Everybody Wins: Non-competitive games

by Jeffrey Sobel

Cooperative play consists of games and activities that the participants play together, rather than against one another, just for the fun of it. Through this kind of play, we learn teamwork, trust, and group unity. The emphasis is on total participation, spontaneity, sharing, the joy of play, acceptance of all players, playing our best, changing rules and boundaries to suit the players and recognizing that every player is important. We don’t compare our differing abilities and past performances, we don’t emphasize winning and losing, results and standings.

Competitive games often result in isolating some players in favor of creating stars. Practices, uniforms, waiting a turn, specialized skills, strict rules, equipment, coaches, spectators, and choosing teams — where the worst player is chosen last — have no part in cooperative play. Instead, we compare how we do to our own past performances, and not to how the other players are doing. We learn how to accept our mistakes, how to be supportive with the mistakes of other players. Since each player’s role is important, no one is isolated.

Because teams are for the moment, and sides are changed often throughout this kind of play, all of the players in a cooperative game really represent one total team. No one person’s ability is as important as the simple fact of participating and having fun together. This kind of activity conveys an important message: you are okay just the way you are; we accept you. No one is ever singled out as being the best or the worst, chosen last or made to play the least popular position because he or she does not measure up to the abilities of the others. The players are more important than the game; we care about each other, not about the strict interpretation of rules and traditions.

With every game, the players will be learning more about cooperation, sharing, getting along with their playmates. But you don’t have to tell them this.
They will be having such a good time, they won’t even care.

For the Leader

In these games, most of the direction of the play comes from the players themselves. The pace must change with their needs. If you, the leader, see that your players are starting to tire, simply change to another game or take a short break.

Change is an important word for the leader, as well as for the players. We change boundaries, rules, equipment, the number of players, sides — anything that will help us have more fun. If a game does not flow, we can try to alter it by asking for suggestions, or we can simply go on to another game. Try to allow yourself and your players the chance to be creative, innovative and spontaneous through change: you can even change a game so much that you have invented a brand-new one. Anything is possible as long as you are having fun and playing safely. After certain rules for safe play are securely in everyone’s mind, and after the game is flowing by itself, then you; the leader, can join in the fun and still maintain order — and show the kids that there is still a bit of the child left in you!

To start a new game, the leader should get all the players grouped together, quiet and, if possible, sitting down. Then, using your own style, whether it be humor, a story, or whatever, give a very short explanation of the game you are about to play. Stress safety, the boundaries, describe the equipment if any, and give the rules of the game. Then start the game at a slow pace to allow the children to learn as they play. If there are many rules and explanations, they can be added as the game progresses, starting with only the most basic. The children should learn through playing the game.

At the beginning of the play period there may be a few children who are hesitant about playing, for one reason or another. Treat such children carefully, or you may lose them. Have some of the others try to coax a hesitant child to play, or do it yourself, but don’t push. Let him or her sit and watch the others. Usually, after a short time the reluctant child will join in — possibly with a little more coaxing and assuredly with a lot more enthusiasm than initially.

The end of a game may be a long time off or it may be right around the corner. If the children are having fun you might play the game again, but I suggest that you change to another game if any of your players show resistance, before more get tired of what you are presently playing. End the game before it ends itself.

We play these games and take part in these activities to allow our children to have fun while learning to cooperate, but children will be children. Most of the time the games will go smoothly, but if one doesn’t flow, don’t take it personally — just change to another game. Allow your children freedom in their play, and they will grow.