

Teaching Games and Dances in Elementary Music

by Shirley W. Wilson

To those other than music professionals, game playing in any class might seem like a “time waster.” But to those who teach music to children, they have found that games offer benefits no other elements of the curriculum can. An old proverb states: “He who learns with pleasure learns full measure.” In other words, “Children love to play!”

Anecdotal evidence shows that no other activity of the music lesson holds students’ full attention like games. It behooves us, therefore, as music educators, to create as many game opportunities for children as possible, provided the experience leads to solid music learning. Not only can teachers create their own games for learning, but they can draw upon a solid, large body of folksong games, dances, and play parties, both from America and around the world.

Besides the benefit of improved attention by students, there are plenty of musical rewards from teaching games and dances. Some of these are listed below in no particular order.

1. Reinforcement of beat and rhythm through walking, clapping, gestures.
2. Sensibility to phrasing and/or form.
3. Support for weaker singers through amount of inherent repetition.
4. Improvisation opportunities through words, gestures, ostinatos.
5. Use as preparation or review of musical elements—melodic, rhythmic, form.
6. Practice in inner-hearing—Students can perform game movements to either hearing the rhythm clapped or the beat heard or hidden.
7. Solo opportunities—singing, game leading, movements
8. Two-part opportunities through dialogue games.
9. “Social” development—taking turns, choosing partners, holding hands.

10. Enthusiasm for music class because of this favorite activity.
11. Cultural exposure through history of words, gestures, use of game or dance in another time or country.
12. Encouragement for children to play these games on their own—at home, on the playground, producing independence and reinforcement of music learning.

To provide students with a positive game experience, teachers need to be wise in the way in which they present games and dances. Some observations and tips for teaching games and dances are listed below in no particular order.

1. Know the game well before teaching it. Have a “plan” for teaching it.
2. It is best to teach the game and song together, but with harder games, it might be possible to teach them in stages.
3. With a harder game, or with a difficult group, use a small group to demonstrate the game for everyone else.
4. Within a lesson, choose games or dances from which you can extract musical examples for your lesson focus.
5. Children need not be aware of your educational reasons for choosing a game. They should feel that games are mainly for fun.
6. Encourage “ownership” of games by the children. Teacher should become a “facilitator” as soon as possible, letting children lead.
7. Learn to adapt games for smaller spaces, level of control and/or social skill of the group. Sometimes, merely changing the game by seating students instead of having them stand, dropping hands and doing a clapping ostinato instead of holding hands, breaking the game into smaller groups, using same-gender partners, will allow you to use a game you thought you couldn’t use.

8. Play the game for an appropriate amount of time, neither too long nor too short. When teaching younger children, try to give everyone a “turn” as quickly as possible, even if you must keep a list of children who haven’t yet played. Generally, it is better for a class to want more game time, than to tire of the game before you end it.
9. Find a way for every child to feel comfortable playing the game, having a “turn.”
10. Prompt reluctant children to take a “turn” and participate.
11. Eliminate children from the game who create dangerous conditions for classmates, or who “take over” the game from the class.
12. Design your classroom seating and furniture arrangement for games. Consider safety of children when they play games.
13. Limit competitive games (usually teacher produced). They can leave the class moody, with grumpy “losers.” This produces exactly the opposite effect than what you intended.
14. Plan lessons with periods of concentration and relaxation. Games can be a reward for heavier work. Conversely, when planning a game early in the period, plan the transition after the game so that children can return to more cognitive learning.
15. Think about the classroom teachers. While most games, at least those with the most activity, should be saved for the end of class, make sure that you leave enough time to “settle” the class before they must line up.
16. Try to plan a game or dance within each lesson. Younger children need more games.
17. Let children have a “favorite game day” as an incentive, or at least give children occasional opportunities to pick their favorites.