

# Board games

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Therapists often make board games to provide an engaging way for children to express their feelings or learn and practice new skills within play. Children generally enjoy making their own game and identify more with their game than a pre-made or commercial game. What follows is a description of how we make board games with children, to help them identify helpful and unhelpful ways of managing their feelings. This activity can be used at the beginning of therapy with the aim of assessing the child's existing strategies and helping them to see that there are some alternative responses they can try. Alternatively, it can be used as a tool to review and reinforce strategies later in therapy.

## MATERIALS

- » You will need a piece of card for the board, in A4 size or larger. Using paper then laminating it after completing the game also works well.
- » You may like to photocopy the game template provided in the *Board game template* on page 100 or to print a plain grid. An online search for “print free blank board game” will yield a number of other options.
- » You will need some markers or pencils to decorate the board, and possibly extra cardboard to cut for cards (optional).
- » Finally, you will need a dice and counters to play. It's helpful to have spares so that children can take them home with the game.

## PROCEDURE

Ask the child if they would like to make a board game together. Use a game template or help the child to draw the squares on the card.

Talk to the child about their reason for coming to see you, and how you thought that together you could make a game to help with this. Assist the child to come up with a name for the game, perhaps suggesting some alternatives. For example, a child who is experiencing difficulties in managing their anger might make a game called Temper Trail.

Explain that the aim of the game will be to get from the start to the finish. Some squares will show helpful things to do when they are feeling angry (or scared/upset) and will let the child move forward. Other squares will have unhelpful things to do when they are feeling angry, and will move the child backwards.

Help the child to consider options for what they could do when feeling angry, and ask them whether that is a helpful or unhelpful thing to do. Write each one into a different square with an instruction to move forwards or backwards. For example, they might write “Take a deep breath—go forward two spaces” on one of the squares, while another might say “Hit your sister—go back five spaces.”

If you are making the game towards the beginning of therapy, you might like to suggest a few options for some of the squares, commenting that you wonder whether they will be helpful or unhelpful. You might suggest that the child may want to think about these or even try these out so that you can add in next session whether these are move forward or back options.

After making the game, you can play it together as a way of reviewing the strategies.

## FOR PARENTS

If parents are in the room when you make the game, try to have them contribute. What do they find helpful when they feel anxious or angry? Ask the child if that would work for them. What would be something unhelpful for the parent to do? What has the parent noticed their child doing (helpful or unhelpful)?

This is a good one to send home with the child, along with dice so they are ready to play with parents and siblings, to provide further opportunities for review and discussion.

## DEVELOPMENTAL CONSIDERATIONS

If you are making a game with younger children, it will need to be simple, with fewer and larger squares to enable easier play. They may like to add pictures to the squares to represent the strategy or response. Be prepared to help with the counting and to offer suggestions of helpful and unhelpful strategies, emphasizing those that are behavioral. The Snakes and Ladders variation described below is also a simple game that many young children will be able to understand and play.

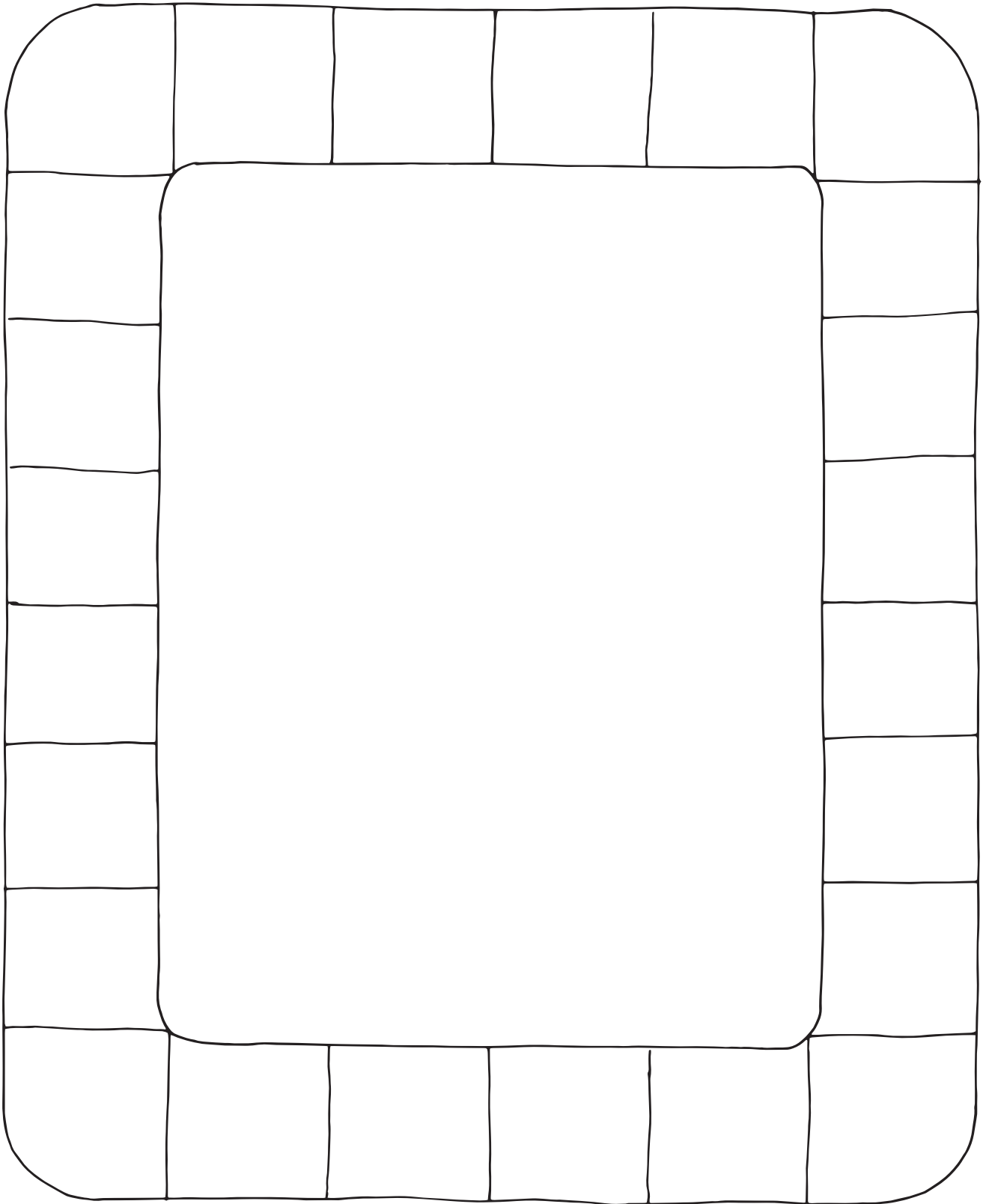
Older children tend to like games that are more complicated and may like to create cards that they have to pick up when they land on particular squares. For example, a card might say “You choose to calm down in your room, advance ten spaces” or “You remember to think ‘I can do it’—move ahead five spaces.” Older children may be able to generate a larger range of strategies, including cognitive and behavioral strategies.

## VARIATION

You may also like to use the format of Snakes and Ladders. In this variation, we explain that ladders are helpful things that let us move forward, so in this game we think of ladders that help to manage anxiety or anger. We draw in the ladders, and write or draw the helpful strategies in the squares in which the ladders begin. We then explain that the snakes are those things that are unhelpful and draw in some snakes. We consider unhelpful things the child might do in response to their feelings, drawing or writing one near each snake’s head.

To assist with generalization, you may ask parents to prompt children to consider whether something they are doing is a snake or a ladder when relevant.

Other examples of board games to make in therapy can be found online. A similar activity is also presented in Hobday and Ollier (2005), who also use a Snakes and Ladders game, though they write behaviors they want to promote on the ladders and unacceptable behaviors on the snakes.



**Board game template**