

Play Starter Guide

10 games for home and class, with nothing to buy. Ages 4 to 12, 5 to 20 minutes each.

PLAY-001 · 2026 EDITION



10

games, no equipment to buy

4–12

ages, each game shows its range

5

areas of development

FREE

print and share with your group

BEFORE YOU START

Ten games, five areas

Each game needs nothing more than paper, a pencil, a few household objects and some space. It works with one child at the kitchen table or a class of twenty-five.

**Thinking**

Remembering rules, planning, switching between ideas, noticing patterns.

Games 2, 7

**Talking**

Explaining, listening, asking questions, taking turns in conversation.

Games 3, 8

**Feelings**

Naming feelings, reading faces, waiting, seeing another point of view.

Games 4, 9

**Moving**

Balance, coordination, stopping and starting on cue.

Games 1, 6

**Making**

Building, drawing, inventing, trying again after something fails.

Games 5, 10

**After the game**

Four short questions to help children notice what they did.

You are part of the game. Research on play in education suggests that children learn most when an adult sets up the play and joins in lightly, asking a question or adding a twist. A review of 39 studies found that this kind of "guided play" helped some outcomes, such as early maths and shape knowledge, more than direct instruction did, while for others the differences were small (Skene et al., 2022). Treat each game as an invitation, not a script.

1 Opposite Day



Age 4-8



2 or more players



5-10 min



open space

HOW TO PLAY

- 1 Agree on three actions: jump, sit, freeze.
- 2 Call them out and children do them.
- 3 After a few rounds, announce "Opposite Day": now jump means sit, sit means jump, and freeze means dance.
- 4 Mix normal and opposite rounds by holding up a card that says OPPOSITE.

MAKE IT EASIER

use only two actions and switch to opposite once.

MAKE IT HARDER

add a fourth action, or let a child be the caller.

WHAT IT BUILDS

Stopping an automatic response and following a changed rule, a core part of self-control. Games of this kind have been studied as classroom routines for preschoolers.

WATCH FOR

Who laughs at their own mistakes and carries on, and who needs to watch others before moving.

2 The Missing Thing



Age 4-10



2-6 players



10 min



6-12 small objects, a cloth

HOW TO PLAY

- 1 Lay out the objects.
- 2 Everyone looks for 30 seconds.
- 3 Children close their eyes while you remove one object and cover the rest.
- 4 Lift the cloth: what is missing?

MAKE IT EASIER

start with 5 objects and remove one.

MAKE IT HARDER

remove two, or swap the positions of two objects and ask what changed.

WHAT IT BUILDS

Visual memory and attention. Children often invent their own ways to remember ("the red things are on the left"); ask them to share their method.

WATCH FOR

Strategies: a child who names the objects out loud is using language to help memory.

3 Story Stones

 TALKING

 Age 5-12

 2-8 players

 15 min

 8-10 pebbles or paper circles with simple drawings (sun, key, boat, tree, door, cat, rain, box)

HOW TO PLAY

- 1 Put the stones in a bag.
- 2 The first player draws one and starts a story using that object.
- 3 Each player in turn draws a stone and adds a sentence that uses it.
- 4 The last player must end the story.

MAKE IT EASIER

let children look at all the stones first and pick one.

MAKE IT HARDER

every sentence must begin with "But" or "Then suddenly".

WHAT IT BUILDS

Sequencing, listening to what came before, and connecting ideas.

WATCH FOR

Whether children build on the previous sentence or start a new story each time.

4 Face Detective

 FEELINGS

 Age 4-9

 2-10 players

 10 min

 nothing

HOW TO PLAY

- 1 One player turns away and makes a face showing a feeling (surprised, worried, proud, bored).
- 2 They turn back and hold the face for three seconds.
- 3 The others guess the feeling and say one clue they noticed: "eyebrows up", "mouth tight".

MAKE IT EASIER

start with four big feelings: happy, sad, angry, scared.

MAKE IT HARDER

add a situation ("Show how you feel when your tower falls down") and let others guess both.

WHAT IT BUILDS

Naming feelings and reading faces, which children use when they try to understand others.

WATCH FOR

How precise the clues are. Moving from "sad" to "disappointed" is progress.

5 Paper Bridge

 MAKING

 Age 6-12

 1-4 per team

 20 min

 3 sheets of paper per team, two books of the same height, coins

HOW TO PLAY

- 1 Put the books 15 cm apart.
- 2 Each team builds a bridge between them using only the paper (folding is allowed, tape is not).
- 3 Test by adding coins one at a time.
- 4 Then give teams five minutes to improve their design and test again.

MAKE IT EASIER

show one fold (a zig-zag) before they start.

MAKE IT HARDER

move the books 25 cm apart, or allow only one sheet.

WHAT IT BUILDS

Testing, failing and redesigning; early ideas about shape and strength.

WATCH FOR

What children change after the first test. Improvement matters more than the final number of coins.

6 Slow Motion Race

 MOVING

 Age 4-10

 2 or more players

 5 min

 a start and finish line about 4 metres apart

HOW TO PLAY

- 1 It is a race, but the last person to cross the finish line wins.
- 2 Everyone must keep moving the whole time; anyone who stops completely goes back to the start.

MAKE IT EASIER

shorten the distance to 2 metres.

MAKE IT HARDER

walk only on tiptoe, or carry a spoon with a paper ball on it.

WHAT IT BUILDS

Balance, body control and resisting the urge to rush.

WATCH FOR

Who plans how slowly they can go, and who speeds up without noticing.

7 Twenty Yes-or-No

 THINKING

 Age 6-12  2-10 players  10 min  paper, pencil

HOW TO PLAY

- 1 One player thinks of an animal, object or place and writes it down secretly.
- 2 The others ask questions that can only be answered yes or no.
- 3 Count the questions on the paper.
- 4 Can the group find the answer in 20 or fewer?

MAKE IT EASIER

choose from six picture cards on the table.

MAKE IT HARDER

only questions that split the possibilities in half earn a point ("Is it bigger than a cat?" rather than "Is it a dog?").

WHAT IT BUILDS

Asking useful questions, narrowing down possibilities, holding several facts in mind.

WATCH FOR

The moment children stop guessing single answers and start asking questions that group things.

8 Listen and Draw

 TALKING

 Age 6-12  pairs  15 min  paper, pencils, simple pictures made of shapes

HOW TO PLAY

- 1 Partners sit back to back.
- 2 One holds a simple picture (for example, a house made of a square, a triangle and two small squares) and describes it without naming the object.
- 3 The other draws what they hear.
- 4 Compare the drawings, then swap roles.

MAKE IT EASIER

the listener may ask three questions.

MAKE IT HARDER

the describer may not use shape names, only lines and directions.

WHAT IT BUILDS

Precise explanation and careful listening. Both children learn how much detail another person needs.

WATCH FOR

How the describer changes their words in the second round.

9

Two Sides of the Story

 FEELINGS


Age 7-12



2-8 players



15 min



short situation cards you write yourself

HOW TO PLAY

- 1 Read a short situation: "Ali borrowed Deniz's pencil and it broke." One child tells what happened as Ali, another as Deniz.
- 2 The group asks each character one question.
- 3 Then everyone suggests one fair way to fix the problem.

MAKE IT EASIER

use situations with animals or toys instead of classmates.

MAKE IT HARDER

add a third character who saw what happened.

WHAT IT BUILDS

Seeing a situation from more than one point of view and looking for solutions both sides can accept.

WATCH FOR

Whether children explain the other character's feelings, not only their actions.

10

Rule Makers

 MAKING


Age 7-12



3-6 players



20 min



any simple objects (a ball, cups, coins, dice)

HOW TO PLAY

- 1 Give the group three objects and ten minutes to invent a new game with them.
- 2 The game needs a goal, at least two rules and a way to decide who wins.
- 3 The group teaches their game to another group or to an adult, who plays it and suggests one change.

MAKE IT EASIER

start from a game they know and change one rule.

MAKE IT HARDER

the game must work for players of different ages, or be cooperative with no single winner.

WHAT IT BUILDS

Designing, negotiating, explaining rules clearly and improving an idea after feedback.

WATCH FOR

How the group handles disagreement about rules. This is often where the most useful talking happens.

AFTER THE GAME

Talk for two minutes

A short talk after playing helps children notice what they did. Pick one or two questions, not all of them.

01

**What was the hardest moment?
What did you do then?**

02

**Did you change how you played
halfway through? Why?**

03

**If we play again tomorrow, what
would you try?**

04

Who helped you? How?

SAFETY AND INCLUSION

Clear the space before movement games (1 and 6) and agree a "stop" signal.



Every game can be played seated. For Opposite Day, clap instead of jumping; for Slow Motion Race, move a hand along the table.



In Face Detective and Two Sides of the Story, use invented situations, not real conflicts between children in the group.



Keep small objects (games 2 and 5) away from children under 4.



What's next. Full EduTrend Contents packs with more games, lesson plans and observation sheets are coming to EduStore, starting with G4C-110 Thinking Games. Free articles and games: edutrend.org/blog

SOURCES

What this pack is based on

1. Skene, K., et al. (2022). Can guidance during play enhance children's learning and development in educational contexts? A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Child Development*, 93(4), 1162–1180.
2. Tominey, S. L., & McClelland, M. M. (2011). Red Light, Purple Light: a randomized trial using circle time games to improve behavioral self-regulation in preschool. *Early Education and Development*, 22(3), 489–519.
3. What Works Clearinghouse (2022). *Red Light, Purple Light* intervention report.
4. Yogman, M., et al. (2018). The power of play: A pediatric role in enhancing development in young children. *Pediatrics*, 142(3), e20182058.

Evidence. Guided play has research support for some outcomes. The games are original classroom practice; Opposite Day is similar to, not the same as, the studied Red Light, Purple Light games.

Edition. PLAY-001 · v1.0 · 2026 Edition · EduTrend Contents

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