARS."

10.  Peanut Butter Jelly Game

* Sitting on the floor in a large circle, have one ball represent the peanut butter and the other ball represent the jelly. The object of the game is to always throw the peanut butter ball and roll the jelly ball.
* The child holding the peanut butter ball throws it to anyone in the circle, and the child holding the jelly ball rolls it to anyone in the circle. Whoever receives the peanut butter ball must continue to throw it to someone else, whereas the jelly ball must be rolled.

Jump and freeze video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=388Q44ReOWE&feature=youtu.be>