INTRODUCTION

Cooperative games come in many forms. Their distinguishing characteristic is that there is no single, identifiable winner and therefore, no loser. Everyone has fun and everyone playing wins together. This is an especially important feature for very young children and for children who are by nature highly competitive and have not yet developed the ability to celebrate genuinely when they do not win. If we are honest with ourselves, most of us are still working on that particular skill.

When a home-schooling family incorporates game playing into the curriculum, they may encounter the raised eyebrows of skeptics. However, it doesn't take much convincing when a well crafted list of the benefits is readily available.

BENEFITS

LANGUAGE

Development

One of the most basic benefits of a cooperative game is how it advances the development of language. Researchers agree on one point of language and literacy development: practice is at the heart of improvement. The child who has many opportunities to practice talking is far ahead of his peers who spend the greater part of their day passively experiencing language in front of the television. The child who regularly engages in give and take conversations with adults ultimately uses language to a much greater degree than her peers who are more often talked to (told) than talked with. According to Gordon Wells, in his 2009 book *Meaning Makers, Second Edition*, the talked-with child is more likely to succeed in academic subjects, tends to be more secure emotionally, demonstrates more self-confidence, and demonstrates sophisticated cognitive abilities. When one thinks about it, it makes sense. Who among
us doesn't experience that flush of confidence when we feel like we've been genuinely listened to and our opinion matters.

**Vocabulary**

As with Language Development, vocabulary increases as the child is exposed to and uses new words. The wise parent and caregiver recognizes their child is far more capable than some experts credit them. Talk to him about cooperation and why it is a good thing when playing with others. Before long he will be slipping that fancy word into sentences as he tries to convince his playmate to hand over a favored toy or share a limited playground resource. Remember, children can’t use their words if they aren’t exposed to words and observe adults using theirs to solve problems.

**COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT**

A critical component of language development is the ability to thinking in an organized way, a skill not supported with random, passively supervised play. Games of all sorts require that children access prior knowledge, and when the caregiver who thinks aloud models organized thinking, a child has opportunities to observe the benefits of strategies and mimic the behavior. Cooperative games provide a safe and fun venue because there is no risk of "losing" the game. Children need many daily opportunities to string their thoughts together and test the outcome to become competent communicators and thinkers. This is why very young children, and children who have fewer opportunities to engage in extended give-and-take conversations need more than a few beats to respond to a question that requires little more than a “yes” or “no” answer.

During cooperative game play, children have opportunities to observe the adult model his or her thinking about various strategies from which to choose. The children learn that they can analyze and identify different choices. As they discover that actively
thinking about choices is more advantageous over the most obvious move, they are motivated to think strategically to figure out what works best for them and the team.

Early on, when introducing new cooperative games, the wise adult scaffolds the behavior by, again, thinking aloud and talking about the benefits of “this choice” over “that choice.” Over time, the decision making is turned over the players and assuming an interested grown-up is modeling using their words by thinking aloud, the children are led discuss their own thinking thereby practicing both conversation and thinking skills. When adults take advantage of teachable moments, children discover there is indeed something to think about and thinking can be fun. It is unfortunate that thinking is quite rare in today’s media culture. We all tend to sit passive in front of a screen, reading or watching, without truly thinking about the underlying why or questioning a statement that is presented as truth.

**SOCIO-EMOTIONAL Cooperation**

Children are not by nature cooperative, though some are more “other” focused (versus “self” focused) and therefore prone to develop cooperative strategies to meet their own internal needs of acceptance and engagement. The beauty of cooperative games is that children, regardless of their temperament, discover the internal benefits of encouraging others. An example of a common resource becomes a cooperative game is the playground swing set. The athletic child who loves to swing and tends to be oblivious to others can happily monopolize a swing. With the introduction of some adult attention and cooperative expectations, a couple swings can meet the physical, emotional, and social needs are many children through consistent expectations and simple counting.

While children discover the benefits of cooperation, the stage is set for a self-focused child to experience the satisfaction of sharing a limited resource. By keeping the wait
time for the next turn developmentally appropriate, i.e. short enough for the child to
tolerate, confidence is supported because a trusted adult is monitoring and providing
individualized attention, and ensuring that the reasonable needs and desires of all the
children involved are acknowledged and met. Children learn that cooperation can be
fun. Because the individual needs of the confident and less confident children are met,
everyone enjoys opportunities to develop confidence and self-advocacy.

**Turn Taking**

Related to cooperation, turn taking is a critical component of game play, especially
board games. With adult supervision and modeling, the child learns how to track the
movement of the game around the board or through the queue. The Western protocol of
turn taking, generally from left to right, is absorbed rather than explicitly taught. When
the pace of the game is appropriately quick, children learn to appreciate the anticipation
for the next turn while learning how to tolerate the wait. For children who are by nature
indecisive, the introduction of a timer (or simple counting to 5 or 10) will encourage them
to make a choice before their turn is ended.

**Delayed Gratification**

Research indicates that children who are skilled at waiting to receive what they want are
more likely to excel academically. Delayed gratification is another important component
to cooperative games, as the child learns how to wait for her next spin or his next play.
The ability to delay gratification requires that the child has had opportunities to
experience the frustration of waiting before attaining a goal. The confidence that “I will
get what I want… I just have to wait” develops, over time, in developmentally appropriate
increments. The benefit of cooperative games is that they are played for very brief
periods of time, in the case of a shared playground swing, as short as 30 seconds.
EXAMPLES OF COOPERATIVE GAMES

Sampler of Board Games by Peaceable Kingdom

- Count Your Chickens – a great beginning for very young toddlers. Teaches counting skills, fine motor control as they learn to work the spinner and pick up and move pieces, correct marker movement across the board, turn taking, celebrating the success of others, recognition of the bonus square that adds “one more” and game playing protocols.

- Seeds for the Birds – a logical next step as toddlers mature. This game introduces strategies as the player must decide which tile to turn over next and the potential benefits. Object is for the mother bird to collect more seeds for her babies than the squirrel takes.

- Hoot, Owl, Hoot – a simple game that supports development of strategy and thinking skills. This game also incorporates three levels of play, each more complex as more owls are added to the game play. The object of the game is to move the owls to the nest before the sun comes up. Provides teachable moments about owl behavior. Teaches color recognition, and basic strategies as the child considers which of three available cards might get the owls home.

Puzzles

Developmentally appropriate puzzles provide opportunities for cooperative play when two or more children work together. Some initial supervision will be necessary to establish protocols and expectations, but the opportunity for a child who is typically successful with puzzles (and therefore loves doing them) to support a child new to puzzles is obvious.

The additional advantage of working puzzles is the development of accessing prior knowledge, viewing a puzzle piece from multiple perspectives: shape, size, image,
color, edge discrimination, etc. These skills represent foundation stones for future literacy.

Sampler of Potentially Cooperative Playground Games

In general, cooperative play is supported when an adult (or respected peer) celebrates the accomplishment (versus victory) of another. Rather than simply observing, the involved adult care-giver watches for opportunities to clap, shout out cheers, praise and specifically encourage the children when they cooperate during various active games. When scolding is kept to a minimum, the children are motivated to duplicate behaviors that are rewarded with positive adult attention.

- Swings – often a limited, highly desirable resource. Rather than have the swiftest runners monopolizing the swings, the caregiver teaches the children the benefits of counting. At the end of the count, “first one off is the first one on” provides incentive to dismount and turn the swing over to another child. Because children need adult attention, the presence of the teacher and action of the teacher counting is re-assuring and desirable and further supports the desirability of sharing the swings. Children learning the skill may refuse to dismount. When the teacher accepts their choice and simply refuses to push (or allow the swing to move), the child discovers the advantage of cooperation. This field-tested activity works with all ages from the youngest toddler to school-age.

- Balls – tossing and catching with partners (holding limited or not allowed) or kicking and chasing (no goals, no holding). Common sports terminology can be effective as in Basketball’s 35-second shot clock.

- Duck, Duck, Goose – choosing and chasing. By removing the competitive element of the Goose trying to return to his place in the circle thereby forcing the Duck to choose again, the game becomes one of cooperation and participation (and lots of running…sometimes more than once around the circle).
The Multiple Benefits of Cooperative Games

- Musical Chairs – sharing and inviting. The cooperative version of Musical Chairs results in eventually a single chair remaining in the play field and the participating children figuring out how to safely connect with the remaining chair(s). This can be include sitting on laps, establishing a physical connection with a chair, or forming a human chain starting with the successful “sitter.”

CONVERTING COMPETITIVE GAMES TO COOPERATIVE GAMES

As established above, with a little thought and creativity, many traditionally competitive games can be converted to games that focus on cooperation and accomplishment. By adjusting the focus from winner/loser to a celebration of success or improvement, children benefit as their confidence and sense of achievement increases.

Take, for example, Musical Chairs. Rather than exclude the child who fails to find an unoccupied chair, all the players continue to participate. Children can be encouraged to suggestion solutions as the number of players increasingly outnumbers the available chairs. Players may simply call out to their companions to “Come, share my chair with me!” As the available chairs continues to decrease, the players can be encouraged to shift strategies…perhaps holding the hands of seated players, or using a specified foot or finger to make contact with the chair. The adult assisting with the game can serve as ringmaster or encourage the children to offer solutions, which supports the development of creative problem solving and higher order thinking.

SUMMARY

Cooperative games provide developmental opportunities in socio-emotional, language and cognitive development areas while encouraging practical skills like turn-taking, delay of gratification and cooperation. True cooperative games eliminate the competitive challenges of a single winner. Everyone wins together as all reach the goal
through the efforts of all players. With a little imagination, the outcome of some popular competitive games can be tweaked to reset the inherent competitive nature to a more cooperative outcome that all players can enjoy. This article will provide titles of cooperative board games as well as suggestions for transforming common competitive playground and nursery games into cooperative play.