PARTY GAME BOOK · GAMES FOR KIDS

Game cards

57 games · two cards per page, cut on the dashed line

CARD	GAME	AGES	TIME	TYPE
1	Hide and Seek	3-10	10-30 min	Indoor
2	Sardines	5-12	10-30 min	Indoor
3	Hot and Cold	3-9	5-15 min	Indoor
4	Simon Says	3-8	5-15 min	Indoor
5	Freeze Dance	3-10	5-15 min	Indoor
6	Balloon Keep-Up	3-10	5-15 min	Indoor
7	The Floor Is Lava	4-10	5-20 min	Indoor
8	Memory Tray	5-12	5-15 min	Indoor
9	Animal Charades	4-12	10-30 min	Indoor
10	Laundry Basket Toss	3-8	5-15 min	Indoor
11	Clue Treasure Hunt	5-12	15-40 min	Indoor
12	Freeze Tag	5-12	10-20 min	Outdoor
13	Red Light, Green Light	3-9	5-15 min	Outdoor
14	What's the Time, Mr. Wolf?	4-8	10-15 min	Outdoor
15	Duck, Duck, Goose	3-6	10-15 min	Outdoor
16	Sharks and Minnows	6-12	10-20 min	Outdoor
17	Capture the Flag	8-12	20-45 min	Outdoor
18	Hopscotch	4-10	10-20 min	Outdoor
19	Sack and Three-Legged Races	5-12	10-20 min	Outdoor
20	Water Balloon Toss	5-12	10-20 min	Outdoor
21	Nature Scavenger Hunt	3-12	15-45 min	Outdoor
22	Flashlight Tag	7-12	15-30 min	Outdoor
23	Flashlight Scavenger Hunt	3-9	10-25 min	Outdoor
24	Shadow Tag	4-10	5-15 min	Outdoor
25	Pass the Parcel	3-8	10-15 min	Party
26	Musical Chairs	4-10	10-15 min	Party
27	Pin the Tail on the Donkey	3-8	10-15 min	Party
28	Hot Potato	3-10	5-10 min	Party
29	Piñata	4-12	15-20 min	Party
30	Mummy Wrap	5-12	10-15 min	Party
31	Doughnut on a String	5-12	5-10 min	Party
32	Limbo	4-12	10-15 min	Party
33	Sleeping Lions	3-8	5-10 min	Party
34	Egg and Spoon Race	4-10	10-15 min	Party
35	Wink Detective	8-12	10-20 min	Party
36	Four Corners	5-12	5-15 min	Classroom
37	Heads Up, Seven Up	6-12	10-15 min	Classroom
38	Silent Ball	7-12	5-15 min	Classroom
39	Telephone	5-12	5-10 min	Classroom
40	Doggy, Doggy, Where's Your Bone?	3-7	10-15 min	Classroom
41	Around the World	6-12	10-15 min	Classroom
42	Draw and Guess	6-12	10-20 min	Classroom
43	Bingo	4-12	15-30 min	Classroom
44	Who Am I?	7-12	10-20 min	Classroom
45	I Spy	3-10	5-15 min	Quiet and car
46	Twenty Questions	6-12	10-20 min	Quiet and car
47	The Alphabet Game	6-12	15-60 min	Quiet and car
48	The License Plate Game	6-12	15-120 min	Quiet and car
49	Story Chain	5-12	5-15 min	Quiet and car
50	Rock, Paper, Scissors	4-12	2-15 min	Quiet and car
51	Would You Rather	6-12	5-15 min	Quiet and car
52	Categories	8-12	5-15 min	Quiet and car
53	Tic-Tac-Toe	4-12	2-10 min	Pencil and paper
54	Dots and Boxes	6-12	5-15 min	Pencil and paper
55	Snowman	6-12	5-15 min	Pencil and paper
56	Sprouts	8-12	5-10 min	Pencil and paper
57	Sink the Fleet	8-12	15-30 min	Pencil and paper

Free to print and copy. From partygamebook.com/games-for-kids/

INDOOR GAME

Hide and Seek

ages 3-10 · 3-12 players · 10-30 min · indoors, outdoors · some running

One player counts while everyone else hides, then goes looking. The oldest game on this page, and still the one kids ask for first.

SETUP

Agree on the rooms or the part of the yard that's in play, and name the places that are off limits before anyone hides. Pick a base, like a couch or a tree.

HOW TO PLAY

1. The seeker stands at base, closes their eyes and counts out loud to 20 (or 50 for older kids).
2. Everyone else hides somewhere inside the boundaries.
3. The seeker calls "Ready or not, here I come!" and starts looking.
4. Found players come back to base. The first player found is the next seeker.
5. Optional home-free rule: a hider who reaches base before being tagged calls "Home free!" and is safe.

SAFETY

- Nothing that latches or closes: no dryers, chests, coolers, cupboards that lock or car trunks. Say it out loud before every game.

TIPS FOR THE GROWN-UP

- Three- and four-year-olds often hide in plain sight or giggle. Let the seeker "not see" them for a few seconds; it's half the fun.
- Give a younger seeker an older helper rather than leaving them counting alone again and again.

VARIATIONS

- Hide the Teddy: one child hides a stuffed animal and everyone else looks for it.
- In the dark: play in one room with a flashlight for the seeker (see Flashlight Tag).

Free to print and copy. Every child gets a way to play.

cut

INDOOR GAME

Sardines

also: Reverse hide and seek

ages 5-12 · 4-15 players · 10-30 min · indoors · calm

Hide and seek turned inside out: one player hides and everyone else searches. Each seeker who finds the hider squeezes in with them, until the last seeker finds a giggling pile.

SETUP

Pick a hider and set the boundaries. A house with a few closets or a church hall with side rooms is ideal.

HOW TO PLAY

1. The hider goes off to hide while everyone else counts to 50 together.
2. Seekers split up and search on their own, quietly.
3. When you find the hider, don't announce it. Wait until no one is watching and squeeze into the hiding place too.
4. The hiding place fills up like a tin of sardines. The last seeker to find the group is the next hider.

SAFETY

- Same rule as hide and seek: no hiding in anything that latches, and no stacking up on shelves or bunk beds.

TIPS FOR THE GROWN-UP

- Turn the lights down a little for older kids; it makes the quiet part more exciting.
- Remind seekers that the goal is to stay hidden together, so whispering beats laughing.

VARIATIONS

- Two hiders who hide separately; seekers can join either pack.

Free to print and copy. Every child gets a way to play.

Hot and Cold

also: Warmer, Colder

ages 3-9 · 2-12 players · 5-15 min · indoors, outdoors · calm

Hide an object, then guide the searcher to it by calling out "warmer" and "colder." It works with a two-year-old's teddy or a class of thirty.

YOU NEED

A small object to hide

SETUP

Choose an object everyone can recognize: a toy, a beanbag, a paper heart or a wrapped treat.

HOW TO PLAY

1. The searcher leaves the room or covers their eyes.
2. Everyone else watches while one player hides the object.
3. The searcher comes back and starts looking.
4. The group calls "warm," "warmer" and "hot!" as the searcher gets closer, and "cool," "cold" and "freezing" as they move away.
5. When the object is found, the searcher picks the next one to hide it.

TIPS FOR THE GROWN-UP

- For very young kids, hide the object partly in view the first few times.
- Clapping works instead of words: louder when they're close, softer when they're far. That's handy for mixed ages and kids still learning English.

VARIATIONS

- Holiday versions: a paper leprechaun on St. Patrick's Day, a heart on Valentine's Day, a small pumpkin at Halloween.

cut

Simon Says

ages 3-8 · 3+ players · 5-15 min · indoors, outdoors · some running

The leader gives commands, but players only follow the ones that start with "Simon says." A listening game that works anywhere there's room to wave your arms.

SETUP

Everyone stands facing the leader, an arm's length apart.

HOW TO PLAY

1. The leader calls a command with the magic words: "Simon says touch your nose." Everyone does it.
2. Then a command without them: "Hop on one foot!" Anyone who hops has been caught.
3. Mix the two, and speed up as players get good at it.
4. After a few minutes, pick a new Simon.

TIPS FOR THE GROWN-UP

- Skip the old rule where caught players sit out. Caught players can do three jumping jacks and keep going, or join the leader as "Simon's helpers" who watch for slips.
- Use commands that build skills: balance on one foot, touch something blue, count to five in Spanish.

VARIATIONS

- Holiday versions: "Santa says," "Turkey says," "Leprechaun says."
- Opposite Simon (ages 7 and up): do the opposite of what Simon says.

INDOOR GAME

Freeze Dance

also: Musical Statues

ages 3-10 · 3+ players · 5-15 min · indoors, outdoors · high energy

Everyone dances while the music plays and freezes the moment it stops. The quickest way to burn off party energy in a small room.

YOU NEED

Music you can pause

SETUP

Clear the middle of the room and push back rugs that slide. One grown-up runs the music.

HOW TO PLAY

1. Start the music. Everyone dances.
2. Stop the music without warning. Everyone freezes like a statue.
3. Anyone still moving is caught.
4. Start the music again. Make the pauses shorter as the game goes on.

SAFETY

- Clear toys and slippery rugs off the floor before the first song.

TIPS FOR THE GROWN-UP

- Caught players can become judges who help spot wobbly statues, so nobody sits out for long.
- Call a shape to freeze in: an animal, a letter, a superhero, a snowman.

VARIATIONS

- Musical Bumps: everyone sits down fast when the music stops; last one down does a silly dance move for everyone to copy.
- Countdown Freeze for New Year's: freeze on "Happy New Year!" instead of on silence.

Free to print and copy. Every child gets a way to play.

cut

INDOOR GAME

Balloon Keep-Up

also: Don't Let It Touch the Floor

ages 3-10 · 1-12 players · 5-15 min · indoors · some running

Keep a balloon in the air by tapping it up, and don't let it touch the floor. Kids can play alone, in pairs, or as a whole team counting taps.

YOU NEED

Balloons (or a beach ball)

SETUP

A grown-up blows up the balloons. Clear breakables off nearby tables.

HOW TO PLAY

1. Toss the balloon up. Players tap it back into the air.
2. Count every tap out loud as a team.
3. If the balloon touches the floor, start the count again and try to beat your record.
4. Add a rule each round: only elbows, only heads, or players must take turns in order.

SAFETY

- Children under 8 can choke or suffocate on uninflated or broken balloons. A grown-up blows them up, watches the game and picks up every broken piece at once.
- Ask about latex allergies first, or use foil balloons or a beach ball.

TIPS FOR THE GROWN-UP

- Two balloons at once is chaos in the best way for ages 6 and up.
- A beach ball is a good swap for kids with a latex allergy and for groups with children under 8.

VARIATIONS

- Balloon tennis: paper plates taped to paint stirrers make good paddles.

Free to print and copy. Every child gets a way to play.

The Floor Is Lava

also: Hot Lava

ages 4-10 · 1-8 players · 5-20 min · indoors · high energy

Someone shouts "The floor is lava!" and everyone has five seconds to get off the floor. Then cross the room using only cushion stepping stones.

YOU NEED

Cushions, pillows or carpet squares

SETUP

Lay cushions, pillows or carpet squares around the room as stepping stones, a big step apart. Mark a start and a finish.

HOW TO PLAY

1. A caller shouts "The floor is lava!" and counts down from five.
2. Everyone gets onto a stepping stone before the count ends.
3. Players cross from start to finish touching only the stones.
4. Take away one stone after each crossing so the gaps get bigger.

SAFETY

- Stones go on the floor only: no climbing on tables, shelves or the backs of couches.
- Cushions slide on wood and tile. Play on carpet, or use cushions with grippy backs.

TIPS FOR THE GROWN-UP

- Add a "lava monster" who walks on the floor and tags players who are on the floor between stones.
- Little ones can hold a grown-up's hand on the big jumps.

VARIATIONS

- Team crossing: the whole team must get across, and players can share stones.

cut

Memory Tray

also: Kim's Game

ages 5-12 · 2-25 players · 5-15 min · indoors · calm

Look at a tray of objects for one minute, cover it, then list everything you remember. A calm game that sharpens attention, and it comes from a novel.

YOU NEED

A tray, 10 to 20 small objects, a cloth to cover them, paper and pencils

SETUP

Put 10 to 20 everyday things on a tray: a spoon, a key, a crayon, a leaf, a coin, a sock. Cover it with a cloth.

HOW TO PLAY

1. Uncover the tray. Everyone looks without touching for one minute.
2. Cover it again.
3. Players write or draw everything they remember. Little kids can say them to a grown-up.
4. Uncover the tray and count. One point per object.

SAFETY

- Keep small objects like coins and buttons away from children under 3.

TIPS FOR THE GROWN-UP

- Use fewer objects (6 to 8) for ages 5 and 6.
- Rudyard Kipling's 1901 novel Kim has a boy trained with a tray of jewels; scout leaders have played it as Kim's Game ever since.

VARIATIONS

- What's missing? Take one object away while eyes are closed and ask which one is gone.
- Holiday trays: things from the classroom year for the last day of school, or winter things in December.

INDOOR GAME

Animal Charades

also: Charades for kids

ages 4-12 · 4+ players · 10-30 min · indoors · some running

Act out an animal or an action without words while everyone guesses. Pre-readers can whisper with a grown-up; older kids can play in timed teams.

YOU NEED

Slips of paper with animals or actions (optional)

SETUP

Write animals or actions on slips of paper and fold them into a bowl. For pre-readers, whisper the word instead.

HOW TO PLAY

1. A player picks a slip and reads it silently (or hears it whispered).
2. They act it out with no words. Little kids can use animal sounds.
3. Everyone else guesses out loud.
4. Whoever guesses right acts next. For teams, set a one-minute timer and count correct guesses.

TIPS FOR THE GROWN-UP

- Start with easy animals (dog, cat, elephant, frog) and work up to actions (brushing teeth, building a snowman, riding a bike).
- Shy kids can act in pairs.

VARIATIONS

- Holiday word lists: our Christmas charades page has 150 ready-made ideas.

Free to print and copy. Every child gets a way to play.

cut

INDOOR GAME

Laundry Basket Toss

also: Sock Toss

ages 3-8 · 1-12 players · 5-15 min · indoors, outdoors · calm

Toss rolled-up socks into a basket from behind a line. A first game for toddlers and preschoolers, and a quick relay for bigger kids.

YOU NEED

A laundry basket or bucket, rolled-up socks or beanbags, tape for a line

SETUP

Put a strip of tape on the floor and the basket two or three big steps away.

HOW TO PLAY

1. Each player stands behind the line and tosses three socks.
2. One point for every sock that lands in the basket.
3. After everyone has had a turn, move the line back a step.
4. For teams, keep a running team score.

TIPS FOR THE GROWN-UP

- Let three-year-olds stand as close as they need to; making the basket is the point.
- Two baskets at different distances (1 point and 3 points) keep older kids interested.

VARIATIONS

- Pot of Gold Toss for St. Patrick's Day: wrap the socks in yellow paper and call the basket the pot of gold.

Free to print and copy. Every child gets a way to play.

INDOOR GAME

Clue Treasure Hunt

also: Scavenger hunt with clues

ages 5-12 · 1-12 players · 15-40 min · indoors, outdoors · some running

Each clue leads to the next hiding place, and the last clue leads to a treasure. Picture clues work for kids who can't read yet.

YOU NEED

Paper clues, a small treasure at the end

SETUP

Write 6 to 10 clues. Hide each one where the clue before it points (the clue that says "I keep the milk cold" sits in the fridge door). Keep the first clue in your hand.

HOW TO PLAY

1. Hand the first clue to the players.
2. They read or solve it and run to the place it describes.
3. Each hiding place holds the next clue.
4. The last clue leads to the treasure, which the team shares.

TIPS FOR THE GROWN-UP

- For pre-readers, draw the hiding place (a bathtub, a shoe, the mailbox) instead of writing a riddle.
- Give every child in a group a numbered clue to read aloud, so one fast reader doesn't do it all.

VARIATIONS

- Egg hunt with clues at Easter; gelt hunt at Hanukkah.

Free to print and copy. Every child gets a way to play.

cut

OUTDOOR GAME

Freeze Tag

also: Stuck in the Mud

ages 5-12 · 5+ players · 10-20 min · outdoors · high energy

Tagged players freeze in place until a free teammate unfreezes them. Nobody is ever out, which is why it outlasts plain tag.

SETUP

Set clear boundaries away from fences, walls and play equipment. Pick one tagger for every 6 to 8 players.

HOW TO PLAY

1. Taggers count to five while everyone scatters.
2. A tagged player freezes with legs apart and arms out.
3. A free player unfreezes them by crawling between their legs or giving a high five (pick one rule before you start).
4. If the taggers freeze everyone, they win. Switch taggers every two or three minutes either way.

SAFETY

- Teach the safe tag: a light touch on the back or shoulder. No pushing, grabbing clothes or tackling.

TIPS FOR THE GROWN-UP

- High-five unfreezing is easier for little kids and anyone in a skirt or a wheelchair.
- Hand the taggers a pool noodle each so tags are soft and easy to see.

VARIATIONS

- Shadow freeze: on a sunny day, step on someone's shadow to freeze them.

Free to print and copy. Every child gets a way to play.

OUTDOOR GAME

Red Light, Green Light

ages 3-9 · 4+ players · 5-15 min · outdoors, indoors · some running

Run on green, freeze on red, and be the first to tag the caller. A starter game for preschoolers that older kids still like.

SETUP

The caller stands at one end of the space. Everyone else lines up at the other end, about 20 big steps away.

HOW TO PLAY

1. The caller turns their back and calls "Green light!" Players move toward the caller.
2. The caller calls "Red light!" and spins around. Everyone freezes.
3. Anyone the caller sees moving goes back to the start line.
4. The first player to tag the caller wins and becomes the next caller.

TIPS FOR THE GROWN-UP

- With a big group, send movers back only five steps instead of all the way to the start.
- Ages 3 to 4 do best when the caller doesn't spin too fast.

VARIATIONS

- Yellow light means slow motion. Purple light means hop. Kids love inventing new colors.

Free to print and copy. Every child gets a way to play.

cut

OUTDOOR GAME

What's the Time, Mr. Wolf?

ages 4-8 · 4-20 players · 10-15 min · outdoors, indoors · high energy

Players creep up on the Wolf by asking the time, until the Wolf answers "Dinnertime!" and chases them home.

SETUP

The Wolf stands at one end with their back to the group. Everyone else stands on a home line at the other end.

HOW TO PLAY

1. Players call together: "What's the time, Mr. Wolf?"
2. The Wolf answers with a time, like "Three o'clock," and players take that many steps forward.
3. Repeat. When the players are close, the Wolf shouts "Dinnertime!" instead, turns, and chases them back to the home line.
4. A player tagged before reaching home becomes the next Wolf.

SAFETY

- Run the chase on grass, and keep the home line well away from walls or fences.

TIPS FOR THE GROWN-UP

- A short distance home keeps the chase exciting rather than scary for three- and four-year-olds.
- Let the Wolf use a funny growly voice; kids love it.

VARIATIONS

- Halloween twist: "What's the time, Mr. Pumpkin?"

Free to print and copy. Every child gets a way to play.

OUTDOOR GAME

Duck, Duck, Goose

also: Duck, Duck, Gray Duck

ages 3-6 · 6-20 players · 10-15 min · outdoors, indoors · some running

One player walks around the circle tapping heads, then picks a "goose" who chases them around the circle. In Minnesota it's "Duck, Duck, Gray Duck."

SETUP

Everyone sits in a circle facing in, with a little room between them.

HOW TO PLAY

1. The player who is It walks around the outside of the circle, tapping each head and saying "duck."
2. When It taps someone and says "goose," the goose jumps up and chases It around the circle.
3. It tries to sit in the goose's empty spot before being tagged.
4. If It makes it, the goose becomes It. If It is tagged, they go around again.

SAFETY

- Run around the outside of the circle in the same direction every time, and leave room so runners don't trip over legs.

TIPS FOR THE GROWN-UP

- Make sure everyone gets a turn: kids who've already been the goose sit with their feet tucked under.
- Skip the old "mush pot" where tagged players sit in the middle.

Free to print and copy. Every child gets a way to play.

cut

OUTDOOR GAME

Sharks and Minnows

ages 6-12 · 8+ players · 10-20 min · outdoors · high energy

Minnows try to cross the ocean without getting tagged by the sharks in the middle. Tagged minnows turn into seaweed that can grab at runners.

YOU NEED

Cones or chalk for the two sides

SETUP

Mark two safe lines (beaches) about 25 big steps apart. One or two sharks stand in the middle; everyone else lines up on one beach.

HOW TO PLAY

1. The sharks call "Fishy, fishy, cross my ocean!"
2. The minnows run to the opposite beach.
3. A tagged minnow becomes seaweed: they stand where they were tagged and can tag runners who pass within arm's reach, but can't move their feet.
4. Keep crossing back and forth. The last minnow left is the first shark next game.

SAFETY

- Play on a field, not in a pool. Safe-tag rules apply: a light touch, no grabbing or tackling.

TIPS FOR THE GROWN-UP

- Choose one shark for about every eight minnows.
- A big field makes the game better, not harder: the long runs are the fun part.

VARIATIONS

- Sharks become the minnows' teammates once tagged (everyone becomes a shark), which ends faster.

Free to print and copy. Every child gets a way to play.

OUTDOOR GAME

Capture the Flag

ages 8-12 · 10+ players · 20-45 min · outdoors · high energy

Two teams each guard a flag in their own half of the field and try to steal the other team's. The big-kid game for a park, a camp or field day.

YOU NEED

2 flags (bandanas work), cones for the center line and jails

SETUP

Split the field in half with cones. Each team puts its flag somewhere visible in its own half and marks a jail near the back.

HOW TO PLAY

1. Players can't be tagged in their own half. Once they cross the center line, they can be tagged.
2. A player tagged in enemy territory goes to that team's jail.
3. A free teammate can rescue a jailed player by tagging them; both walk back to their own half.
4. The first team to carry the other team's flag back across the center line wins.

SAFETY

- Safe tag only: no tackling, pulling or holding. Agree on the boundaries before the first round.

TIPS FOR THE GROWN-UP

- Have teams pick guards, attackers and rescuers. Kids who don't love running make great guards.
- Wear team colors or pinnies so tags aren't argued about.

VARIATIONS

- Two flags per team for big groups.
- Night version with glow sticks on the flags (with a grown-up watching).

Free to print and copy. Every child gets a way to play.

cut

OUTDOOR GAME

Hopscotch

ages 4-10 · 1-6 players · 10-20 min · outdoors · some running

Toss a marker into a chalk court, hop through it, and pick the marker up on the way back. Every child learns it on a sidewalk.

YOU NEED

Sidewalk chalk, a marker (a flat stone or a beanbag)

SETUP

Draw a court numbered 1 to 10: single squares and side-by-side pairs, with a turnaround space at the top.

HOW TO PLAY

1. Toss your marker into square 1.
2. Hop through the court, skipping the square with your marker: one foot on single squares, both feet (one in each) on side-by-side pairs.
3. At the top, turn around and hop back. Stop to pick up your marker, then hop over its square and out.
4. Next turn, toss the marker into square 2, and so on. Your turn ends if the marker misses its square, or you step on a line, lose your balance or put a hand down.
5. On your next turn, pick up where you missed. The first player through square 10 wins.

TIPS FOR THE GROWN-UP

- For three- and four-year-olds, skip the marker and just hop through.
- Kids can design their own courses: snail-shaped ones are an old tradition.

VARIATIONS

- Shamrock hop: draw shamrocks instead of squares for St. Patrick's Day.

Free to print and copy. Every child gets a way to play.

OUTDOOR GAME

Sack and Three-Legged Races

also: Field day races

ages 5-12 · 4+ players · 10-20 min · outdoors · high energy

Two field day classics: hop to the line in a sack, or run with your leg tied to a partner's. Both work as races or as team relays.

YOU NEED

Old pillowcases or burlap sacks, soft fabric strips or bandanas

SETUP

Mark a start and a finish about 10 to 15 steps apart on grass. Sacks for one race; fabric ties for the other.

HOW TO PLAY

1. Sack race: each racer stands in a sack holding it at the waist, hops to the finish line and back.
2. Three-legged race: partners stand side by side and tie their inside ankles together with a soft strip of fabric.
3. Partners put an arm around each other's shoulders, count "inside, outside" together and walk or run to the finish.
4. For relays, each racer or pair hands the sack (or touches the next pair) at the start line.

SAFETY

- Grass only, never pavement. Tie ankles with soft fabric, not rope, and loosely enough to slip out.

TIPS FOR THE GROWN-UP

- Practice walking before running in the three-legged race; the counting is the trick.
- Pair kids of similar height.

VARIATIONS

- Red, white and blue relay for the Fourth of July: teams in color-matched sacks.

Free to print and copy. Every child gets a way to play.

cut

OUTDOOR GAME

Water Balloon Toss

also: Egg toss

ages 5-12 · 4+ players · 10-20 min · outdoors · some running

Partners toss a water balloon back and forth, stepping farther apart after every catch, until it bursts. The perfect hot-day party game.

YOU NEED

Water balloons, a bucket

SETUP

Fill the balloons and keep them in a bucket. Partners line up facing each other two steps apart.

HOW TO PLAY

1. One partner tosses the balloon underhand to the other.
2. Every pair that catches without a burst takes one step back.
3. A pair whose balloon bursts is soaked and done (or refills and keeps playing).
4. The last pair with an unbroken balloon wins.

SAFETY

- Children under 8 can choke on broken balloon pieces. Pick up every scrap after the game; it also protects birds and pets.
- Ask about latex allergies first; sponges are the alternative.

TIPS FOR THE GROWN-UP

- Wet sponges make a reusable, no-cleanup version.
- Gentle underhand tosses only.

VARIATIONS

- Egg toss with raw eggs for older kids, with old clothes and a hose nearby.

Free to print and copy. Every child gets a way to play.

OUTDOOR GAME

Nature Scavenger Hunt

ages 3-12 · 1+ players · 15-45 min · outdoors · some running

Find a feather, something fuzzy, three kinds of leaves and something that smells good. Our printable list comes in a picture-light version for little kids and a harder one for older kids.

YOU NEED

The printable hunt list, a pencil, a bag (optional)

SETUP

Print a list for each child or team. Agree on the area and a meeting place.

HOW TO PLAY

1. Hand out the lists and pencils.
2. Players search the area and check off what they find.
3. Look, don't pick: draw it, point it out to a grown-up or take a photo. Only fallen things go in the bag.
4. Meet back and share the best find.

SAFETY

- Leave living plants, nests and animals where they are, and wash hands afterward. Know which plants to avoid in your area (poison ivy, for one).

TIPS FOR THE GROWN-UP

- Pair younger and older kids so reading isn't a barrier.
- A magnifying glass makes any patch of grass interesting.

VARIATIONS

- Color hunt: find something in every color of the rainbow.

Free to print and copy. Every child gets a way to play.

cut

OUTDOOR GAME

Flashlight Tag

ages 7-12 · 4-15 players · 15-30 min · outdoors · some running

After dark, It tags players by catching them in the flashlight beam and calling their name. A summer night favorite.

YOU NEED

A flashlight

SETUP

Play at dusk in a fenced backyard you know well, with a grown-up nearby. Walk the yard first and move anything to trip over.

HOW TO PLAY

1. It closes their eyes and counts to 30 while everyone hides or moves around the yard.
2. It walks around shining the flashlight.
3. A player caught in the beam and named correctly is tagged.
4. The first player tagged is the next It.

SAFETY

- Familiar, fenced yards only, walking only, and a grown-up outside. Aim at bodies, not faces.

TIPS FOR THE GROWN-UP

- A walking-only rule keeps the game safe in the dark.
- Glow sticks on wrists help a grown-up keep count of everyone.

VARIATIONS

- Flashlight scavenger hunt for little kids: hide pictures or reflective stickers and let them search with a flashlight.

Free to print and copy. Every child gets a way to play.

OUTDOOR GAME

Flashlight Scavenger Hunt

ages 3-9 · 1-10 players · 10-25 min · indoors, outdoors · calm

Turn off the lights and hunt for hidden pictures, toys or reflective stickers with a flashlight. Spooky enough to be exciting, gentle enough for preschoolers.

YOU NEED

A flashlight for each child or pair, pictures or objects to find

SETUP

Before dark, hide 10 to 15 things around one room or a small yard: pictures cut from a magazine, small toys, reflective stickers. Make a matching list.

HOW TO PLAY

1. Turn the lights down and hand out the flashlights.
2. Kids search with their beams and check off each thing on the list.
3. Finders leave the item where it is and call out what they found, so everyone gets a turn to spot it.
4. Lights on, and count the finds together.

SAFETY

- Clear tripping hazards first, and keep a grown-up in the room or yard.

TIPS FOR THE GROWN-UP

- A dim room, not a pitch-black one, for kids who are nervous about the dark.
- Our printable has a flashlight hunt list.

VARIATIONS

- Glow stick hunt: hide snapped glow sticks around the yard at dusk.

Free to print and copy. Every child gets a way to play.

cut

OUTDOOR GAME

Shadow Tag

ages 4-10 · 3-20 players · 5-15 min · outdoors · high energy

On a sunny day, tag someone by stepping on their shadow. It teaches kids to watch where the sun is, and nobody gets touched.

SETUP

Play on a sunny morning or late afternoon, when shadows are long. Set boundaries.

HOW TO PLAY

1. It chases the other players.
2. Stepping on a player's shadow tags them, and that player becomes It.
3. Players can hide their shadow in the shade of a tree or building, but only for a count of five.

SAFETY

- Sunscreen and water on hot days.

TIPS FOR THE GROWN-UP

- Around noon, shadows are short and the game gets hard. Play earlier or later in the day.
- It's a no-touch game, so it suits kids who don't like being tagged.

Free to print and copy. Every child gets a way to play.

Pass the Parcel

ages 3-8 · 5-20 players · 10-15 min · indoors · calm

A prize wrapped in many layers goes around the circle while the music plays. When it stops, the player holding it tears off one layer.

YOU NEED

A small prize, newspaper or scrap paper for layers, music you can pause, stickers (optional)

SETUP

Wrap the prize in one layer per child. A sticker between each layer means nobody goes home empty-handed.

HOW TO PLAY

1. Everyone sits in a circle.
2. Start the music and pass the parcel around the circle.
3. When the music stops, the player holding the parcel tears off one layer (and keeps any sticker inside).
4. Keep going until someone unwraps the last layer and wins the prize.

SAFETY

- For children under 4, put stickers, not candy, between the layers.

TIPS FOR THE GROWN-UP

- The grown-up on the music can, without looking too obvious, make sure every child gets a layer.
- Remind kids it's one layer per stop, not two.

VARIATIONS

- Question parcel: write a silly question or a dare on each layer to answer before passing it on.

cut

Musical Chairs

also: Musical Islands

ages 4-10 · 5-15 players · 10-15 min · indoors · high energy

Walk around the chairs while the music plays, and grab a seat when it stops. One chair goes each round. There's a version where nobody is out, too.

YOU NEED

Sturdy chairs, one fewer than players, music you can pause

SETUP

Put the chairs in a line, alternating which way they face (or back to back), with one fewer chair than players.

HOW TO PLAY

1. Start the music. Players walk in a circle around the chairs.
2. Stop the music. Everyone sits on the nearest empty chair.
3. The player left standing is out and helps run the music.
4. Take away one chair and play again. The last player seated wins.

SAFETY

- Sturdy chairs only (no folding chairs that can pinch), no pushing, and walking pace.

TIPS FOR THE GROWN-UP

- Musical Islands, for ages 4 to 6: use paper plates or hula hoops on the floor instead of chairs. When an island is taken away, nobody is out; everyone has to share the islands that are left.
- Walking only, no running, keeps it safe.

VARIATIONS

- Holiday chairs: tape a picture on each chair (pumpkin, snowman, heart) and call out the picture that's safe.

PARTY GAME

Pin the Tail on the Donkey

ages 3-8 · 3-20 players · 10-15 min · indoors · calm

Blindfolded and gently spun, each guest tries to stick a tail in the right spot. The guest who gets closest wins. Any picture works, so it's easy to theme.

YOU NEED

A big drawing of a donkey (or any animal), paper tails with tape, a blindfold or scarf

SETUP

Tape the picture to a wall at kids' shoulder height. Write each guest's name on a paper tail with a loop of tape on the back.

HOW TO PLAY

1. The first player stands about three steps from the picture.
2. A grown-up ties on the blindfold and turns the player gently around three times.
3. The player walks forward and sticks the tail where they think it goes.
4. Leave every tail in place. Closest to the right spot wins.

SAFETY

- Spin gently, and clear the floor between the start and the wall.

TIPS FOR THE GROWN-UP

- Kids who don't like blindfolds can close their eyes or wear sunglasses covered with paper.
- Have a grown-up hand on the player's shoulder while they walk.

VARIATIONS

- Pin the nose on the reindeer, the hat on the snowman, the feather on the turkey or the bow on the present.

Free to print and copy. Every child gets a way to play.

cut

PARTY GAME

Hot Potato

also: Pass the Pumpkin

ages 3-10 · 5+ players · 5-10 min · indoors, outdoors · some running

Pass the "potato" around the circle as fast as you can while the music plays. Whoever holds it when the music stops does something silly.

YOU NEED

A beanbag, soft ball or real potato, music you can pause

SETUP

Everyone stands or sits in a circle.

HOW TO PLAY

1. Start the music and pass the potato quickly around the circle.
2. Stop the music. Whoever is holding the potato is caught.
3. The caught player does a quick silly task (sing a line, hop five times, make an animal noise), then starts the potato going again.

SAFETY

- Pass, don't throw, with little kids.

TIPS FOR THE GROWN-UP

- The silly-task rule keeps everyone in the game. If you'd rather play elimination, keep it short.
- For a class, use two potatoes going in opposite directions.

VARIATIONS

- Thankful Potato at Thanksgiving: the holder names something they're thankful for.
- Pass the Pumpkin at Halloween with a small pumpkin or an orange beanbag.

Free to print and copy. Every child gets a way to play.

PARTY GAME

Piñata

ages 4-12 · 4-20 players · 15-20 min · outdoors · some running

Each guest takes a turn swinging at the piñata until it breaks and the treats spill out. The safety setup matters more than the piñata.

YOU NEED

A piñata, a plastic bat or broom handle, a blindfold (for older kids), bags for the treats

SETUP

Hang the piñata from a branch or beam, about at the swinger's head height, with a grown-up holding the rope so it can be raised and lowered. Mark a wide circle around it.

HOW TO PLAY

1. Line up from youngest to oldest. Everyone not swinging waits outside the circle.
2. The swinger gets three swings. Older kids can be blindfolded and gently turned around first.
3. When the piñata breaks, everyone waits until the grown-up says "Go!"
4. Kids collect the treats into their own bags. Share out extras so everyone ends up with about the same.

SAFETY

- Only the swinger inside the circle, ever, and the circle needs to be wider than the bat can reach.
- For children under 4, fill the piñata with stickers or small toys suitable for their age, not hard candy.

TIPS FOR THE GROWN-UP

- Pull-string piñatas are easier and safer for kids under 5.
- Let the birthday child or the youngest guest go first.

Free to print and copy. Every child gets a way to play.

cut

PARTY GAME

Mummy Wrap

also: Toilet Paper Mummy

ages 5-12 · 6+ players · 10-15 min · indoors · some running

Teams race to wrap one player into a mummy with toilet paper. A Halloween classic that's just as funny at a birthday party.

YOU NEED

Toilet paper (1 or 2 rolls per team)

SETUP

Make teams of three or four. Each team picks a mummy and gets a roll.

HOW TO PLAY

1. Say "Go!" and start a two-minute timer.
2. Teams wrap their mummy from the shoulders to the feet.
3. When time is up, the mummies show off. A grown-up or the other guests judge the best mummy.
4. Switch mummies and play again.

SAFETY

- Never cover the face and never wrap around the neck.

TIPS FOR THE GROWN-UP

- Categories (scariest, neatest, fastest) mean more than one team can win.
- Keep a trash bag ready; the cleanup is part of the game.

VARIATIONS

- Snowman wrap at Christmas: add a paper hat and a carrot nose drawn on paper.

Free to print and copy. Every child gets a way to play.

PARTY GAME

Doughnut on a String

ages 5-12 · 3-15 players · 5-10 min · indoors, outdoors · calm

Doughnuts hang on strings at mouth height, and kids race to eat theirs with their hands behind their backs. Messy, quick and very photogenic.

YOU NEED

Ring doughnuts, string, a broom handle or a clothesline

SETUP

Tie a doughnut to each string and hang them from a broom handle held by two grown-ups (or a clothesline) at each child's mouth height.

HOW TO PLAY

1. Players stand in front of a doughnut with hands behind their backs.
2. On "Go!", everyone tries to eat their doughnut without using hands.
3. The first to finish (or to eat the most when the timer ends) wins.

SAFETY

- Small bites, and stand still while chewing: kids shouldn't run, play or lie down with food in their mouths.
- Not for children under 4.

TIPS FOR THE GROWN-UP

- Check for food allergies and dietary rules before choosing the food.
- Powdered sugar doughnuts make the best photos.

VARIATIONS

- Apple on a string in the fall, using small apples.

cut

PARTY GAME

Limbo

ages 4-12 · 4+ players · 10-15 min · indoors, outdoors · some running

Lean back and shuffle under the bar without touching it. The bar goes lower every round.

YOU NEED

A pool noodle, broom or rope, music

SETUP

Two people hold the bar at chest height for the shortest player. Line everyone up and start the music.

HOW TO PLAY

1. Players go under the bar one at a time, leaning backward, feet first.
2. Touching the bar or putting a hand on the floor ends that player's run.
3. After everyone has gone, lower the bar a little.
4. The last player to get under wins.

SAFETY

- Play on carpet or grass, and stop lowering when kids are close to the floor.

TIPS FOR THE GROWN-UP

- A pool noodle held loosely drops if it's bumped, so no one gets hit.
- Kids who are out become bar holders.

Sleeping Lions

also: Sleeping Bunnies

ages 3-8 · 4+ players · 5-10 min · indoors · calm

Everyone lies perfectly still as a sleeping lion while the hunters try to make them laugh or move, without touching. The calm-down game for the end of a party.

SETUP

Clear floor space so everyone can lie down. Pick one or two hunters.

HOW TO PLAY

1. The lions lie down and keep perfectly still, eyes closed.
2. The hunters walk around telling jokes and making funny noises, but can't touch anyone.
3. A lion who moves, laughs or opens their eyes joins the hunters.
4. The last sleeping lion wins.

SAFETY

- Hunters can't touch the lions; that's the main rule.

TIPS FOR THE GROWN-UP

- Play it right before parents arrive. It settles the room.
- Sleeping Bunnies, for ages 3 and 4: after a short sleep everyone sings "Wake up, bunnies!" and hops around the room.

cut

Egg and Spoon Race

ages 4-10 · 4+ players · 10-15 min · outdoors, indoors · some running

Balance an egg on a spoon and hurry to the finish line without dropping it. A field day race that also works down a hallway.

YOU NEED

Spoons, plastic eggs, potatoes or table tennis balls

SETUP

Mark a start and a finish line. Each racer (or each relay team) gets a spoon and an egg.

HOW TO PLAY

1. Racers hold the spoon handle with one hand, egg on the spoon.
2. On "Go!", walk or run to the finish line and back.
3. A dropped egg means stop, put it back on the spoon and carry on.
4. For relays, pass the spoon and egg to the next teammate.

SAFETY

- Plastic eggs indoors.

TIPS FOR THE GROWN-UP

- Big spoons for little kids.
- Hands behind the back for older kids, or carry the spoon handle in your mouth.

VARIATIONS

- Easter version with dyed hard-boiled eggs for older kids.

Wink Detective

also: Wink Murder, Killer

ages 8-12 · 6-20 players · 10-20 min · indoors · calm

One secret winker puts players to sleep with a wink, and everyone tries to work out who it is. A sit-down mystery game for sleepovers and older kids' parties.

YOU NEED

Slips of paper, one marked with an X

SETUP

Everyone sits in a circle. Fold one slip per player into a bowl, with an X on exactly one.

HOW TO PLAY

1. Each player draws a slip and looks at it secretly. The X is the winker.
2. Everyone looks around the circle and makes eye contact.
3. The winker winks at players one at a time. A player who is winked at counts silently to five, then dramatically falls asleep.
4. Anyone who thinks they know the winker raises a hand and accuses. A right guess wins the round; a wrong guess and that player falls asleep too.
5. The winker wins by putting everyone else to sleep.

TIPS FOR THE GROWN-UP

- Kids who can't wink can blink both eyes, or stick out their tongue for a second.
- We call it Wink Detective for younger groups; the older names are Wink Murder and Killer.

cut

Four Corners

ages 5-12 · 8+ players · 5-15 min · indoors · some running

Kids tiptoe to a corner while It counts with eyes covered, then It calls a corner. The classroom party game that needs only four signs.

YOU NEED

Four signs, numbered 1 to 4

SETUP

Put a numbered sign in each corner of the room. Pick one student to be It, sitting in the middle with eyes covered.

HOW TO PLAY

1. It counts down from ten while everyone tiptoes quietly to a corner.
2. At zero, It calls a corner number without looking.
3. Everyone in that corner sits down at their desk and is out for the round (or does five jumping jacks and stays in).
4. Repeat until one student is left. They're the next It.

SAFETY

- Tiptoe only, and move desks so the corners are clear.

TIPS FOR THE GROWN-UP

- With a big class, call two corners per round.
- Get-to-know-you version: make the corners answers (favorite season, pet, food) and talk about them instead of calling one out.

VARIATIONS

- Holiday corners: pink, red, purple and white for Valentine's Day; four Halloween pictures in October.

Heads Up, Seven Up

also: Thumbs Up, Seven Up

ages 6-12 · 14+ players · 10-15 min · indoors · calm

Seven students secretly press down one classmate's thumb each, and the tapped students try to guess who did it. A quiet favorite for any class party.

SETUP

Pick seven students to stand at the front. Everyone else sits with head down on the desk, eyes closed, one thumb up.

HOW TO PLAY

1. The teacher says "Heads down, thumbs up."
2. The seven walk around quietly. Each presses down one student's thumb, then returns to the front.
3. The teacher calls "Heads up, seven up!"
4. Students whose thumbs were pressed stand and guess who tapped them. A right guess means they swap places with the tapper.

TIPS FOR THE GROWN-UP

- For smaller classes, play Heads Up, Four Up.
- Remind tappers to press thumbs gently and not to tap the same friend every round.

cut

Silent Ball

ages 7-12 · 10+ players · 5-15 min · indoors · calm

Toss a soft ball around the room without making a sound. Talk, drop it or make a bad throw and you sit down. Teachers love it because it's quiet.

YOU NEED

A soft foam ball

SETUP

Students stand by their desks or in a big circle. The teacher is the judge.

HOW TO PLAY

1. Toss the ball to anyone, without a sound.
2. You're out (sit down) if you talk, drop a good throw, or throw one nobody could catch.
3. Out players watch and help judge.
4. Play until two or three are left, then start a new round with everyone.

SAFETY

- Foam balls only, underhand throws.

TIPS FOR THE GROWN-UP

- Set a rule for laughing before you start; it will happen.
- No throwing back to the person who just threw to you.

VARIATIONS

- Holiday Silent Ball with a small plush pumpkin, snowman or heart.

Telephone

also: Whisper Down the Lane, Broken Telephone

ages 5-12 · 6+ players · 5-10 min · indoors, car or waiting room · calm

Whisper a sentence down a line of players and see how mixed up it is by the end. In Pennsylvania it's Whisper Down the Lane.

SETUP

Sit or stand in a line or a circle.

HOW TO PLAY

1. The first player makes up a sentence and whispers it once to the next player.
2. Each player whispers what they heard to the next person, only once.
3. The last player says it out loud.
4. The first player says the original. Compare them.

TIPS FOR THE GROWN-UP

- Silly sentences with names and numbers get the best mix-ups.
- A rule of one whisper only, no repeats, is what makes it work.

VARIATIONS

- Picture telephone: draw a picture, the next person writes what it shows, the next draws that, and so on.

cut

Doggy, Doggy, Where's Your Bone?

ages 3-7 · 6+ players · 10-15 min · indoors · calm

Someone sneaks the doggy's bone and the whole class hides their hands while chanting. The doggy gets three guesses. A preschool and kindergarten favorite.

YOU NEED

A small object as the bone (a block or an eraser)

SETUP

The doggy sits on a chair at the front, facing away from the class, with the bone under or behind the chair.

HOW TO PLAY

1. The teacher points to one child, who tiptoes up, takes the bone and sits back down with it behind their back.
2. Everyone puts their hands behind their backs and chants: "Doggy, doggy, where's your bone? Somebody took it from your home!"
3. The doggy turns around and gets three guesses.
4. If the doggy guesses right, they go again. If not, the child with the bone is the next doggy.

TIPS FOR THE GROWN-UP

- Give hints if the doggy is stuck: "It's someone wearing red."
- Great for learning names in September.

CLASSROOM GAME

Around the World

ages 6-12 · 8+ players · 10-15 min · indoors · calm

A traveler stands behind a classmate, and whoever answers the flash card first moves on. The goal is to travel all the way around the room.

YOU NEED

Flash cards (math facts, sight words or holiday words)

SETUP

Students sit at their desks. One student, the traveler, stands behind the first seated student.

HOW TO PLAY

1. The teacher shows a flash card.
2. The traveler and the seated student race to answer.
3. If the traveler wins, they move to stand behind the next student. If the seated student wins, they become the traveler and move on.
4. Anyone who makes it all the way around the room wins.

TIPS FOR THE GROWN-UP

- Choose cards everyone has practiced, so it feels like a game and not a test.
- Holiday vocabulary cards make a nice party version.

Free to print and copy. Every child gets a way to play.

cut

CLASSROOM GAME

Draw and Guess

also: Sketch relay

ages 6-12 · 6+ players · 10-20 min · indoors · some running

One player draws a word on the board while their team guesses against the clock. No letters, no numbers, no talking.

YOU NEED

A whiteboard or big paper, markers, word cards, a timer

SETUP

Split into two or more teams. Write words on cards (holiday words work well).

HOW TO PLAY

1. A player from the first team takes a card and has one minute to draw it.
2. Their team shouts guesses. The drawer can nod or point but can't talk, write letters or write numbers.
3. A correct guess scores a point and the drawer takes another card until the minute is up.
4. Teams alternate. The highest score after a few rounds wins.

TIPS FOR THE GROWN-UP

- Let reluctant drawers draw in pairs.
- Our Game Maker can make and print a word list for any theme.

VARIATIONS

- Everybody draws: all teams draw the same word at once, and the first team to guess it wins the point.

Free to print and copy. Every child gets a way to play.

Bingo

also: Holiday bingo

ages 4-12 · 2+ players · 15-30 min · indoors · calm

The caller reads out words or pictures and players mark them on their cards. First to complete a line shouts "Bingo!" Holiday cards are the class party standard.

YOU NEED

Bingo cards, markers or paper squares, a list of items to call

SETUP

Give each player a card and markers. Mix up the calling list.

HOW TO PLAY

1. The caller reads one item at a time.
2. Players who have it on their card mark the square.
3. The first player with a full row, column or diagonal shouts "Bingo!"
4. Check the card against the called list, then clear and play again.

SAFETY

- Use paper squares or bingo daubers, not small candies, with children under 4.

TIPS FOR THE GROWN-UP

- Picture cards work for pre-readers.
- Play for a full card or a picture frame (all the edge squares) to make rounds longer.

VARIATIONS

- Blackout bingo: cover the whole card.

cut

Who Am I?

also: Headbands, sticky-note guessing

ages 7-12 · 4+ players · 10-20 min · indoors · calm

Everyone wears a card they can't see, then mingles asking yes-or-no questions to work out who or what they are. A good arrival game for parties.

YOU NEED

Sticky notes or index cards and tape

SETUP

Write an animal, a storybook character or a holiday thing on each card. Stick one on each player's back or forehead without letting them see it.

HOW TO PLAY

1. Players walk around and ask each other one yes-or-no question at a time: "Do I have fur?"
2. After one question, move on to someone new.
3. When you think you know, ask: "Am I a penguin?"
4. Guessed it? Move your card to your front and keep answering questions for others.

TIPS FOR THE GROWN-UP

- Choose things every child in the room will know.
- Pre-readers can use picture cards with a grown-up reading questions.

I Spy

ages 3-10 · 2-10 players · 5-15 min · indoors, outdoors, car or waiting room · calm

"I spy with my little eye something that is green." The game for waiting rooms, restaurants and long car rides.

SETUP

Nothing to set up. Agree that the object has to be something everyone can see.

HOW TO PLAY

1. The spy picks something everyone can see, without saying what it is.
2. They say: "I spy with my little eye something that is..." plus a color (or "that starts with B").
3. Everyone guesses.
4. Whoever guesses right is the next spy.

TIPS FOR THE GROWN-UP

- Colors and shapes for kids who don't know letters yet.
- In the car, pick things inside the car; outside things go by too fast.

VARIATIONS

- I Spy a sound: "I hear with my little ear..."

cut

Twenty Questions

also: Animal, Vegetable or Mineral

ages 6-12 · 2-10 players · 10-20 min · indoors, car or waiting room · calm

One player thinks of something, and everyone else has 20 yes-or-no questions to work out what it is.

SETUP

The thinker picks a person, animal, place or thing and keeps it secret.

HOW TO PLAY

1. The traditional first question is "Animal, vegetable or mineral?"; after that, only yes-or-no questions.
2. Count the questions out loud.
3. Anyone can guess at any time, but a wrong guess counts as a question.
4. If nobody gets it in 20, the thinker wins and goes again.

TIPS FOR THE GROWN-UP

- Teach the good-question trick: questions that cut the choices in half ("Is it bigger than a car?").
- For younger kids, limit it to animals.

The Alphabet Game

also: Road sign alphabet

ages 6-12 · 2-8 players · 15-60 min · car or waiting room · calm

Find every letter from A to Z, in order, on signs, trucks and billboards outside the car. The road trip game most families already know.

SETUP

Decide whether you're playing as one team or each person for themselves.

HOW TO PLAY

1. Look for the letter A on anything outside the car: a sign, a truck, a store.
2. Call out the letter and where you saw it. Then look for B.
3. Work through the alphabet in order.
4. First to Z wins. As a team, see how many miles it takes.

TIPS FOR THE GROWN-UP

- Q, X and Z are hard: agree in advance that any word containing them counts, wherever the letter is.
- License plates can count or not; decide before you start.

VARIATIONS

- Alphabet categories: name an animal (or food) for every letter in order, no looking out the window.

cut

The License Plate Game

ages 6-12 · 1-8 players · 15-120 min · car or waiting room · calm

Spot license plates from as many states as you can on a trip. Our printable has all 50 states and Washington, D.C. to check off.

YOU NEED

The printable 50-state checklist, a pencil

SETUP

Print the checklist. Decide whether parked cars count.

HOW TO PLAY

1. Watch for plates from other states.
2. Call out the state and check it off.
3. Keep the list for the whole trip (or the whole summer).
4. Count your states at the end.

TIPS FOR THE GROWN-UP

- Rest stops and hotel parking lots are where the rare states turn up.
- Kids can color in each state on a map as they find it.

VARIATIONS

- Plate math: add up the numbers on a plate; highest total wins.

Story Chain

also: Fortunately, Unfortunately

ages 5-12 · 3-15 players · 5-15 min · indoors, car or waiting room · calm

Build a story together, one sentence each. Kids are fearless storytellers, and the result is usually ridiculous.

SETUP

Sit in a circle (or go around the car). Someone gives a first line: "Once upon a time, a dog found a key."

HOW TO PLAY

1. The next player adds one sentence.
2. Go around and around.
3. After a few rounds, the grown-up gives a signal that it's time to wrap up, and the next player ends the story.

TIPS FOR THE GROWN-UP

- Fortunately/Unfortunately version: sentences alternate between "Fortunately..." and "Unfortunately..."
- One-word-at-a-time is harder and funnier for older kids.

cut

Rock, Paper, Scissors

ages 4-12 · 2+ players · 2-15 min · indoors, outdoors, car or waiting room · calm

Rock crushes scissors, scissors cut paper, paper covers rock. Settle anything, or run a whole-class tournament where nobody sits out.

SETUP

Players face each other with one fist out.

HOW TO PLAY

1. Together, say "Rock, paper, scissors, shoot!" pumping your fist on each word.
2. On "shoot," show rock (fist), paper (flat hand) or scissors (two fingers).
3. Rock beats scissors, scissors beat paper, paper beats rock. Same sign means play again.
4. Best two out of three wins.

TIPS FOR THE GROWN-UP

- Cheerleader tournament for a class: everyone pairs up; the loser becomes the winner's cheerleader and follows them, chanting their name. Winners pair up again until two players, each with a huge cheering section, play the final.

Would You Rather

ages 6-12 · 2+ players · 5-15 min · indoors, car or waiting room · calm

Pick one of two choices and explain why. Kids will argue for ten minutes about whether they'd rather have a pet dragon or a pet unicorn.

SETUP

Have a list of questions ready, or take turns making them up.

HOW TO PLAY

1. Ask a question: "Would you rather be able to fly or be invisible?"
2. Everyone picks one. No "neither."
3. Each player gives a reason.
4. The next player asks the next question.

TIPS FOR THE GROWN-UP

- Moving version for a class: one side of the room for each answer.

cut

Categories

ages 8-12 · 2-12 players · 5-15 min · indoors, car or waiting room · calm

Pick a category, then go around naming something that fits until someone repeats or runs out. Simple, fast and surprisingly tense.

SETUP

Pick a category: animals, cereals, things in a kitchen, words that rhyme with "cat."

HOW TO PLAY

1. Go around the group. Each player names one thing in the category.
2. No repeats, and you have five seconds.
3. A player who repeats or freezes is out for the round, or loses a point.
4. The last player standing picks the next category.

TIPS FOR THE GROWN-UP

- Letter rule for older kids: everything has to start with the same letter.

Tic-Tac-Toe

also: Noughts and Crosses

ages 4-12 · 2 players · 2-10 min · indoors, car or waiting room · calm

Get three in a row on a three-by-three grid before your opponent does. It's the first strategy game most kids learn.

YOU NEED

Paper and a pencil (or the printable grids)

SETUP

Draw a grid of two vertical and two horizontal lines. One player is X, the other O.

HOW TO PLAY

1. X goes first and writes an X in any square.
2. Players take turns.
3. The first to get three marks in a row (across, down or diagonally) wins.
4. If the grid fills with no row, it's a draw, sometimes called a cat's game.

TIPS FOR THE GROWN-UP

- When both players play perfectly, every game is a draw. Older kids enjoy working out why.
- Take turns going first.

VARIATIONS

- Four in a row on a five-by-five grid makes the game last longer.

cut

Dots and Boxes

ages 6-12 · 2-4 players · 5-15 min · indoors, car or waiting room · calm

Take turns joining dots. Close a box and you claim it and go again. The French mathematician Édouard Lucas described it in 1889.

YOU NEED

Paper and a pencil (or the printable dot grid)

SETUP

Draw a grid of dots, five by five for a first game. Each player uses a different color or writes their initial.

HOW TO PLAY

1. On your turn, draw one line joining two dots next to each other, across or down (never diagonally).
2. If your line closes the fourth side of a box, write your initial in it and take another turn.
3. Keep going until every box is claimed.
4. The player with the most boxes wins.

TIPS FOR THE GROWN-UP

- The trick is to avoid drawing the third side of a box.
- A bigger grid makes a longer game: try eight by eight.

Snowman

also: A friendly word-guessing game

ages 6-12 · 2+ players · 5-15 min · indoors · calm

Guess the secret word one letter at a time. Every wrong guess adds a piece to a snowman; finish the word before the snowman is done. Many teachers use it in place of the older gallows version.

YOU NEED

Paper or a whiteboard, a pencil or marker

SETUP

The word-setter thinks of a word and draws one blank line for each letter.

HOW TO PLAY

1. Players guess one letter at a time.
2. Right guess: the setter writes the letter in every blank where it belongs.
3. Wrong guess: the setter writes the letter to the side and draws one snowman part: bottom ball, middle ball, head, eyes, nose, mouth, arms, hat.
4. Guess the whole word before the eighth part (the hat) goes on to win. Whoever solves it sets the next word.

TIPS FOR THE GROWN-UP

- Holiday word lists make it a party game.
- Our printable sheet has blanks, an alphabet strip and a snowman outline to color in.

VARIATIONS

- Summer version: build a sandcastle or a flower instead.

cut

Sprouts

ages 8-12 · 2 players · 5-10 min · indoors, car or waiting room · calm

Join dots with curved lines and add a new dot on each line. The last player who can move wins. The mathematicians John Conway and Michael Paterson invented it in 1967.

YOU NEED

Paper and a pencil

SETUP

Draw three dots well apart on a sheet of paper. (Two dots for a quick first game.)

HOW TO PLAY

1. On your turn, draw a line (straight or curvy) from one dot to another, or from a dot back to itself in a loop.
2. Then put a new dot somewhere on the line you just drew.
3. Lines can't cross each other, and no dot can have more than three lines touching it.
4. The last player able to make a move wins.

TIPS FOR THE GROWN-UP

- A game that starts with three dots can't last more than eight moves, so it's quick.
- Draw the dots big so it's easy to count the lines at each one.

Sink the Fleet

also: Salvo, pencil battleships

ages 8-12 · 2 players · 15-30 min · indoors, car or waiting room · calm

Hide a fleet of ships on a grid, then take turns calling out squares to find and sink your opponent's. An old pencil-and-paper game; the board-game version came later.

YOU NEED

The printable fleet grids (or graph paper), a pencil each

SETUP

Each player has two 10-by-10 grids labeled A to J across and 1 to 10 down: one for their fleet, one to track their shots. Each player secretly draws five ships on their fleet grid, in straight lines across or down: 5, 4, 3, 3 and 2 squares long. Ships can't overlap.

HOW TO PLAY

1. Take turns calling one square, like "C7."
2. The other player answers "hit" or "miss." Mark the answer on your tracking grid.
3. When every square of a ship has been hit, its owner says "You sank my ship" and says which one.
4. The first player to sink the whole fleet wins.

TIPS FOR THE GROWN-UP

- Sit back to back, or prop up a folder between you, so nobody peeks.
- Younger kids can play on a 6-by-6 grid with three small ships.

VARIATIONS

- Salvo: call one shot for each of your ships still afloat, all at once.

cut