

KIDS ON BIKES

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Role Playing Games (RPGs) have been a stable source of entertainment for over 40 years. It is a hobby that connects people, of varying ages and professions, in the pursuit of fun and collaborative storytelling. This unique form of gaming is all about creating characters and running them through various adventures. Role playing stimulates creativity, problem solving, and provides opportunities for development of social skills. Educators and therapists are using role playing games to teach and heal. This short guide is designed for parents to enable them to use Kids on Bikes for more than just entertainment.

At its heart, role playing games are about creating stories together. Stories are also the way that we as people describe ourselves to others and it is how we interpret events in our life. For example, think of the first day at your job, or the day you met your significant other. Or, in a different way of examining this, think about a day you felt embarrassed, or scared. The way you remember those events is the story you tell about you.

The Bodhana Group is a non-profit organization based in York, PA that uses tabletop role playing for education, skill, and therapy. We create rich worlds and resonant characters, then help players take their characters through adventures that help them rehearse and practice skills, which can translate into real world application. We work with children, teens, and adults who face a range of issues, including social skills, anxiety, and depression. We want to make sure you know that we are not advocating for you to replace mental healthcare with role play. If your child has a psychiatric diagnosis or behavioral condition, we recommend that you seek treatment for them with a trained professional. The suggestions we make are only to help teach good pro-social skills, to help navigate situations in life like making friends or dealing with stress.

THE BENEFITS OF RPGS

Role playing games offer many opportunities to teach and heal. Here is a snapshot of some of the benefits that come from this hobby:

- **Creativity/Expression:** Players create unique characters with histories and backstories. Additionally, they immerse those characters into adventures with others. This collaborative story grows and changes as everyone adds to it. Some players have expanded their love of this game into creative expression including writing, drawing, and even dressing up as their character! This helps with verbal expression and, through playing as a character, helps build identity through performance.

- **Social Skills/Empathy:** One of the largest benefits we see from role playing is how we learn and improve social skills. Remember we said role playing games are a collaborative activity? Well, sharing the story means that we interact with others while we have fun. This allows us to develop listening skills, expression, partnering, and cooperation. By sharing adventures where each player acts out the part of another character we also can learn empathy, which involves understanding emotions and taking the perspective of someone else. We also can use the setting or the adventure to explore themes and emotions. This is similar to how people watch movies or TV and experience an emotional connection to what they are watching. Being a part of the story as it develops helps this process be more powerful!
- **Problem Solving:** Role playing games, and the adventures in them, are also great opportunities for people to learn unique and creative solutions to a problem. Part of the fun of the game is that the person running the adventure, sometimes called a Gamemaster, presents a challenge to the group. The group then discusses options for how to manage the problem. This can be any situation from how to get into the locked warehouse, to how to convince the bad guy to give up their life of crime. If you want someone to practice a certain type of skill, all you need to do is design a challenge that involves that skill. So, if you want to develop confidence in someone that is shy, we might want to make them the spokesperson for the group. The player is trying to succeed in the game, but in reality they are practicing the skill of public speaking.
- **Resilience:** Role playing games are excellent teachers of dealing with adversity. Part of the adventure, like any good story, is that sometimes things don't go the way we would like them to. Maybe the bad guy loves his life of crime. One of the biggest factors of RPGs are dice, or some other form of resolution. Players state what they want to do, and then use dice, or cards to see if they were successful. Sometimes, we don't succeed. Maybe we try to pick a lock and the roll we make doesn't succeed. This challenges us to think of another way to solve the problem, or adjust and accept our failure. This is an important skill for life, being able to adapt and try again.

Not only can kids learn and grow through playing in sessions of RPGs, they also can benefit greatly from running sessions. Becoming the game master gives the player a different way to use the game for a set of different skills. By telling the story, we not only practice creativity, we also have a fun way for kids to learn planning skills, listening skills (from attending to the players around the table), and the flexibility to adjust to what is happening as everyone contributes to the story.

SPECIFICS ABOUT KIDS ON BIKES



Kids on Bikes (KoB) is one such role playing game with a great potential for telling stories that you can use to help your child learn great lessons while they are having fun. One of the first aspects of the system is that it takes its name and inspiration from stories and media that are classic tales of adventure for young people. Movies like *The Goonies* or *E.T.* and television shows like *Stranger Things* or *Scooby Doo* are all examples of stories where kids are the center and focus. The stories you will tell in KoB feature kids or teens discovering mysteries and investigating weird happenings. This setting is a natural fit to telling stories about kids and teens.

Just think back on some of the most fond memories you might have from your childhood. Have you ever walked a length of railroad tracks or checked out that abandoned warehouse on the edge of town? Now just imagine if something weird was to be found in either of those places. Now these stories can be creepy, funny, scary or dramatic. This is all up to you as a group. As a parent, you can create settings and facilitate stories that are both fun and offer ways to help kids experience situations that can teach valuable lessons and practice skills.

We are going to talk about some of the special aspects of KoB that, when given a more detailed look, can give us a finely tuned tool that can bring us.

1. WORLD BUILDING AND CREATIVITY

Kids on Bikes uses a very tight system of questions, shared around the table, to help build the world. Now, of course this is a great collaborative storytelling technique, but looking closer, there is a lot to be gained from this activity.

The first thing shared questions do is easily bring the participants together. By everyone collaborating on the story, you are already practicing the skill of working together. Sharing suggestions promotes the idea that the game is about more than one person's story, and instills the atmosphere that everyone has something to offer. Everybody is not only putting their ideas into the forefront, they are also making decisions about the world. This shapes the environment we will be playing in. Each player not only gets to offer something, but when questions are answered, this provides fuel to

the fire of creativity as the story gets bigger. The addition of new details opens up possible additional ideas and pathways for invention. This rise in excitement actually yields more story creation, as new information is taken in by the brain and enhanced by what others are adding. Let's examine one of the questions in a little more detail:

- Rumors. Each player offers a rumor they have heard about the town. It can be true, untrue, or maybe we are not exactly sure. The true benefit here is that players are giving you ideas about what kind of stories they want to tell. Let's examine this. They might be telling you they want to explore, fight, solve puzzles, or just hang and have fun. This helps with not only generating ideas, but it also gives another little mystery to the adventure to come. Players want to be surprised, so this allows for players to have an idea taken and changed a little. As we keep mentioning, these activities all stimulate creativity and expression. The fun thing is the amount of shared creation is up to your group. You can have people offer ideas, or you can simply only have one player give each rumor on their own. Our experience is that as long as you share the stage, there are enough lines for everybody.

2. CHARACTERS TEACHING SOCIAL ROLES

Characters are the essential part of any role playing game. They are idealized versions of ourselves that allow us to explore, learn, struggle, and succeed all within the safe space of make believe. Characters are unique because they allow us to put as little, or as much, of ourselves into them as we want. We can be braver, or stronger, or quicker than we really are and kind of test drive other ways of acting.

Characters in KoB are unique in that they are based on tropes. If you were unaware, a trope is a literary or story-telling convention that is familiar or resonates with us. You see common examples like the Bully with a Heart of Gold, or an Abandoned Hospital. Tropes are found in every form of storytelling from TV and books to movies and plays. Tropes are somewhat universal and they help us not only find imagery and themes to tell stories, they also use a language that others can easily understand to help them picture what we are talking about. So when we use tropes, we share stories that bring us together.

Further, the tropes used in *Kids on Bikes* can actually be used to help kids explore various social roles. The tropes not only represent age ranges, which could be interesting for a kid to play as an adult, or an adult to play as a child, they also allow someone to step into the role of a Bully, or Jock, or even a Mathlete. This explores social archetypes. Think for a moment of what you might imagine a mathlete to look like? Did you see clutched books, taped glasses, the latest from the 1982 J.C. Penney catalog? This is actually one of the ways tropes work. We see people in a certain way based

on perception. Parents can use the way we play characters to help break down stereotypes and preconceived notions. Maybe the Jock is really nice but just good at sports. Maybe the Bully was treated poorly by others and became a Bully.

Some of the tropes allow for widely different interpretations. One other example is the Popular Kid. How would a child play this character? This can tell us a lot about what a kid thinks being popular looks like. It might show what they have been taught makes someone popular. Do clothes, money, being nice lead to being popular? We can even show other ways that someone can be popular to help teach different ways to gain acceptance. Is someone popular because they are a good friend? Are they popular because they always listen? Creatively exploring relationships allows us to practice and discover what it is that makes a healthy relationship. This can help kids learn about the nuances of interactions with others. Sometimes, exploration can lead to self-discovery and growth.

Let's say we have a child, who has social skills challenges, playing the Popular Kid. What can we learn or teach by exploring this? The way the child plays Popular Kid might give us a window into what they think about being popular. This then allows us to know what we can teach or reinforce about that person's understanding of relationships. This is where the hobby can really shine, we can tell any story using RPGs. By being selective about which stories we choose to explore, we can provide a direct reflection of something that might be occurring in a person's life. Think about the stories that have resonated with you; you ever feel a rush after watching an underdog story? This is because you connected with the Underdog. Internally, you were re-experiencing and processing your similarities and differences to that situation. By doing this you are evaluating your own experience, which is one way we learn. Gaming provides a safe way to tell these types of stories.

By making careful selection of a type of character, we can use people and situations from life to help teach certain skills, like managing conflict or cooperation.

Some suggestions for parents:

- Have kids play an older version of themselves—this could help a kid practice what being older is like. Having a significant other, their impression of what older kids do or how they act. It might give a peek into goals and hopes.
- Have kids play someone different from themselves—this choice can help explore roles and empathy. You could play someone shy, or adventurous.

- Explore the role of someone they disagree with (e.g. bully, teacher, coach.)
- Have them play as a parent and give advice to a kid character. Playing specific roles helps us see outside of yourself and see a problem from another perspective.
- Have kids make a character based on a favorite character. This can be the perfect way to get a hesitant child excited about playing. Play as your hero!
- Ask reflective questions about why they chose a certain trope. What we play can offer a window into what someone is feeling and how they see themselves.

When deciding which suggestion to use, remember that when using a role playing game for a specific purpose, you want to find the closest way to represent what you want to practice or teach (or it could just be for fun!)

3. RELATIONSHIP QUESTIONS



Another unique facet of KoB that really has a lot of potential for therapy, are the relationship questions. This addition addresses an age old issue in traditional RPGs, the question of why are we all together, and why the heck are we risking our lives with strangers? The relationship questions help us establish connections between the players, but these questions also help people explore the connections within our own relationships. Now, the really useful part is that these questions are not all positive. After all, there are some people whom we know for not so nice reasons. We have people in our lives we get along with and people we have issues with. Learning to navigate relationships is a very formative skill that has been tied to successful people, and to people who have strong empathy and the ability to manage stress and adversity.

The interesting thing is that the questions are more than how do you know or not know this person. They are introspective at times and can actually bring into bearing further questions that help develop deeper moral reasoning and thinking. Most morality for children involves “I do something bad, something bad happens”, or “I am good, so a good thing happens.” The system from their perspective is very black and white, or concrete. But

we do not live in a world that is black and white, our world is gray at best. Relationships, and the way they change over time, involve a lot of nuances that can be tough to learn. The relationship questions provide unique ways for us to think about the nature of relationships, and by doing this we can hope to explore more of the subtle ways we even think about relationships. For example, when you play with the full character creation, you answer both a positive and negative question about each person you know. This, for a very specific example, shows us that no one is either all bad or all good. Friends can sometimes let us down, or make a choice that makes us mad. And even “bad people” can have something we like or admire about them. Oftentimes, the rules change or someone’s feelings get hurt and we are left confused. These questions inspire deep consideration about how people know each other, either good or bad.

Some examples are:

- What item did this character give you that you treasure? - This not only helps us recognize that items are sometimes more than physical things, they can carry emotional meaning as well. This could help with grief and loss of a pet or relative through play.
- What is your private nickname for this character and why? - We share special connections with others. Nicknames are usually tied to a special or memorable event in one’s life. They are like a snapshot in a growing photo album. That name takes us back. How we remember events and people in our life is a powerful way we interpret relationships and realize the difference between healthy and unhealthy connections.
- What is this character doing, either knowingly or unknowingly that hurts you? - This question helps acknowledge that sometimes the people in our life hurt us emotionally without knowing. It also helps with emotional identification and expression, and can help kids speak up about feelings through their character. Dealing with this conflict in the game can even help teach conflict management.
- What bad reputation does this character have around the town? - This question can lead to a discussion about how people observe the behavior we engage in and how they might perceive us as a result. This teaches cause and effect, and consequences of our actions.
- Why do you care about this character more than they care about you? - Sometimes we can have a deep amount of respect for someone that they don’t reciprocate. Questions like this one can help people learn to identify what we value in someone, and that sometimes this can be unhealthy or unbalanced.

- You hurt this character years ago. Why can’t you apologize? - We sometimes make mistakes in our relationships and we are sometimes afraid of apologizing because of losing the relationship, even though keeping secrets can equally harm the way we interact.
- Why was your only brief interaction with this character so positive? - We remember different details about people when we interact with them. Sometimes the smallest things mean the most to us and can help teach us about what it is we truly value.
- What would losing this character mean to you? - This question is very deep and some might be afraid of even broaching the topic of loss with a younger child. But exposure to the idea of loss actually helps prepare someone for this eventuality. It helps us realize why people are important to us, which helps us appreciate people more in the present moment.

Some suggestions for parents:

- Really pay attention to the questions that people are given and make a note of them. Make sure to have situations and interactions in the game that can make the characters talk through the questions.
- Read through the questions and choose those that you might relate to a situation your child is going through, or a lesson you might want to teach.
- Make sure the questions match the emotional level of your child.
- Make up your own questions. They could be simpler if your child will have trouble with more complex questions. For example, what do you like about this person? What do they do that makes you smile (or frown)?

4. MOTIVATIONS AND FEARS

Characters are also designed with motivation and fears. Each of us has a motivation, a goal that helps drive our choices. Maybe one of our motivations is to always be honest. This is a great choice, but it can sometimes get us into trouble, especially when the truth hurts. We can use this in a session to help players explore their choices as characters. This practices and models the same behavior in our real life. What motivates you? Does it change? Why do you have that motivation? How do you differ from your character? Do you have the same or a different motivation?

Some hints for parent use:

- Give characters difficult choices, like we sometimes have in life.
- Ask real world questions about their motivation.
- What if our motivation might hurt someone else's feelings?

Fears are also a type of motivation that might keep us from making a certain choice. Everyone has things they are afraid of. Some of the most commonly felt fears are heights, spiders, closed spaces, or the dark. We normally act in ways that we wouldn't normally when we encounter these fears. One important point to make (and we can help kids understand) is that we are afraid for a reason. Maybe we were bitten by a spider when we were younger. Maybe we fell from a ladder and are now afraid of heights. Sometimes these fears can be in conflict. What if there is a cluster of spiders coming and you have to climb over a deep pit to get away from them, but you are afraid of both. What do you do? How do we handle fear? Games can help us practice these situations and figure out if our choices would make sense. Teaching someone that being afraid is okay is one way we can teach talking about and recognizing feelings.

Some hints for parents:

- Ask what the character does when they encounter fears. What is their body doing? What are they feeling? What's their first impulse?
- Make it a struggle if the person does not act like they are afraid.
- Let the child pick a real fear to develop confidence.



5. CREATIVE RESOLUTION CHOICES

In every RPG, people are presented with a problem or challenge that helps move the story along and gives some level of difficulty for the players. The player then, as their character, decides how they would like to solve the problem. Not only does this help make the story better, it also helps develop creative and critical thinking, and problem solving. There are few problems in life that have only one solution. Part of life is learning how to approach a problem differently, especially if the first attempt is not successful. Role playing games at their heart follow the pattern of: a challenge is presented

by the GM, players respond with a proposed solution, they use a randomized method to see if they succeed or not, and the pattern continues. If they fail, another challenge occurs. If they succeed, we proceed forward until the next challenge. Most games feature characters with various attributes that offer ways to reference the statistics of the character. KoB uses six main stats: Brains, Fight, Flight, Grit, Charm, and Brawn. The interesting thing about these is that they are not necessarily static ways to approach a problem. You might encounter a bully during the course of the game, you're heading to the arcade and he wants your pocket full of quarters. This is a tough situation and depending on who you are, and what your skills and strengths are, you could do any of the following:

- **Brains** - Book smarts. Maybe you can offer to write the bully's book report.
- **Fight** - Fisticuffs. You might want to take a risky sucker punch.
- **Flight** - How fast you are. You could just run away.
- **Grit** - How hard it is to break you. You could try to keep a straight face while he threatens you, or you could let him punch you and show that you can take it.
- **Charm** - Navigating social situations. You tell him a good joke or convince him to leave you alone.
- **Brawn** - Your strength and physical ability. Maybe you stand up tall and flex your muscles to convince him to back off.

Now, we didn't say all the ideas were the best, those are just simple suggestions, each using a different stat. When we problem-solve, we use various information that we have and try to see possible solutions. This also involves seeing different potential outcomes. This is another highly important skill in life, as we are constantly problem solving and being faced with new challenges. In a role playing game, you can propose situations in the story to help see how someone might solve it and allow them to practice multiple pathways to resolution.

Let's say you have two siblings who are arguing. It could be over TV, tablet time, or any normal situation. In the game we can create conflict that is part of the story and then put the player through the paces to be able to:

- Challenge them to think of different solutions.
- Pursue a choice and see potential consequences.
- Take the new information and use it later to do something else.

This simple model in a game setting is a micro-version of how human beings and animals learn to approach problems. The practice of slowing things down to consider options is a process that the more we use it, the better our brain gets at slowing down our thinking. Games offer a unique approach to this in that the consequences are fictional, so chances can be taken with little to no real risk. This also develops cause and effect reasoning as well as bolstering someone to take risks. Let's say our attempt does not get the result we want. Well, this is new information, and how that resolved can help us take this new information to develop a new strategy.

Let's say you tried to take a punch from the bully to show how tough you were. You fail your roll and that punch hurt. Now you know how tough the bully is, so maybe you won't try to fight him. This new information has helped eliminate another possibility.

Perhaps you try to run away. Physically he cuts you off. Maybe now you sheepishly imitate the roadrunner with a little meep meep. He giggles a little. Another path opens up.

6. ADVERSITY TOKENS

Adversity tokens are a special addition to KoB. They are given to a player when their character does not succeed at a roll. They have a variety of uses in the game to help with future rolls, or to activate strengths. But the concept of adversity and failure is one that can also be very instrumental is teaching resilience. Some of history's greatest inventions have not been the result of succeeding, but instead the result of finding a use for a failed attempt at something else. Post-it notes were the product of someone accidentally making a weak adhesive by mistake. A brilliant idea from a colleague who used the glue to stick bookmarks to his hymnal yielded the creation of the glue being applied to a single side of thin paper. The Post-it note was born. Every worthwhile endeavor carries with it some risk.

Speaking of risks, we all know they can bring either success or failure. Like it or not, this is a key point to life. We discussed earlier that resilience is a crucial skill. Everyone has to deal with situations that do not go the way that we would like them to go. We might study all night and still not get the grade we thought we wanted, or we might not get the promotion we thought we deserved. One of the main tenets of not succeeding is taking that experience and trying to analyze what we could have done differently or better.

A unique twist you can do with adversity tokens is ask the player to explain what they learned when they spend these tokens. This further helps with considering our actions and their consequences. It also can be helpful in teaching a younger player that in a moment of perceived failure, there is a lesson we could learn, even if that lesson is how we can do something differently the next time. The most important lesson is learning that adversity

is part of growth, provided that we can learn to use that adversity to our advantage.

7. POWERED CHARACTERS



The Powered Character is one of the pinnacle pieces of KoB. It is a wonderful tool not only for narrative potential, but also as a great teacher for two main concepts. One is power. Power is a feeling that we get when we are confident or in a state of comfort. Power is central to anything happening. Devices need power to function. But sometimes power can be used when we are scared or when we feel threatened. Power in a role playing game is a great metaphor for emotion. Power used in anger can destroy or hurt. And often misused power hurts the person that uses the power. It can hurt our connection to others, it can hurt us physically. This is represented by the Super Powered Ally's use of Powers. Yes, the character has powers that can get them out of a scrape, but those powers carry with them a cost, just like acting out in anger. This balance of power and its use can be a powerful lesson for a younger child. Using powers also can bring a reaction from those around us who see us display and use our power.

Another great aspect of the Powered Character is how the character is shared around the table. Each player gets a number of aspects for the Powered Character. They could be Powers, personality traits or behavior patterns. When these are revealed, they are laid in front of the player that will control narrating them when they are brought into the story. This important part of playing the powered Character actually helps develop the story and the players in a unique way. By focusing a situation towards a certain aspect, you actually help make sure everyone contributes to the story. This helps make sure that one person does not do all the talking. You give everyone a chance. But you need to make sure you are still playing the character in a way that is respectful of all the others aspects. Shared ownership of the Powered Character means sharing control of the story. This helps develop collaboration and cooperation not as a forced skill but as one way to make the game more forward and to make sure that everyone is having fun. It also is a powerful way to help develop good speaking skills, communication, and confidence.

Some suggestions for parents with using the Powered Character:

- You can pick character aspects that encourage learning about others. Scared of bright lights, communicates only through grunts and gestures, or ignorant of social norms. Encourage playing of these aspects as a way to understand others and never allow them to become mean spirited.
- Pick aspects that give the player some challenge to help them experience a feeling or behavior that is not within their normal range of experience.
- Give aspects that might get played a lot in the game to a person who is shy.
- Give aspects to a player that might represent a skill we want to develop. Let's say someone has trouble managing conflict. Give them the Good at Calming Others Down aspect. This lets them practice that skill through play.
- Use the aspects that speak to the Powered Character and how they relate to the group to develop social skills.

Some general hints:

- Use “yes, ... and”. In a game someone might suggest something that you didn't expect. Let the story go where the players want it. The story we want to tell is often the story we need.
- Don't be afraid to be silly. Younger players are heavily encouraged by the actions of older people and adults. Role model getting into character and having fun.
- Kids learn a lot from what they watch and what they encounter. Sometimes just having characters who help demonstrate bad and good morals provide good stories that teach good lessons.
- Tell fun stories that are like movies or TV you want to watch. These encourage kids that want to play. The more they play the more we can teach. Have fun!