

## ACTIVITY: Red Light – Green Light

**RATIONALE:** To be successful in some situations, we need to have the ability to *inhibit actions* that are not appropriate to that situation.

**BENEFIT:** As the child demonstrates this ability within the structure of a game, he becomes aware that he can choose to consciously inhibit his own actions. A secondary benefit is that, since the child inhibits behavior in response to a **verbal cue** (the words *Red Light*), that same cue can be used by a parent or teacher in other situations in which the child needs to stop a particular behavior. **Note:** Two ideas for linking this activity to home assignments are given below:

1) **The Pause Button** and 2) **The Stay-on-Track Map**.



**MODALITY:** This game can be played in individual, group or family therapy.

**MATERIALS NEEDED:** None. A large room or long hallway is needed to have sufficient space for Game 1 (Traditional game). No special space is needed for Game 2 (Variation of traditional game)

**EXPLANATION FOR CHILD:** *Sometimes what we don't do is just as important as what we do.*

Have a discussion with the child about this: When is it important to “not do” something? Try to come up with a variety of child-friendly examples for both children and adults; this will help the child realize that this is an important life-long skill.)

*Sometimes if we have already started to do something, we have to STOP right in the middle of what we are doing.*

(Have a discussion with the child about this. Can the child think of a time that he or she had to STOP themselves in the middle of doing something? Was it easy or was it difficult?)

*In this game, we will practice stopping in the middle of doing something. The cue to stop is the words “Red Light.”*

**GAME 1 (traditional play):** One person is the **Stop Light** and stands at one end of the room (or hall.) The other players stand at the opposite end. When the **Stop Light** says “*Green Light*,” the players can walk, hop on one foot, jump, etc (no running unless played outdoors) toward the **Stop Light**. At any time, the **Stop Light** can say “*Red Light*.” Then the players have to STOP exactly where they are, even if in mid-movement. If they move at all after *Red Light* is called, they have to go back to the beginning. Then the **Stop Light** says *Green Light* and the players can move again until the next time *Red Light* is called. The first player to get to the **Stop Light** is the winner and that Player becomes the **Stop Light**.

**GAME 2 (variation):** The players engage in some sort of activity such as building with blocks or putting together a puzzle. They begin when the **Stop Light** says *Green Light* and must stop immediately and completely when they hear the cue *Red Light*. They should hold the “pause” until the **Stop Light** says *Green Light* again. (Optional: During the pause, compliment the child’s ability to stop the action quickly and completely in response to the cue.)

Since there is no clear end point in this game, just play for a while and when the child shows mastery, switch roles and give the child a turn to be the **Stop Light**.

**NOTE:** You can make the game more challenging (and silly) by substituting similar sounding words for *Green Light* and *Red Light*. (*Green Grass, Green Tight, Red Bed, Red Fight*.)

**LINK THIS ACTIVITY to HOME ASSIGNMENTS:**

### 1. The Pause Button

Parents can use this technique at home while the child is performing simple chores (such as setting the table, feeding the dog, folding the clothes.) Here’s how:

- The child begins the chore when the parent says *Green Light*.
- When the parent says *Red Light*, the child must “pause” (inhibit all action, as if a “pause button” has been pressed.) Use the “pause” to recognize what the child has done thus far in completing the chore. Express appreciation in specific ways. For example, if the child’s chore is to feed the dog:
  - *Max is a lucky dog to have you to help take care of him.*
  - *I like the way you put the dog food back on the shelf so neatly.*
  - *You carried Max’s water bowl very carefully.*
- Give a big **Yahoo!** when the chore is done.

**Note:** This home assignment has three benefits:

a. This assignment gives a structure for creating positive parent-child interaction regarding household chores.

b. This assignment gives the child another context to practice an important ability: **interrupting an ongoing action** in response to a cue from the parent. This cue can then be used in other situations in which the parent needs to help the child stop a particular behavior. (see next assignment: The Stay-on-Track Map)

c. The parent-child interaction in this assignment (the child **pauses** in response to a cue and, during the pause, **listens** to the parent’s encouragement and feedback) can also be used in other situations. (see: The Stay-on-Track Map)

## 2. The Stay-On-Track map

Impulsive or distractible children often need to inhibit behaviors that get them “off track” in a particular situation. The Stay-On-Track map helps the child make a plan prior to the situation, identifying “Do It” actions and “Don’t Do It!” actions.

Here’s how:

1. Copy a blank **Stay-On-Track Map**. (see accompanying handout)
2. On the stepping stones, write the actions that the child needs to take to stay **on track** in that situation (going to the store, getting ready for school in the morning, etc)
3. On the **Don’t Do It!** List, write some actions that would be **off track** for that situation.
4. Decide on a **cue** that the parent can use if the child gets off-track. (It could be the words *Red Light*, or another cue that is meaningful for the child.) Write the cue in the lower right corner.
5. The parent should review the map immediately **before** the situation occurs.
6. During the situation, if the child “gets off track,” the parent gives the cue and the child “pauses.” The parent uses the pause to remind/encourage the child to get back on track. (Have the child and parent practice this in your office; be sure that they keep the interaction positive.)
7. Afterwards, review the map and point out all of the ways that the child was successful in staying on track **or** in pausing and getting back on track. If the child was not successful in getting back on track, make a plan for doing better next time. (Perhaps the situation was too overwhelming or distracting; perhaps the child needs more external support for performing the desired behaviors.) Be positive and supportive!

**Example** of a Stay-On-Track map for going on a shopping trip.

**The goal** in this plan is for a shopping trip to be a pleasant time for both parent and the child.

**Simon Says Don't Do It!**

Run  
Ask for things not on list

Don't get *off track!*

**Stay-on-Track Map** for \_\_\_\_\_

Help make shopping list

Push shopping cart

Get things off shelf when asked

Cross things off on list

Help put bags in car

The cue to "Get Back On Track" is "Red Light"

**Example** of a Stay-On-Track map for getting ready for school in the morning.

**The goal** in this plan is to be ready on time, (or perhaps even a bit early, so the child has time to play.)

**Simon Says Don't Do It!**

Watch TV  
Play

Don't get *off track!*

**Stay-on-Track Map** for \_\_\_\_\_

Get dressed

Eat breakfast

Brush Teeth

Comb hair

Make bed

The cue to "Get Back On Track" is "Are you on track?"