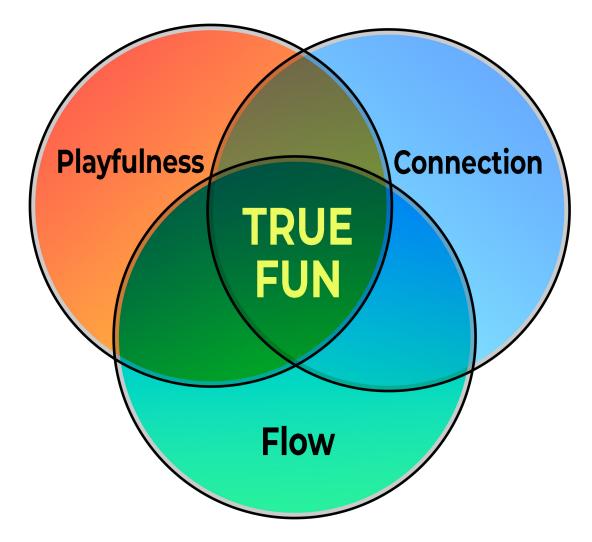# Creating a
Gameplay
PLAY-list

Developed Cooperatively by Outdoor Sport Institute & Indiana Teen institute

"If you are not having fun you are doing something wrong."

— *Groucho Marx*

Playfulness **Connection**

TRUE FUN

Flow

"True Fun is the confluence of playfulness, connection, and flow. Whenever these three states occur at the same time, we experience True Fun." — Catherine Price, The Power of Fun

GAMES TO THE RESCUE!

Helping others learn and have fun can be challenging, especially when working with various ages, skill levels, and backgrounds.

Good news! Games can help. Playing a group game effectively creates a fun and welcoming environment. It also gives participants of different abilities a shared experience while simultaneously building their skills.

Great gameplay can seem like magic. But it's also easier said than done. Many of us have experienced a game that flopped. The wrong game can lead to boredom or, worse, frustration and discouragement. The good news? It's easier than you think to have an ideal game on hand when you need it.
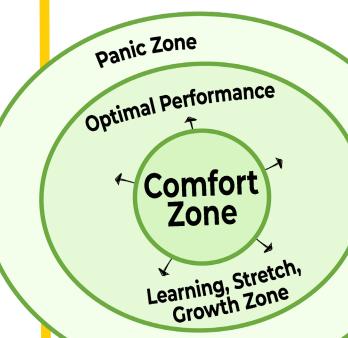
> **"It is a HAPPY TALENT to know HOW to PLAY."**
> **—Ralph Waldo Emerson**

Create your "PLAY-list"

You don't have to be a human encyclopedia of games to start using them more effectively. You simply need a good **PLAY-list** – a personal reference guide to help you choose when and how to use games.

Let's review FOUR tips to help you create your **PLAY-list.**

1. Know Your Context

Panic Zone

Optimal Performance

Comfort Zone

Learning, Stretch, Growth Zone

> **"CONTEXT is the key - from that comes the understanding of everything."**
> — Kenneth Noland

A commonly used model for understanding the participant experience is the **"comfort zone, stretch zone,** and **panic zone."** Peak fun occurs AFTER participants are in their comfort zone.

Some participants may arrive squarely in their comfort zone. In contrast, others may show up in (or near) the panic zone, maybe because they don't know anyone or feel intimidated by new activities or experiences.

The games we play will typically land better if we first make people comfortable and then invite them to stretch. To do so, it helps to understand the context you are working within.

With practice, you will learn to assess the context quickly and adjust gameplay as needed.

ASK YOURSELF

■ **Do people seem like they need to move closer to or farther from their comfort zone to be more engaged?** How can you sequence your games to achieve this? Remember that this question is about tuning into what they need, not what you want them to do.

■ **What's the goal?** Are you selecting an activity to help people get to know each other better or work on a skill they just learned? Are you trying to bring the group's energy up or wind things down?

■ **How is the group reading and responding to your energy?** Can you adjust your gameplay to meet them where they are?

■ **Are your choices culturally relevant and respectful?** Does the game you have in mind unintentionally alienate people because it draws on shared experiences they don't have? Is it demeaning or exclusionary?

■ **Is the environment conducive to the game?** Is the space adequate to safely play the intended game? Are there other factors that might limit engaging gameplay? Consider weather conditions, potential distractions, or any environment-related challenge that might inhibit play.

2. Aim For Inclusion

> **"Overwhelming evidence from psychological studies suggests that cooperative activities produce more open communication, sharing, trust, friendship, and even enhanced performance than competitive activities do. These differences were found in laboratory and field settings, as well as in a variety of experimental games."**
> — **Foundations of Sport and Exercise Psychology**

In any group, you will have participants of differing experience levels, cultural backgrounds, physical capacity, and skill proficiency. **Adapt your PLAY-list and gameplay to the audience you have.**

USE ELIMINATION GAMES SPARINGLY

ELIMINATE PLAYERS, ELIMINATE FUN. It's no surprise that people have more fun when actively playing. In fact, for some participants, elimination can be upsetting. It's not so much that they want to win, but they want to keep playing *and* remain part of the group!

EXAMPLE

Musical Chairs is a well-known game where players walk in a circle around a group of empty chairs while music plays. Each player must race to sit in an empty chair when the music stops. After each round of play, a chair is removed, making it progressively harder to occupy an open seat. If a player can't find a seat, they're out of the game.

Imagine you're playing with a group of young children. If a more physically developed child participates, it's not hard to guess who will have the advantage in claiming a seat. What if we flip the script? Instead of eliminating players each round, perhaps we tell players that they ALL need to be touching a chair when the music stops? The emphasis has shifted to inclusion, promoting connecting, problem-solving, and cooperation, not competition by elimination. And now, each child can participate equally regardless of size.

Which version of the game do you think creates more laughs and, ultimately, more fun? Aiming for inclusion also helps increase engagement, which brings us to tip #3.

3. Maximum Engagement

Make the point of the game to keep the game (fun) going. Author and scholar James Carse coined this an *infinite game*.

> *"A finite game is played for the purpose of winning, an infinite game for the purpose of continuing the play,"* wrote Carse.

Both finite and infinite games can play a role in facilitating a positive experience for those learning an outdoor sport. Infinite games, however, tend to foster more engagement.

1. *With no clear endpoint, they allow participants more time to play with and practice skills.*
2. *With no winner or loser, those who have less initial success with learning skills are not penalized for it.*
3. *Participation is prioritized over "success." Those that generally self-eliminate from a competitive environment are encouraged to keep engaging.*

Choose games where there is always an option for the action to continue.

Have players work together. The energy, laughs, and playfulness will exponentially increase when you have people communicating and cooperating. We're not just saying this because cooperation is a handy life skill. It turns out that when a group's energy has a common goal, it tends to it amplifies the benefits.
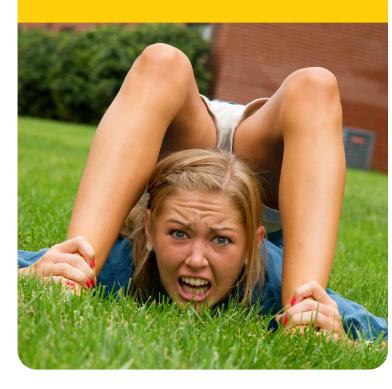
The best games keep everyone's attention. Whether creating a new game or adapting an existing game think about what everyone's doing while playing. Even if someone is "out," is there a way to keep their interest and give them a role?

Can We Still Play Finite Games?

Definitely! Games that have clear endpoints and clear winners can be lots of fun. If you're working with a group that participates in an outdoor sport competitively, using finite game structures can be an excellent tool to help participants practice working under the pressure of competition. Try keeping these principles in mind:

- Finite games work better when there's already strong group cohesion

- Cooperation is key. Just because you're playing a finite game doesn't mean it has to be everyone for themselves

- Even if your finite game has winners and losers, find a way to keep everyone engaged

4. Collect a FUN "Bag of Tricks"

Sometimes all you need is a rubber chicken.

Don't underestimate the power of playful, silly, and goofy props. Not only can these items be helpful additions to the games we play, but they also can serve as non-verbal cues that we aren't taking ourselves too seriously.

Some of our favorite props include:
- Rubber chicken (or fish, or animal of choice)
- Foam pool noodles
- Soft toss-able balls
- Soft frisbees
- Different lengths of rope /webbing
- Plastic hoops
- Deck of Cards (super-sized)
- Balloons
- Disks that make easy place markers
- An assortment of animal chew toys

Once you've assembled your collection of props, it's easy to add, subtract, and change them over time. Make it mobile, literally. Find a FUNbag, so it's easy to keep them with you.

"You can't get a suit of armour and a rubber chicken just like that. You have to plan ahead."

— *Michael Palin*

5. Create Your PLAY-list!

Aim for inclusion, keep people engaged, and bring a rubber chicken. Easy, right?

Even with these tips, we know it can be challenging to come up with a game on the spot. The good news is if you create a **PLAY-list**, you don't have to. A **PLAY-list** is an easy reference guide for you when leading your programs. It can be a small handwritten note card or a detailed, typed page. For our example, we'll use an index card.

On one side of the card, write down four categories:

Solo	
Pairs	
Small Groups	
Teams	

Then, you're going to jot down the names of one or two games in each category that you're comfortable playing.

Solo	Swat Tag
Pairs	Partner Tag, Handshakes
Small Groups	Quick Line Up, Categories
Teams	Giants, Wizards, and Elves

You can add helpful cross-categories if you want more detail for easy reference.

	High Energy	**Low Energy**
Solo	Swat Tag	Rock, Paper, Scissors
Pairs	Partner Tag	Handshakes
Small Groups	Quick Line Up, Triangle Tag	Categories
Teams	Giants, Wizards, and Elves	

	New to Each Other	Know Each Other
Solo	Swat Tag Rock, Paper, Scissors	Rock, Paper, Scissors Swat Tag
Pairs	Handshakes	Partner Tag
Small Groups	Quick Line Up, Categories	Triangle Tag
Teams	Code Breaker	Giants, Wizards, and Elves

As you discover more games, you can change up your **PLAY-list** or add to it. If you're new to a game, you might need to have the instructions written down. With a bit of practice, we usually remember the games we like. Then all it takes is a glance at the name to recall the details.

The point is that you don't have to remember every game you've ever used. You can pre-load your **PLAY-list**. The other great news is that recalling one game in a category will bring others to mind over time.

But we're not done yet. On the other side of your card, you will add two columns labeled "Tweaks" and "Nuggets." Here you can jot down the creative tweaks you find to help your games work better. It's also where you can capture helpful concepts that you'd like to remember.

Tweaks	Nuggets
Have people find new partners using the handshakes game.	Remember – consider the context Read how the group is readings me

You might find that you want to create alternative **PLAY-lists** for the various programs you facilitate. Pulling your **PLAY-lis**t out and referencing it while you're with participants is also totally okay. Playing games and having fun doesn't need to be a magic trick.

Finally, Seek New Ideas

A commonly asked question is, "where do you get your games?"

Many of the best games we play are those adapted from other situations. There's no shortage of books, websites, and other resources available to gather ideas. There's also a lot to learn from seeking out training in group facilitation. Doing so will improve your teaching, coaching, group management, and ability to lead games.

Finally, don't be afraid to ask the participants. There's nothing wrong with the question, "anyone got a game they'd like to share?" And if you find yourself stumbling upon a great game with the groups you serve, please share with us!