

the magic realm of play



The play world is the child's natural medium for personal growth and positive learning. Young people are the masters of this magic realm—they play the most and are most influenced by play. Their play is both serious business and pure fun. At its heart, it signifies nothing less than how they will be in this world.

Play is an ideal medium for positive social learning because it is natural, active, and highly motivating for most children. Games constantly involve people in the processes of acting, reacting, feeling, and experiencing. They can be a beautiful way to bring people together. However, if you distort children's play by rewarding excessive competition, physical aggression against others, cheating, and unfair play, you distort children's lives.

In cooperative sports, we are actually going back to an ancient form to help more children blossom into happy and fully functioning human beings. Cooperative play and games began thousands of years ago, when tribal peoples gathered to celebrate life.

The concept behind cooperative games is simple: People play with one another rather than against one another; they play to overcome challenges, not to overcome other people; and they are freed by the very structure of the games to enjoy the play experience itself. No player need find himself or herself a bench warmer nursing a bruised self-image. Since the games are designed so that cooperation among players is necessary to achieve the objective(s) of the game, children play together for common ends rather than against one another for mutually exclusive ends. In the process, they learn in a fun way how to become more considerate of one another, more aware of how other people are feeling, and more willing to operate in one another's best interests.

People of every size, shape, age, and ability—from infants to the aged—can enjoy these games, and they can be played virtually anywhere with almost no equipment. When the right games for a specific age or ability are chosen, they almost always result in total involvement, feelings of acceptance, cooperative contribution by all players, and lots of smiling faces.

One of the things we hope to teach the children of the future is to become more receptive to *sharing* both human and material resources (for example, ideas, talents, concerns, feelings, respect, possessions, equipment, time, space, and responsibility). Our studies assessing the social impact of well-designed cooperative-games programs have consistently shown an increase in cooperative behavior in games, in free play, and in the classroom for children involved in these programs. The change does not occur overnight; but over a period of several months, the children seem to become more considerate and caring human beings.

Cooperative learning can also enhance a child's capacity to create or excel by freeing her to do so within a less threatening framework. In addition, cooperative games can satisfy the desire to engage in enjoyable, self-paced leisure activities for the sheer fun of it. The feelings generated in many little people can best be summed up in the words of one who said "In cooperative games I feel left in."

Cooperation, Creativity, and Choice

The "magic" of cooperative games revolves around several real freedoms that help nurture cooperation, good feelings, and mutual support. To understand how the games "work" a little better, think about these aspects of cooperative activities.

FREEDOM FROM COMPETITION

The distinctive feature of cooperative games that separates them from all other games, old and new, is their structural makeup. For example, in the traditional game *King of the Mountain*, the rules dictate that one person be king while all others are to be shoved down the mountain. The game has a competitive structure in that it demands that players act against one another and excludes all but one from attaining the object of the game. In the cooperative version, *People of the Mountain*, the structural demands of the game are completely reversed. The objective is to get as many people as possible to the top of the mountain, and children play together to accomplish it. This frees them from the pressure to compete, eliminates the need for destructive behavior, and by its very design encourages helpful and fun-filled interaction.

When you place people in competitive *King of the Mountain* structures *and* you make them feel as if their personal acceptability or self-worth is dependent on being on top, you create problems. These problems surface in the form of high levels of distress, dropping out, destructive aggression, and depression. If the outcome is made to seem important enough, people will deceive, cheat, hurt, and even kill to get to the top. And the rules they learn as children will affect them all their lives. By accepting the competitive goal as all-important, people not only become more willing to destroy others but may also destroy themselves and their families in the process.

FREEDOM TO CREATE

Children are creative largely because they have not yet learned that their world *must* be viewed or acted out in certain narrow or preset ways. Their refreshing visions will continue to grow if they are given the freedom to create and adapt and are encouraged for their creative endeavors. Why is this important? Because children who are free to develop their creativity not only get a great deal of personal satisfaction but also gain experience in working out solutions to their own problems. If we destroy children's curiosity, creativity, and originality of thought, we risk destroying the future of humankind. As pointed out by Sir Herbert Read, "Destructiveness and creativity are opposed forces. . . . To create is to construct, and to construct cooperatively is to lay the foundation of a peaceful community."

Cooperative games have grown out of many people's creative thought and will continue to do so. They should never become so rigid or static that they are resistant to creative and sensitive input from participants. No rule—in this or any other book—

should be seen as hard and fast. Let's keep on freeing children to create in a truly cooperative atmosphere.

FREEDOM FROM EXCLUSION

Games in which players are put out or removed are particularly brutal because they punish those who are less experienced or less skilled, fostering feelings of rejection and incompetence. Worse yet, the elimination effectively removes the opportunity to gain additional experience and improve skills. Games that are truly cooperative eliminate the elimination and reject the entire concept of dividing players into winners and losers.

Do you like pressured situations in which you have to worry about being accepted or achieving some numerical score? Most kids—like most adults—prefer self-paced activities in which they don't have to worry about failure, criticism, or rejection. They like to be with friends, to meet personal challenges, and most of all, to have fun.

If smiles are any indication of joy, you will quickly observe that highly organized competitive sport is not for joy. It is simply another area of specialized work, aimed at achievement.

FREEDOM TO CHOOSE

Providing children with choices (even small ones) demonstrates respect for them and confirms the belief that they're able to be responsible for themselves. When you treat children like responsible human beings, rather than like pawns, they will begin to behave in a responsible way. Try asking your children how they think a game should be played or how a game could be made more fun or how they can ensure that no one is left out or feels bad. When a particular problem arises, ask them how to solve it. They will almost always come up with humanizing suggestions.

When children are given the freedom to offer suggestions, make decisions, and choose for themselves, their motivation is greatly enhanced. It makes them feel important, gives them a sense of personal control, solves many problems, and helps them learn to make decisions for themselves. The initial choices can be within realistic limits, such as deciding how to make a number or shape by using their bodies, selecting a few cooperative games to play, or choosing a fun activity with which to end the games session. From a modest beginning their input can increase to the point where they have complete control over themselves and their play.

I cannot overemphasize the importance of listening to children's feelings and perspectives. However, in order for children to express their true feelings in your