Self-Esteem Games for Children

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The imperative for combining theory with practice

Picture the following imaginary scenario. Seven-year-old Adam is joining in with a group game of 'By the sea' – an active, fun game chosen by group facilitator Maggie to help the children to let off steam. The group has previously been concentrating on a written task which proved to be quite difficult for Adam. 'You're already OUT Adam!' comes the indignant cry from Ben. 'You can't keep joining in when you're ALREADY OUT!' Maggie invites Adam to stand near her and help her to decide who is out next time. Adam reluctantly agrees but during the next round insists that Ben is 'out'. The game quickly deteriorates into a series of denials and second chances. Finally an exhausted Maggie brings things to an early close when she spots Adam systematically emptying out the contents of the sand tray in the far corner of the room.

Why is it that some group games seem to 'work' and others don't? I believe that one of the main reasons lies in how well the facilitator understands the importance of the game process and how powerful this process can be. Of course, games played as energizers or treats can be exciting and fun and a source of immense pleasure for the players. Occasionally, however, they can also be sheer torture for the quiet child, the child who has difficulty under-standing the rules of games, the child who is already full of pent-up frustration or anxiety, or who fears being 'left out' or losing yet again. In contrast, a well-chosen game played with awareness on the part of the facilitator can be an incredibly effective instrument for support-ing a child's emergent sense of self and self-esteem.

Without this awareness the many opportunities for helping children to build cognitive, social and emotional skills through the medium of games can so easily be missed or, worse still, can unwittingly be misused and foster even deeper feelings of low self-worth.

My aim in writing this handbook is therefore to facilitate a mindful approach to playing self-esteem games by bringing together some of the theory of self-esteem and of play and combining this with guidelines for playing a range of non-competitive games. These are intended to supplement other strategies that facilitators are already using in order to contrib-ute to an *integrated approach* to help 5–11-year-olds build, maintain and reinforce healthy self-esteem. Games alone are not the panacea for all self-esteem ills and, realistically, 'Maggie' and I are not super-enlightened, constantly mindful people, but in recognizing the nature and power of games we can certainly give it all we've got!

I have chosen to focus on non-competitive games where the enjoyment and the challenge come from the process itself rather than from winning. This is not because I have an aversion to competitive games. In fact, far from this being the case, I do believe that there is a place for such games once a child is ready to engage in them and does so by their own choice. The child's world is after all a competitive arena and most children will naturally play games of skill that involve winning or losing or being 'in' or 'out' whether we adults encourage them or not. Younger children and those who are particularly vulnerable to low self-esteem will find these win-or-lose games extremely difficult to cope with, however, and will need to first develop a certain degree of emotional resilience, competence and self-efficacy, all of which can be fostered initially through non-competitive activities.

During my years as a speech and language therapist I have collected many different games from various sources. Some of them have been passed on to me by colleagues in the teaching and therapy professions or by children in therapy groups; some came from books; many are adaptations of school and party games I remember playing as a child; some are games that I have played on various professional training courses. Occasionally, when I believe that I have made up an entirely new game to suit therapy purposes, I later come across just such a game being used in a different context! Such is the nature of games – because they follow certain conventions they are constantly being recycled and re-invented in play-grounds, therapy rooms, classrooms and homes across the world.

The games presented here have been selected on the basis of clinical experience and observations to represent just a few of the many possibilities. It will quickly become apparent that throughout the sections there are also a handful of activities that are not structured games in the true sense of the word but do involve an element of play. These have been added because I have found them to be particularly helpful tools in the self-esteem tool box. The stretching of a definition to encompass these activities is, I hope, a useful transgression! Further similar activities can also be found in *Helping Children to Build Self-Esteem* (Plummer 2001).

With occasional adaptations, all the games can be played in schools and will fit into a wide selection of personal, social and health education (PSHE) and other learning objectives. The material can also be incorporated into a diverse range of therapy approaches with individual children or groups.

Crucially, many of the games can be played at home by families. The role played by parents and siblings in supporting a child's self-esteem is tremendously important, and encouraging families to play these games together can have a far-reaching impact on the process. The special time shared between family members during a fun game can, in itself, be a boost to helping parents to understand their children, show their love, and strengthen their relationship. In the context of self-esteem, sharing moments of laughter, problem-solving and creativity during games can be rewarding and re-affirming for both children and parents.

However, for families who do not generally play games together the idea of incorporating game activities into their daily lives can be extremely daunting. Encouraging parents to play games as part of a therapeutic or teaching strategy needs to be approached very carefully

and with full awareness of how easy it is for adults to misconstrue the reasons for playing games. 'Keep it simple, keep it fun' is the best guideline.

I have not attempted to offer any formula for choosing which games to play or how many to play at any one time. This is because the ways in which the games are adapted and incorporated into educational and therapy approaches can and should vary according to the setting and according to the needs, strengths and experiences of the children. Each facilitator will naturally bring their own personality, imagination, expertise and knowledge to the games and create something new from the basic format. In this way, playing with the process of playing becomes an integral part of our own learning.

How to use this book

The games and activities are divided into nine sections: warm-ups, the seven foundation elements of healthy self-esteem (Plummer 2001) and wind-downs.

In some instances this categorization is slightly arbitrary since many of the games could be placed in more than one section. Because the elements of self-esteem are intimately connected, you will find that you are often touching on several aspects within just one game. However, if you keep the principal focus in mind this will help you to evaluate and adapt individual games appropriately.

Each section starts with a brief overview of the process or the foundation element to be explored. This is followed by a selection of games relevant to that particular aspect.

As well as the primary objective, you will also find a list of additional skills that each game could promote. I have chosen to limit these lists to just a few key areas but there is plenty of room for you to add further skills that you feel are important for your own focus of work. Undoubtedly, the more often that you play these games, the more skills you will want to add to each list!

For ease of reference, the games have been marked with a set of symbols to indicate age-appropriateness and the amount of speaking involved. The symbols used are as follows:

⑤	This gives an indication of the suggested *youngest* age for playing the game. There is no upper age limit.
⏱ 10 mins	An approximate time is given for the length of the game (excluding the discussion time). This will obviously vary according to the size of group and the ability of the players.
♟ ♟ ♟	Indicates that the game is suitable for larger groups (eight or more).
♟ ♟	The game is suitable for small groups.
♡♡♡	The game involves a lot of speaking unless it is adapted.
♡♡	A moderate amount of speaking is required by players.
♡	The game is primarily a non-verbal game or one requiring minimal speech.
☑ observation	This gives an indication of an additional key skill used or developed by playing this game.

Language levels

Although the amount of speaking involved in each game has been noted, the games have not been categorized according to levels of verbal understanding nor according to the spoken language *ability* needed. Some games will obviously require adaptations to support children with specific speech and language difficulties or learning difficulties. You may find that children who do not have the necessary understanding of more complex verbal instructions may just need time to observe others before joining in or they may benefit from having the instructions broken down into smaller chunks. It will be important to then check their understanding after each part of the instruction.

Adaptations

Ideas for expanding and adapting the games are offered as a starting point for your own experimentation with the main themes.

Reflection

Each game description finishes with a selection of ideas for reflection and for discussion with older children. These suggestions are also intended to provide focus points for facilitators to use during their own planning and reflection meetings.

Sometimes even the briefest time spent in reflecting on the process of a game can help children to realize that they are not alone in how they feel and this in itself can be a tremendously helpful experience for the child with low self-esteem. Equally, children who play games regularly will often learn purely through the experience and will not necessarily need to verbally reflect on what happened within the sessions. As a general principle I would suggest that we should not give more time to a discussion at the time of playing than we do to the game itself. It is the experience of the game that is the most important aspect. However, these topics can provide an opportunity for drawing links between different themes at later times. You could remind children of particular games when this is relevant: 'Do you remember when we played that game of "Pass the shell"? What did you feel when you were praised?'

Coordinator's notes

Although this is first and foremost a resource book, emphasis is also placed on the value of reflective practice. If we are to be effective in our work with children then we must, of course, continually evaluate and monitor our own skills and reflect on our personal learning. Each page therefore includes space for facilitators to add their own notes. These might include such things as personal insights and experiences of using the games, personal preferences, dislikes, problems and successes (see pages 30–31 for further guidelines).

Finally, because you will undoubtedly have many more games in your repertoire and will gather further ideas from colleagues and children, each section ends with a blank summary page for 'additional notes'. Here you can add to your list and make any further general comments on your experiences with the games you have used.

My hope is that this format will encourage reflective practice but that it will not *dis*courage enjoying the pure fun of playing games with young children. This, after all, is the essential value of self-esteem games – having fun while learning about ourselves and others!

The remainder of Part One explores the concept of self-esteem, outlines the significance of play in the development of feelings of self-worth and competence in young children and offers guidelines for facilitating the games.