
Responsive Classroom Newsletter

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Active Games for Active Bodies

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Children need plenty of opportunities throughout the school day to be active. Their bodies need to move. Not just once a week at gym class but throughout the day, especially during the winter months when there are fewer opportunities to play outdoors.

This is a time when teachers see the effects of pent-up energy: children seem fidgety and restless and have a hard time maintaining focus. Providing children with frequent opportunities to use their physical energy is a proactive strategy which can help prevent these problems while at the same time increasing children's ability to concentrate on their learning. One easy way to provide these opportunities is to incorporate simple active games into your daily routine.

Many Responsive Classroom teachers already use active games during Morning Meeting. Here I suggest three other times when you might want to use active games in your classroom. The types of games I'm suggesting can be played in ten minutes or less yet will go a long way toward keeping energy high and concentration strong in the classroom (not to mention the added benefit of strengthening children's sense of belonging and inclusion). Consider these games a starting point. At the end of the article, you'll find a list of resources which offer a wide variety of physical games and activities that can be used in the classroom.

When Children Need to Wait

The bus driver for a field trip is ten minutes late; children are at the rug waiting for Morning Meeting to begin; students have formed a line to go to lunch but the lunch-room monitor has not yet arrived. These are times when children can frequently use pent-up energy in nonproductive ways - nudging each other in line, wrestling while waiting at the meeting circle, etc. A structured game for children to play at these times can provide a positive outlet for their energy and also make transitions smoother. Here is one of many possible games you can teach your students to play when there is waiting time.

Game Suggestion: "Dum Dum Da Da"

This quick rhythmic game can be easily varied to suit your needs.

The teacher begins by chanting, *dum dum da da*, making a movement for each syllable. For example, I might begin:

dum (clap hands)

dum (clap hands)

da (pat knee)

da (pat knee)

The students then repeat the chant with the accompanying movement. I often begin very slow, then speed it up, then gradually bring it back to a slow pace. You can also try going from small motor movements such as snapping fingers to whole body movements such as touching toes and jumping high in the sky. Or perhaps from silent to loud and back to silent again. I often end this game with gentle silent motions such as tapping your shoulders or nodding your head as a way of signaling that the game is over and it's time to move on to the next activity.

When Tension is High

You've just finished a serious conversation concerning water pollution; your class has spent the morning taking the state achievement tests; there's been a long Class Meeting about a problem in the classroom. The air feels heavy and you sense the need for some lightening before moving on to the next activity. Tension can greatly limit children's ability to concentrate. At times like these when it is high, rather than moving right into the next academic activity, take a few minutes to play an active game. The chance to relax, laugh and have fun together will help to reduce tension and improve concentration.

Game Suggestion: "How do you like your neighbors?"

Players sit in a circle. There are enough chairs or designated places for everyone to sit in the circle except the leader. The leader is in the center. Everyone is given a number. The leader asks a player, "How do you like your neighbors?" The player can offer one of two replies. If the player says, "Very well," then all the players jump to their feet and change seats. If the player says, "I'd like new neighbors," the leader then asks, "Who would you like for new neighbors?" The player answers with two numbers (for example, "5 and 12"). The players with these numbers then change places with the players seated to the left and right of the player who called the numbers. Each time players change seats, the leader also tries to sit in one of the vacant seats. The person left standing becomes the new leader.

When Energy is Low

It's mid-afternoon, students have been sitting for several hours, eyelids are heavy, bodies are drooping. Now is the time for a game which requires children to stretch and move their bodies. Afterwards, they'll be more energetic and much more able to focus on the work at hand. Here's a good energizing game, especially useful for those after-lunch-time blues.

Game Suggestion: "I See"

This game can be used as an energizer or transition activity. It begins with the teacher saying: "I see!" The class responds, "What do you see?" The teacher responds, "I see bubbles floating in the air." The students act out that idea until the teacher says, "I see." All the students stop again and respond: "What do you see?" The game continues with the teacher (or student leader) suggesting another idea.

Here are some suggestions to get started. Of course you will choose movements that suit your students. Older children will probably not want to be "bees buzzing around" but they may enjoy pretending to be rock-and-roll stars or star athletes. Try calling out movements that move from the very slow to the very active and back to the slow again to end the game. By ending with a command similar to, "I see students walking quietly to their chairs," you can easily end the game and help children move into the next activity.

"I see children hopping all around."

"I see planes flying through the sky."

"I see puppy dogs sleeping on the ground."

"I see cowboys riding horses."

"I see bees buzzing around."

"I see rockets zooming to the moon."

"I see my friends walking to our line spot."

"I see my friends quietly putting away their materials."

Teaching the Games

When you play an active game in the classroom, you want it to be lively and fun but you also want it to feel safe and comfortable for every child in the group. Below are some guidelines to use when teaching children how to play an active game.

- **Clearly explain the rules and procedures followed by a demonstration.** *Have a few children demonstrate what the game will look like: "What does it look like to jump safely?" "What does a gentle but firm hand clap look like?" etc.*
- **Be clear about your expectations for behavior.** *The more specific you can be, the better. For example, if I were introducing the game, "How do you like your neighbors?," I would use questions like the following to make sure that rules and behavior expectations are clear: How can we take care of each other? How can we*

move across the circle to change seats? What could you do if someone gets to a seat right before you do? What could you do to be a good sport if you're the last one standing?

- **Monitor the game for success and stop the game when it's not successful.** *If the game's not working, stop it right away and figure out what went wrong. Perhaps the space needs to be made smaller or larger. Perhaps the game is too hard or too easy. Perhaps rules need to be clarified or practiced.*
- **Find a way to play the game with your students while still maintaining control.** *Children love to have their teachers play with them and likewise many teachers enjoy the chance to play with their students. Find a way to play that allows real participation without losing your ability to monitor the pace and success of the game. Perhaps start outside the game and move into the game once you see it is working smoothly or choose to play alongside a child who needs some extra support.*
- **Be aware of the pulse of the group and be ready to change the pace of the game.** *Keep an eye on whether the pace of the game seems right and be ready to speed it up or slow it down at any time in response to the needs of your group. Some games are only fun if they're played at a fast pace. In this case, the teacher would make sure that the game keeps moving quickly.*
- **Don't overplay a game.** When games are overplayed, they become stale and children lose interest. Be aware of how children are responding to a particular game. Some games can be played over and over again and children seldom lose enthusiasm; other games are best played once. Develop a repertoire of games and keep a running list in your classroom.

Recommended Resources

Below are some excellent resources for active games which are suitable for classroom use. These games are noncompetitive in nature and, in addition to improving student concentration and focus, will help to build and strengthen the sense of community in your classroom.

The Cooperative Sports and Games Book, Volume I and II by Terry Orlick

Everyone Wins! By Sambhava and Josette Luvmour

The Incredible Indoor Games Book by Bob Gregson

About the Teacher

Mark Farnsworth is a Physical Education teacher at the Regional Multicultural Magnet School in the city of New London, Connecticut. This K-5 school serves 435 children from 11 surrounding towns. Regional Multicultural Magnet School has been a Responsive Leadership Forum school for four years.

Mark is currently in his sixth year of teaching Physical Education. He has also worked as a high school football coach and as a coordinator and instructor for the local recreation department.

Mark sees play as an ideal opportunity to teach children critical social skills. "Through structured play children learn to be inclusive, to take risks, to care for one another, and to problem-solve." Mark is also interested in using structured play to facilitate and reinforce academic learning and is currently working in collaboration with classroom teachers in this area. He is a presenter at Responsive Classroom workshops.

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