

# Reinventing Rules in Outdoor Games

Use this tool to inspire children's agency, collaboration, and systems thinking through whole-body play.

## Step 1

Teach children a non-competitive outdoor or physical education game so they have a chance to become familiar with a complex system (the game) with rules, characters, and goals. The game should include a helping component and be playable by the whole class. (See "[Game Descriptions](#)" at the end of this tool for suggested games.)

## Step 2

Before playing the game, ask children to draw pictures, talk through, or act out parts of the game in the classroom (e.g., *What does it look like to tag? ...to be tagged? ...to save someone?*). Ask children to model the parts for others. Allow time for each child to rehearse the parts before playing the game.

## Step 3

When teaching the game, ask children to anticipate what conflicts or hard moments might arise. Discuss those parts in greater depth and invite clarifying questions. Ask children to suggest strategies by sharing what they might say to themselves or others in such instances.

## Step 4

Find out who would like to try a particular role. Offer roles that carry more power to children with less social power. Pay attention to equity (race, gender identity, neurodiversity, etc.) to make sure everyone has an opportunity to play a range of roles.

## Step 5

Use the first game to get a sense for children's interpretations of the rules and experiences with problems and breakdowns. Pause the game to clarify roles or rules or to make adjustments.

## Step 6

Reflect on the experience with the children. Ask questions such as, *What felt fun? hard? confusing? frustrating? inclusive? exclusive?* After the reflection, invite children to give handshakes, high-fives, or hugs, especially if emotions have been running high. This will help bring the group back together as a community.

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## Step 7

Create signals and make adjustments so the game will feel fun for everyone. For example, hand-on-head might mean “I’m not taggable”; rock-paper-scissors can be a way to move from a disagreement back to the game; a yellow pinnie might signify, “I’m playing, but I’m not getting tagged.”

## Step 8: Reinvent the rules

Once children are familiar with the game, invite them to add new characters, roles, or rules. When children offer an idea, give other children an opportunity to ask them questions to clarify their ideas. In general, do not add more than one or two characters or rules at a time.

### Tips and Variations

- A single round of any of these games may only take a few minutes, so you can often fit several rounds into one period. The repetition also allows children to swap roles or try new characters.
- In all of these games, there are multiple options for what happens when someone gets tagged. Children can squat down and wait to be rescued; they can become the new tagger (trading jobs with the child who tagged them); they can give something to the tagger (like the rubber band in the Resource Game); they can become a helper to the tagger (like the sea monster in Grump Island); or they can transform into a new character (like the seaweed in Octopus Tag, or moss in the Great Wall of China).
- If, when rehearsing a game, children ask a large number of “what if” questions, tell them you will address the questions as they occur during the game, but not during classroom discussion.
- Once children have schemas for a variety of games, you can adjust the games to reflect ongoing project work (or a component of that work) in the classroom.

For video examples and reflections on practices that inspire inventiveness, become an Opal School Online Sustaining Member at [learning.opalschool.org](https://learning.opalschool.org).



## Children need to practice the capacity to negotiate and sometimes disrupt the rules around them.

Although games rely on agreements about rules and the willingness of players to follow them, an over-reliance on following rules can sometimes detract from children's agency and inventiveness. Children benefit from invitations to negotiate and renegotiate rules, to ask questions, to build consensus, and to commit to agreements made by the group. Such skills are called on in a healthy democratic society; practicing them by playing games throughout childhood helps to strengthen these skills in a low-stakes setting and to build community.



### Suggested Time Frame

These games typically take 45 minutes. Introducing and reflecting on a game requires almost the same amount of time as playing it — so 45 minutes might include 10 minutes to get ready, 20 minutes to play, 10 minutes to review, and 5 minutes of transition time.

### When and How

Use this tool when you want to deepen children's understanding of games, rules, systems, or a particular area of study. You can also use this tool to build community, especially if the game includes opportunities to help others. Games can also be used simply when you want children to go outside and move around.

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## Game Descriptions

### China Wall

The goal of this game is twofold: For some children, it is to cross the 'Great Wall of China,' while for others, it is to prevent anyone from crossing the wall. Set up a line of cones about 30 feet across in a playing area. Ask two children to stand on the line of cones and act as "dragons" who can tag those crossing the wall. The dragons call the rest of the group across by saying, "Can you cross the Great Wall of China?" The group responds, "Yes," and charges from one side of the area, through the wall, to the other side. Dragons can run up and down the length of the wall of cones, but may not step off of it with both feet. Dragons can only tag others when the latter are crossing the wall. If children are tagged, they become "moss" on the wall and can tag others on the next crossing, but they may not run up and down the length of the wall. Children can add rules, such as that those who are tagged start off as dragon "eggs," but with each crossing, the eggs gradually hatch and grow into full-blown adult dragons with full tagging powers. The game continues until most of the wall is clogged up with dragons and moss, making it very difficult for anyone to cross. Then a new round starts.

### Cross if You...

In this game, children try to move from one side of a playing area to the other. A caller (student or teacher) says, "Cross if you \_\_\_\_\_ [e.g., "like singing"]." If the statement applies to the players, they move from one side of the area to the other. This game can be used as a way for children to get to know other children if they pay attention to the prompts and when children cross. Prompts can range from "cross if you like reading," to "cross if you have slept in a tent," to "cross if you like strawberries." Children can add a tagger to make the game more exciting. When someone crossing gets tagged, she becomes the next tagger, or a helper to the existing tagger.

### Grump Island

Set up two lines of cones on each side of the playing area, with two hula hoops in the middle representing islands in the ocean. Players try to "swim" across one side of the ocean to the other. They are required to step on an island during their ocean crossing to "rest." There is one Grump on each island. The Grump holds a soft dodgeball and tries to throw it at the swimmers as they cross. If a swimmer gets hit, the Grump becomes a swimmer and the swimmer is the new Grump on the island. There is also a sea monster who can travel anywhere in the ocean, but not on the land or on an island. If the sea monster tags a swimmer, the swimmer joins hands with the sea monster, and they become a two headed sea monster. Once the sea monster has four heads (four children with hands joined), it can decide whether to divide into two two-headed sea monsters, or to try to tag a fifth person. If a fifth person is tagged, she becomes a new single-headed sea monster, while the others go free and become swimmers. Children can add helping characters. For example, one child might introduce a sea turtle, who can "carry" a swimmer (hands on shoulders) safely to the other side of the ocean.



## Everyone's Tag

Everyone is a tagger in this game. Each player tries to tag others without being tagged themselves. If a child is tagged, she squats down until the child who tagged her gets tagged. Then she can run free. If two people tag each other at the same time, they play "rock-paper-scissors" to decide who goes down and who runs free. Again, the person who goes down watches to see when the person who tagged them gets tagged by someone else. There is also a "poison cabbage" version of this game where those who are squatting down after being tagged can tag anyone who passes near them (without moving or diving), and then are free to run again. This helps the tagged people not get too bored waiting for the child who tagged them to get tagged. You can also call a "jail break" or "new round" as often as you like to free the players who are down and keep everyone moving.

## Resource Game

Hide resources (in the form of various colors of popsicles sticks) throughout the playing area (often a meadow or open paved area on the playground) and surrounding area (often trees, rocks, or playground equipment). The popsicles sticks might represent food, water, or something else that the characters in the game need. Set up five hula hoops in a central area as "home bases" for small groups (typically three to five children). Ask for two or three volunteers to act as predators. The children trying to collect resources have several bands around their wrists that represent "lives." In order to survive, each small group has to collect a certain number of each resource. Resources may only be picked up and brought to home base one at a time, so children may not grab an entire handful of popsicle sticks. If children are tagged by a predator, they must give the predator one band. The predator usually tries to collect a certain number of bands from the players. (Sometimes one student seems to do most of the running and collecting without much interaction with teammates. In that case, you can suggest that players who share a home base need to work together to collect the resources [popsicle sticks] before returning home. You could specify that a resource needs to pass through at least two [or even all] teammates' hands before it can be brought to home base.) You might invite children to decide what happens to players who run out of bands. For example, perhaps there is a character who delivers bands to those who have none, or perhaps those players need to return to their home base for the remainder of the round.

## Bees and Butterflies

Place two hula hoops that represent "hospitals" in the middle of the playing area. Most of the children are butterflies; a few are bees with foam pool noodles to tag the butterflies. If a butterfly gets tagged, she squats down and calls for help. Two other butterflies can respond by joining arms with the tagged butterfly, bringing her to the hospital, and counting to five. After that, all three butterflies can run free. This game can be modified to include ladybugs, wasps, and/or humans, each with a unique role that either helps or challenges the other characters.



## Octopus Tag

In this game, the majority of the group tries to cross an imaginary ocean while avoiding a predator--the octopus. The octopus tags by using its hands or a soft dodgeball. When players are tagged, they become "seaweed" and can tag other swimmers crossing the ocean, but they cannot move their feet; Like kelp, they are anchored to the ocean floor. Sometimes the seaweed are given dodgeballs to increase their chances of tagging a swimmer passing by.

