

RUNNING KID ROLEPLAY

THE ART OF PINT SIZE STORYTELLING

By Mark Rein•Hagen

One of the questions I am asked the most is how to run a roleplaying game for kids, or alternatively, how to run a roleplaying game for parents and their kids. While this is something that I find very easy and natural to do, as a longtime GM and parent, I still understand how intimidating it can be. This article explains how to break the storytelling ice with kids and create an amazing introduction to roleplaying for them.

You will find gaming with kids to be very rewarding. There is almost nothing more fun than sharing your love for roleplaying and feats of wild imagination in a way that also uses your geek math skills, research, and acting. As fun as it is for you, the kid's excitement will likely be even more if you do it right. Solving issues you will have on how to introduce the story, rules, and character creation as well as how to create a fun scene, encounter, and conclusions in a way that kids not only understand but love, is the art of "Pint-Sized Storytelling".

Hopefully, after reading this article, you will know better how to go about it.



1. Use Any System

You can use any game system you want to make characters, but be flexible and flashy. Really, it is okay to wing it! Make sure you dress the scene. Have miniatures, buildings, dungeon tiles, lots of cool dice, plenty of wooden tokens, and glass beads on hand to make sure the table looks FUN. Even if all you have are Legos and wooden blocks, put them on the table. You should also try to collect some cards (Magic or whatever) at hand so you can pass out as Monster Cards, Treasures Cards, or Friend Cards. Kids love collecting things, and tell them they can keep the cards.

Kids love rolling dice, so make sure you let them do exactly that. The younger they are the less consistent you need to be about a game system, but still, even a

youngster is going to want to roll the same dice for a sword attack each time. So if you are using your own system, keep notes on what you are asking the player(s) to roll.

2. Get Other Adults To Join

Get another adult to join in as well, but try to get them to think and act like a child when they play their character while secretly helping YOU move the story along! The focus of the rules and story cannot be on the adults, it has to always be on the kids—keep things at the pint-sized level. Even if the other adults are not experienced RPGers, they can help keep the kids focused and excited. You might find yourself needing a strong player to be the healer of the group or someone who can do reliable damage. They can also help model the kind of behavior (both in and out of the game) and help refocus your younger players. Remind these adults they're in support roles, and must not monopolize the decision making, but sometimes having a wise person to give advice and heal the group is a huge boon to inexperienced gamers.



3. Make Character Creation Fun

Most RPGs start with making a character before the story begins. A lot of the games that are targeted at 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.

Present the character creation rule ultra-light. Talk to each to see what makes them excited and simply, LET THEM BE THAT, and help them find their way to the character that matches their imagination. 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.

Try to start their characters WITH power, and thus at a higher level rather than a base level, so they can see how cool their characters are rather than struggle through lower levels. Let them see how cool their class is, rather than learn to enjoy the slow build-up of skills and powers.

If you've got a curious kid at the table who may have questions about the numbers or words that go on their character sheet, while you should feel free to

answer, don't let them or you get lost in details. Other kids are going to worry about making a "final decision" about their character. If so, promise them that they can change things later if they want.

4. It's Always About The Story

No matter the game, the starting point should always be characters and story, not rules. You should spend ZERO time at the outset talking about rules and game mechanics. We all—kids and adults alike—already love storytelling, not just in movies but also in picture books, TV shows, advertising, and novels. We are storytelling animals, predisposed to enjoy listening to and creating stories out of nothing. So think of what you are doing as more of a story than a game at first, and the kids will MUCH more easily be able to follow along.

Think of a great way to introduce your story and world, villain and adventure, and casually ask the kids if they want to join in. Start talking about what they want to do, and perhaps who they want to be. Rules can come later, and even then, it's far better to keep all of the complicated details to yourself. If dice need to be rolled, you can tell them which dice when the time comes.

When a player wants to do something, just describe how to do it (what dice to roll or token to spend) and simply narrate what happens. Don't bother explaining the rules right then. When they are interested they will ask you what it all means, and THEN you can explain. 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.



The best way to do this is to provide clear options. Old school role-players dislike being led by the nose, or even being given multiple-choice options on how to proceed through a story. They tend to seek freedom and total creative control. But such open-ended "freedom to rove" is not the right choice with a group of kids trying roleplay for the first time. You need to build a story around them and their characters. You need to give them a place to start, a direction to go in, and then set them free.

Never be afraid to provide kids with specific choices to advance the story: "Well, you can do this, or you can do this." It's fun to

describe a secret wizard laboratory filled with strange alchemy, but harder for kids to know what to do. If they already know they are looking to recover a lost wind-up mechanical dragon in the laboratory, then they are less likely to burn down the whole castle.

5. Expect & Enjoy Chaos

If you can expect anything, you can expect things to devolve into chaos. And that is okay. It's part of the fun, and you need to roll with it, enjoy it and learn how to bring them back into the story again without crushing their imaginations and sense of hilarity.

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 Ranger can go punch the Prince? I want to do 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. Be clear about those expectations. Raucous laughter and occasional shouting are to be expected, but you don't want it to take over the entire experience. When things are getting too insane, stop everything and explain that you can't continue until everybody listens to a SECRET you want to tell them. Lean in and whisper something. Make it a cool plot twist and you will have their rapt attention.

Make sure you don't let a kid hurt another kid, even if it is in character. If one player is about to do something that is likely to lead to tears from someone else, you have to act and use storytelling and boundary-setting skills to move the player away from that action. Often the best way to do that is to explain the consequences to their character INSIDE the story.



6. Always 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, wants to attempt a crazy feat, or would like to say something wild, then most of the time JUST SAY YES, and move forward. Let their imaginations guide the play. RPGs are always about situations and stories that would never happen in real life, so don't 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 a kid wants their character to jump over the castle, it's probably not going to work (unless that is unique magic their character has). But give them a tiny chance to try, and celebrate the fun of failure, or possible success. Make failure FUN, and try to get the kids to laugh as you describe what happens in splendid but agonizing detail.

7. Pay Close Attention To Each Player

Every great GM has a secret they never tell players. Always listen carefully to what players say, and what they talk about with each other. The closer you pay attention to what your players like, dislike, expect, fear, and hope for the better an experience you can give them. This is doubly true for kids. Your real job is to create a fun experience for every player, and your powers of observation are vital.



However, each player is different, and everyone wants different things, so you need to make sure you are putting elements into the story, something for everyone. Some kids want to wage war and do combat and lots of it, they want mayhem and drama and the rolling of lots of dice, other kids just want to talk all the time, and thus would prefer to talk their way out of (or into) situations. Other kids want to tell jokes, make puns, and be silly. Make sure you divide your attention between every kid and every desire they have and provide everyone a moment to shine. Use the spotlight power of your focus and attention as the GM as a tool to draw players into the story and the drama. Sure, it might take a bit of coaxing at first, but even mortally shy

kids appreciate being drawn in and given the chance to share their thoughts. Leave no one out, ever.

8. Limit The Time

Grownup groups can game for hours, teenagers can game for the entire weekend (those were the days), but that's not going to fly with a group of 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.

Now, some kids are going to be rapt with attention for the storytelling for hours, another kid might only pay attention during dice rolling, some kids might need regular breaks, other kids might want to play with the miniatures and props. Whatever they need to do, let them. Always be ready to put the game on hold and then start back up again when they are ready.

9. Gaming Aids

Gaming aids that help kids understand and move through technical elements of the game are a huge boon. For a younger child, sometimes just having a little wooden figure or a card with a picture of what their ability is (and tokens to represent how many times they can use that ability) is a fantastic way for them to visualize things like what spell they're casting and how many spell slots they have. For an older child, spell and ability cards with descriptions (just as an adult would use) are exactly what they need. It doesn't have to be fancy, but being visual and tactile really helps.

10. Reward Greatly, Punish Lightly

Don't be a killer DM, and don't be a rules lawyer, and don't be afraid to fudge the numbers a bit so a critical success finishes off a foe (and keeps the game moving). It may also mean that critical failures don't hurt other party members, but merely means a character slips and falls and has to spend an action getting up next turn. Feel free to take great latitude with the numbers so that each kid has a chance to be a superstar, whether that's in a fight or while roleplaying. The point is to facilitate a great experience while fostering a love of imagination and roleplaying.

So finally, and most importantly, the characters of kids should NEVER LOSE and NEVER DIE in your story or game. Never. Save lessons about danger, loss, and caution for later on, when they are old hands at roleplay, for now, keep it light, keep it safe, and keep it happy.

About Us

We are **Lostlorn Games**. Badlander is our take on the 5e “roll D20” Open Game License rules system, designed in a way to allow for a more narrative and storytelling style. It is perfect for playing with kids because it has all the fun stuff of the classic RPG fantasy game, but all you need is a character sheet to play.

Stay tuned for our new KID-FRIENDLY character sheet!

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