

Games Where Everyone Belongs

Children can see that the people around them are different from them in many ways—different ages, different sexes, different sizes, different languages, different skin colours, different abilities. If these simple differences become reasons to exclude some categories of people, they turn into prejudice and discrimination—ageism, sexism, racism, etc. We can help children develop more accepting attitudes by encouraging them to play in a way that includes everyone. Cooperative games are a good way to do this.

What is a cooperative game?

Young children play for fun. When they are digging in the sandbox, running in the park, dressing up to play house, there are no winners and losers, just the game. On the other hand, when adults and older children play games and sports, usually someone wins and someone loses. Cooperative games have winners and losers too. The difference is that all the players win together by reaching a common goal. If they fail, they all lose together. Moreover, the only way to win is to work together to overcome obstacles. Everyone's on the same team, and everyone's contribution is important.

Variation on an old favourite

In the traditional game of musical chairs, children walk around chairs while music plays; there is one less chair than the number of children. When the music stops, everyone looks for a chair to sit on. The child who is too slow, or who doesn't want to push his friends, is eliminated. The game ends when everyone has been excluded except the child who has beat out his opponent for the last chair. One winner and many losers.

Here's a way to turn this into a cooperative game that will be fun for everyone. Put cushions in a circle, one for each child. The children go around the cushions while music plays. When the music stops, everyone must sit on a cushion. Take away one cushion, but leave all the children in the game and start the music. When the music stops again, some children must share a cushion. Keep going till only one BIG cushion is left on which all the children are more or less sitting. Just like in the competitive version of the game, children learn to listen to musical cues and follow rules. But instead of trying to beat everyone else, the challenge is to work together so that everyone is at least touching that one last cushion. Everyone belongs in the game, right to the end.

Board games

What about board games? They are often suggested as good toys to teach and practise colour recognition,

counting, taking turns, following rules and manipulating small pieces. Board games don't have to be competitive to achieve these aims; many toy stores sell cooperative board games. You can also change the rules to play many games cooperatively: the first person to reach the end of the board starts rolling the dice to help the others, and the game continues till everyone gets to the last square. In a family, this can make it possible for older and younger siblings to play a game together without fighting.

Stage of development

Cooperative games are fun for all ages, but they especially suit children younger than seven. If you have ever played a competitive game with preschoolers, you know they don't like losing. Their attitude can be explained by their level of cognitive and emotional development.

- Before they're six or seven, children have a rather hazy idea about cause and effect. They don't understand that the number that comes up on the dice is a matter of chance. They're mad because they think someone made them lose.
- Young children haven't yet understood the nature of rules. They don't understand why you don't want them to cheat. To them, changing the rules is just another strategy for winning.
- Young children only care about the present moment, so it doesn't matter that they won yesterday or that they might win tomorrow. They wanted to win *now*!

Learning about real life

Some people argue that real life is competitive and children need to learn to lose. It is certainly true that children need to learn to cope when things don't go the way they'd like. They'll learn best by watching you. Since you all either win or lose together in a cooperative game, you will have a perfect opportunity to model how to react to losing. "I guess we're all disappointed. We tried hard, but we didn't succeed this time. But we had fun playing, didn't we?"

Cooperative games also build skills like empathy, problem solving and mutual encouragement. Children learn that we all win when everyone works together. It starts with including the different ages and sexes in the family. As children get older, attitudes learned in cooperative play can carry on into the neighbourhood, the school and beyond so that differences are seen as rich contributions and not reasons for exclusion.

by Betsy Mann

See also *Cooperative Games and Sports (2nd edition)* by Terry Orlick, and *Everyone Wins!: Cooperative Games and Activities* by Josette and Ba Luvmour. Also www.familypastimes.com.