

Cooperative Games Theory: Elements to look for in an activity

The basic concept of cooperative games is that the group works together to overcome a common problem or to obtain a difficult goal. The interactive challenge and the elimination of competition allows for many possibilities in which a child can feel joy and personal success. For the challenging child, cooperative games become the vehicle towards attaining success. Play with relatively few rules assists in encouraging participation.

In order to maximize the positive effect of each activity, there are key questions you should ask yourself as the group leader when creating a cooperative game. Five elements to look for in an activity are:

1. Inclusion: Does the activity include everyone? Has elimination been eliminated rather than the participants? Think of how it felt when you were young and you played games that required you to be "out". Imagine the challenging child who gets bored easily or is frequently distracted and may act out negatively to gain attention while sitting on the sidelines. Being included in an activity helps a child develop a sense of belonging and importance.

2. The focus is off of failure: Does the activity encourage the players to try (maybe even risk) again and again without feeling as though they have failed? No one likes to fail, especially if he/she is never given the opportunity to try again. The noncompetitive element of cooperative games lends itself to a variety of moments that register inside the child as a success. Activities that encourage children to try either again or in different ways in a safe environment helps participants develop a sense of confidence, perseverance and a willingness to try and even risk. There is little opportunity for a child to be called a "loser", since there is none!

3. Each participant is allowed to enter in at his/her own level: Does the activity enable both the unskilled and the skilled participant an opportunity to be an integral contributing member? Does the activity allow both the unskilled and skilled participant an opportunity to learn from each other and contribute to one another's growth? Being able to learn from one another and to also contribute to one another's growth helps in developing one's confidence and also develops team building and group bonding while fostering autonomy.

4. All participants are sharing in a challenging experience: Does the activity enable each player to feel that he/she is contributing to the challenge of the activity? (The previous mentioned factors help to create this climate). When all participants are working together towards the challenge of the activity, a sense of togetherness and bonding will be created.

5. The environment is safe socially, emotionally and physically: Is the activity threatening in any way? Is there the potential for someone to get hurt - either subtly or blatantly? Clarity in regards to the rules of the activity in addition to setting clear limits in the space must be maintained. If a child is not ready to participate, the child can be the "timekeeper" or the "observer" that will give positive feedback about others, etc.

Reference: Torbert, Marianne. *What to Look for in a Game* - a handout produced by The Leonard

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Cooperative Games

1. **Swedish Meatball (The Name Game)** - Goal: Getting to know people in the group. There are many ways we do this as dance/movement therapists. We have everyone stand or sit in a circle and have people pair their name with a movement that says something about them. Or, they can choose a rhythmic type movement that matches the syllables in their name. These sort of activities become memory games in which you keep adding on people's movements. At the end, when you do it silently, it becomes a choreographed dance. People all learn differently - some are aural, some are visual, and some are kinesthetic learners. This activity taps into every sort of learner.

Tell everyone that you need their help in learning everyone's name. Everyone starts in a circle. Tell them that they need to start a pattern in which a person throws the trashball to a person and then that person throws to someone new until everyone's had a turn. When you get the ball, say your name. You really only have to pay attention to the person to whom you are throwing and the person who is throwing to you. Eventually, the group should shout the names. Instruct the group to do this task as fast as possible. If the ball drops, just instruct the group to keep it going. Assure the group that it's OK if the ball drops.

Questions asked: How did you complete this task? How did you feel when everyone was shouting your name?

2. **Chaotic Team Juggle** - Goal: Dealing with an anxiety-provoking situation. After Swedish Meatball, without telling the group members, I instruct the group to keep the pattern going as quickly as possible and don't say each other's names. I then start adding balls to the pattern.

Questions asked: How did you complete this task? How do you deal with anxiety in your life? Is it similar to how you dealt with it during this game?

3. **Cooperative Musical Chairs** - Goal: Bringing people together

In classic musical chairs, we teach that the bully wins. Ultimately it ends up as a violent game in which someone gets hurt. In cooperative musical chairs, instead of taking people and chairs away, we take away objects. When the music stops, the group members go towards an object - a chair, a sheet, etc. All members can stop at an object or they can ask another group member if it's OK to connect with them by placing their hand on their shoulder or by "foot tag". They must ask permission to touch. Have group members make the music if possible. Get a democratic vote re: what object to take away. When all the objects are gone, ask if the game is over.

4. **Blanketball/Living Basketball** - Goal: Working cooperatively

Using two sheets or parachutes, ask the group members to raise the trashball 1 foot. Take a vote

to see if the majority believes they met the goal. Then ask to raise the trashball 3 feet. Continue to challenge. Add more balls. Raise the ball as close to the ceiling without touching. After this task is completed, ask the group how they worked together to complete this task.

In Living Basketball, the groups need to throw the balls onto each other's sheets. One group throws when the other group catches, and visa versa.

5. **Inseat Volleyball** - Sharing in a positive social experience, sustaining a difficult task (staying in seat when otherwise you'd like to get up), frustration tolerance, following directions

Also called "Buns in Your Seat" or "Beep Ball"

Sitting in chairs, the groups face each other as if an imaginary volleyball net is between them. The goal is to have everyone touch the trash ball as if it's a volleyball at least once as quickly as possible. The leader acts as the person who can keep the ball in play if it touches the floor too far for anyone to pick it up, since they cannot get up out of their seats. Another person can be the time-keeper. Everyone starts with their hands in the air (or saying "Beep-Beep"). When a person touches the ball, their hands go down. They can touch the ball again to keep it in play. When everyone has had a turn, time is called, since this is a game where you are trying to beat your time.

Questions: Strategy - what was your strategy to reach your goal?

6. **Group Detective (Guess the Leader)** - Goal: movement observation

The group is divided into two. A co-leader for this activity is most helpful. The group that is the "detectives" needs to pick a boss. The group that is the "movers" needs to pick a leader. The movers must move exactly like the leader. They cannot decide to make a pre-set pattern. The detectives must figure out who the leader is. When individual detectives think they know who the leader is, they tell the boss, who waits for a consensus. When a consensus is made, the group leader asks the group to stand quietly behind who they think the leader is.

Questions: How did it feel to be the leader? How did it feel to be the follower? In this instance, being a follower is very good and the better you are at it, the better the game is played. How is this connected to real life? How did the detectives figure out who the leader was?

7. **The Tag Games**

Foot Tag/Elbow Tag/Islands/Safe from the Sharks - Use the trashball to keep track of who is "it". When you are two, you are safe. Three's a crowd. A fast-paced activity that doesn't require a lot of room to play.

Help - Tissues on the head means that you can actively play the game. When the napkin falls off, you need to ask for help. The group leader is in charge of putting the napkin on the "it".

Be My Friend One, Two Three - The "it" tries to catch someone and says the phrase when they catch someone. Like "Rattlesnake Tag" the people the "it" catches tag along for the ride.

8. **SWAT** - Goal: channeled aggression

Everyone sits on the floor. An upside-down trashcan is in the middle of the circle. If you want to play, you sit with your legs outstretched in front of you. If you want to watch, you sit with your legs pretzel-style. Using a rolled-up magazine, the "it" lightly touches someone from the knee down. That person must quickly put the "swat" on top of the trashcan and sit down before the person swats them back.

9. **Frantic Ball** - Goal: Frenzied, yet channeled energy - working together

Everyone sits in a circle. Like soccer, you can't use your hands. You must keep the tennis ball moving and it can't leave the circle. To keep it challenging, add more tennis balls. When the ball is still or leaves the circle, the group leader calls 1 - 2 - 3 and then time is called.

Questions: What was your strategy?

10. **A Big Wind Blows** - Goal: Getting to know each other - Finding out what people did over the weekend - observation

Everyone sits in a circle. The group leader asks questions like: A big wind blows for everyone who is wearing red...who has flown in an airplane...who visited their church/mosque/synagogue this weekend...who lives with their grandparents. If you can say 'yes' to a question, you must switch seats with someone

Questions: Ask the people who didn't get up if they noticed who did and visa versa

11. **In Plain View** - Goal: Cheating/Hide and Seek Cooperatively

Tell the group to close their eyes while you hide an object in plain view, meaning it won't be covered and you don't need to touch or move anything in order to find the object. When the object is hidden, you tell the group members to look for it quietly and when they find the object, they must sit down. They are not to touch it or give any clues. When everyone is sitting, you ask the group to point to the object.

12. **Compliment Tag** - Goal: Closure/Ritual

Every group has a group activity or ritual that ends the group. It could be a warm fuzzy box or compliment tag, when a group member compliments another group member on a goal met, etc.

CHOOSING SIDES IDEAS

- 1. "PICK A PARTNER"** (sometimes you will need to indicate "...about your size", ...and sometimes it won't matter). **ONE PARTNER GO HERE AND THE OTHER THERE.**
- 2. BIRTHDAY MONTHS** - Perhaps you can make a game of various months changing lines until you seem to have fairly even teams. Then you could say "Everyone who was born on the eighteenth of any month, move over and join the small group". ("Tired of Being Chosen Last?" AAHPER Journal, January 1985, p. 96-97).
- 3. "THOSE WHO PREFER...(PLAIN M & M's) - THOSE WHO PREFER...(PEANUT M & Ms).**
- 4. "LOOK AT YOUR FINGER NAILS - IF YOUR PALM IS FACING UP GO THERE, PALM DOWN = THERE". "PUT YOUR THUMB OR PINKY IN THE AIR - THUMBS GO TO THE RIGHT-PINKYS TO THE LEFT"**
- 5. "CLASP YOUR HANDS - IF YOUR RIGHT THUMB IS ON THE TOP GO RIGHT, LEFT THUMB GO LEFT".**
- 6. YOU COULD PLAY "MOVING MATH" UNTIL THE GROUP IS DIVIDED IN HALF. "GIVE ME THE ANSWER IN GROUPS $2 + 2$, 100 DIVIDED BY 10, (After changing groups from big to small and vice versa ask them a problem that will divide the group size in half).**
- 7. "CLOSE YOUR EYES - TAKE TWO STEPS BACKWARDS OR TWO STEPS FORWARDS".**
- 8. "BE A COW OR A DOG. COWS GO LEFT, DOGS GO RIGHT".**

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