



Lifelong Games: Playing Together for Fun

Bernie DeKoven, one of the originators of the New Games movement, has devoted his life to developing games for people of all ages that bring them together emotionally in the context of playing for fun.

In order to experience deep fun in play with a wide range of people, Bernie suggests that we learn a variety of games and game formats. That way, we discover new games for our own enjoyment and increase the likelihood of finding ways to have fun with a great many people.

Here are some of Bernie's favorite lifelong games. They are truly games for all ages because they are especially fun when played between kids and parents and grandparents, all together at the same time — which is precisely the point!

Walking Games

Free-Form Frisbee Golf

When you're out for a walk, take a Frisbee, plastic plate, or shoe with you. Decide on the target you'd like to hit: a tree, or rock, or fire hydrant — something visible, indestructible, and at least two good throws away.

Next, estimate how many throws it will take to get to the target (that's going to be par). One of you tees off (throws). The other picks the Frisbee up where it landed and throws from there. Your joint score is the total number of throws it takes to get through a course that you basically make up as you go along.

Waiting Games

Found-Object Song Writing

When you're in the car and the preschool grandkids are getting restless, start singing something you all know: "Row, Row, Row Your Boat," for example. As you drive along, change the words to something you both observe so that you make a silly song: "Row, Row, Row your rock gently down the trash can; merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily, life is but a billboard."

Colors

Here's a game that fills time if you have to wait in line or sit in traffic. On somebody's signal, everybody says a color. Then, on the next signal, everybody says another color (not the one that you just said). And on and on until everybody just happens to say the same color at the same time.

Indoor Games

Cranks

When you're stuck inside and you want to get the kids away from the TV, play a game where one person is the Cranked and the others are the Crankers. The Crankers take turns attaching an imaginary crank to any body joint (elbow, knee, finger, wrist) that will move the body part in the direction the Cranker wants that part to go — up or down or left or right. It's most fun if you try to get the Cranked to do something, like eat a piece of bread or sit down.

Theater of the Air

This game for creative fidgeters is played when everyone is tired enough to lie down for a while. You lie on your backs, with your heads together like spokes on a wheel. And you all put your hands straight up, so you can see everybody's hands, and you get an instant Air Stage effect. It's like a stage up there, where our disembodied hands can carry on conversations, speaking in our disembodied voices.

We're on our backs. Spokes in a wheel, hands in the air. We let our fingers do the talking. It's like shadow puppetry without the shadows. Hand shaking. Hand slapping. Hand music. Hand dancing. And whenever we need to thicken the plot, in come the Silly Foot Beings, the dialog with whom invariably leading to a semi-yogic collectively callisthenic performance of Whole Body Theatre.

Anywhere Games

Pru (pronounced "proo-eee")

Clear the dance floor (living room, kitchen, back yard). Get more or less everyone together. (For any game to be fun, participation has to be optional). When the mass is about as critical as it will get, everyone closes their eyes and starts milling around. When people bump into each other, they shake hands, while saying prui. If the person they encounter is not prui, they each go off to find someone else.

On the other hand (as it were) when someone bumps into the actual, pre-appointed prui, shakes hands and says prui, the prui shakes hands, doesn't say anything, and doesn't let go. Now both people are prui, remaining prui until the end of the game. If either of them is encountered by anyone else, more people are added to the prui.

The game continues until more or less everyone has become prui. Then they can open their eyes. There are some exceptionally fun moments as more and more people feel their way towards pruinness. It gets quieter and quieter. The plaintive sounds of the unpruied few mingling with the invisibly giggling many.

Group Juggling

You need a lot of tossable/catchable things, almost one for every player. My favorites are balls made out of socks. Safe. Fun. Get people into a circle. Introduce one ball. Ask the group to toss the ball around the circle, being sure not to toss it to someone too close or too far away. Continue until everyone gets the ball (ask people to hold up one hand until they've gotten the ball.). Then have them repeat the toss, exactly in the same pattern.

After several rounds, introduce a second ball. Depending on competencies, the second ball can be in a new pattern or follow the established pattern. The task of the group is to see how many balls they can keep going without dropping any.

There are a veritable myriad ways to complicate this activity. Have them try to expand or contract the circle. Walk around. Change directions. Throw in reverse patterns. Add music, a handclapping rhythm.... The main dynamic is between how complex to make it and how to properly assess and engage the increasing skills of the group.

Panther, Person, Porcupine

There are three positions. Each position has an accompanying sound. I like to ask people to make up both the position and the sound. The Panther position, for example, might be hands like claws, extended, with accompanying roar. The Porcupine position, of course, will require a leap of silliness.

If you don't like porcupines, you can try perhaps persimmons or purple painted palomino ponies. Like Rock/Scissors/Paper, each one beats the other - the Panther beats the Person, the Person beats the Porcupine and the Porcupine trumps the Panther.

People get into three teams. Each team, as a whole, decides what position it wants to take. When ready, all three times line up in a triangle and display their choice. The team that wins takes a person from each team that it beats.

There are two ways that the game can be tied - when all choose the same or when all choose something different. The vast implications of this are quite potentially significant. We recommend that you play until there are only two teams left. If you want the game to go on for another hour or so, continue until everyone is on one team.

The Schmerltz

The Schmerltz (also spelled "Shmerlz" or "Schmerlz" or even "Schmerlts") is, in essence, a sock with a tennis ball inside. The ball is worked down to the general sock toe area and a sock knot is made as close to the ball as possible. A Schmerltz made out of pantyhose is no more or less a Schmerltz than a Schmerltz made out of traditional knee-length argyles. A pantyhose Schmerltz containing a soccer ball, or even a tightly rolled and wadded ball made of actual socks, is still a Schmerltz.

Following the completion of Schmerltz-making, we enter into the next phase, Schmerltz-tossing. Traditionally, the Schmerltz-tosser holds the Schmerltz by the socktop, whirling the Schmerltz overhead or underarm, and then, when the proper twirling speed is achieved, releases the Schmerltz, thus flinging it into the proverbial air.

The Schmerltz-catcher, who may or may not be the same person as the Schmerltz-tosser, then endeavors to 1) catch the Schmerltz by the tail, or 2) avoid getting hit by it, to the genuine amusement of all those so engaged.

Long Distance Game Playing

Even when you live far from children, you can have fun with them in between visits. Here's a long distance activity to try.

Merry Monster Making

On a blank sheet of paper, start drawing the head and neck of a "monster." When you're finished, fold the paper so that only part of the neck shows, and tape the other part down. Send it to your grandchild (little kids love receiving mail!), with instructions on how to proceed -- such as "Start where I left off, and make a body for the neck. When you're finished, fold it over so that part of the body still shows, and tape down the rest. Then send it back. If you need help with this, ask Mom or Dad."

When you get the drawing back, continue drawing the legs, again folding the paper so that your grandchild knows where to continue the drawing, and again taping your part down. When the drawing is complete, untape, unfold, draw or put a frame around it, title it, and send it back to your co-artist.

Bernie DeKoven is the author of *Junkyard Sports* and *The Well Played Game*. For more games and fun activities, visit his website DeepFun.com.