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Dungeons & Dragons

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Dungeons, Dragons, and a Gateway to . . . the Occult?

There may not be a more famously geeky pursuit than **Dungeons and Dragons (D&D)**. D&D is a fantasy roleplaying game in which people of all ages and backgrounds gather in basements for an hour or two (or six) to collaboratively play pretend. Though D&D has existed since 1974, it's enjoyed a renaissance in recent years, thanks to the meteoric rise of geek culture, to [the surge of "liveplay" broadcasts](#) of the game over the Internet, and to affectionate nods in Netflix's *Stranger Things*, the overnight sensation that made the '80s cool again.

But parents have some questions and concerns. Is D&D a harmless hobby, or are there darker aspects to it? Is it more akin to *Lord of the Rings*...or the Ouija board? Is it something true, beautiful, and good? In other words, can we let our kids play it?

What exactly is Dungeons & Dragons?

Put plainly, D&D is **a structured way to play pretend together**. Using rulebooks (whether the [official D&D rulebooks produced by Wizards of the Coast](#) or other products), the players construct fictional characters with specific skill sets, histories, and personalities. A player might decide to be an elf skilled in archery, a warrior with a magical sword, or a wizard whose social skills have dulled after a lifetime of study. A major component of this character-building is selecting an [alignment](#), which gives the character a general moral posture. *Lawful/Chaotic* determines the character's commitment to following the rules or shirking them, while *Good/Evil* delineates the character's level of altruism.

Once the players have settled on their characters, they tell a story together using a board game (though there are now [digital versions](#) of D&D, as well). Most of the players will control only one character, narrating their decisions and dialogue to the others. One designated player, the Dungeon Master (DM), controls all the non-player characters (NPCs) and guides the others through quests, often using dice to determine the difficulty of challenges.

The rulebooks give the players a shared framework for their story. When confronted with an obstacle, a player can't say, "I develop the ability to fly," unless he or she can make it work within the rules. These limitations force the play group to work together and develop creative solutions, rather than cheating their way out.

Are D&D players the ones playing with plastic swords?

Rarely. It's easy to confuse D&D with Live Action roleplaying (LARPing), and the activities are similar. However, D&D doesn't typically involve costumes or props. Most of the action takes place in the players' imaginations as they narrate their in-character choices to one another. D&D is also, rather famously, best suited to basements so that

players can feel free of judgment and self-consciousness while they pretend to be wizards.

— Haven't I heard of this game before?

If you're old enough, you may remember the "[Satanic Panic](#)" of the 1970s and '80s. Though there were many contributing factors to the scare, the game also played a role, thanks to things like Jack Chick and his "[Chick Tracts](#)," as well as [media panic surrounding multiple deaths of teens](#) who also happened to enjoy D&D. They falsely linked these deaths to the game, saying that the game led to involvement with the occult. Though the claims were categorically denied by the families of the victims, some stories are hard to kill, and these claims continued to be circulated.

Because of this history, the fear that Dungeons and Dragons will act as a dark spiritual gateway is a fairly common one among parents. As recently as 2011, Focus on the Family aired [an episode of Adventures in Odyssey](#) in which the impressionable Jimmy Barclay dabbled with roleplaying games...and accidentally interacted with demonic forces. [Others](#) have posited that D&D is an authoritarian cult that prompts suicides. One mother, [Patricia Pulling](#), founded an anti-D&D advocacy group in 1983, after her son committed suicide—an act she believed was related to his passion for Dungeons and Dragons. (If you'd like to read more about the history, [this article](#) offers links at the end, including to some podcasts that look into the satanism and occult claims. However, none of them is from a Christian perspective.)

— So are there spiritual risks?

The claims are enough to give any parent nightmares, but, for the most part, they're exaggerated. [There are some](#) who are now practicing occultists who claim that the game piqued their interest in and was the impetus for researching the occult as youths. But the percentage of D&D players from the '70s and '80s who actually went this route is small. Many, many more played the game without ever going any further.

That's not to say that D&D is entirely without risks. Many of the symbols, terms, and "spells" [are similar](#) to those found in actual occult rituals. However, it is possible to have a DM (Dungeon Master, the one running the story) set up a storyline in which there are no false gods or magic. There are even [rulebooks written by Christians](#) to encourage play that is more in line with Scripture.

In addition, as with any kind of narrative, the subject matter and the way people handle it matter and vary enormously. D&D can be a fun, Tolkien-esque romp through taverns, castles, and forests, but it can also get a little dark (depending on who's telling the story), which some kids might not be prepared for. Even if they're usually able to handle mature subject matter in media, roleplaying puts them *inside* the story, so some aspects of it can hit them harder than normal. This sensitivity is nothing to be ashamed of. There's great value in a tender heart, especially in an increasingly cynical world.

Though the game isn't as sinister as was once feared, it's clear that it requires parental guidance and monitoring, especially for younger kids. If you decide to let your kids

play, play with them (or, if nothing else, require them to play in an open room in the house, not the basement where they disappear for hours and you have no idea what's transpiring). Then, if you come across something questionable or confusing, you are there to research and talk through it with them, as well as to answer any questions they might have. You can then also monitor their reactions, emotions, and mental health and make appropriate changes accordingly. And most of all, you can pray with and for them, as well as ask questions about how the game is affecting them.

If your kid is playing D&D already and struggling with the subject matter, *don't freak out*. Think of it like a movie that has caused some unexpected nightmares. Help them process their fear and anxiety, encourage them with the knowledge that they are protected by the Creator of the universe, and let the experience inform future decisions.

This kind of reaction doesn't have to spell the end of your child's interaction with D&D, however. One of the best aspects of roleplaying games is that the audience has a say in where the story goes. Encourage your child to talk with his or her group (or, if they're embarrassed, the DM of the group) about toning the story down a little, or changing the course of the story to focus on subjects that aren't as dark.

— Are there positive aspects to the game?

Definitely. D&D is an *interpersonal, face-to-face* activity. For kids whose communities fit inside their pockets, this experience is rare and special, especially for those who have a hard time fitting in with their peers. If your teens are eager to play Dungeons and Dragons, it might well be an opportunity for them to find a community that shares their interests. A roleplaying group can give teens a place to feel comfortable to be themselves through pretending to be other people. They just need to be careful not to blur the lines between fantasy and reality.

D&D is also an outstanding creative outlet for imaginative kids. [Novelists, actors, and even professional athletes](#) play D&D and have done so since they were young. For many of them, it was the first place they felt free to express themselves and experiment with new ideas. D&D offers an opportunity for constant practice, space to innovate, and like-minded peers to inspire growth. These are vital opportunities for burgeoning artists.

Even for teens who aren't interested in pursuing a career in the liberal arts, D&D can be helpful. It pushes players to collaborate, think about problems from unintuitive angles, and communicate their ideas clearly. These skills translate smoothly from board games to boardrooms, and several places in between.

Roleplaying games are essentially an exercise in imagination and empathy. For a couple hours a week, kids can pretend to be someone else. They take on a lived experience they wouldn't normally have. Not unlike books, D&D can expand our horizons and give us a window into other perspectives. This isn't just escapism (though it certainly can be)—looking at the world through someone else's eyes is a training ground for a fundamental Christian virtue: compassion.

This ability is deeply valuable, if unintuitive—after all, who has ever thought they needed training in compassion? But loving others as we love ourselves is not as simple

as we might think. It's challenging to imagine other people with the same complexity, goodwill, agency, and value as ourselves. Roleplaying games can help us do that.

Last of all, there is good to be found in D&D simply because it's fun. Fantasies and imaginative play have lost significant value in modern America; we prioritize efficiency and cost/benefit ratios. But we have been called to *abundant life*, and there is more to abundant life than productivity. God our Father delights in the act of creation and invites us to join Him in it. In making art, in imagining, in play, we connect with Him.

— Are there other concerns?

As with any hobby, D&D has the potential to be carried a little too far. For some kids who struggle to connect with their peers, affection for D&D can look like addiction. They can lose track of time or struggle to focus on other activities, such as schoolwork, chores, and church. Others might get comfortable shouting "Fireball!" and "Magic Missile!" at their siblings, which, though somewhat obnoxious, will typically be harmless.

In both cases, it's important to help your children establish good boundaries around their pastimes. Encourage them to have fun in ways that are healthy, and help them develop wisdom about where they put their attention.

D&D also has the potential to impact kids' social lives in ways they're not expecting. The last two decades have been the era of the nerd: comic book characters have become blockbuster stars, and the world's richest entrepreneurs are computer geeks. But social stigmas don't evaporate quickly; it's very possible that kids who get into D&D will experience some teasing and bullying because of their hobby. Be aware of the possibility, and if it happens, remind your children that their worth is rooted in God's love for them—not the admiration of their peers. Help them navigate the sense of shame that comes with having hobbies outside the mainstream, and never let them forget how much you love and accept them.

— Should I allow my kids to play it?

This question is complicated to answer. The website *Geeks under Grace* sought to answer this question, and [their article is a must-read](#) in coming to a conclusion. They take the time to discuss all of the objections to and arguments for the game, looking to Scripture for guidance the whole time.

The objections include:

- The use of magic;
- The pantheon of false gods, which some of the characters are required to worship;
- Its time-consuming nature and how it can lead to idolatry and addiction;
- How its "open" format means you can do despicable things;
- How some people have a hard time differentiating fantasy from reality; and
- How it might lead people into the occult.

The arguments for it include:

- How it promotes creative and critical thinking;
- How it could be used as outreach to groups of people who don't traditionally attend other outreach activities (like playing or watching sports); and
- How the creator of D&D was a Christian.

Overall, we have to recognize that each child is different and will have different inclinations, tendencies, and temptations. So the decision needs to be made on a case-by-case basis. (Again, we highly recommend reading the article for better clarification.)

Ultimately, if you decide to avoid the game altogether, explain why to your kids, especially the older ones. Doing so will help them understand your rationale and demonstrate that you're not just saying no without doing any research. While explaining why to them, it may help to ask questions like, "1 Samuel 28 shows God's disapproval of magic. How do you think that applies to us today?" Helping them see your reasoning by getting them to think for themselves is much more powerful than simply giving them all your reasons and saying, "And that's final." It's the difference between guiding them to the truth and spoon-feeding it to them. Also, if you offer an alternative game that's less controversial but based on similar ideas and gameplay, they're much less likely to react poorly to your decision.

If your objection is to D&D specifically and not roleplaying games in general—or if you just want alternatives—know that there are dozens (if not hundreds) of RPG-style games that, though not quite as popular as D&D, carry much of the same appeal without the stigma. D&D can be considered vaguely in the middle as far as "appropriateness" goes. There are many RPGs that tend toward "safer" universes, and many that tend toward much darker universes.

— Can I use D&D to connect with my kids?

Definitely! The first and most important step is to make sure your children know you love them and appreciate their interests. Doing so will communicate more to them than either of you can recognize at first. Roleplaying has been a fringe activity since its conception; even now, with more attention in the mainstream, it's far from popular. Your children are aware of this context, and even if they claim it doesn't bother them, it's hard to pick up an activity that your peer group considers weird. They need to know that they are still valuable and welcomed, that they belong. As a parent, you can provide that space for them. In fact, we know of entire families who have played modified versions of D&D together, having a game night instead of a movie night.

That doesn't necessarily mean your older children who already play the game will want you to participate right away; if you'd like to join in, it might be best to wait for an invitation.

If you'd like to find common ground without intruding on your child's space, there's a vast ecosystem of D&D-adjacent content that you can use to connect with your child.

- **[Darts and Droids](#)**: A webcomic that presents the Star Wars films as if they were a D&D campaign.
- **[The Gamers: Dorkness Rising](#)**: A short movie available on YouTube that depicts a roleplaying group bonding as they play through a campaign. (Content may not be

appropriate for all audiences.)

- **Order of the Stick**: A webcomic following the exploits of characters inside the D&D world. (Content may not be appropriate for all audiences.)
- **Critical Role**: A stream following professional voice actors as they roleplay together. (Mature content.)

The bottom line

At its heart, Dungeons and Dragons is a game that encourages communication, collaboration, and creativity. It helps kids build their own communities in a world that is increasingly atomized. And, to put it bluntly, the rumors of its demonic undertones have been *greatly* exaggerated.

Dungeons and Dragons, as with any roleplaying Game, is fundamentally what the players make of it. If the players want a light and fun adventure, an exploration of their characters' personalities, or something darker, the game doesn't force any of these avenues. The game is the framework into which the players insert themselves in order to build a world.

Perhaps the best way to treat D&D is to think of it as a cousin to books and movies. There's reason to be cautious; we are called to be wise and discerning in how we nourish our minds. But that is not the same as discarding and avoiding anything that might harm us. We have not been given a spirit of fear, but of power, love, and a sound mind (2 Tim. 1:7).

While it's ultimately up to you whether your children receive your blessing to participate in roleplaying games, remember that you do not need to fear the hobby. Even as there is potential harm in playing pretend, there is the potential for beauty and delight and God-honoring creativity. Perhaps more importantly, there are opportunities for your children to grow in their understanding of the world, connect with others like them, and have fun along the way.

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