



A PENGUINS POOL PARTY + PARALLEL PARKING: PROBLEM SOLVING FUN WITH SMART GAMES

Momma Told Me: If it was easy it wouldn't be a puzzle.

As a young girl I didn't have much social game. Momma was disabled, and home full time. She was what would be identified as a helicopter parent today. Wherever she went, I went. Whatever she did, I did. And that included a full homeschooling regimen in addition to my ongoing public school attendance and education. As a result I became socially awkward, yet intellectually advanced, for my age.



In grade school my the teacher would often announce 'free play' time for kids to unwind between lunch and the end of the day. There were shelves full of board games and building blocks, toys. The kids would split into groups and excitedly dive into various forms of creative and collaborative play. I would hunt for my favorite, solo, activity- the Tangrams.

Tangrams, a Chinese geometric puzzle consisting of a square cut into a series of interlocking shapes used to recreate various images and patterns, kept my mind occupied and engaged. I loved the thrill of solving the flashcards on my own, and progressing higher through the color coded difficulties each week.

Of course, today, it's much less unusual for young minds to seek out challenges through puzzles and creative building, over frivolous activities and games. STEM (Science, Tech, Engineering, and Math) learning is not only commonplace, but often a group activity. Gone is the stigma of problem solving and innovating being 'nerdy,' and in is the mindset that honing these skills is actually cool. Skills that begin earlier than ever, in the educational path of a modern child- problem solving tools can begin to excite young minds as early as 3 and 4. Even better, brands like Smart Games are innovating puzzle games that appeal to a wide age range, so your child can grow with them, or even work to problem solve with older siblings.

At the daycare we focus primarily on building communication and social skills. Many of the children we care for have learning disabilities, social anxiety, or both. Where the public schools have placed them in independent learning programs, where they thrive intellectually, we realize the importance of building social skills in addition. All of our children, ages 4-11, interact with one another daily, and participate in group activities at least once a week.

When [Smart Games](#) sent us a selection of their newest problem solving puzzle games I was immediately excited. Sure, I really wanted to just sit down with one and work my way through the puzzle book from front to end, but I was

particularly excited about the potential to build pattern recognition in the littles, and spacial solving skills in the oldest.

Each game presents it's own new set of learning challenges through colorful, hands on, 3-dimensional characters and real moveable puzzle pieces. The basic concepts start out at their simplest, and each tier of difficulty (there are 3 tiers) either adds additional variables, or removes visual keys, further pushing the depth of visualization required to see the end puzzle.

I knew [Penguins Pool Party](#) would be an immediate hit, if for nothing else, for it's adorable penguin characters and 3-dimensional ice block pieces. Naturally the youngest players got distracted from time to time, in an effort to make up names and background stories for the little birds, but it was all hands on deck when it came down to solving the next puzzle.

That particular game works by placing a number of penguins on the game board, as specified by the layout image in the companion puzzle/solution book. Players are then challenged to fit all of the iceberg pieces on the board, the penguins serving as UN-moveable roadblocks to an otherwise easy solution.

When working with kids as young as 4 and 5 in our play group we often let the oldest child place the first block. On the Beginner puzzles many of the initial pieces are quite obvious. This left the youngest player with the last piece to place. This may seem easy- but at 4 and 5 there's still a bit of special recognition to work out when deciding how the pieces fits exactly into the remaining cavity.



Penguins Pool Party is one of our favorite games- I can attest to this because it has been pulled out numerous times since, at the urging of both age groups, and we have yet to crack some of the harder puzzles at the end of the book. I especially love these Smart Games because they require minimum pieces, which are large and easy for small hands to grab and manipulate, and they store away easy without taking up much space. I do worry about the puzzle book/solution guide going missing at some point, and wonder if the brand has plans to release their companion booklets online for reference in such a case?

The second game we decided to play was the Parking Puzzler, suggested for ages 6+, with a total of 60 challenges across 3 difficulty levels. Unlike Penguins Pool Party, Parking Puzzler seems to provide a slightly more challenging way of visualizing puzzle concepts that provided too hard for our youngest attendees. I could tell the 4 and 5 year-olds were bored and frustrated right off the start, and decided to dismiss them to free play- leaving a group of 7-8 year-olds to tackle this game. Our sharpest of the younger kids, Lynnsey, 5, did stick around and enjoyed the challenge of learning the game, but still struggled even on the lowest level.



This particular game requires a lot of logic, and had many of us taking long pauses before we'd even pick up a piece, let alone set it down. Not only do the cars, and their attached clear acrylic shapes, all need to fit on the board, but the cars cannot be occupying 2 parallel spots, or parked in the driving lane. Keeping this in mind really helps advanced problem solvers complete the puzzles, but proved a little much to remember for some younger players.

Personally, I found this game challenged myself to think in a pattern I normally wouldn't, and felt it was much more strategic than the other games we'd received. It's precisely the game I, even as an adult, would tuck myself in a comfy chair with and play for a few hours.

We had some pretty standard problem solving and logic games when I was in grade school. If I wanted a true challenge I had to get on a PC, with a floppy disk, or sit down with a puzzle book and work out solutions in a linear method. [Smart Games](http://www.mommatoldmefblog.com/2016/11/smart-games.html) really help encourage the problem solving process by offering hands on, real time puzzle manipulation and visualization. And the satisfaction of snapping that last piece into place is almost as fulfilling as my beloved Tangrams. Even better, the 3D hands on puzzles encourage team-work and appeal to multiple ages, no matter the difficulty bracket. These definitely are must have games for the STEM kid of today.

What Daughter Says: Problem Solving is more fun with friends.

Source: <http://www.mommatoldmefblog.com/2016/11/smart-games.html>