How to Promote Children's Development Through Playing

Group Games

by Rheta DeVries

Games have commonly been used for recreation, physical and social development, and Group games with rules have not always been viewed as having educational value. for the energy release that enables **children** to get back to inactive work at desks. However, Piaget's research and theory (for example, Piaget, 1932/1965) convince constructivist educators of the value of group games for **intellectual** and moral development as well as for social and physical development.

Rationale and Objectives

Group games can be justified as educational in terms of their value for sociomoral development and **intellectual** development (discussed more fully in DeVries & Kohlberg, 1987/1990).

Sociomoral Development

The sociomoral objective of constructivist teaching is long-term progress in the structure or stage of moral reasoning, not just in the specific content of moral rules or even behavior conforming to moral rules. That is, our aim should focus not in an isolated way

just on teaching moral rules or moral behaviors but on facilitating the construction of inner moral convictions about what is good and necessary in one's relations with others. If we focus only on conformity to rules given ready-made to **children**, conforming behavior may reflect only superficial knowledge of social expectations without personal commitment to the moral value itself.

The broad constructivist sociomoral goal is for **children** to develop autonomous feelings of obligation (or moral necessity) about relations with others that are not just dictates accepted from adults. Group games contribute to **children's** self-regulation or autonomy by providing a context in which they can voluntarily accept and submit to rules. In daily life, in contrast, they usually do not have the option of choosing to accept and follow rules. The reasons for rules given by adults are often not understood, and following these requires blind obedience. However, if we want to develop **children's** inner moral convictions, we must engage them in activities in which we can allow them to be self-regulating. Group games is one such type of activity in which rules are not so sacred, and **children** can find out for themselves what happens when they fail to follow game rules. In games, **children** have possibilities for safely constructing their feelings of obligation to rules. Feelings of moral necessity about relations with others develop in games as **children** confront issues of fairness, individual rights, and the reasons for rules.

They can practice mutual respect which is a defining characteristic of cooperation and democratic principles.

A competitive game is especially conducive to moral development because opposed intentions must be coordinated within a broader context of cooperation. That is, competition can only exist when players cooperate in agreeing on the rules, enforcing them, abiding by them, and accepting their consequences even when unfavorable to themselves. The game cannot occur unless players cooperate by coordinating their points of view.

Intellectual Development

Group games promote **children's intellectual** development by engaging them in opportunities to exercise reasoning and become more logical in thought. The **intellectual** advantages of group games vary, depending on the type of game, its particular demands on reasoning, and the ways in which **children** do reason in the course of the game.

The cognitive advantages of playing Tic Tac Toe are discussed in another piece on this Home Page. Cognitive advantages of various types of group games are discussed elsewhere (Kamii & DeVries, 1980).

Choosing Educational Group Games

While we argue for the general educational value of group games, not all games are educational, and some games are educational at one age and not at another. In choosing games, consider the criteria of good group games and the types of group games.

Criteria of Good Group Games

Three criteria are useful in choosing educational group games:

1.**Is there something interesting and challenging for children to figure out how to do?** Here the task is to find games that are neither too easy nor too difficult. If the parent or teacher has to do too much telling **children** what to do in the game, it is too difficult. If **children** have nothing to figure out how to do, it is too easy and while it may have value as recreation, the game is not educational.

2.**Can children themselves judge their success?** A good group game is one in which **children** do not have to depend on others to tell them whether they are successful or not. They know when they throw a ball at a hole in a board whether it went through the hole or not.

3.**Do all players participate actively throughout the game?** While older **children** can enjoy following the process of a game even while they wait for their turn (softball, for example), younger **children** must be physically active in order to be mentally active. Musical Chairs, when played in the classic way, is no longer interesting to **children** who are put out of the game. However, by modifying the game, this disadvantage can

be overcome. For example, by removing only one chair and allowing the one left standing to join in the next round, **children** remain physically and mentally active.

Types of Good Group Games

Eight types of educational group games are:

1.aiming games (such as Darts, with Velcro for safety),
2.races (such as Three Legged Race),
3.chasing games (such as Tag),
4.hiding games (such as Who's Got the Button?),
5.guessing games (such as Guess Which Hand the Penny Is In),
6.games involving verbal commands (such as Simon Says),
7.card games (such as Go Fish), and
8.board games (such as Tic Tac Toe and Bingo).

See Chapter 3 in the book, Group Games in Early Education (reference below), for descriptions of more than 100 games that meet the criteria for good group games.

Principles of Teaching

The main goal of playing group games is to promote the child's reasoning and moral development. Reasoning is challenged and develops as the child tries to figure out, for example, how to get three in a row in Tic Tac Toe. Social and moral development are promoted as the child tries to figure out how to cooperate and negotiate with partners in order to play fairly. Two general principles are proposed, with specific recommendations.

Reduce the use of adult authority and encourage children to regulate the game

Remember that the educational value is not correct playing of the game as an end in itself. Parents and teachers can lose the value of the game by insisting too much on correct play and by being authoritarian. When this happens, **children** have little room to make errors and correct these out of obedience rather than real understanding. Instead, try to reduce the exercise of unnecessary adult authority and promote **children's** autonomy. Some ways to do this are to:

1.**Present rules as coming from authority beyond the parent or teacher**. Consult

written rules and refer to these as one's own guide.

2.**Participate as a player in the game**. By participating as a player in the game, the parent or teacher creates a more equal relationship with **children**, making it possible for the child willingly to submit to the rules without it being an obedience issue. As a player, the adult can help **children** become more conscious of the possibilities in the game through talking aloud and modeling strategies and ways of handling difficult feelings upon losing. Also, as a player, the adult may selectively protest when rules are not followed and initiate discussions of what is fair.

3.**When conflicts arise, support and help children discuss rules and reach mutual agreement about how to play and what is fair**. In games, **children** can learn how to negotiate and compromise. The parent or teacher can help **children** be conscious of the other's views and feelings, and to find a way out of their difficulty. See Chapter 5 of Moral Classrooms, Moral **Children** for strategies in conflict situations.

4.**When children ask what to do, refrain from telling and turn the decision making back to children.** It is easier simply to tell **children** what to do, but it is better to say, "That is a problem. What can we do?"

5.**Encourage children to invent games**. **Children** who are experienced with games will be able to make up their own games. You can provide blank game designs, dice, spinners, paper, and pens, and suggest that **children** make up games, write the rules, and teach them to other **children**. Modify the game in terms of how **children** think, so they have something they want to try to figure out.

It is important to think in terms of **children's** purposes in the game. Consider the following recommendations:

1.**Let children play according to their understanding of the rules**. While the parent or

teacher may repeat a rule **children** may have forgotten, do not insist on rules to such an extent that **children** lose their autonomy. If **children** in an aiming game do not stand behind the line and nobody objects, do not insist on this rule. However, you may call attention to your own behavior when taking a turn, and **children** may pick up on this as a rule they want to follow, too.

2.**Do not insist on competition**. Do not push competition if **children** play in a noncompetitive manner. It is often challenge enough to figure out how to follow what the rules say to do.

3.**Evaluate a game in terms of how mentally active children are**. A general principle is to "Figure out what is going on in **children's** minds." You can do this by observing the sense **children** make of the rules, observing whether they have a competitive attitude, and observing the strategies or lack of strategies they invent.

References

DeVries, R., and Kohlberg, L. (1987/1990). Constructivist early education: Overview and comparisons with other programs. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young **Children**.