Fun with Family and Friends

Objective: To develop healthy social interactions and learn about one of the world’s oldest games that is still played today

Age Range: All ages

Hands-on Activity: Play a version of mancala

Life Skills: HEAD = decision-making, learning to learn; HEART = nurturing relationships; HANDS = self-motivation; HEALTH = managing feelings.

Introduction

Play is a universal part of the human experience. Games are critically important in establishing healthy social interactions and decreasing stress. Humans have been passing the time with games and play for millennia. One of the oldest known structured games in that is still played widely today is mancala or “Kalah”. There is evidence of mancala being played in Ancient Egypt and Rome with versions of the game being found in cultures across the globe. Part of its universal appeal is the simplicity of the materials required that can be customized as much or as little as desired. It can be played as inexpensively as a gameboard of holes in the dirt and rocks as the playing pieces. In contrast, mancala boards of ornately carved ivory have been found too. Below is an upcycled version that you can do with items you can find around the house. If you enjoy the game and want a more lasting gameboard, consider a wooden one!

Activity Materials

- An empty egg cartoon (12-count preferred)
- 2 small bowls
- 50 craft beads, beans, or other small items

Figure 1. Set up of a typical mancala gameboard with opposing players facing each other. Player 1 has six small cups in front of them with a bowl to their right (green) and player 2 has six small cups in front of them with a bowl to their right (red). Each of the 12 cups will contain 4 small objects at the start of the game.

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**Activity Instructions**

1.) The objective of the game is to be the player with the most objects in their bowl at the end of the game. To start the game, four small objects will be in each cup.

2.) The first player will take a turn by picking up all the objects from one cup on their side of the gameboard. They will move counterclockwise one cup and place one object into that cup, repeating the process and continuing to move around the board counterclockwise until they run out of objects (only placing one object in each cup/bowl). As the player moves around the gameboard, their own bowl will serve as a cup in which they place an object, but they will not drop an object into the opposing player’s bowl.

   a. When the first player runs out of objects in their hand, they can pick up all the objects in the last cup they placed an object into and continue only IF there are existing objects in that cup.

   b. If a player places their last object in an empty cup, their turn is over.

   c. If a player places the last object from their hand into their own bowl, they may choose any cup on the board from which to pick up objects and continue their turn.

3.) Once the first player has completed their turn, the second player can move using the same rules as above. Players will alternate turns until all six cups in front of one player are empty.

4.) The player with the most objects in their bowl at the end of the game wins!

**NOTE:** There are multiple versions of this game! Feel free to change and adapt the rules as you see fit to make it easier or more challenging. However, before beginning play, make sure the rules are mutually agreed upon and understood.

**Reflection**

After a round or two of play, the players will begin to recognize beneficial moves, be able to strategize, and anticipate moves of others. What did you notice about the game as you played? How would you share it with someone else? What could you do to play it with someone socially distanced?

**Conclusion**

While this activity is a simple game on the surface, it can have great benefits on both the body and mind. Board games can improve cognitive function, hand-eye coordination (and related skills), and healthy lifestyle choices. Spending leisure time with others increases mood too! Use this game a tool to build real connections with others and improve overall wellness.

**Resources:**


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