

THIS WEEKEND'S FAMILY ACTIVITY

The Hint Hotline

GAME

SKILL: PRODUCTIVE ASKING

45 MINUTES

RECOMMENDED AGE RANGE

Ages 8–14 — old enough to articulate where they are stuck, young enough that the habit of asking for direction rather than answers is still forming.

WHAT YOU NEED

Index cards or sticky notes (one per person)

Pens

A timer

Any subject or topic for inspiration (optional)

ACTIVITY STEPS

- 01 Write Your Stuck Spot.** Each person writes down one thing they genuinely do not understand or are curious about. Write it as a real question, not just a topic. Fold the card face-down so no one else can read it. The question should be something the writer could not answer confidently right now if asked on the spot.
- 02 Pass and Prepare.** Pass cards around the table so everyone holds someone else's question. The person whose card it is gets to ask for up to three hints, but never the direct answer. Before asking for each hint, the asker must say "What I understand so far is..." and describe their current thinking. That sentence is required every time.
- 03 The Hint Rules.** The hint-giver can only respond with questions, partial clues, or directions. "What would happen if you changed this part?" or "Think about the last time you saw something like this" count. Saying the answer directly does not count. If the hint-giver gives too much, that hint does not count and they try again with less.
- 04 Three Hints, Then Write.** After all three hints, the card's owner writes their best attempt at an answer or explanation in their own words on the back of the card. Set a timer for two minutes to write without stopping, even if what comes out is partial or uncertain. It does not have to be correct. It has to be theirs.
- 05 Read Aloud and Debrief.** Each person reads their written answer aloud. Discuss together: which of the three hints moved your thinking most, and what would you have asked differently now that you have heard the answer? The second question is the important one — a kid who can describe what a better hint would have sounded like has already learned something about what kind of help actually helps.

THE DEEPER LESSON

OpenAI just built a feature called Study Mode specifically because the default behavior, left alone, was to skip this process entirely. The Hint Hotline trains the internal version: the habit of locating your own confusion and asking precisely for what you need, rather than for the answer. The required "What I understand so far is..." sentence before each hint is not a formality. It is the skill itself. Asking for a hint requires knowing what you do not know, which requires having spent time inside the problem. That habit works the same whether you are talking to a chatbot, a tutor, or a parent.

CONVERSATION STARTER

When you were trying to explain where you were stuck before asking for a hint, what was harder than you expected?

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