



# TRADITIONAL PLAYGROUND GAMES



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# TRADITIONAL PLAYGROUND GAMES

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# Traditional Playground Games

Play is an essential part of the development of all children and traditional playground games have been played for hundreds of years all over the world.

Once a child reaches school age and begins to play with other children, play becomes a social occasion and games become elaborate rituals.

When playing traditional games I have noticed that children have an incredible capacity to be poetic and creative; in contrast to when they are taught games in PE where the rules are fixed, in the playground they can influence how games are played. You may notice children's love of rhymes with these old traditional games. I have found that these are often adapted and can exist for the pleasure of themselves and to help children to make sense of the world and reflect cultural fears. I remember the rhyme, 'My mother said, I never should, play with gypsies in the wood,' this reflected some of our cultural fears at the time. 'In and Out the Dusty Blue Bells,' used to have the ending, 'You will be my master.' Most children now say, 'You will be my partner.' This reflects the passage of time and possibly political correctness! While listening to children playing you may also have heard some rhymes verging on the taboo!

In the playground children have the freedom to be themselves, unencumbered by the rules and regulations of us adults. There is what the Opies (1969) call a 'juvenile code'.

When it comes to rules, children often have their own for games or they find ways to make them more co-operative and fair or just more fun!

At Musselburgh school in Dunedin, New Zealand, I recently played the game, 'Duck, Duck, Goose'. The children had made up some different rules that made the game even better and I have included their ideas in this game. When the goose was caught by the trapper, he reverted to being a duckling and had to squat down in the centre of the inner circle and make duck-like noises and gestures with his arms. This child remained in the centre of the circle until another duck was caught.

## Traditional Games in this Section

I have chosen many popular games for this section that children regularly play in the playgrounds. I have also selected some that I loved in my youth.

Game number nine is called 'Queelio Cockio', and is often referred to as 'Queenie' in other playtime books. This was one of my favourite games when I was ten years old and I have chosen to call it the name that we used to use. You will find that some games do have alternative names and the children may want to re-name or adapt them. Do add their ideas and suggestions when you print off the games from the CD-ROM and please email me new games and any suggestions that make these games even better.

Traditional playground games and games in general have often been handed down from generation to generation. Sadly many of our children cannot play on the streets today, due to parental concerns of stranger danger and busy roads. We hope that you and your schools will now pass on the legacy of our old traditional games to the children you teach.

# 1. Farmer, Farmer May We Cross Your Golden River?



15 minutes

Age Range: 6-10

Ideal Number of Players: 6+

Equipment Needed: None

## How to Play

One player is named the farmer and stands in the middle of a designated area of the playground.

The other players stand behind a line, in a row about ten metres away from the farmer.

A designated 'home' area is agreed, usually the opposite end of the play area.

The players call out, 'Farmer, Farmer may we cross your golden river?'

The farmer replies, 'Not unless you have the colour... on.'

Those players lucky enough to have that colour on may cross the playground safely to the designated home area.

The farmer then counts to five and on five the other players must walk or run 'home' whilst the farmer tries to catch them. Anyone who is caught helps the farmer to choose what colour the players should be wearing next to be able to cross the river.

The game continues with a different colour each time until the last player is caught and she becomes the farmer.

## Variations

Once a player is caught they stand in the middle, join hands with the farmer and help him to catch players.

## Comments

Make sure all players keep inside the marked area.





## 2. In and Out the Dusty Bluebells



10-15 minutes

Age Range: 5-7

Ideal Number of Players: 8+

Equipment Needed: None

### How to Play

'In and out the dusty bluebells  
In and out the dusty bluebells  
In and out the dusty bluebells  
Who shall be my partner?

Tippity, tappity on your shoulders  
Tippity, tappity on your shoulders  
Tippity, tappity on your shoulders  
You shall be my partner.'

This is a ring dance for at least eight dancers.

#### Verse 1

Everyone stands in a circle holding their hands up high to make an arch between each dancer. One dancer is chosen and skips in and out of the arches while all players sing the rhyme.

#### Verse 2

On 'Who shall be my partner?' the dancer stops and taps whoever is closest on the shoulder. This dancer then joins on to the first dancer and they weave in and out again as the first verse is repeated. The game is repeated until all the children form a chain, then they all skip round for as long as they like.



### 3. What's the Time Mr Wolf?



20 minutes

Age Range: 5-11

Ideal Number of Players: 12-20

Equipment Needed: None

#### How to Play

One player is chosen to be Mr Wolf.

The other players stand in a line on the opposite end of the playground about 10-12 metres away from Mr Wolf. This line is referred to as 'home'.

Mr Wolf stands with his back to them.

The players chant, 'What's the time Mr Wolf?'

Mr Wolf replies (for example), '3 o'clock.'

The players advance the same number of steps, that is, 3 steps for 3 o'clock.

The game continues until Mr Wolf thinks the players are close enough to catch and after being asked the time again he replies, 'Dinner time,' then turns and chases the players. The first child caught becomes Mr Wolf.

If Mr Wolf does not catch anyone, he has to be Mr Wolf again.

If a player reaches Mr Wolf before dinnertime, they tap Mr Wolf on the shoulder and run for home. If the player gets home then she is safe. If she is caught then she becomes Mr Wolf.

#### Variations

In some versions of this when Mr Wolf catches a player they have to return to home.



## 4. Grandmother's Footsteps



15 minutes

Age Range: 5-11

Ideal Number of Players: 6+

Equipment Needed: None

### How to Play

Players stand at a 'home' base in a line.

Grandmother stands with her back to them about ten metres away.

The players creep forward, but whenever Grandmother whirls round they must stop advancing and 'freeze'.

If she sees any of them moving, she sends them back to the starting line again.

The child who is the first to touch Grandmother becomes the next Grandmother.

### Variations

Before Grandmother can turn around, she must count to ten or say a rhyme such as, 'L-o-n-d-o-n spells London' or 'One, two, three, four, five jam tarts.'

She can say this quietly, under her breath, so the other players can't hear and don't know when Grandmother is about to turn round.

### Comments

This game is also called Sly Fox, Peep behind the Curtain or Black Pudding.



## 5. Fishes in the Sea



10-15 minutes

Age Range: 5-10

Ideal Number of Players: 8+

Equipment Needed: None

### How to Play

The players stand in a circle. They are alternately named Cod, Haddock, Plaice and Salmon.

One player is chosen to be the Fisherman. This person is the caller and stands in the middle of the circle.

When a fish name is called, all the players in that category move around the outside of the circle in a clockwise direction until they reach their places again. They are instructed on how to move with various directions. For example, Cod – high tide, Sharks – coral reef, Plaice – tide turns and so on.

High tide – move quickly.

Low tide – move slowly.

Tide turns – change direction.

Fisherman about – crouch down low to avoid the nets.

Sharks – walk backwards.

Coral reef – jump.

The last person back to their place becomes the Fisherman.





## 6. Duck, Duck, Goose



10-15 minutes

Age Range: 6-10

Ideal Number of Players: 10+

Equipment Needed: None

### How to Play

The players sit in a large circle facing inwards.

One player is chosen to be the 'tapper' and walks around the outside of the circle. As he walks around, he touches each child gently on the head whilst saying, 'Duck, duck, duck.'

At some stage he will tap a child and say, 'Goose,' instead.

The goose then jumps up and chases the tapper around the circle.

The tapper in turn tries to get all the way back to the gooses spot, 'home', without getting caught.

If the tapper gets home safely, the goose becomes the new tapper and the game starts again.

If the goose catches the tapper, the game starts again with the tapper being on again.

### Variations

When the goose gets caught by the tapper, he then reverts to being a duckling and has to squat down in the centre of the inner circle and make duck-like noises and gestures with his arms. This player then remains in the centre of the circle until another goose is caught.

### Comments

If the person who has been picked as the goose manages to get back to the space first they can then fold their arms so they are not chosen again.



## 7. Captain's Coming



10-15 minutes

Age Range: 5-11

Ideal Number of Players: 6+

Equipment Needed: None

### How to Play

The players assemble in the centre of the playground or in a hall. A leader is chosen who calls out various commands. The commands need explanation to each participant before the game can begin. A game of Captain's Coming can have any number of various commands; the more there are, the more that needs to be memorised, and the harder it is to play.

The group competes with each other to complete the commands. If there is an obvious person or, if applicable, group of people who are last to start a command, they are then out. The game continues until there is only one person left – the winner.

### The Commands

Bow – everyone races to the front of the room.

Stern – everyone races to the back of the room.

Starboard – everyone races to the right of the room.

Port – everyone races to the left of the room.

Captain's coming – everyone stands tall, salutes and shouts, 'Aye aye Captain.'

Captain's wife – everyone curtseys.

Scrub the decks – mime scrubbing on hands and knees.

Climb the rigging – everyone pretends to climb a rope ladder.

Man the lifeboat – find a partner and hold both hands. Anyone without a partner is out.

Sharks – lie on stomach with feet up.

Freeze – stop all actions when this is called. If a further command is given without saying 'unfreeze' anyone obeying it is out.

### Variations

There are lots of variations of this game. You can find many alternatives by doing a Google search of Captain's Coming on the Internet or you may want to make up your own.

To make this a more co-operative game, you can just play for the fun with nobody being out.

### Comments

This game is also a good wet play game.



## 8. The Keeper of the Treasure



10-25 minutes

Age Range: 4-10

Ideal Number of Players: 8-30

Equipment Needed: Keys or a bean bag

### How to Play

A suitable treasure is found (a bean bag, set of keys).

The players form a circle and create a space large enough to represent a door for the children to run through.

A leader is chosen.

One player is chosen to be the keeper of the treasure. She then sits in the middle of the circle with her eyes closed and the treasure placed behind her back.

The leader then silently selects a robber by pointing to a player.

The robber then tiptoes as quietly as possible up to the keeper and steals the treasure from behind the keeper's back.

Once the keeper realises the robber has the treasure she leaps to her feet and chases the robber, in a clockwise direction, around the circle, with the intent of catching him. The aim of the game is either for the keeper to catch the robber or for the robber to get back to the keeper's home base in the centre of the circle.

While the players wait for the robber to steal the treasure they chant, 'The robber is coming, the robber is coming, the robber is coming,' and then as the robber picks up the treasure and runs out of the door they shout, 'The robber has come!'

If the keeper catches the robber then she is the keeper again and a new robber is chosen. If the robber gets back to the home base in the centre then he is safe and becomes the keeper and a new robber is chosen.

### Comments

If you find when playing this game that players run through gaps in the circle other than the door, it may be helpful at the start of the game to create a rule which says players cannot jump/run out of the windows (the gaps) they can only run out of the door.



## 9. Queelio Cockio



15 minutes

Age Range: 6-11

Ideal Number of Players: 4+

Equipment Needed: Ball or bean bag

### How to Play

A person is chosen to be 'Queelio'.

Queelio stands with a ball/bean bag in his hand and his back to the other players who stand about 6-10 metres away.

Queelio then throws a ball over his shoulder and the aim is that one of the other players catches it or picks it up.

Whoever catches the ball hides it behind their back.

All players, except Queelio, put their hands behind their backs so that Queelio doesn't know who has the ball.

When Queelio turns, the players chant, 'Queelio Cockio, who's got the ballio?'

Queelio has to guess who has the ball. If the guess is correct, he remains Queelio; if he is wrong, the player who has been successful in concealing the ball takes his place.

### Variations

When Queelio turns round to guess who has the ball, it is best if he doesn't make up his mind immediately as to who has the ball. Instead he should ask one player and then another to stretch out a hand, turn around, do a star jump and so on. This is considered to be part of the play. The player needs to show the empty hand if they don't have the ball. The players often pretend they have the ball even if they haven't! Queelio can then guess who he thinks has the ball.

### Comments

The player must admit to having the ball or will automatically be 'out'. The player who is Queelio must not look when throwing the ball or Queelio himself will be 'out'.

This is known as a traditional Scottish ball game.



## 10. Mother May I?



10-15 minutes

Age Range: 5-11

Ideal Number of Players: 6+

Equipment Needed: None

### How to Play

One player is 'Mother'.

The other players line up and face Mother about ten metres away.

Mother selects one of the players and says something like, '... (name of player), you may take five giant steps.' That player then responds with, 'Mother, may I?' Mother replies, 'Yes, you may.'

Mother then addresses another player and the game continues until one of the children reaches Mother. Whoever makes it to Mother first becomes Mother for the next round.

Does this sound simple? It is! Except that in the excitement of the game, someone is bound to take their steps without asking, 'Mother, may I?' When that happens, Mother reminds the player of her manners and the player is sent back to the beginning of the line.

### Variations

Here are some ideas for the different ways children can move.

Scissors step – jump while crossing your feet, then jump while uncrossing them.

Banana step – lying down with feet at current spot, marking where the top of your head was and getting up there for new spot.

Bunny hop – a hop.

Baby steps – small steps.

Giant strides – giant steps.

For an older children's variation, try this one: 'Fourth cousin once removed on my father's side, may I?'



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**EXTRACT FROM  
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