

Helping Children Cooperate

During a game of Cooperative Musical Hoops, several children move around the room freely while the music is playing. When it stops, they run to the one remaining hoop on the floor, intent on meeting the challenge: finding a way to share it. Their teacher smiles at the sound of their laughter but also at their suggestions for solving the problem.

Finally, after a few failed attempts, one child stands in the center of the hoop. The rest link with him by holding hands and forming a circle. With pride and excitement on their faces, they look for their teacher's reaction. They are all inside the hoop.

The subject of competition sometimes provokes strong feelings among early childhood educators and families of young children, especially when it comes to games, physical activities, and sports. Is competitiveness an inborn characteristic that children need to succeed in school and beyond?

New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof (2011) wrote a story about his attempts to teach the game of musical chairs to a group of Japanese 5-year-olds. Kristof's efforts proved unsuccessful because the children kept politely stepping out of the way so their peers could sit in the chairs! His story and research from social science experts indicate that competitiveness is learned.

The benefits of cooperation

Certainly there are occasions in life when the competitive process is appropriate. But when we consider the relationships in our lives—with friends, family members, coworkers, and the larger community—we realize the value of cooperation. Research indicates that cooperation

- is conducive to creating emotional health;
- leads to friendlier feelings among participants;
- promotes a feeling of being in control of one's life;
- increases self-esteem;
- results in greater sensitivity and trust toward others; and
- increases motivation (Kohn 1992).

When we give children the chance to cooperate, to work together toward a solution or a common goal like inventing a game or finding a way to fit inside a single plastic hoop, all the children giggle and laugh. They know they each contribute to the success of the venture. Each child realizes she or he plays

a vital role in the outcome and accepts responsibility in fulfilling that role.

Children also learn to respect others' ideas and to accept the similarities and differences of others. Cooperative activities seldom cause the feelings of inferiority that can result from the comparisons made during competition. On the contrary, because cooperative and noncompetitive activities lead to greater chances for success, they generate more confidence in children.

Bringing cooperation into the classroom

Early childhood professionals are in a unique position to encourage cooperation among children. Teachers can foster cooperation in many different ways. One powerful way is to plan activities that promote children's physical fitness while at the same time inspiring cooperation instead of competition.

Plan cooperative games to keep all children engaged

- Cooperative Musical Chairs (like the Cooperative Musical Hoops game described in the opening vignette), as opposed to traditional Musical Chairs, fosters *inclusion* rather than exclusion. Chairs are removed when the music stops, but all of the children continue to play.
- In Balloon Toss, pairs of children keep a balloon in the air, taking turns tapping it. Together they count the number of times they touch it before the timer goes off.

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With this article, Rae closes the Learning by Leaps and Bounds column (published since July 2008). This and past Learning by Leaps and Bounds columns are available in an online archive at www.naeyc.org/yc/columns.

Group children so they solve challenges as a team

- Invite pairs or small groups of children to make shapes with their bodies by lying on the floor in certain ways and working together. For example, they could create circles, triangles, and squares. Have the children form a standing circle with hands on one another's shoulders. Then ask them to support one another as they try to balance on their tiptoes, on just one foot, while leaning back, while leaning to one side, and so forth.
- Place a small feather in an open space. Ask children to work together to move it from one point on the floor to another without using their hands. Suggest to children that they find out how many people it takes to blow a feather across the floor.
- Put several beanbags in the center of a large parachute. Ask all the children to grab a corner of the parachute

and work together to get the beanbags off. How long does it take to toss all the beanbags off of the parachute when the children are moving it up and down?

- Invite pairs of children to lie on their backs with the soles of their feet connected and try to roll across the floor without breaking the connection.

To learn more

- For additional ideas, refer to *No Contest: The Case Against Competition—Why We Lose in Our Race to Win*, by Alfie Kohn (see "References").
- For cooperative game ideas, try *Cooperative Games and Sports: Joyful Activities for Everyone*, by Terry Orlick (Human Kinetics, 2006); *Everyone Wins! Cooperative Games and Activities*, by Josette Luvmour and Sambhava Luvmour (New Society Publishers, 2007); *Great Games for*

Young Children: Over 100 Games to Develop Self-Confidence, Problem-Solving Skills, and Cooperation, by Rae Pica (Gryphon House, 2006); and *The Spirit of Play: Cooperative Games for All Ages, Sizes, and Abilities*, by Dale N. LeFevre (Findhorn Press, 2007).

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