Old School
By Thomas R. Cuba, Ph.D.
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I recently heard someone explaining the benefits of playing computer games. Hand-eye coordination was at the top of the list. Developing a quick reaction time was also mentioned. Those are good traits. I wondered how we learned those things back in 1960. Two things came to mind: Jigsaw puzzles and plastic models.

The more I thought about it, the more I felt that these old hobbies of mine might have been a larger contributor to my development than I had originally thought. The hand-eye coordination is easily seen. It's difficult to paint a mustache on a one inch high plastic pilot. That acknowledgement led me to conclude that fine motor skills were also enhanced by the gluing and painting that was required to create a WW-I fighter plane. The plastic model experience still had more to offer. As I ruminated on the process, I realized that putting together a square-rigged sailing ship honed many more skills. First, the instructions must be read. Many times, that leads to new words being added to the vocabulary. Not many eight-year-old boys know what a turnbuckle is, unless they put together ships. To reading comprehension, add the ability to actually follow the directions. Putting pieces on in the proper order is critical. Perhaps the final contribution was in the field of creativity. Sure, the models all came with decals and color suggestions, but sometimes special and personal designs were added.

Jigsaw puzzles have their own skills to contribute. Color-matching, shape recognition, and pattern recognition are all skills that hone the brain's ability to see the world reliably. The puzzle itself enhances the ability to see the pieces of the world that make up the bigger pictures of society, community, and synergy. Looking at a piece of the puzzle and trying to figure out which way is "up" contributes to spatial orientation and even situational awareness. Developing techniques such as the edge-first approach versus the main feature first approach contributes to the ability to prioritize in manner that enhances efficiency.

As I prepared this paper, I also recognized that crossword puzzles can also make a valuable contribution. For children, there are puzzles devoid of old movie references and these are the ones which contribute to reading, spelling, and added vocabulary. The one difference is that with crossword puzzles, it is best to have both a parent and a dictionary at the ready.

Finally, there is something else worthy of emphasizing: Time. Each of these require time, and therefore patience. There is no instant gratification beyond the next word,

puzzle piece, or a well-painted mustache. Time is valuable beyond the development of patience. It also allows the lessons to become more deeply embedded.

When our children learn words and spelling by popup dictionary balloons, the experience is short-lived and often the word is gone again. When hand-eye coordination is developed pressing buttons, is it really hand-eye coordination? Can you take that hand-eye coordination and go play baseball? Are you going to have the patience to learn the game? Are you going to have the ability to invest time into the exercise and training needed to play the game?

Now, I know that some people are habitual critics and will point out that I skipped over the computer game's contribution to reaction time. Puzzles and models don't develop that skill. Baseball does.

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