

Teaching Kids
Ways to Engage
So They Don't Misbehave

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Why we need to teach kids to engage

1.) Kids are naturally attracted to stimulation and novelty.

For better or worse, children's brains will automatically seek engagement because they are drawn to stimulation and novelty. It's in their wiring! So when they are doing a task that does not engage them, **they will find something that *does* engage them.** And often what engages them are activities that we don't want them to be doing!

That's why...

...they often taken so long to get dressed in the morning. They start to put on their clothes and then become attracted by anything more interesting – such as what they might play with their friends at school that day. And then they forget that they were supposed to be getting dressed!

...they misbehave in stores and restaurants. When they don't have anything to engage them, they will FIND something to do, and often that "something" is loud or disruptive.

...they bother their siblings "for no reason." They have nothing to do so they will annoy their sibling to create the stimulation that they are seeking (even if they're not aware that they're seeking it.)

... they struggle with clean up and with homework. Because those tasks are often not engaging, they will be distracted by other things that are more engaging.

Once children learn to make tasks engaging, they can stay on task (get dressed and clean up when you ask) , behave better when they go places that are not necessarily kid-friendly (stores) and do what they're supposed to do (clean up, do homework, and leave their siblings alone).

Why we need to teach kids to engage

And...

2.) It's not our job to "entertain" our children.

The point of teaching our kids these engagement strategies is not to provide entertainment for them.

On the contrary, the point of these strategies is **to teach them how to remain focused so that they can do the things that need to get done – whether they are "boring" or not.**

The truth is that children do happen to enjoy these strategies, so they start to use them themselves.

I started to use some of the "tooth brushing" strategies mentioned in this document with my daughter when she was about 2 1/2, and **by the time she was 3 she was coming to ME every day telling me what fun thing she was going to do during toothbrush time.** I had nothing to do with it anymore.

A mother who had taught her 5th grader many of these strategies called me to thank me. She said that her son reported that he'd started to get distracted on his math test... **but because he knew these strategies, he was able to reign himself back in and complete the test.** She wasn't even around to remind him!

So use these strategies and realize that eventually when you repeat them often enough, children will internalize and start to use them independently.

Why we need to teach kids to engage

On each page of this document, you'll see suggestions for engaging kids during everyday tasks.

Many of these suggestions can be used in a variety of scenarios, not just the one that is mentioned at the top of the page.

However, if you're ever somewhere and you don't have this document, just remember to:

Engage Their Brains

Engage Their Bodies

Those two tips might spark some ideas for how you / they can create engagement in any situation!

Most tips in this document are appropriate for children ages 3 – 11 or so.
If you need other age-appropriate suggestions, don't hesitate to reach out!

Note that I only came up with some of these ideas myself.
A list of references can be found at the end of the document.

The Grocery Store

Engage The Brain

- Print out pictures (or words for older kids) and ask them to find things on their “list” to put in the cart
- Ask them how many orange items they can find. Ask them how many items they can find that start with the letter N.
- Grocery store bingo.
- Have kids find the letters in the alphabet (in order) using products in the store. See how many times they can go through the whole alphabet.
- Ask them questions: What’s their favorite/least favorite thing in this aisle? What would be the grossest two things to combine in this aisle?

As they get older...

- Have them help you figure out which item is cheaper
- Have them help you choose produce

Engage The Body

- Ask them carry something, get something from a low shelf, cross of grocery list items
- Ask them to put something in the cart creatively...They can put an item in with one hand behind their back or while sticking their tongue out.
- At each aisle, ask them to skip to the end of the aisle and back (being careful not to get in anyone’s way!)
- Ask them to push the cart while you steer.

Car / Airplane Rides

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Engage The Brain

- Games: Eye spy, 20 questions, Car ride bingo...
- Audio books
- Ask them questions
- Have them wave at others and see who waves back
- Let them pick an age in your life and you tell them a story from that year in your life.
- Play "Fortunately, Unfortunately." Tell a story with each person giving the one line of the story. One person starts their story with "Fortunately..." The next starts with "Unfortunately..." and so forth.
- Whopper stories – tell them a story and then add whoppers throughout: "and then a rabbit jumped up and landed on my head and I couldn't shake it off..." Then have them tell you a whopper story.

Engage The Body

- Call out directions – put your left hand on your right elbow, etc.
- Fidget toys
- Stickers and construction paper
- Crafts (dollar store supplies are cheap and you can do so much with them)
- Drawing prompts
- Magnetic books
- Lacing cards / string for bracelets

Dinner Time

Engage Their Brains

- Ask them to eat a certain number of bites before doing something: "Eat two bites and then tell me your favorite food. Eat too more bites and then tell me your favorite color..."
- Tell a story around the table with each person telling a line. They have to eat 3 bites before they can tell their line.
- Play "Pass the Sound": Person A points at Person B while making a silly sound. Person B repeats the sound and then takes 3 bites. Person B then turns another person and makes a new silly sound. That person takes 3 bites and the pattern is repeated.
- Play "I can... Can you?" You say, "I can take 2 bites of rice. Can you?" "I can eat with my opposite hand. Can you?" Everyone gets a turn saying, "I can... can you?"
- Go around the table with each person rolling one die. Whatever number that person rolls is the number of bites they have to take of a food.
- Someone chooses a color. As a family, you name all of the foods you can think of with that color. If someone stops eating, the game stops.
- Ask children what they'd wish for if they had magical powers to make wishes come true. They can tell you one new wish after each bite.

Engage Their Bodies

- Put a bungee cord around the legs of the chair and let them kick it
- Let them sit on a stability ball
- Put a stool under their feet and let them push on it
- Play "Freeze song." Sing/play a song, and while the music is on, they must be eating. When you stop singing the song, they must stop mid-chew. Then start singing again.
- Hide a secret item in an oven mitt. Everyone tries to guess what's in the mitt.

Bath / Shower Time

Use Their Brains

- Let them rotate which shower/bath they use
- Use “when... then”: Tell them they can do something once they’ve washed each body part. “When you wash your legs, then you can use wall paint on the walls,” “When I wash your hair, then we can sing a silly song.”
- Motivate them to wash by using a bath song
- Challenge them to finish their bath before 3 songs are over. (Let them know you’ll check to make sure everything is truly clean when they’re done!)

Use Their Bodies

- Let them use squirt guns or turkey basters in between wash times
- Clean their toys: Ask them to scrub, scrub, scrub their toys as hard as they can
- Fill up water bottles: They have to use their muscles to keep the water bottles down

Younger kids:

- Ask them to pat their head while you’re washing each body part. If they are old enough, they can count how many pats each body part takes.

Older kids:

- Ask them to wash with their opposite hand

Brushing Teeth

Engage Their Brains

If you're brushing their teeth:

- Let them "brush" a stuffed animal's teeth while you brush their teeth
- Ask them how many times they can say the ABCs while you brush their teeth

If they're brushing their teeth:

- Brush your teeth while they're brushing their teeth
- Ask them to copy you as you brush your teeth

No matter who is brushing

- Use an app that motivate kids to brush for longer

Engage Their Bodies

- Ask them to stand on one foot while they are brushing their teeth and see how many times they have to put their foot down
- Ask them to stand still like a statue. Tell them you're going to try to move their body as you're brushing their teeth and challenge them to be still.
- Play "freeze"... let them make silly movements and then say "freeze." You (or they) brush their teeth for 15 seconds and then they move again until you say "freeze." Repeat until tooth brushing is complete.

Cleaning Up

Engage Their Brains

- Have them use the silliest (or quietest, or most creative) voice they can as they say what they are putting away
- Challenge them to clean up before you can get through the ABCs twice
- Clean by color: Tell them to put away everything blue, and then everything red, etc.
- Make cleaning a mysterious mission by whispering "The first part of your mission is to clean up the legos. You will unlock the second part of the mission once that is done." Continue until everything is cleaned.
- Pretend they're making a movie or a commercial and tell them you'll record them while they're cleaning. Ask them to choose characters to be.

Engage Their Bodies

- Pretend your hands aren't working and try to put things away with other body parts (toes, chin to carry things, etc.)
- Put bins and baskets on the floor of the room you are trying to clean. Have them try to make a basket with the toys.
- Ask them to act like a robot / superhero / favorite character: As they are cleaning, they should move their bodies (and talk) like that character would
- Put on music and have them clean. Stop the music and have them freeze, then start again when the music does.

Getting Dressed

Engage Their Brains

- Leave a trail of clothes for them to follow and put on
- See how many items of clothing you are wearing. Ask them to put on the same number of items (or more).
- Have them put on their clothes to “unlock” a favorite activity that they want to do. You can even hand them a key once they’re done.
- Tell them a story or sing them a song while they’re getting dressed.
- Have them tell YOU a story. They can tell you a line of the story after each article of clothing that they put on.
- Play Simon Says with putting articles of clothing on. (If you say, “Simon says,” they must obey the rule.)
- Make up a silly noise that you do after each item of clothing gets put on.
- Ask “what would you do if” questions. “What would you do if you found a toy on the playground?” They get to answer a question after each item of clothing that they put on.

Engage Their Bodies

- Ask them to put on their shirt while standing on one leg
- Have them put on their clothes with their eyes closed
- Have them do 5 jumping jacks after they put on an article of clothing
- Warm up their clothes (especially in winter)

Waiting

(In Line, At an Appointment, At Restaurants)

Engage Their Brains

- Do something silly and dare them not to laugh. Have them do the same.
- Find an object and then think of words that rhyme with the name of that object.
- Play “I’m thinking of a number” game... Think of a number and then tell them to guess. Let them know whether your number is higher or lower.
- Play “would you rather”?
- Play “what’s missing” with items in your bag. Show them 10 items (or less for younger kids) in your bag. Then have them close their eyes. Remove one item and ask them what is missing.
- Ask them to stare at something for 20 seconds... and then name everything they saw
- Ask them to look at a space in the room and try to remember it. Then tell them to close their eyes and ask them questions about it. (What was the color of the lamp, etc.?)
- Name a category and your child has 10 seconds to name as many things in that category as possible. Make categories general (“animals”) for young kids, and specific (“animals with no teeth”) for older kids.
- Determine a word or phrase to listen for. Everyone stays quiet until they hear someone else around them area say that word or phrase.
- One person chooses 4 random letters. Kids come up with sentences in which each word starts with the designated letter. For example, HRTB. Harry read three books.

Engage Their Bodies

- Do songs that require them to use their bodies...hokey pokey, itsy bitsy spider, etc.
- Ask them to act out a book or story
- Hide/identify an item and play “hot” or “cold” until they find it
- Play Stand Up Twister...They have to put their right hand on their left ear, etc.
- The “Body count” game.. Ask them to do something with their body. This can be as easy or as hard as you want it to be. (Blink 5 times, hop on one foot 3 times, etc.)
- Drop a small scrap of paper. Have the kids try to catch it with two fingers before it hits the ground.

When You're Talking to Other Adults

Engage Their Brains

- Have a special box of toys/items that they can play only during times when you'll be talking to other adults for a little while
- Have them think of a story to tell you (or a song to sing you) when your conversation is over
- Ask them to build you something / draw you something that you'll look at when your conversation is over
- Have them make up different words to a tune of a song they know
- Choose three items and have them make up a story about those items that they can tell you later
- Have them design (or think of items on) a menu so you can play "restaurant" later

Engage Their Bodies

- Have them make up a dance or show to do for you when your conversation is over
- Ask them to draw what they'd like their next birthday party to be like
- Ask them to see how many times they can drop a penny it so it lands on their shoe without falling off. Tell them to keep trying to break their record (how many times they can do this in a row) until you are done talking.

You're Making Dinner

Engage Their Brains

- Put on music and all sing together
- Have them think of clues to describe an animal. You guess what the animal is.
- Have a freeze-a-funny-face contest. Who can hold a funny face for the longest without laughing?
- Guess what's in my purse... Have them guess as many items as they can that are in your purse. Then "guess what's in my closet," "guess what's in the guest bathroom," etc.
- Put a few items in a paper bag. Have kids take out one item at a time and make up a story (or sing a song) about it.
- Give them a short list of things to remember and repeat back. Make it silly if you want to.

Engage Their Bodies

- Ask them to draw you a picture / build you a tower that you can look at when you're done cooking
- Ask them to thread dry pasta on string
- Ask them to wrap play food in foil... and then do a "reveal" at dinner
- Send them on a scavenger hunt to find things throughout the house
- Give them [boredom boxes](#) or [quiet boxes](#)

Other Ideas

You Need to Get Work Done

- Give them a few minutes on your computer first
- Ask them to 'help' you while you work: they can clean the back of your laptop, they can take notes while you work, you can ask them to take a picture of something and then scan it or copy it.

They Need to Be Quiet

- Silent conversations: Write conversations on a piece of paper. "How are you?" "What's your favorite thing to do?"
- Draw part of a picture... fold it over, and then the other person has to extend the picture.
- Have them listen very hard to the sounds they hear. Ask them to remember at least 3 sounds.

You Want To Work Out

- Have them do something next to you
- Give them an audio book to listen to