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What Makes a Game Developmentally Appropriate?

While setting up the room for a staff development workshop, I listen in on a conversation nearby. One teacher tells another about Alma, a 5-year-old who earlier that day had a crying jag when she was eliminated from a game of Musical Chairs. The second teacher clucks in sympathy, then changes the subject.

Hmm, I think to myself, Where's the discussion about modifying the game so that in the future it doesn't make children feel bad? Aren't organized games meant to be fun and contribute to children's learning?

AS YOU MAY RECALL FROM YOUR OWN CHILDHOOD, being eliminated from Musical Chairs—being a loser—feels terrible. Furthermore, during the game, the children you were playing with were not your friends, they were your opponents. Children know that, to avoid being labeled losers, they must do whatever it takes to win. And we've all seen this lead to punching, poking, kicking, scratching, screaming, and shoving.

Because we, as early childhood professionals, are entrusted with the education of the whole child, it is important to regard the activities we present, including games, as opportunities to promote children's development in one or more domains—cognitive, social, emotional, and physical. When we select games, we need to ensure that they are developmentally appropriate, just as we do when planning other parts of the curriculum. It is important for games to teach as well as entertain.

Children learn from all of their experiences. What will children learn from the games we offer—self-confidence,

problem solving, cooperation, trust, and improved motor skills? Or “rejection, competition, failure, and humiliation” (Staley & Portman 2000, 67)? It's up to us to decide.

Eliminate the negative

Neil Williams created the Physical Education Hall of Shame, a list of children's games he considers inappropriate for physical education programs, for example, dodgeball, Musical Chairs, Simon Says, and Red Rover (find the full list at www.auburn.edu/~brocksj/4360hastietext/hallofshame1994.pdf). These games tend (1) not to foster children's development; (2) to embarrass children in front of their classmates; (3) to focus on eliminating children, and thus (4) to afford players limited participation time in the physical activity; and (5) to carry a high risk of injury or harm (Williams 1994).

NAEYC's new position statement on developmentally appropriate practice stipulates that play allow children “to stretch their boundaries to the fullest in their imagination, language, interaction, and self-regulation” and offer opportunities for children “to practice their newly acquired skills” (NAEYC 2009, 18). It's relatively simple to modify a game so that it allows children to participate continually, to develop and practice skills in one or more domains, and to have fun.

TO DO MORE

Instead of playing the traditional **Musical Chairs** that caused Alma so much pain, play a game of *cooperative* Musical Chairs, in which the goal is for children to find ways to share the remaining chairs. In this version, children practice prosocial behaviors and improve their problem-solving abilities. And they do so while having a wonderful time! (If children have difficulty with this version, you can modify it further by using hoops laid flat on the floor, instead of chairs.)

To play a cooperative version of **Simon Says**, divide the class into two groups (instead of one large group), with the children arranged in either two circles or two lines. When a child moves without Simon's “permission,” he leaves his original circle or line to join the other group, and he continues playing. Full participation allows children to acquire the listening, direction-following, and movement skills that are the objectives of Simon Says.

One more example is **Duck, Duck, Goose**. Traditionally played, it involves physical activity for only one or two players and a good deal of waiting for the rest of the participants. Also, some players are repeatedly chosen to be the goose.

If, instead of sitting motionless in a circle, the children stand in a circle and walk in place as the game is played, all players engage in more physical activity. Also, implementing a rule that the child who is *it*

can't choose someone who has already been the goose ensures that more children have a chance to chase. When the game is played this way, children benefit from a low to moderate level of physical activity as well as practice in walking in place, chasing, and fleeing. From a social/emotional perspective, the modified version creates a sense of belonging while it helps develop a sense of humor.

TO LEARN MORE

For developmentally appropriate game ideas to use in your classroom, check these resources:

Orlick, T. 2006. *Cooperative games and sports: Joyful activities for everyone*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

Pica, R. 2006. *Great games for young children: Over 100 games to develop self-confidence, problem-solving skills, and cooperation*. Beltsville, MD: Gryphon House.

Sanders, S.W. 2002. *Active for life: Developmentally appropriate movement programs for young children*. Washington, DC: NAEYC.

Torbert, M. 2005. Using active group games to develop basic life skills. *Young Children* 60 (4): 72–78.

Torbert, M., & L.B. Schneider. [1993] 2005. *Follow me too: A handbook of movement activities for three- to five-year-olds*. Washington, DC: NAEYC.

References

NAEYC. 2009. Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs serving children from birth through age 8. Position statement in *Developmentally appro-*

prate practice in early childhood programs serving children from birth through age 8, 3rd ed., eds. C. Copple & S. Bredekamp, 1–31.

Washington, DC: NAEYC. www.naeyc.org/about/positions/pdf/PSDAP.pdf

Staley, L., & P.A. Portman. 2000. Red Rover, Red Rover, it's time to move over! *Young Children* 55 (1): 67–72.

Williams, N.F. 1994. The Physical Education Hall of Shame, part 2. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance* 65 (2): 17–20.

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