

How to Teach Your Kids Poker, the Easy Way

I have three children, ages eight, four and also four. (Twins.) Studies suggest that three is [the most stressful number of children](#), but there's an important consolation, which is the family poker game. Four players are ideal for spades or hearts, two for spit or gin rummy, but five is a respectable poker table.

And so it was important to me to teach my kids poker as early as possible, which turns out to be at four years old. I initially tried to do this the way I'd been taught, which is the wrong way.

The wrong way typically begins with the order of hands. The winner of a poker hand is the player with the best hand, so you have to know which hands are better than others. A straight flush beats four of a kind, a flush beats a straight, three of a kind beats two pair, etc. For a child, this is a lot to memorize, though also an exciting assortment of trivia to know and argue about.

But this isn't what poker is about. Poker is a game of incomplete information — you rarely know if you have the best hand — and, more important, a game of betting. The essential action of poker is betting, or folding if the betting gets too rich for you. The winner is the player with the best hand who's still in at the end of the hand, and you get to the end of the hand only if you call all the bets along the way. If you have the best hand and fold, you lose. And if you have the worst hand and *make* everybody else fold — by bluffing, by betting and acting like you have a good hand — then you win.

That dynamic is more central to poker, and more fun to learn, than the order of hands. And you can get to it immediately, if you begin teaching poker the right way.

The right way to begin is with one-card poker.¹ Everyone antes one chip and gets one card, face down. You look at your card. There's a single round of betting, which proceeds around the table: If no one else has bet, you can bet or check (do nothing); if anyone in front of you has bet, you can call (or match the bet), raise or fold. When everyone has called the last bet or folded, those who are left in the hand show their card. The highest card wins: Ace is highest, then king, so on down to two.

That's it. No pairs, no flushes, no full houses, no complicated order of hands to remember, though you do have to remember that a queen beats a jack. But you learn a lot of poker. You will always win with an ace, but you have to learn to maximize

the *value* of your ace, to induce other people to bet into you and call your raises. One of my proudest moments as a parent was when my daughter first [check-raised](#) me with an ace.

You'll probably win with a king, but if someone raises you, does that mean that they have an ace (and have you beat), or a queen (and are overconfident), or a six (and are bluffing)? There are 52 cards, so you can estimate the probabilities if you are mathematically inclined, though if you are four you probably won't.

You probably won't win with a six, but if you bet it confidently you might bluff everyone else out. If everyone else checks, and you're the last person to bet, you might as well bet: You have "position," everyone else has a weak hand, and you might be able to steal a pot. The essentials are there.

Once the kids have mastered this, you can introduce the order of hands gently with two-card poker. (Any pair beats a high card, highest pair wins.) Then teach the rest with five-card straight poker. This isn't a great game, but it's a brief stopover on the way to five-card draw, which is a perfectly respectable poker game. Texas hold'em is not far behind.

Another inessential complication that took up a lot of my attention when I learned poker is the value of chips. I learned to play with little plastic chips with different values: Whites are 1 and reds are 5 and blues are 10 or 25 or something, I forget. It's not important. Now, at my house, we play that each chip is worth a chip. Easy.

The colors do mean something though. From our dissolute youth, my wife and I have nice clay poker chips in a range of colors. Each player starts the game with a stack of chips in his or her own color. This encourages gloating. The chips are all worth the same, but you can tell with a glance at the stacks not only who's winning but also who's beating whom. If you have a bunch of yellow chips, then you know you've taken them from your father, and that is satisfying.

I once described my system to an executive at a proprietary trading firm, who asked: "So do you cash them out for ice cream?" A reasonable question that had never occurred to me. Real poker players play for money; chips are an in-game tool for keeping score, but at the end you settle up for money. Or ice cream, fine, but a game where the chips disappear at the end is pointless.

This is simply not a problem for twin four-year-old boys. People have lost their houses in Vegas with less emotion than our sons show when they lose to each other. They're

fully motivated just playing for the thrill of the game.

We taught my daughter this way when she was four. Now she's eight, a solid no-limit hold'em player who's started on [Modern Poker Theory](#).²As a parent, I'm pleased that I've given her the tools to put herself through college hustling poker games, and then go work at a proprietary trading firm. With our four-year-olds, we're still on one-card poker, but it is pretty fun, and the dream of a real family poker night is within reach.

1. Those who came up playing dealer's choice games might be familiar with [another one-card poker game](#), sometimes called "blind man's bluff." In this game, each player is dealt one card and, without looking at it, places it facing out on her forehead. Each player can see every other player's card, but not her own. Then you bet. I find that this does not teach poker concepts as well as "regular" one-card poker, and requires levels of sophistication and manual dexterity that are tough for little kids.

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2. This is *mostly* a joke, though not entirely.

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