

ABOUT NATIVE AMERICAN GAMES

Game playing is a pastime enjoyed by most people. Native Americans are no exception.

The origins of many games were with the tribal gods. Because of this, games were played ceremonially to bring rain, ensure good harvests, cure illness, expel evil spirits, or give pleasure to the gods by demonstrating physical fitness. Though games are usually played for fun and pleasure, Native American games also played a role in the education of children by helping them develop skills necessary to be successful adults.

In general, boys and girls played separately, though they often might play the same games with variations in the rules. Certain ceremonial games were forbidden to women, particularly those games which might disrupt the protective powers of hunting and warfare spirits. In addition to games similar to boy's games, girls played "house," sometimes with miniature tipis or igloos. They also had dolls made from various materials such as wood, grasses, corn husks, animal skin, or bone. Doll play helped girls learn the skills of childcare.

Native Americans highly honored skilled athletes just as they honored brave warriors. Many games played by men and boys served to train them in skills needed for warfare and/or hunting. These games tested a boy's skill, dexterity, agility, strength, and stamina. The Cherokee Indians refer to stickball games as "the little brother of war."

Children played most of the same games as adults. In addition, they enjoyed races, tug-of-war, hide and seek, and blind man's bluff types of games.

Native American games fall into two general categories: games of chance, the outcome of which depends on luck, and games of skill. Games of chance are played with sticks, dice, or involved guessing. Skill games require physical and/or mental abilities. In the past, many games were played with balls made of animal skin stuffed with grass or hair, or inflated animal bladders.

NATIVE AMERICAN GAME KIT

This kit includes an assortment of games of both skill and chance, plus directions for variations of running games. There are games suitable for both indoors and outside play, as well as a variety of group sizes.

Equipment for several players or two teams are included in the kit. Also, there are directions for simple and inexpensive versions of the games. These could be made at home or as part of a classroom study.

We suggest that when large numbers of children are using the kit, several stations be set up and the group divided so everyone would be playing different games but at the same time. By rotating groups, the children could have an opportunity to learn and play most or all of the games. Since a variety of games are in the kit, teachers are encouraged to select the games that best suit their needs.

LEARN WHILE YOU PLAY

Since Native American games developed skills, have students identify the skills that each game they play would develop. Then, have the group discuss ways these skills would help Native American people of long ago and how the skill could be useful to us today.

BULL ROARER

Once widespread, today primarily in the Southwest

Bull roarers are used in ceremonies by the Pueblo Indians to call the Wind Spirits and bring rain. Children sometimes play with them. Hopi children may only play with them in the spring when there are no crops in the ground to be harmed should a wind come. The fear of a wind storm is so great among the Paiute and Apache plains dwellers that children are forbidden to play with bull roarers.

Equipment: Bull Roarers (also known as Moaning Sticks) consist of a flat stick 5 or 6 inches long with a hole near one end. A cord is tied through the hole on one end and the other end is attached to a stick serving as a handle.

Play: Grasping the handle, the child whirls the bull roarer over his head. A buzzing sound should result. Be sure the player has plenty of room with no other children nearby to avoid contact with the whirling stick.

BUZZ TOY

Ancient cliff dwellers and Pueblo

Any number may play, but each player must have a buzz toy.

Equipment: Buzz toys consist of a flat bone or wooden disk 3" in diameter with two holes pierced near the center. Two small pieces of wood for handles are attached to a doubled cord that goes through the 2 holes.

Play: Holding a handle in each hand, the disk is wound by whirling the string until it is twisted tightly. Then the string is pulled and released alternately causing the disk to unwind and rewind producing a humming or buzzing sound. Indian children would use their spinning disk to touch another child's disk and try to stop it from spinning. When played this way, the child whose disk is still spinning after others have been stopped is the winner.

RING AND PIN

Many tribes across North America

Any number may play. Turns must be taken.

Equipment: A ring or pierced bone, hide, grass, shell or wood, a string and pointed stick or bone for a handle.

Play: String is tied to pierced object at one end and pointed stick on the other. Player swings the pierced object or ring up into the air and tries to put the pointed stick through the hole. Some tribes in Canada play this in the spring because it is believed to hasten the coming of the sun.

NOTE: Versions of several games like the bean game, bull roarers, and ring and pin are found all over North America. Anthropologists think this wide distribution is a result of these being very ancient games rather than the result of contact by tribes in later times.

RUNNING GAME

Klamath (Northwest Coast)

Any number may play. This is traditionally a girls game.

Equipment: None.

Play: Players line up behind a starting line. Taking a deep breath, they run as far as they can while yelling loudly. When a player runs out of breath he/she must stop and stand still. The player running the greatest distance before running out of breath wins.

LAUGHING GAME

Nootka (Northwest Coast)

Any number may play.

Equipment: None.

Play: Players sit opposite each other in two lines or in pairs. Each tries to make the opponent laugh. First to succeed, wins.

GAME OF SILENCE

Chippewa (Northeast Woodlands), Inuit (Arctic)

Any number may play.

Equipment: None.

Play: Game of silence. Last one to speak wins. This is said to be Inuit mothers' favorite game for children in the winter.

BEAN GAME

Cherokee (North Carolina & Oklahoma)

Two or more players.

Equipment: A shallow basket (paper plate), seven flat sided beans or peach pits marked with paint or marker on one side only.

Play: Object of game is to toss and catch beans flipping them from unmarked side up to marked side up. Before play, decide how many turns each player will take. Players alternate turns, but scores for each turn are totaled. All 7 beans are placed plain side up on the bottom of the basket. Holding sides of basket, carefully toss beans up and catch them trying to flip beans over to marked side during the toss. Count the number of beans landing marked side up for your score. If any beans fall out of the basket player loses that turn and gets no score. After all players have taken the designated number of turns add the individual scores. Highest score wins. Tooth picks or corn kernels can be given to children as scoring pieces. Each child can count his markers at the end of the game. This game is good for young children learning to count.

CORN COB GAME

Zuni (New Mexico)

2 or more players

Equipment: One corn cob, flat stone to hold the corn cob, two flat stones to toss. If you want to form teams, each team should have a set of equipment.

Play: Set the corn cob on end on a large flat stone. Players stand behind a line four feet away. (As skill improves, players move back to greater distances from the cob.) The flat stones are tossed toward the corn cob. Player tries to knock over the cob and have the stone bounce back towards him. If cob is knocked over and stone falls behind where cob was standing there is no score. If stone knocks over cob and lands even with the cob's upright position the player gets another turn. Scoring only occurs when cob is knocked over and stone lands in front of the cob's standing position. Player then scores one point. The number of turns for each player or the winning score is predetermined and the player with the highest score or first to reach the designated score, wins.

STICK DICE

Havasupai (Southwest)

2 to 8 players, usually men

Equipment: 3 flat sticks, 3 inches long, white on one side, red on the other.

Play: Players take turns tossing the dice. Sticks are tossed up to land on flat surface. All three white sides equal 10 points or counters (tooth picks or corn kernels if used), 2 white and 1 red equals 2 counters, 2 reds and one white equals 3 counters, and 3 red equals 5 counters. Toothpicks may be used as counters. Highest score wins.

KICKING THE STICK

Pueblo (Southwest)

2 teams of even numbers, usually boys

Equipment: 2 sticks, four inches long and one inch in diameter.

Play: Select 2 leaders who then choose sides. The players stand in parallel lines behind their leaders. A line is drawn in front of the leaders and place the sticks on this line, one in front of each team. At a given signal, the leaders run forward and kick the sticks as hard as they can, each one taking the stick in front of his team. The rest of the players follow, getting into the race by taking their turn at kicking the stick whenever they get a chance. The players must not pick up the stick at any time. They must kick them out of any brush or hole that they may get into. Before the race a goal must be decided upon, at which place the players are to turn homeward. The players must all pass this goal before they turn about and go in the other direction. If they fail to pass it, they cannot kick the stick again. The first team to kick its stick back to the starting place is winner. In the early days, the young men were required to run for many miles every morning to enable them to become fast runners and strong at bearing heat and cold. Kicking the stick is one of the games they used for training. Adults usually ran for several miles out of the village before they started homeward.

BALL RACE

Zuni (New Mexico)

6-20 players

Equipment: sticks, five inches long, one for each player and a fist sized ball or stone for each player.

Play: The players are divided into two sides, facing a goal some thirty feet away. Each player has a stick of wood and a ball or even a stone the size of a fist, which he knocks toward the goal with the stick. The side that gets all its balls or stones across the goal line first wins. Indian children often decorate the sticks by painting or carving them. A track or circuitous route can be marked out rather than a straight course to the goal. This type of course would be more challenging to older students.

SHUTTLECOCKS

Zuni (New Mexico)

Any number may play.

Equipment: Corn shuck shuttlecock.

Play: Players try to see who can bounce the shuttlecock off the palm of their hand the highest number of times. Using the back of the hand presents more of a challenge.

SNATCHING PLACES

Dakota Sioux (Prairie-Plains)

6-20 players

Equipment: Pieces of cloth or paper large enough to stand upon. One fewer pieces of cloth than the number of players.

Play: The players form a ring, each one standing on his blanket, which marks his "owanka," or place. (The places may be marked by a piece of cloth or paper.) The places should be about two feet apart. One player without a blanket stands in the center of the ring. The others constantly change places with one another, while the one in the center tries to step into a space left vacant for a moment. When he succeeds, the player displaced must stay in the center until he in turn is able to find a vacant place.

RING TOSS

Navajo (Southwest)

2-20 players

Equipment: Vine or wooden ring 4 1/2" in diameter 1/2 painted white, 1/2 painted green and 2 pegs about 12" long. Pegs should be placed in the ground about as far apart as players can toss the ring.

Play: The players line up and start pitching the rings in turn. The player stands by one peg and tries to toss the ring close to or over the other peg. If ring falls so white side touches peg it counts one. If green side touches it counts two. Tossing ring over peg counts ten. The amount of points necessary to win (say ten) should be decided upon in advance and may vary with each game.

VAPUTTA

Pima (Southwest)

12-30 players, usually boys

Equipment: one small pebble

Play: The players are divided into teams and a leader is chosen for each. The teams line up facing each other a few feet apart. A goal is marked off about fifty yards distant from the first player on each team. The leader of the team that has first turn walks along behind his players, carrying a pebble or some small object in his hand. He pretends to place it in the hand of several players as he passes along, and actually does place it in one hand. When he reaches the end of the line, the leader of the opposite side guesses which player had the pebble or object. If he guesses right, he takes the object to hide in the hands of his team. If he guesses wrong, the player at the far end of the line having the object runs and jumps over the upheld leg of the man at the head of the line. This moves his side one man and the length of the jump nearer to the goal. The same leader hides the pebble once more and the play continues. The team that fools the other team the most and can jump the greatest distances will reach the goal first and win.

RACES (The 3 races below require no equipment)

BEAR RACE

Northwest Coast

Play: Players line up behind starting line. At signal they begin to run imitating a bear's shuffling gait – place left hand and right foot forward at the same time, then right hand and left foot forward. The first over the finish line wins; or the one with the best imitation of a bear may win. Older Children can return to the starting line to make the race longer and more challenging.

Lesson: Observe ways of nature around you (in this case, the bear's movements). It also teaches that speed is not always as important as correct play.

CRAB RACE

Northwest Coast

Play: Players line up 4 feet apart along the starting line. At a signal, players drop on all fours and move sideways, crab like, to the finish line. Older children should return to starting line but not turn around at end of course rather just reverse directions. Sometimes it is easier to run this way in one direction than the other, so both directions should be included for older children.

FROG RACE

Northwest Coast

Play: Players line up along a starting line. At a signal, they must squat down clasping their fingers around each leg just above their ankles and hop in this position to the finish line. If a player falls over but does not let go of his ankles he may continue. Any player releasing hold of his legs must start over. First over finish line wins.

BUFFALO WHEEL

Arapaho (Prairie-Plains)

2-20 players, usually boys.

Equipment: hoop laced with string (spider web-like) leaving a hole in the center and a stick, three to four feet long.

Play: The holes in the hoop are named for animals beginning with the center and moving toward the rim. One player stands at a distance and rolls the hoop by the player with the stick. That player throws the stick at the hoop trying to pierce the center hole. Each player has a predetermined number of chances tossing the stick. The player piercing the center or coming closest to the center the most times wins.

HANDS AND BONES

Blackfoot (Prairie-Plains)

2-12 players.

Equipment: 2 small oblong bones, one white, one with a black ring around it.

Play: The players are divided into two sides and seated in two lines opposite one another. The leader of one side takes the two small oblong bones, one in each hand. The leader changes the bones from one hand to the other, moving his hands and swaying his body, trying to make it impossible for his opponents to guess in which hand he holds the marked bone. If the opposing side guesses right, they win a point. The side guessing correctly continues to guess until they miss. Then their leader must try to fool the other team. First team to get 10 points wins the game.

STICK COUNTING

Chippewa (Northeast Woodlands)

2-6 players or 2 even numbered sides

Equipment: Eleven brightly painted sticks and ten counters (tooth picks) for each player.

Play: Players on each side sit facing each other. The leader of the side having first turn holds up the painted sticks and quickly divides them so that one hand holds five, the other six. The player opposite quickly guesses which hand holds the odd number of sticks by tapping that hand. If he guesses correctly each one on his side gets a counter from the opposite team and the next team member gets to guess. If he guesses incorrectly, his team must give counters to the opposite team and the sticks pass to him and his team. Players on each team play in turn at guessing or dividing the sticks. The player or team with the most counters at the end of a designated time wins.

DIRECTIONS FOR MAKING GAMES

(Some sample copies are included in resource kit packs.)

BEAN GAME: 18” heavy paper plates with a rim (Chinet) serve well as a basket. Dried large lima beans may be found in any grocery store. Students might enjoy decorating their paper plate “baskets” with Native American symbols or motifs.

BULL ROARERS: An adult size tongue depressor (drug stores and craft supply stores) with a hole drilled near one end will work as the sounding portion of the bull roarer. Any medium weight string about 18” long can be put through the hole and tied in a knot leaving a loop. I prefer heavy duty crochet thread (Cro-Sheen) found in variety stores. No handle is necessary but one can be made from a stick. Symbols pertaining to water are appropriate for decorating the bull roarers.

BUZZ TOY: Large buttons are successful substitutes for a wooded disk.

RING AND PIN: Paper towel cones may be cut into rings with a hole punched in one side for the string. Plastic curtain rings (large ones for young children) work well but are more expensive. Your butcher might be able to get you bone circles from hams or other meat cuts if you want authenticity. Tie one end of an 18” to 22” string around a stick or Popsicle stick or tongue depressor and pass the other end through the ring and tie.

CORN COB GAME: Flat stones from a creek or two poker chips glued together make good throwing stones. A dried corn cob cut flat on one end is easily obtained in the summer or fall or dry one from a meal at home. The stone for the cob to sit upon is not essential.

STICK DICE: The depressors can be cut in 3” lengths and painted appropriate colors with magic markers.

STICK COUNTING GAME: Colored unsharpened pencils will work well, especially with younger children.

BALL RACE: Sticks can be cut from commercial dowels or obtained from the woods. They do not have to be straight or smooth, just strong. Old, “dead” tennis balls would work well in this game.

SNATCHING PLACES: Large paper grocery bags could become “blankets” but might be slippery. Carpet scraps or samples or pieces of foam rubber carpet cushion should work also.

Craft shops have hoops and rings in various sizes which can be made into gaming pieces. Hardware stores carry wooden dowels in various diameters which can be cut to specified lengths for games requiring stakes or pegs.

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