Activities and Guidance for Children in Crisis

For Early Childhood and Primary Grade Educators

Developed by:

The International Play Association IPAWORLD.org

The American Association for Promoting the Child's Right to Play (IPAUSA.ORG)

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THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAY AND SUPPORT FOR YOUNG CHILDREN IN CHALLENGING CIRCUMSTANCES

INTRODUCTION

This document provides a comprehensive framework for supporting and enriching the play experiences of young children, particularly in challenging circumstances, including natural disasters, life-threatening emergencies, regular disruption of the child's routine, or other unexpected events. By exploring various types of play—imaginative, nature-based, rhythmic, and physical—educators and caregivers can foster resilience, promote healthy development, and ensure that all children have access to meaningful, joyful learning opportunities. The following chapters provide practical guidance, modifications for inclusivity, and resources for extending play beyond traditional settings, underscoring the critical importance of play in the holistic development of every child.

NATURE OF EMERGENCIES AFFECTING CHILDREN

Natural disasters, life-threatening emergencies, or other incidents are any event that disrupts the child's normal living situation and requires the assistance of an adult to ensure the child's survival or continued healthy development. Sample emergencies could include the ongoing traumas of war, violence in schools, neighborhoods, or public places, lacking basic human needs, such as food or shelter, immigrating from countries where violence is prevalent, or having one's community undergo a natural disaster stemming from weather conditions or terrorism.

PROVISION OF CARE AND RECOVERY

In all emergencies, trained adults and volunteers provide for a child's basic survival, including food, shelter, clothing, and ongoing education. For example, UNICEF addresses the special needs of young children by supporting the development of Early Childhood Development (ECD) Centers and establishing equivalent settings in temporary settlements. These centers and settings assist the child's recovery and rehabilitation. They also help mothers and caregivers cope with and overcome feelings of stress and helplessness.

EMOTIONAL SUPPORT AND LEARNING IN CRISIS

UNICEF also recognizes that specialized training is needed to provide for the child's emotional needs during times of crisis, instability, and violence. UNICEF created the Early Childhood Developmental Kit to help adults organize learning and play activities for children exposed to emergencies. Caregivers can be older children, parents, teachers, or other trained individuals who provide opportunities for young children to continue learning and playing while developing their ability to cope with various situations.

ADVOCACY FOR THE RIGHT TO PLAY

The American Association for the Child's Right to Play, IPA/USA (IPAUSA.org) is the national affiliate of the International Play Association (IPA) World. The purpose of this organization is to protect, preserve, and promote play as a fundamental right for all humans. Membership is open to any individual, group, or organization that endorses the child's right to play.

This is stated in the United Nations' Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1959), and highlighted in Article 7, paragraph 3, which states: "The child shall have full opportunity for play and recreation which should be directed to the same purposes as education; society and the public authorities shall endeavor to promote the enjoyment of this right..." and in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), Article 31, which asserts:

- States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child, and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.
- States Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life. They shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational, and leisure activities.

In the face of adversity, play emerges not only as a right but as a lifeline for children navigating the turbulence of crises. Far beyond a simple distraction, play becomes an essential bridge to recovery, fostering resilience, restoring a sense of normalcy, and enabling children to process their experiences in a safe and nurturing environment. Whether improvising games in makeshift shelters or finding solace in familiar routines, children instinctively turn to play to reclaim moments of joy and connection amid uncertainty.

Play is woven into the very fabric of childhood, supporting adaptation and growth even when the world feels unpredictable. Through playful interactions, whether structured activities or spontaneous moments, children build supportive relationships, master new skills, and rediscover hope. For caregivers, enabling play is a powerful means of supporting healing and fostering community, reinforcing the idea that, even in the direst circumstances, every child deserves the freedom to imagine, explore, and thrive.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAY IN CHILDHOOD (ADAPTED FROM IPAWORLD.ORG)

CHILDREN AND THEIR ESSENTIAL NEEDS

Child-led play is a biological necessity for healthy development. Throughout history and across all cultures, children have always engaged in play. Alongside basic needs such as nutrition, health, shelter, and education, play is vital in supporting each child's ability to reach their potential, gifted at conception.

THE ROLE AND NATURE OF PLAY

Play serves as a form of communication and self-expression that combines thought and action. It brings children satisfaction and a sense of achievement. Play is instinctive, voluntary, and spontaneous.

BENEFITS OF PLAY

Through play, children develop physically, mentally, emotionally, and socially. Play is not simply a way to pass time; it is an essential means of learning to live.

www.ipaworld.org (Adapted by IPAUSA, 2025)

SUPPORTING CHILDREN THROUGH TRAUMA, LOSS, AND EMERGENCIES

INTRODUCTION

This handbook is designed to provide individuals with guidance on comforting children and fostering effective communication, with a focus on the healing and developmental power of storytelling, art, and play. It also outlines principles for organizing play activities and lists resources and materials to aid caregivers in challenging circumstances.

This guide helps children process challenging events and emotions. By focusing on body language, honest communication, and attentive listening, caregivers can foster resilience and healing in children, particularly when play and creative engagement are integral to their approach.

COMMUNICATING WITH CHILDREN IN EMERGENCY SITUATIONS

IN AN EMERGENCY, GET DOWN ON THE CHILD'S LEVEL

Caregivers can open or enhance communication by adjusting their physical stances, kneeling, or bending down to the child's level. Speaking calmly, making eye contact, and showing genuine interest will help build trust. Children often sense and internalize the emotions of adults, so caregivers need to reassure children that they are not responsible for any adult's fear, anger, feelings, or distress.

AVOID MINIMIZING CHILDREN'S LOSS

When children face loss, they may experience and display intense emotions. They need to understand that expressing deep sadness or strong emotions is perfectly acceptable. Dismissing or ignoring these emotions will not alleviate their distress or aid in their recovery. Adults should respect children's feelings and offer reassurance that their reactions are normal. Children may find that upsetting images and fears return repeatedly and with great intensity, which is a typical response. Older children might worry that their reactions mean something is wrong with them. Caregivers should accept children's feelings without judgment, impatience, ridicule, or teasing.

ENCOURAGE CHILDREN TO EXPRESS THEIR FEELINGS THROUGH WORDS

During emergencies, young children often feel a wide range of emotions but may not have the words to express them directly. Their feelings may manifest as crying or emotional outbursts. Adults can help by providing vocabulary to name these feelings, such as "troubled," "concerned," "worried," "scared," "shocked," "mad," or "angry." Teaching children the words to describe their emotions helps them process what they are going through and can be comforting and healing.

OFFER SIMPLE AND HONEST EXPLANATIONS

Children need clear, truthful explanations about events that disrupt their lives. Providing reasons for emergencies—such as natural disasters or harmful actions—helps children feel a sense of control and understanding. Caregivers should avoid secrecy and share information in small, age-appropriate portions, repeating explanations as often as needed. Listening carefully and being prepared to stop other activities to give the child full attention when they are ready to talk is essential.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAY IN HEALING AND DEVELOPMENT

Play is a powerful tool for children's learning, problem-solving, creativity, and physical development. It is a universal activity that reflects culture and tradition and is central to healthy development. Play is especially valuable during emergencies because:

- It serves as a universal way for children to process their experiences
- It expresses love and provides comfort during stressful times.
- It brings joy to both children and caregivers.
- It helps children find meaning and pleasure even in crisis.
- It gives caregivers opportunities to support and praise children naturally.
- It helps resolve issues between caregivers and children.
- It passes on cultural values and traditions.
- It utilizes readily available natural materials.
- It encourages focus and concentration, helping children manage stress effectively.
- It allows caregivers to observe how children are managing stress.
- For children to gain the benefits of play, adults should follow the child's lead in play rather than direct activities.

Playing with caregivers who participate as equals, rather than leaders, builds positive memories. Maintaining family traditions and connections with extended family also strengthens relationships.

PLAY ACTIVITIES FOR DIFFERENT AGES

Infants are curious and eager to explore. Caregivers should engage with them by looking, talking, singing, making facial expressions, and holding them to stimulate their senses. In the first year, movement-based play is key.

One-year-olds enjoy making and listening to sounds, copying facial expressions, and exploring play objects. Caregivers should provide safe items for them to touch, hold, taste, and explore.

Two-year-olds like sorting and dumping objects, playing with caregivers, and imitating others.

Three- and four-year-olds have vivid imaginations. They make up stories, act them out, and use simple props in play. They enjoy listening to stories, drawing, playing with clay, singing, and moving to music, as well as simple games of chase.

Children ages five to eight still enjoy games, which become more organized and challenging at this stage.

Indoors, adults should ensure a safe play area by removing glass items, padding sharp corners, covering unused sockets, cleaning floors, and keeping small or hazardous objects out of reach.

PLAY AND SAFE ENVIRONMENTS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

PLAY ACROSS EARLY CHILDHOOD

- Infants explore their surroundings through sensory play—looking, listening, and being held.
- One-year-olds enjoy creating sounds, mimicking adults, and manipulating objects.
- Two-year-olds enjoy sorting and dumping items, engaging with caregivers, and imitating others.
- Three- and four-year-olds use their imagination in storytelling, crafts, singing, and movement activities.
- Children aged five to eight enjoy more organized and challenging games.

CREATING A SAFE PLAY ENVIRONMENT INDOORS

- Remove glass items and cover sharp corners.
- Secure electrical outlets and ensure floors are clean.
- Eliminate small objects that could be swallowed.
- Keep hazardous substances, such as cleaning fluids and medicines, out of reach.
- Prioritize interactive, child-led play with others instead of screen time.

CREATING A SAFE PLAY ENVIRONMENT OUTDOORS

- Provide enough space for children to move freely, avoiding obstacles and collisions.
- Maintain adequate supervision and check for hazards, such as rocks or tree branches, that could cause falls.
- Provide areas that include shade and clean drinking water.
- Ensure all children remain in clear view for supervision.

UNDERSTANDING RISK AND HAZARD

- A hazard is a danger in the environment that is beyond a child's understanding and could cause injury.
- Risk refers to a challenge or uncertainty that a child can recognize and choose to engage with.
- Risk-taking is a natural and essential part of early childhood development.

THE VALUE OF RISK PLAY

Taking valuable risks helps children develop:

- Awareness of their abilities
- Judgment and decision-making skills
- An understanding of consequences
- Coordination and dexterity
- Resourcefulness and creativity
- Confidence and independence

SUPPORTING CHILDREN IN RISK PLAY

Support children by allowing them to explore and challenge themselves. Never force a child into situations that make them uncomfortable. Observe to determine if more support or greater challenges are needed. Assess risks by considering the likelihood and severity of harm, the benefits of the activity, and whether the child is enjoying themselves or feeling scared.

MANAGING HAZARDS

Risky play does not mean leaving children unattended. Adults must remain responsible for removing hazards such as sharp edges, fragile items, choking hazards, and access to dangerous areas, while still allowing the child sufficient freedom appropriate to their abilities.

IDEAS FOR ORGANIZING PLAY SPACES

If possible, set up dedicated areas for dramatic play, art, building (blocks), sensory activities, and games with balls for older children.

ORGANIZING AND SUPPORTING PLAY FOR CHILDREN

ADULT SUPERVISION AND SAFETY

Risky play does not mean leaving children unattended. Adults remain responsible for removing hazards, including sharp edges, fragile items, choking hazards, and access to dangerous areas, while allowing freedom appropriate to each child's abilities. Whenever possible, create dedicated areas for dramatic play, art, building (blocks), sensory activities, quiet areas with books, puppets, or stuffed animals, and areas for active group games for older children.

SAMPLE PLAY MATERIALS FOR DIFFERENT AGE GROUPS

- Infants (six to twelve months): Avoid choking hazards.
- One- to two-year-olds: Avoid choking hazards.
- Two- to three-year-olds: Avoid choking hazards.
- Three- to five-year-olds: Squeeze toys, pull toys, yarn balls, rocking horses, kites, mobiles, plastic bowling sets, wagons, rhythm instruments, climbing ropes, floor mirrors, beanbags, light wheelbarrows, wading pools, jump ropes, snap-lock beads, activity tables, tricycles, low stilts, lightweight paddles, pat mats, tunnels, foam balls, Velcro mittens.
- Things to ride on: feet-propelled toys, ride-on vehicles, low scooters and wagons, bouncing tubes, beach balls, push-and-pull toys resembling adult tools, tricycles or other pedal-powered vehicles, lightweight bats and balls, paddle racquets, ribbon wands, and scarves.
- Older children: Full-size scooters, climbing platforms, large balls, play barrels, junior sports equipment, scooter boards, potato sacks, hopscotch mats, low seesaws, and rock climbing walls.
- Large parachute
- 9" colored cones
- 4' by 6' tumbling mats
- Rubber balls
- Low balance beam or boards
- Paddles and badminton birdies
- Makers Table with art supplies: clay, playdough, popsicle sticks, plastic knives, cookie cutters, paintbrushes, new toothbrushes, natural materials such as small branches with leaves, flowers, etc.
- Sidewalk chalk
- Boxes and tape
- Sheets for fort-building or spray painting with spray bottles filled with tempera paint and water
- Loose parts: leaves, cardboard boxes, sales papers, pine needles, pinecones, sticks, flowers, acorns, rocks, shells, grass blades
- Assorted crafting supplies
- Building blocks, nuts and bolts, PVC pipe scraps
- Water, bike tires, wading pools (for ball pits, shredded paper pits, etc.)

Always watch for choking hazards.

CREATING A DAILY PLAY PROGRAM FOR CHILDREN IN EMERGENCIES

Children feel more secure during emergencies when routines are maintained. A consistent *yet flexible* schedule provides predictability and security. Adults should follow children's lead to determine when to move on to the next activity and in the routine, plan for extended periods of child-led play. Teacher-initiated activities are acceptable, but children should have the choice to participate. Adults should engage with children during play, supporting but not intruding.

FOCUSING ON FUN AND ENCOURAGING POSITIVE PLAY BEHAVIOR

Children may sometimes misbehave while playing. Caregivers are responsible for safety, but should preserve the fun of play. To help prevent discipline issues and encourage good behavior, caregivers can:

- Create a quiet signal, such as raising a hand, to get the group's attention.
- Explain each child's role or expectations during play.
- Promote harmonious play among all children.
- Praise specific positive behaviors (e.g., "You were so kind to your friend").
- Ensure everyone has a turn and an opportunity to play.
- Reinforce safety rules (take turns, be kind and gentle).
- Teach conflict resolution skills (ask what happened, how the child felt, what they tried, what they need to do, and whether it's a good or bad choice; offer support).

With older children, offer more responsibility, praise self-control, and listening skills. If inappropriate behavior occurs, ask the child to take a break and allow them to rejoin when ready, reminding them what to do differently next time. Avoid physical punishment or humiliation, such as moving their clip from green to yellow or red, pulling a card, or using another humiliating disciplinary method.

SUPPORTING POSITIVE PLAY AND CREATIVE USE OF MATERIALS

SAMPLE FORMATIONS FOR PLAY

- Behind Line: Children line up so each looks at the back of the head of the one in front.
- Side-by-Side Line: Children stand shoulder to shoulder, stretching the line if there is crowding.
- Personal Space: Each child chooses a spot where they cannot touch others or objects nearby.
- Triangle: Groups of three children form a triangle, facing inward.
- Circle with Caregiver: The Caregiver joins children in a circle formation.
- One Body Length Apart: Children space themselves so that their arms do not touch others during activities that require spacing.

WAYS TO BEGIN PLAY ACTIVITIES WITH OLDER CHILDREN

There are various methods to start a game or select an "It" player for children ages 5-8:

- Flipping a Coin: The Caregiver flips a coin, and the correct guesser is chosen.
- Hiding the Pebble: Children guess which hand conceals the pebble to be selected.
- Picking Sticks or Straws: Children draw, and the one with the shortest stick is chosen.
- Hand on the Stick: Players stack their fists on a stick; the player in the top position starts the game.
- The Last Stick or Straw: Children pick from a pile, and the one left with the last piece is chosen.

SUGGESTED PLAY ACTIVITIES USING LITTLE OR NO MATERIALS

THE HEALING ROLE OF STORYTELLING, ART, AND PLAY

Storytelling: Storytelling helps children process stressful or traumatic experiences. Children can recount their stories, starting with events before the emergency, what happened during it, and imagining an ending. Storytelling supports language and expressive development and can involve sentence completion or using dolls as story characters.

Drawing and Painting: Through drawing and painting, children express mental images of real or imagined events. These creative activities can prompt discussions and offer relief from fears by allowing individuals to express their feelings visually, especially when language is limited.

Play: Play allows children to imitate family roles, interact with peers, explore, and invent. These activities are vital for restoring normalcy and providing joy, particularly for children affected by emergencies or losses.

EXAMPLES OF SIMPLE PLAY ACTIVITIES

- Squeeze Toy: Sew two fabric shapes together, stuff with soft material, and stitch closed to make a soft toy.
- Box Blocks: Fill empty containers with crumpled newspaper and seal them shut with tape to create building blocks.
- Picture Puzzle: Paste or draw a picture on cardboard, varnish it, and then cut it into pieces to create a homemade puzzle.
- Hand Puppets: Use an old sock, decorate it with a face and a name, and use it as a puppet.

CREATIVE PLAY IDEAS USING EVERYDAY MATERIALS

STONES (ROCKS, PEBBLES)

Stones can be used for a variety of creative activities. They are perfect for art projects, building pathways, collecting, painting, and even hiding, allowing others to discover them. Children can use them as stepping stones, game pieces, for skipping across water, or for drawing on rocks. Gluing small rocks together can form unique pictures or miniature sculptures.

ROPE

Rope lends itself to imaginative play as a snake, a fire hose, a wavy river, a tree vine, or a circus tightrope. Children can also use ropes to create shapes, numbers, letters, or various objects. Jump rope increases physical activity.

BARRELS

Barrels offer many opportunities: children can roll, sit on, balance on top of, or crawl through them. Arranging barrels end-to-end creates tunnels, while upright barrels may be used as drums or tables. An open barrel might transform into a spaceship, clubhouse, or cave.

Always check for sharp edges or hazardous materials before use.

TIRES

Tires can become swings, hiding spots, obstacle courses, or quiet nooks. Children can jump into or over them, crawl through, roll them, or imagine them as stores, clubhouses, or buildings in a play area.

MUD

Mud is ideal for making mud pies, drawing, digging, sculpting, painting, or creating footprints and tracks.

SAND

Sand provides an endless source of entertainment—digging, drawing, building castles, searching for hidden treasures, creating roads, filling containers, forming sand art, making wet sand sculptures, or burying pretend treasure.

CARPET SQUARES

Carpet squares can be anything a child imagines: magic carpets, islands, blankets, houses, wagons, sleds, icebergs, cars, boats, or buses.

BUCKETS

Buckets serve many roles: hats, stilts, carrying containers, seats, sand or water toys, helmets, musical instruments, or targets for tossing games.

HAY

Hay bales invite climbing, rolling, tossing, building scarecrows, forming caves, constructing houses, forts, or fences.

DIRT

Children can bulldoze, dig, hunt for insects, build, design, make roads, slide, carry, or mix dirt to make mud for play.

WATER

Water play includes painting with leaves or brushes, digging in rivers, splashing, testing what floats or sinks, filling and emptying containers, digging holes to see if water stays, swimming, mixing dirt with water to make mud, or washing toys.

LADDERS

Ladders can be turned into trains, bridges, firefighter props, climbing equipment, or used for balancing and imaginative construction play.

BRICKS

Bricks are helpful for stacking, staging toy figures, building walls or buildings for miniature cars, creating walkways, or making patterns.

IMAGINATIVE PLAY ACTIVITIES

BIRTH TO 3 MONTHS

- My Face: Draw faces on cardboard or paper plates to show different expressions. Show them to the infants and encourage them to touch and interact with the faces.

- Look at Me: Use a mirror or reflective material to play a game of peekaboo. Show the infant their reflection and then remove and return the mirror for playful engagement.

6 TO 12 MONTHS

- I Gotcha! Use a toy with a face to call the child's name and gradually move it closer, using playful voices. When the toy reaches the child, say "gotcha!" You can also use yarn or string.

ACTIVITIES FOR 12 MONTHS TO 2 YEARS

- Open and Close: Gather a variety of containers and objects that open and shut, like jewelry boxes or shampoo bottles. Help the toddler open and close each one, saying "open" and "close" each time.
- Tasting Fiesta: Host a tasting party featuring small plates of diverse foods. Children can select a piece of food from each plate and show their enjoyment by jumping or clapping their hands.
- Playing and Sorting Objects: Provide a bowl of small objects and a recycled egg carton or cups. Encourage children to sort the objects by color, shape, or size, placing similar items in the same cup.
- Fill and Dump: Give children spoons, buckets, bowls, or containers. Encourage them to fill the containers with water, sand, dirt, or mud, then dump them out, chanting "fill and dump!"
- Push the Trucks/Cars: Give each child a toy car or truck and encourage them to push it along different surfaces, making sound effects and introducing the concepts of fast and slow movement.

ACTIVITIES FOR AGES 3 TO 4

Pretending to be

- A tree: Stand tall, using arms to mimic leaves and branches swaying in the wind.
- A spinning top or move quickly like a racecar.
- Superheroes: Leap over tall buildings, bounce like a ball, or swing from jungle vines.
- Playing in the park: Scamper like a squirrel or pretend to fly a kite.
- Cowboy or Cowgirl: Brush a horse, toss on a saddle, hold the reins, and gallop. Swing a rope to catch a wild horse.
- An airplane: Stretch arms out like wings and fly through imaginary clouds.
- Ants: Move close to the ground, scurrying quickly.
- Camels: Plod through the desert.
- Wild animals: Walk like a gorilla, beat your chest, move like a bear, or stretch up tall like a giraffe. Create an elephant's trunk with your arms and stomp around.
- Birds: Waddle like a penguin, soar like an eagle.

- On the farm: Pretend to dig, plant seeds, pump water, or fix a barn with a make-believe hammer. Flap arms to be a buzzing bee or flutter like a butterfly to colorful flowers.
- Sea animals: Show how a clam opens and closes, wiggle like an eel, or move like a jellyfish floating in water.

CREATIVE MOVEMENT AND IMAGINATIVE PLAY FOR CHILDREN

CHILDREN CAN EXPLORE A WORLD OF MAKE-BELIEVE THROUGH A VARIETY OF CREATIVE MOVEMENT ACTIVITIES. SOME IDEAS INCLUDE:

- Show how a jellyfish floats in the water.
- Move quickly like mice and scamper into a make-believe hole.
- Trudge along train tracks with your arms, just like a train.
- Rock back and forth like a sailboat or blast off like a rocket ship to the moon.
- Sprint and turn quickly like a speedboat.
- Pretend you're a police officer, gripping motorcycle handles and moving quickly.
- Climb a tree to rescue a small cat.
- Stoop low and jump forward using your legs like a frog.
- Become a tall building by stretching upward and outward, then create a wide shape.
- Shake rugs in the wind and stretch to dust cobwebs from the ceiling for a cleaning house game.
- Form a giant mountain peak with your arms and stretch up to the clouds, then make raindrops by fluttering your fingers and run quickly from the rain.
- Quack and waddle like a duck.
- Mold and shape make-believe clay or bend strong metal into art as an artist.
- Create the shape of an orange or an apple with your body.
- Build a tunnel with your legs.
- Pretend to be a soap bubble floating through the sky and then pop!
- Draw on the floor with your foot as if it were a pencil.
- Use your hand as a paintbrush to make long, squiggly shapes.
- Jump along a path like a kangaroo.
- Pretend to blow up a balloon, then move as if the air escapes and you deflate.
- Stretch your arm muscles in all directions and show a strong shape.
- Show a tall, narrow body shape, or twist into a knotted, pretzel shape.

GAMES FOR AGES 3-4

CHASE

- Equipment: Two rags or small pieces of cloth
- Setting: Indoors
- Children sit or stand in a circle of eight to ten players. A rag (the "rabbit") is passed rapidly around the circle. After practicing, add a "hound" (another rag) to chase the rabbit. Children work together to keep the rabbit from being caught. The game can use different animal pairs, such as cat/mouse or fox/chicken.

DUCK, DUCK, GOOSE

- Equipment: None
- Setting: Outdoors
- Groups of six to eight sit in circles. One player ("It") walks around tapping others and saying "Duck." When "Goose" is called, the tapped player chases "It" around the circle. If caught, "Goose" becomes "It." The animal names can be changed for variety.

CREATIVE STATUES

- Equipment: None
- Setting: Outdoors
- Children are divided into groups of five. One child is the "twirler," who spins each child and releases them to freeze in a creative statue. The most creative statue becomes the next twirler.

GAMES FOR AGES 3-4 AND 5-8

A, B, C, MOVEMENT

- Equipment: None
- Setting: Indoors
- Each letter of the alphabet inspires a movement. Children are challenged to perform movements such as:

- A - Air: Take deep breaths.
- B - Bounce: Bounce like a rubber ball.
- C - Curl: Curl your body into a round shape.
- D - Dodge: Dodge from side to side.
- E - Explore: Pretend to explore a cave.
- ...and so on through the alphabet.

WHO CAN NAME THAT ANIMAL?

- Equipment: None
- Setting: Indoors
- Children name animals that growl, scratch, have long or short tails, have fur or hair, or not, make noises, and imitate their movements.

GAMES AND ACTIVITIES FOR CHILDREN

INDOOR ACTIVITIES

THINGS AND PARTS

For children aged 5-8, provide a chair or another large object as the focal point. Split the group into two or three teams. Each team takes turns naming or describing different parts of the object. The first team to run out of ideas loses the round. The winning team earns a point, then a new object is introduced for the next round.

TELL ME WHAT YOU CAN DO

With no equipment needed, children ages 5-8 sit in a circle. Each child introduces themselves and shares something they can do, such as singing or dancing. Everyone gets a turn to participate.

WHAT IS IT?

Give one large sheet of paper and a pencil or marker to the group. The adult draws a large picture, such as an animal or a house. Children take turns describing the picture or making up a story about it.

WHO CAN MAKE A CREATURE LIST?

Challenge the children to list as many animals as possible that swim, climb, fly, jump, or crawl.

WHO CAN MAKE A SHAPE?

Provide each child with a piece of paper. Ask them to fold the paper into different shapes, such as a box, boat, hat, basket, house, or Animal.

WHO CAN DRAW ME A PICTURE?

Read a story to the group, then have each child draw a picture inspired by the story using paper and pencils.

WHAT CAN YOU DO WITH A CIRCLE?

Give each child a sheet of paper with a circle drawn in the center. Encourage them to create a drawing that imaginatively uses the circle.

OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES

BIRDS IN THE GARDEN

For children aged 5-8, select one child to be the "Farmer" and give them 4 to 6 small objects to represent vegetables. The "Farmer" and their vegetables stand within a ten-foot circle. The others, acting as "birds," hop on one foot and try to snatch a vegetable without being tagged. If tagged, the vegetable returns to the "Farmer." The game ends when all the vegetables have been taken.

WIZARDS, GIANTS & ELVES

Organize children into two teams, each choosing to be wizards, giants, or elves. The teams face off, perform their chosen action, and determine which group wins based on the rules: wizards beat giants, giants beat elves, and elves beat wizards. The winning team chases the losing team back to home base, tagging as many as possible.

HOMEMADE PAPIER-MÂCHÉ FOR MODELING

Let children tear newspaper into small pieces, soak them in a pail of water, and allow them to stand for 4-5 hours. After draining, stir the mixture until it becomes moldable and pliable. Children shape the papier-mâché into objects and let them dry outdoors.

READY

Give each child an 8 to 12-inch stick and set up a small pile of sand. Children sit in a circle around the stick, taking turns scooping sand away until it falls to the ground. The child who makes the stick fall runs away while the others chase. If tagged, the runner receives a point. After three points, they leave the circle.

NATURE'S COLORS

Children observe their surroundings and identify as many different shades of color as they can find, noting objects that share similar shades of color.

NATURE SHAPE HUNT

Invite children to find objects outdoors that match different shapes, such as circles, squares, triangles, or rectangles.

KICK THE STICK RACE

Split the children into groups and line them up. The first child in each group receives a stick and kicks it to a target and back. Each child in turn repeats this. The race continues until all team members participate.

NATURE PLAY ACTIVITIES

SAND OR DIRT ART

For children aged 3-4, clear a space outdoors and let them use a stick to draw pictures in the dirt. They can also incorporate natural objects, such as leaves, feathers, stones, or sticks, into their artwork.

ANIMAL PACKS

Children select an animal to imitate and lead the group, who copy their movements and actions.

ANIMAL SOUNDS

The adult chooses two familiar animals. Each child silently picks which one to be and scatters around, making the Animal's sound. Children group as they find others making the same sound.

SPECIAL ANIMAL SOUNDS

Children silently select one of two chosen animals, close their eyes, spin around, and walk, making the sound of their chosen Animal. Once they find others of the same Animal, they join hands to form groups. Continue with different Animal sounds for variety.

CLOUD GAZING

Children lie down outdoors, close their eyes, and then open them to observe clouds. They identify shapes, objects, and colors in the clouds, and may later draw what they saw.

NATURE'S SOUNDS

Children lie down and listen carefully to their surroundings, raising their hands when they hear sounds such as birds, wind, or insects. The adult may prompt them to listen for specific sounds.

THE GREAT ROCK HUNT

Children collect rocks of various sizes, line them up from smallest to largest, and use them to create shapes or objects.

CHILDREN'S OUTDOOR AND INDOOR GAMES

ANIMAL AND NATURE ACTIVITIES

Animal Sounds: An adult selects two familiar animals. Each child silently chooses one, spreads out, and makes its sound. Children gather as they recognize others making the same animal sound.

Special Animal Sounds: Kids pick an animal, close their eyes, spin around, and walk while making the sound of that Animal. Once they find others of their kind, they join hands to form groups. Try different animals for variety.

Cloud Gazing: Children lie outside, close their eyes, then open them to look at the clouds. They pick out shapes, objects, and colors, and can later draw what they observed.

Nature's Sounds: Children listen quietly to their surroundings while lying down, raising their hands when they hear things like birds, wind, or insects. The adults may ask them to listen for specific sounds.

The Great Rock Hunt: Kids collect rocks of different sizes, arrange them from smallest to largest, and use them to create shapes or objects.

GAMES WITH EQUIPMENT

Five Stones (Ages 5–8): Each child collects five small stones, tosses them in front, and takes turns with various challenges like tossing one stone in the air while picking up the others. The tasks increase in difficulty, ending with picking up all the stones in one throw.

Find the Heartbeat (Ages 5–8): Children listen to the sounds inside a tree using a plastic cup pressed to the bark, comparing what they hear to their own heartbeat.

Bird Calls (Ages 5–8): Children invent bird sounds, hide or scatter, and mimic bird calls, trying to repeat what they hear from others.

RHYTHMIC ACTIVITIES

I See You Move (Ages 3–4): Children dance and move while a caregiver sings or claps. When the music stops, everyone freezes in place. Anyone who is caught moving helps create music for the next round.

Wind Moves (Ages 3–4): Each child gets two small, lightweight objects and moves them through the air to music, drawing shapes and letters with their arms.

Follow the Leader (Ages 3–8): Children form lines and imitate the movement of the leader at the front, switching leaders regularly.

Name My Moves (Ages 3–8): Children take turns standing in the center of a circle, introducing themselves and leading a dance move for everyone to repeat.

Sing-along (Ages 3–8): The Caregiver sings lines of a song, which the children repeat until the song is finished.

Happy Clappy (Ages 3–8): The Caregiver demonstrates a hand-clapping pattern for children to imitate, gradually increasing the complexity and inviting children to lead.

The Body Band (Ages 3–8): Children create sounds using their bodies—clapping, snapping, stomping, or humming—to form a band, with each section assigned a different sound.

Shaker Maker (Ages 3–8): Children make their music shakers from empty containers and fill them with various objects to create different sounds.

Let's Make Music (Ages 5–8): Children use sticks, rocks, or cans as instruments, with a caregiver conducting the group and signaling when to play quietly or loudly.

Super Sing-Down (Ages 5–8): Groups create songs based on a chosen topic, taking turns to sing lines that fit the subject.

Marching Band (Ages 5–8): Children use found objects as instruments, form groups, and march around the playing area performing their group song.

PHYSICAL PLAY ACTIVITIES

Close the Door (Ages 3–4): Children form a circle. Others pretend to be animals and run in and out until the circle is closed; those trapped inside swap roles.

Squeezy Hands (Ages 3–4): Children sit in a circle, holding hands, and pass a squeeze around as quickly as possible while the leader counts out loud.

Mr. Moon (Ages 3–4): One child is "Mr. Moon" and faces away from the group. Others creep closer while "Mr. Moon" isn't looking, but must freeze when "Mr. Moon" turns around. The goal is to tap "Mr. Moon" without getting caught.

How Far? (Ages 3–4): One child is the "Giant" and calls out how many steps others may take toward them. When closed, the Giant tries to tag someone to become the next Giant.

Tall Tunnels (Ages 3–8): Selected children are "It" and tag others to become the next "It." Two tagged children form a tunnel, and players are freed by running through it.

Drop the Handkerchief (Ages 3–8): Children stand in circles. The "It" runs around, dropping a handkerchief behind someone, who must chase "It" before they can reclaim the spot.

Freeze Tag (Ages 3–8): One child is "It" and tries to tag others, who must freeze when touched; all are tagged until only one remains.

Hot Ball (Ages 3–8): Children form a circle with one in the center, dodging a ball. The child who is hit becomes the next in the center.

Footraces (Ages 5–8): Races start with a line scratched in dirt. Children run to a target and tag the next in line.

Two and Two (Ages 5–8): Two "It" players link hands and catch others, growing the group. When four join, they split and continue until everyone is caught.

Electric Shock (Ages 5–8): Children stand in a circle holding hands. One is "It," eyes closed. A squeeze is passed around, and "It" attempts to locate the source by observing the movement.

Crocodile, Crocodile (Ages 5–8): One child is the crocodile, and the others ask to cross. Only those meeting the crocodile's request may cross safely; the rest try to run across without being tagged.

Rock, Paper, Scissors (Ages 5–8): Two children play rock, paper, scissors, with the first to win five rounds declared the grand winner.

Rush for the Treasure (Ages 5–8): Groups collect and protect "treasures" (sticks or rocks), trying to collect the most by the end of the game.

Driving Piggy to Market (Ages 5–8): Children use sticks to push a ball or a can (the "pig") towards a goal, taking turns in a relay.

Leap Frog (Ages 5–8): Children form lines and leapfrog over each other, moving to the front of the line and

Classic Outdoor Games and Activities for Children

TAG AND CHASE GAMES

Freeze Tag (Ages 3–8): One child is chosen as "It" and attempts to tag other players. When a child is tagged, they must remain in place until all children have been tagged.

Hot Ball (Ages 3–8): Children form a circle with one child in the center. The center child dodges a ball thrown by others; whichever child is hit becomes the next to stand in the center.

Footraces (Ages 5–8): Starting behind a line scratched into the dirt, children race to a designated target and then tag the next in line to take their turn.

Two and Two (Ages 5–8): Two children link hands as "It" and try to catch others; once a caught group reaches four, they split into pairs and continue until everyone is caught.

CIRCLE AND GROUP GAMES

Electric Shock (Ages 5–8): Players stand in a circle, holding hands. One child, "It," stands in the center with eyes closed. A hand squeeze is passed around, and "It" tries to detect the movement.

Crocodile, Crocodile (Ages 5–8): One child is the crocodile, and the rest ask to cross the "river." Only those meeting the crocodile's request may cross safely; the others must try to dash across without being tagged.

STRATEGY AND COMPETITION GAMES

Rock, Paper, Scissors (Ages 5–8): Two children play, and the first to win five rounds is declared the grand winner.

Rush for the Treasure (Ages 5–8): Groups collect and protect treasures (such as sticks or rocks), aiming to have the most by the game's end.

RELAY AND MOVEMENT GAMES

Driving Piggy to Market (Ages 5–8): Using sticks, children push a ball or can (the "pig") toward a goal in a relay format.

Leap Frog (Ages 5–8): Children form lines and leap over each other, rotating to the front and repeating the activity.

STOOP TAG (AGES 5–8)

Organize six or seven players per group, selecting one child as "It." On a signal, "It" tries to tag group members, but players can stoop low to avoid being tagged. After three steps, players must run within the play area. Once all are tagged, the first tagged becomes "It" for the next round.

EASY HOPSCOTCH (AGES 5–8)

A diagram is scratched in the dirt, and each child receives a flat rock, known as a "potsie." Children toss their potsie, aiming for the farthest box, with the turn order decided by the number of successful tosses. Each player hops through the boxes, retrieves their potsie, and advances to the next box. The game continues until someone completes all the boxes.

CIRCLE TOSS BALL (AGES 5–8)

Groups of five or six children form a circle, with one child as "It" in the center. A ball is passed among the circle while "It" attempts to catch it. If successful, "It" swaps places with the last to touch the ball.

WHEELBARROW RACE (AGES 5–8)

Children pair up, each pair chooses a "wheelbarrow" (on hands, supported by the partner holding their ankles). On the start signal, pairs race to a turning line and back—the first to finish wins.

JUMP ROPE ACTIVITIES

Jump the Old Shoe (Ages 5–8): Children in circles use ropes with an object tied to one end. The "twirler" swings the object under the children's feet. Anyone who steps on it switches roles with the twirler.

Jump Rope (Single) (Ages 5–8): Children use ropes sized to their height, practicing jumps such as double jumps, single jumps, backward jumps, alternate leg hopping, side bumps, and "pepper" (fast single jumps).

JUMP ROPE GROUP GAMES (AGES 3–4, 5–8):

- Waves: A "wave" is created by flicking the rope, and children jump over it.
- High Water, Low Water: Rope is moved back and forth as "water" to jump over.
- Visiting: Jumper enters, then another joins, signaling the first to exit.
- Speed Jumping: Rope is spun faster for increased challenge—"Salt" (slow), "Mustard" (medium), "Vinegar" (fast).

Mistakes result in switching roles with a turner, known as "taking an end."

MODIFYING ACTIVITIES FOR SUCCESS

Caregivers can adjust for a better play experience:

- CHANGE: Game name, formation, number of groups, group sizes, or equipment.
- ADD: Timers, safety rules, themes, props, or academic concepts.
- FOCUS ON: Fun, variety in movement, cooperative play, and child feedback.
- PROVIDE: Enthusiasm, encouragement, smiles, safety, and security.

ADDITIONAL PLAY IDEAS

- Action Rhymes
- Hiking
- Simon Says
- Hopping/Jumping Games
- Map Making
- Hill Play
- Four Square
- Box Ball
- Handball
- Galloping Games
- Monkey in the Middle
- Sand Play
- Kite Flying
- Bean Bags
- String Games
- Homemade Frisbee
- King of the Hill

- Balloon Play
- Guessing Games
- London Bridge
- Hide and Seek
- Playing House
- Homemade Tops
- Dress Up Play
- Skipping Games
- Building Blocks
- Homemade Cards
- Target Games
- Homemade Puzzles
- Tic-Tac-Toe
- Connect the Dots
- Simple Art Projects
- Collecting Objects
- Building Models
- Sock/Hand Puppets
- Puppetry
- Toy Vehicles
- Building Roads
- Cardboard Boxes
- Hunting for Bugs
- Newspaper Crafts
- Bubble Play
- Molding Clay
- Homemade Boats
- Climbing Games
- Modified Soccer
- Paper Bag Play
- Homemade Paddles
- Acting Out Scenarios
- Makeshift Basketball
- Tin Can Bowling
- Shadow Games
- Toss & Catch

- Homemade Dolls & Action Figures

CREATIVE AND RESOURCEFUL PLAY ACTIVITIES

Homemade paddles, acting out scenarios, makeshift basketball, tin can bowling, shadow games, toss & catch, and homemade dolls & action figures are just a few examples of inventive play. These activities demonstrate that, regardless of setting or available resources, the potential for play is limitless. Such creative approaches not only foster imagination and physical well-being but also underscore the fundamental value of play in every child's life.

CONCLUSION

These inventive play activities—ranging from climbing games and homemade toys to creative acting and makeshift sports—illustrate the endless possibilities for play, regardless of setting or resources. Such activities not only nurture imagination and physical health but also highlight the fundamental value of play in every child's life.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE CHILD'S RIGHT TO PLAY

ADVOCACY FOR PLAY

Supporting this philosophy, organizations such as IPA WORLD, the American Association for the Child's Right to Play (IPA USA), and UNICEF champion efforts to promote and protect children's right to play. They advocate for initiatives such as recess, after-school play, and inclusive opportunities for children of all abilities, while also offering resources on play policy, research, and community engagement.

LEARN MORE ABOUT IPA USA- VISIT OUR WEBSITE IPAUSA.ORG

The American Association for the Child's Right to Play (IPA USA)- United States affiliate) of the International Play Association (IPAWORLD.org). Promotes, preserves, and protects each child's right to play. Advocates and resources for recess, after-school play, community playdays, special needs population, obesity, playwork, playground design, and more.

Visit ipausa.org for policy briefs, the 50th Anniversary Whitepaper - a collection of 57 papers written by 59 authors in eight categories, all promoting the child's right to play. ipausa.org/whitepaper

Other Initiatives

- Pop-Up Play Days
- Porch Play Chats
- National Day of Play
- International Day of Play
- Screen Free Week- screenfree.org

- Promoting Recess
- Children in Crisis Play Days
- Conferences
- Town Halls
- PlayTalk Blog
- Activities to do at home or school - under Recess and Play
- The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child
- Find our links to Instagram, Facebook, Spotify, and YouTube – top right of the ipausa.org website.

WEBSITES

- ipausa.org: Resources and advocacy for children's right to play.
- bubbles.org: All about bubbles—games, recipes, and science.
- gameskidsplay.net: Playground games, rhymes, and international traditions.
- ipaworld.org: International Play Association, promoting play as a fundamental right.
- playgroundsafety.org: Playground safety, injury prevention, and training.
- nwf.org/natureactivities: Outdoor and nature play activities.
- https://www.fantasticfunandlearning.com/loose-parts-play-kids.html Loose Parts Play
- http://www.funsci.com/fun3_en/toys/toys.htm Fun Science Gallery
- http://www.freechild.org The Freechild Project
- http://www.worldplay.org International Play Association – IPAWorld.org
- http://www.123child.com The Activity Place
- birthdaypartyideas.com: Party ideas and activities for all ages.
- http://www.familytlc.net Family TLC
- http://www.funattic.com Fun-Attic, Inc.
- http://www.funandgames.org Fun and Games.org
- http://legendsandlore.com/puppet-resource.html Legends & Lore, Inc.
- http://www.streetplay.com Streetplay.com
- http://www.teachingideas.co.uk/pe/contents.htm Teaching Ideas for Primary Teachers