

Promoting Peace through Cooperative Games: A Toolkit

Cooperative games are an excellent way to teach and practice peacemaking skills while having fun!

What Are Cooperative Games?

Cooperative games help students develop the essential skills of cooperation, communication, empathy, and conflict resolution by giving them an opportunity to work together toward a common goal. These games require the skills of everyone in the group, not of just one or two people. Contrast this with traditional games, in which there is direct competition between individuals or groups, and you'll see why cooperative games can play such a big role in teaching and reinforcing peacemaking skills.

Why Use Cooperative Games to Teach Peace?

Peacemaking is about relationships. If you can help your students build and sustain supportive relationships, they will be able to practice and promote peacemaking more effectively. The best way to promote the ability to form such relationships is through practice, which can be difficult. Cooperative games are a way to practice the skills of relationships—skills such as communication, trust, problem solving, empathy, and cooperation—in a way that is fun, engaging, and real.

In addition, cooperative games provide an opportunity for students to become aware of and experience issues of power, privilege, and discrimination. This experience provides “teachable moments” that give you a chance to talk about difficult group dynamics with your class in a safe way.

Cooperative games are also a fun way to improve communication skills, inspire cooperation, and build a strong sense of community.

What if you played a game and everybody won?

Practical Tips

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Choosing the Type of Cooperative Game



There are many different types of cooperative games that can be used to reinforce the full range of social and emotional skills. You'll want to pick a game that corresponds to what you're trying to accomplish with your students. For example, if you want your students to work together better, try a team-building game. If you need younger children to use up some extra energy, choose a tag or running game. If you want to build trust in a group of middle school students who are struggling to get along, choose a trust game.

Here is a rundown of some of the most common types of cooperative games and what they can help you accomplish:

Icebreakers—These are the games to try if your goal is to get a new group of students to open up and get to know each other. These games will help students begin to feel comfortable opening up and participating in the class or activity.

Circle Games—Sometimes you want to make sure that all your students are participating actively. Traditional games put teams or individuals on opposing sides, but circle games send the message that everyone is working together. Circle games are also useful when the class is confined to a classroom or smaller space due to rain or other circumstances.

Team-Building Games—If you want to help your students work together toward a common purpose, try a team-building game. In these games, a group works on solving a problem or completing a task together. Team-building games are especially useful if you have students who haven't worked well together in the past or who don't see themselves as a team. Students often discover during a game that they like working with others they wouldn't normally work with. When your class plays the game well, they will have a sense of accomplishment at the end.

Games to Try

You can find these games, and many more, on our Digital Activity Center.

Icebreaker: The Big Wind Blows, found in Grade 3 Lesson 2 (<http://www.peacefirst.org/digitalactivitycenter/node/139>).

Circle Game: Hula Hoop Pass, found in Grade 2 Peacemaker Skills Lesson 9 (<http://www.peacefirst.org/digitalactivitycenter/node/183>).

Team-Building Game: People to People, or as it's known to younger students, **Friend to Friend**, found in Kindergarten Peacemaker Project Lesson 1 (<http://www.peacefirst.org/digitalactivitycenter/node/286>).

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Issue-Based Games—You may want to use these games to set the stage for a group discussion and debriefing of challenging issues such as power, privilege, or discrimination. Issue-based games address topics that can lead to meaningful conversations, but that may also raise powerful feelings in your students. It is therefore helpful to use these games with students who have been together for a while, and to immediately handle any conflicts or charged conversations with skill and sensitivity.

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Trust Game: **Human Knot**, found in Upper Elementary Peacemaker Project Lesson 7 (<http://www.peacefirst.org/digitalactivitycenter/node/188>).

Running or Tag Games—At times, you have younger children who just need to get some exercise. These games incorporate cooperation and a win/win approach to students' favorite tag games.

Trust Games—These are a series of games that require a greater level of risk taking on the part of students, and are useful if you need to work on issues of trust in the classroom. Be mindful of group dynamics before playing these games. For example, depending on the age of your students, there may be gender dynamics at play (e.g., students in middle school may be reluctant to hold the hand of a same-gender student). Or you may have a group of students that is uncomfortable with any form of physical contact. If this is the case, avoid games that require physical contact, such as the Human Knot. In general, cooperative games benefit from your students' having a shared history or having worked together in the past.

Songs—Although songs are not technically games, songs are a fun way to accomplish several goals, such as easing tension, learning one another's names, and building community. Songs may work better for younger children, who are less inhibited. Also, as you will be leading the song, **you** must be wildly uninhibited as well!



Identifying the Goal



As you choose a game(s) for your class, you'll need to consider variables beyond the purpose of the game. For example:

Age—Some games are better for younger children, and some need a certain level of skill and self-control and so are better suited for older children. Choose games that are appropriate for the ages of your students. *The games on the Digital Activity Center are labeled and can be searched by age range, although most games can be used successfully by anyone over the minimum age. In general, use the age range given as a guideline, not a hard and fast rule, and use your judgment and knowledge of your students in choosing a game.*

Group Size—Consider the size of your class as you choose a game. Some games are better suited for smaller classes, some for larger classes. Some games require a minimum number of players to be successful, but not so many that lessons are lost or that some students aren't included actively. *The games in the DAC have a suggested group size to help you choose games for your class.*

Space—The space where you play games is important. First and foremost, it must be safe, which means a space free of obstacles that your students might trip, slip, or fall over. If the game may involve falling, choose a surface such as a grassy or padded area, where your students won't be hurt. Finally, when choosing a space, try to find one where your students won't be disruptive to others when making joyful noise and won't be interrupted in their game.

Supplies—Many games require no materials at all. However, if some materials are called for, they can usually be made easily and inexpensively. For example, clean, rolled-up socks make great indoor balls. Shirts or masking tape can be used to mark bases or boundary lines.

Games to Try

For a **big space** (large field), try **Rock, Paper, Scissors Tag**.

For a **small space**, try **Count Up**, which can be found on our Games/Activities section (<http://www.peacefirst.org/digitalactivitycenter/node/229>).

For **younger children**, try **Pass the Face**, which can be found in Grade 1 Peacemaker Project Lesson 1 (<http://www.peacefirst.org/digitalactivitycenter/node/207>).

For **older children**, try **Toxic Swamp**, which can be found in Grade 5 Peacemaker Skills Lesson 9 (<http://www.peacefirst.org/digitalactivitycenter/node/129>).

For a **large group** (20–30), try **Zoom!** which can be found in Grade 3, Lesson 6 (<http://www.peacefirst.org/digitalactivitycenter/node/144>).

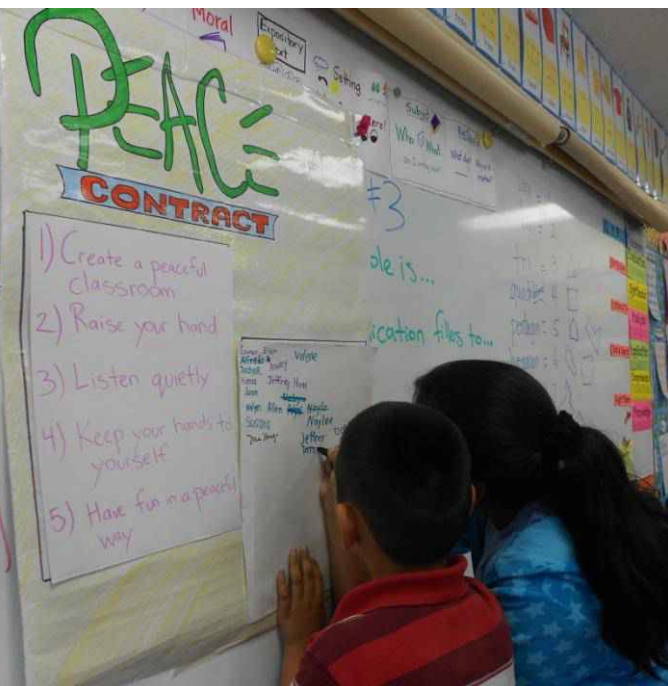
For a **small group** (4–8), try **Compliment Relay**, which can be found in Grade 1 Peacemaker Skills Lesson 5 (<http://www.peacefirst.org/digitalactivitycenter/node/133>).

Putting Safety First

When playing games, safety—both emotional and physical—is paramount.

Ground Rules—Establishing ground rules before the game begins will help keep everyone safe and will help your students feel comfortable taking risks. Before starting a game, take ten minutes to establish the ground rules (or to review previously established ground rules).

Get Student Input on Rules—Begin by asking your students, “What are some basic ground rules that we should all agree to before we begin to play?” If you have a Classroom Contract (see the Pre-Lesson, posted on each grade-level’s curriculum page on the Digital Activity Center), you might start by asking which of the rules in the Classroom Contract are most important to follow during this game. Brainstorm with your class and write their suggestions on the board. Your class may need some help getting started or clarifying suggested rules. Make sure everyone understands what a rule means before adding it to the list. If the list gets long, consolidate it to four or five rules that everyone can agree to. The fewer rules there are, the easier it will be for everyone to remember them.



What Are the Consequences?—Make sure everyone is clear on the consequences for breaking a rule, and that you are comfortable enforcing the consequences. For example, if the consequence for breaking a rule is taking a five-minute timeout from the game, make sure you enforce the rule every time, or students will feel that the rules are being enforced unfairly and may begin to ignore the rules altogether.

Keep It Safe!

Here are some games in which it is especially important to be mindful of safety—both emotional and physical.

Human Knot

In this game, which can be found in Upper Elementary Peacemaker Project Lesson 7 (<http://www.peacefirst.org/digitalactivitycenter/node/188>), students hold hands and are tangled in, what can be for some, an uncomfortable situation—either physically or emotionally. You will want to make sure that students are okay with such close physical contact, and that there is a way to stop the game if someone is uncomfortable, such as by saying a previously agreed-upon word—“Freeze!”

Cooperative Musical Chairs

This is a game where students sit very close to, if not
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Physical Safety—Make sure your students are physically safe by playing in an area where there are no obstacles that they might trip, slip, or fall over. If the game may involve falling, choose a surface such as a grassy or padded area, where your students won't be hurt.

Emotional Safety—Ground rules should also help keep everyone emotionally safe. Examples of ground rules that will help keep your students emotionally safe are:

- Everyone is valuable and has an equal chance to participate.
- Put-downs, teasing, or hurtful words are not tolerated.
- Challenge by choice: Anyone may pass at any time or sit out.
- There is no such thing as a stupid question.
- All personal information revealed in games should be kept confidential (unless someone is going to hurt himself or herself or others).
- Use “I” statements to talk about your own feelings.

Attention Please!

There will be times during your game that you need to get everyone's attention. There are ways to do this that are fun and effective. For example:

- **Call-and-Respond**—Use a two-part phrase as part of a call-and-respond. For example, “When I say ‘peace,’ you say ‘makers.’” You may have to repeat the call two or three times before getting everyone's attention.
- **Call and Clap**—Without raising your voice, say to your students, “If you can hear my voice, clap once”; then demonstrate by clapping once. Wait a moment, then add, “If you can hear my voice, clap two times”; then clap twice. Wait another moment and say, “If you can hear my voice, clap three times.” By this time, your students should be quiet and focused on you.
- **Clap a Rhythm**—Share a clapping rhythm with your students, for example—slow, slow, fast, fast, fast—so that any time you clap out this rhythm, the group must respond in kind and quiet down.

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on top of, each other while they are sharing seats. You will want to make sure that students feel comfortable being so close to one another physically. In addition, it is important to be mindful of physical safety in this game, where students scramble to find a seat. It can be found in Grade 2 Peacemaker Skills Lesson 7 (<http://www.peacefirst.org/digitalactivitycenter/node/181>).

Unique Circle
In this game, which can be found on our Games/Activities section (<http://www.peacefirst.org/digitalactivitycenter/node/293>), students name something that they believe to be unique about themselves, such as a quality or experience they have had. It is important to discuss and agree to ground rules before beginning the game so that others do not laugh or make fun of any of the unique qualities that students choose to share about themselves.

Kicking Off the Game

In order for your cooperative game to be successful, it is important to get it off to a good start. Be sure to set clear ground rules (see page 5), give clear instructions (see page 9), and establish boundaries for the group. Here are some other tips to get your game off to a great start.



Take Your time—Even though it can be hard to take the time to make sure that your students understand the instructions and the ground rules, it is better to take the time than to have the game fail or have someone be unsafe because the instructions were not clear.

Give a Choice—If your class knows several games, allow them to choose the one to be played, if possible. Although it may lead to some disagreement and discussion, that in itself provides an opportunity to work on decision making and consensus building—key peacemaking skills.

Split It Up—Sometimes you will need to split your class into smaller groups in order to play a game. Here are some suggestions for dividing the class up so that the groups consist of new combinations of students, and students have the chance to learn more about one another.

- **Count Off**—This is a tried-and-true tool familiar to most teachers. If the game requires three groups, tell the class to “count off by threes,” and then have the ones work together, the twos work together, etc.
- **Sound Off**—A fun twist on counting off is to use a phrase or a sentence instead of numbers. For example, have your students count off by saying “apple, orange, banana” or another meaningful phrase.
- **Psychic Shake**—This takes a little longer and works better with older students, but it’s a different and fun way to count off. If the game needs four groups, have students concentrate on a number between one and four. Once students have chosen their numbers, have them start mingling. When two students come close to each other, they should shake hands the same number of times as their numbers. When students with the same number find each other, have them stay together. Continue until everyone has found her/his group. If the groups are not even, make adjustments.
- **Categories**—Think of various categories to use to split up the class. If the groups are uneven, make adjustments as needed. Examples of categories to try:
 - Fold your arms. Is your right or left arm on top?
 - How many siblings are there in your family, including you?
 - Standing at the foot of the bed, which side do you get in on?



Giving Clear Instructions

Giving clear instructions to your class is one of the keys to having a successful game. Rules should foster cooperative and respectful play. Here are a few more things to keep in mind when giving instructions:

Wait for Silence before You Give Instructions—If you begin giving instructions to your students before you have everyone’s full attention, you send the message that the instructions aren’t really that important. Remember: Your students must be able to **hear** your instructions if they are to follow them.

Keep It Short and Simple—Keep the number of rules as short and simple as possible while still providing enough structure to play the game. It may be helpful to number the rules when you present them and begin by telling students there are X number of rules for the game.

Freeze!—Develop a “freeze” word or action that can be used to stop the game quickly and effectively should that become necessary. For example, in the Human Knot game, which results in intertwining limbs, students can wind up in positions that are uncomfortable. If this occurs, they should be able to say the agreed-upon “freeze” word to stop the action and get out of the uncomfortable position. Remind your students of the “freeze” word as part of the rules discussion, and practice “freezing” a few times.

Show Me—Have students demonstrate various rules and actions in the game. Your students will understand the rules better if they see and experience the rules in addition to hearing them. This is especially helpful if the game is complex or has a large number of rules.

Practice Makes Perfect—Have a practice round first to make sure everyone understands the rules and actions of the game. Review any rules that seem unclear, and practice any challenging actions in the game.

Are Your Instructions Clear?

Because **we** know what we mean when we give instructions, we assume everyone else does, too! But giving clear instructions is a skill to be mastered. Below are examples of not-so-clear and clear instructions.

Not-so-clear—
“I hope you do a better job of picking up around your table today.”

Clear—
“We need everyone to clean up around his/her table before we can line up. That means picking up and throwing away any trash or scraps of paper on the floor, returning all markers, scissors, and tape to their containers, and putting away all our books and papers. If that’s not finished, we won’t be ready to go.”

Clear rules make for a peaceful game!

Debriefing the Game



Although having fun is definitely one of the reasons to play cooperative games, these types of games have a larger purpose as well—they promote peacemaking by helping your students strengthen and sustain relationships, improve communication skills, and build a strong sense of community. These games may also provide the opportunity to explore issues of friendship, fairness, inclusion/exclusion, and helping others.

In order to reap these benefits of cooperative games, you have to make time to debrief the games you play so that your students have the opportunity to make the connection between the game and their own life experiences.

Debrief—Use these three simple questions during your debrief session to guide students in reviewing and evaluating the game:

- **What?**—Ask some questions that provide time and space for your students to think about **what** they learned and experienced (both academically and socially/emotionally) during the game. For example: *What happened during this game? How did it make you feel? What was hard? What was easy?*
- **So What?**—Ask some questions that help your students think about **why** they played the game. For example: *What did this game teach us? Why was it valuable to play this game? Why is it important to practice team building, communication, or inclusion?*

Dig Deeper

During the course of the debrief, you may become aware of issues that need to be explored more deeply with your class. Here are some suggestions for digging deeper on issues.

Ask open-ended questions: “How was that for you? How did you feel?”

Focus on feelings: “What is everyone feeling right now? Use one word to summarize your feelings.”

Monitor verbal and nonverbal cues: “It seems like people aren’t paying attention here. What is going on?”

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- **Now What?**—Close out the debrief with space to reflect on how what your students learned can be applied outside school. For example: *How can we use what we learned in this game outside school? Are there skills we learned that we can use to build peace on the playground, at home, or on the bus?*

Encourage your students to speak from their own experience and perspective by using I-statements when speaking, and not to make generalizations about what was happening to others. An example of an I-statement is: “I was feeling very bored during this game,” as opposed to: “This game was boring.”

The debrief is a good time to reflect on the effectiveness of the game’s rules. You can also use the debrief to get input and suggestions from your students on the game overall.

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Test out perceptions:
“During this game, it seemed like people were getting frustrated. Is that true?”

Share your feelings: “I am confused. How do other people feel?”

Find additional toolkits, lessons, activities and more at Peace First’s [Digital Activity Center](http://www.peacefirst.org/digitalactivitycenter/) (<http://www.peacefirst.org/digitalactivitycenter/>).

