Cooperative Games: Returning to the Essence of Play

*by Anne Mijke van Harten, contributor to DrToy.com*

In cooperative games people play together instead of against each other. This results naturally in a win/win situation for all players. In less then no time, the focus has shifted from each one for themselves and trying to be the best, to working together to attain the set goal. The challenge of cooperative play is for each participant to explore and discover their own potential and to express that potential in the game, which then naturally adds to the potential of the group. The atmosphere during this kind of games often is a mixture of happiness and creative thinking, in which everyone is involved.

**A sense of belonging**

In our society the last century placed much emphasis on individuality and distinguishing oneself from others. This is easily to observe in the kind of games that were played. Competitive games teach us to be the strongest, the smartest, the fastest… But there can be only one winner, which evidently makes the other players all losers. This creates a feeling of separation instead of feeling welcomed and connected to others and the world around us.

It is my belief that by nature we feel inclined to belong. Not even so much in order to reach a goal, but simply because it is enjoyable being together. The structure of cooperative play encourages children to work together and to support each other. Since everybody-wins-or-everybody-loses in cooperative play, children can relax and appreciate everybody’s role in the game- no matter how small or big. During these kind of games, children are open, moves are discussed and children from different age groups or children and adults can easily play together. Children’s positive characteristics and behavior are strengthened and conserved by co-operative play, characteristics that are very valuable for our current society.  
Co-operative musical chairs

Just as in ordinary musical chairs, a chair is taken away in each round. Yet all players continue playing. When the music stops, they have to make sure they seat themselves on the remaining chairs. This calls for co-operation and creativity. The music will only start after everyone is seated (so no time pressure, no stress). Then another chair is removed. A variation for advanced players is no feet touching the floor. Beware of everyone’s safety and choose chairs that are very solid!

**The nature of play**

Play is an expression of children’s natural desire to explore the world and themselves. This can be observed all the time, where, through their playful exploration, children test the limitations and possibilities they meet along the way. Quite effortlessly, they create all sorts of games in this discovery process, in which basically nothing more is needed than their imagination and whatever materials or resources are available. To children, everything is play and it is through playing that they love learning and learn quickly. To play is to have fun!

From a certain age onwards, children start to experiment with making and applying rules in play. In their own play, they create their own rules, such as- ‘we must stay behind this white line’ or ‘we must keep our eyes closed’. Those rules are not fixed but played with- experimented with… In this kind of play all participants are free to introduce new rules.

Also, children encounter forms of play in which the rules have been set beforehand (the games we buy in the shops, a lot of circle- or group-games as well as all sports). In these mostly –competitive- games the goal is that one individual or one group must win and the others must lose.

I am caught by the fact that all these games, so carefully designed by adults, encourage children to oppose each other. When we are aware that play is a child’s most important learning tool, we may ask ourselves if what we teach children through competitive games– to tolerate the uneasy feeling of being beaten, to pinpoint others’ weak spots in order to be able to beat them, to acquire the notion that it is ‘nice’ to beat others even if they themselves do not enjoy being beaten – really are the values we want to teach and instill in them.  
Healthy competition

In competitive games, apart from things like learning the games and social rules involved, children also have to deal with the effort required to handle their feelings in losing or winning a game. Children lose a lot of energy in this, which otherwise could go to fully experiencing and engaging with their play, Many parents ask themselves how a child that has difficulty losing can be helped to handle this aspect of life. Often games result in children screaming angrily that the proceedings ‘were not fair’, not to mention the many times boards and bricks end up flying through the room! Even now, as a ‘grown-up’, you may still remember how unpleasant it was for you to be the last one chosen for a game. The certain possibility of failure creates stress and often makes children nervous and tense. And it’s not only them; observe grown-ups at soccer matches! Feelings of enmity are quite observable- they just seem to pop-up when people compete. Nevertheless, we still somehow feel that competition is ‘healthy’ for us. With competitiveness so deeply ingrained in our society, co-operative play encourages us to engage in new, and different ways of thinking.

**Returning to the essence of play**

At this moment there isn’t much choice in the kind of games that we can offer our children. Try this: go to a regular toyshop and ask for a game in which children play together, not against each other. You will quickly find that more often than not competition is involved. In my point of view, we encourage a one-sided development in society by the games we offer our children. When we see cooperation as a more natural way of being together and integrate this into our schools, homes, daycare-canters, etcetera, playing together instead of against each other will soon become a matter of course.

In a playful manner children will begin to see their own and other people’s strong points, their self-esteem will rise and they will discover the fun of being successful together. They will joyfully engage play in its full potential. Imagine more and more children who have learned to be cooperative and truly playful, growing up to be adults, and taking their places in society… We can contribute to this positive current by simply starting with offering a choice in the kind of games we teach our children.

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- See more at: http://www.drtoy.com/2011/09/26/cooperative-games-returning-to-the-essence-of-play/#sthash.OJAscHv1.dpuf