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Improve Yourself through Improv

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Watching improv may make you laugh, but doing improv can actually make you smarter. Improv is often thought of as an adult activity, but it is also beneficial for children. Improv classes are a great way for children of all ages to socialize, improve their thinking skills, and enhance self-regulation.

Here is one example of a simple improv exercise called The Minister's Cat. All players stand in a circle, and the first player describes the minister's cat with an adjective beginning with the letter 'A' (for example, "The minister's cat is an *adorable cat*"). Players take turns using different adjectives starting with the same letter. A player cannot use a word that was previously used and leaves the circle if he repeats a word or cannot come up with one. This game requires players to listen and to remember what was said while thinking of a new response. Here is another example of an improv exercise called Freeze. Two members act out a scenario and when the leader yells "freeze," a different member assumes the physical position of an original player and then acts out something new. This requires participants to be creative and to think quickly and flexibly.

Although it might simply look like playing, improv exercises tap into critical skills called executive functions. Executive functions are the part of the brain responsible for self-regulation, working memory, flexible thinking, and initiating activities and ideas. They are essential for solving everyday problems. In essence, executive functions allow people to utilize their intellectual abilities to accomplish tasks. Strong executive functions are actually more predictive of children's success in school than IQ alone.

It is well known that pretend play helps children learn. Improv is essentially pretend play with an extra reliance on executive functions. This is true in both children and adults. Executive function researcher Adele Diamond studied groups of children who did and did not have improv exercises as part of their curriculum. She found that children performed significantly better on executive functioning tests when they practiced doing improv. When children engage in unsupervised pretend play, they are not required to stay in character or to even continue past a few moments. When children engage in improv they are forced to stay in character (exercising inhibitory control), they must remember who is who in a

scene and remember what players have said (strengthening working memory), and they must think flexibly and quickly in order to respond to plot changes. These activities require sustained attention.

Engaging in improv exercises is believed to have a positive effect on other areas of development as well. Many exercises impose a structure where there is a context, a conflict, and a resolution. Characters must establish their role and act accordingly. This understanding may enhance children's reading comprehension and understanding of story development. In addition, they learn to persevere and devise solutions to challenging scenarios. And, importantly, children tend to have fun doing improv! Children love to use their imaginations and act silly with friends. Most enjoy the challenges that come with each exercise, and they feel confident about their performances.

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