
Please, Can We Play Games?

~ Ruth Ker

While there are many games that have a healing influence on the young child because of their content, the very act of playing these games, the exchange of joyful interactions, is also healing in itself. Pretty much any game that a teacher loves and brings with joy and goodwill will have pedagogically healing qualities for the individual child and the group. Social games are an opportunity to be in meaningful relationship with children. Something magical happens in an early childhood program when the educator, who has the interest and discipleship of the children, dons the cloak of playful lightheartedness during group times. Playing games with the children during these times can provide closeness and safety, demonstrate socially-appropriate ways of being, strengthen a sense of justice and provide examples of self-regulation. And, perhaps most important, these games help children to build relationship with one another as well as reconnect to their own sense of “rightful activity.” Playing games in a safe environment can also help remedy stress-oriented behaviors like shutting down, numbing out, the inability to share and the fear of losing control. The caregiver can support the child to begin to trust that the “way of the game” is consistent, predictable and can be known in this environment where “the educator” holds the space for a safe place to practice.

Engaging in meaningful play through games can also contribute to the child’s capacity to self-regulate, to practice opportunities to sometimes be in control, and to trust that interacting with others in playful ways can be safe and fulfilling. For children who are having difficulty playing with others, these games can be strongly motivational to help them be more flexible and spontaneous, relax their containment and/or fear of interacting and make new strides in their willingness to enter free play.

We know that young children tend to explore and relate to their world through play. However, childhood trauma can cause children to numb out, shut down, and develop adaptive behaviour that separates them from others. When children engage in group games that are carefully led by a trusted adult exhibiting joyful, playful energy, a kindred resonance can begin to happen. An unspoken language begins to develop

between the adult and the playing children in the group. This can be a valuable asset while the child is building the courage and stamina to enter the everyday play with others. Skills can be built in this safe harbor—a place where trust, interest, joy, justice and the possibility of discipleship develop within a container of healthy examples.

Although these suggestions are by no means a complete list, here are some of my favourite healing games to play. Games referred to can be found in the book *Please, Can We Play Games? Joyful Interactions with Young Children* (WECAN, 2018).

- (1) In games about animals, introducing ways an animal can self-soothe can provide a way for the children to calm themselves down and therefore set a calmer tone for the group game. Perhaps a pony is nervous about getting new shoes. “Let’s stroke the pony gently. He likes to be softly touched on his legs and his belly. My pony likes to be rubbed right here. Where does your pony want to be touched?” A little later, the children can stroke each other gently.

Pitter, patter polt
Shoe a little colt
Here a nail, there a nail
Pitter, patter polt

- (2) Games that emphasize taking turns, so that everyone is included, and giving others a chance, like “Here’s a Pretty Branch so Gay” or “Oats, Peas, Beans and Barley Grow.”
- (3) We can play our way into impulse control: “I’m pretty sure the animals come right back to the barn when the farmer calls them...” leads into “We Have Some Little Ponies.” Or we may say “The birds want to come back to the nest, I’m sure they don’t fly up into the castle,” along with playing “My Pigeon House.”
- (4) Sensory Games can be tremendously helpful in de-sensitizing sensory issues, especially if repeated over time, and if the child is given the freedom to enter at their own pace. Much is gained by these children when the activity is slowed down and they can sense into it as it is administered to

others. Helpful games include “The Sandwich,” “All Around the Sandwich Shop,” “Rockabye Baby,” and “Caterpillar Roll,” and one of my favourites, “Little Brown Bulb.”

These are just a few of the healing games that I have had the pleasure to play with the children in my care. My relationship with children and their relationships with each other transforms in the alchemy of these joyful interactions. Including games in our early childhood programming is definitely one way we can create healing environments in our classrooms. ♦

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