

# The Whole Spectrum of Social, Motor, and Sensory GAMES

BARBARA SHER

WITH KAREN BEARDSLEY

Using Every Child's  
Natural Love of  
Play to Enhance  
Key Skills and  
Promote Inclusion





Praise for  
*The Whole Spectrum of Social, Motor,  
and Sensory Games*

“This authentically something-for-everyone book is a joyous reaffirmation that children learn best through fun, imagination, simple materials, and exploration of the many wondrous things of which their bodies and minds are capable. A timely guide the the timeless kind of child’s play that should not be allowed to slip into history.”

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The Whole Spectrum  
of Social, Motor, and  
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Play to Enhance Key Skills and  
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**BARBARA SHER**  
WITH  
**KAREN BEARDSLEY**  
ILLUSTRATIONS BY RALPH BUTLER

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For my Dream Team and the many children we have loved at work

For my husband and the many ways he shows love at home

And for my children and grandchildren for everything, always

—Barbara, Mom, and Bubbie

In loving memory of my parents, who took the time to play with me,

and to my daughters, who continue to do so

—Karen and Mom

# Preface · - - - - -

We all know that each child is his or her own unique person with individual interests and skills. We also know that most children go through the same crawl-before-you-can-walk developmental sequences, although some children walk at ten months and others walk at eighteen months. There is a range we all respect. However, all children need experience. Infants are born without a clue about how to move their body; it's the caregiver giving her baby time on his tummy to strengthen his back and putting toys slightly out of reach who helps her baby learn which muscles to use to inch forward. It's the toys that are hung above a baby's crib that help her develop her vision and the skills of reaching and grasping. Being in a playgroup or with others at the park can expose a child to an awareness of facial and body cues.

Experience is always the best teacher, no matter what age we are and what skill we are trying to learn. And for the first five years of life in particular, experience makes all the difference. It has been only in the last ten years that brain researchers have explained how a child's brain develops and grows according to what the child has experienced. We have learned that each time a new activity is consciously experienced, new synapses are formed and the brain enlarges. We have also learned that the one hundred billion neurons that babies are born with and that are connected by practice become atrophied without experiences.

This book is about ways of making these learning experiences fun for children by turning them into games. When children are laughing while they are doing something, they are engaged, and they are learning. When parents and teachers are enjoying the activities as much as their children, or when children are inspired to do the activities on their own, children's skills flourish. You may realize that you already do many of these kinds of

activities, but you want to learn more. As you read this book, you will see ways you can use many games to fit your special child. There are games that are perfect for the child on the autism spectrum, whereas others work well for a child who is hyperactive, and almost all can include neurotypical children. Modify or mix and match, and your child's smiling response will let you know if you've picked the games that suit him.

---

## What Key Skills Are Being Enhanced in the Games?

All of these games address motor, sensory, and social skills in one way or another.

The sensory skills include ones that stimulate the five senses, especially vision, hearing, and touch. The tactile system, the largest sensory system in the body, is composed of receptors in the skin that send information to the brain concerning such factors as light touch, pain, temperature, and pressure. The input gives form to body and spatial awareness and plays an important role in enabling an individual to perceive the environment and establish protective reactions for survival.

The motor games work on proprioceptive and vestibular skills. Proprioceptive skills provide us with a subconscious awareness of body position and how the body is moving. They allow us to adjust automatically in different situations, such as stepping off a curb, sitting in a chair, or staying upright on uneven surfaces. Even fine motor tasks, such as writing, using a soup spoon, or buttoning a shirt, depend on an efficient proprioceptive system.

The vestibular system is found in the inner ear and detects movement and changes in the position of the head. It is how we relate in space and know, for example, if we are right side up or tilted to one side. The information we receive from this system tells us which muscles to tighten to keep



our balance, and so affects our muscle tone and coordination. All other types of sensation are processed according to vestibular information, so it is a unifying system in our brain.

Social skills include the being aware of others; attending to what is happening in the present moment; and learning to share, take turns, play cooperatively, and read social cues.

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## The Videos

Some of the games include links to short video clips. These are included to help you see how the games are organized. For visual learners, which many of us are, this type of presentation can make directions instantly easy to understand. These are not professional videos. They were taken in classrooms where I've worked by teachers Marlon Cabrera, Juana Atalig, Patty Staal, and Ivan Garces. I hope these videos will give you a better sense of how simple, fun, engaging, and inclusive these games really are.

The children are from Head Start centers in Saipan and Tinian. Saipan and Tinian are American protectorates in the Commonwealth of Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI). Although I am from Northern California, I work during the school year for the Special Education Department at the three islands in the CNMI: Saipan, Rota, and Tinian. As an occupational therapist wanting to increase the motor, social, and sensory skills of children with special needs, I go into each child's classroom and present games for all the children that target the skills I want "my" child to learn. In this way, the child with special needs also gets the benefit of feeling part of the group.

In the videos, I do not identify which child has special needs because the point of seeing the games is to notice how everyone can use practice in all the skills and how much fun all the children are having by playing the games together.

---

## How the Book Is Organized

The first chapter presents spontaneous games for all ages, because sometimes an improvised moment can be the best teaching. In addition to enhancing skills, these games can make waiting at the doctor's office or for food at a restaurant enjoyable, helping raise spirits and put everyone in a good mood. "Whose Hand Is on Top?" for example, is a great family game in which everyone has silly fun together but all have to pay attention to keep track of whose hand moves next. And "Ways to Walk" is ideal if you've got a cranky kid not happy about walking a distance. If everyone takes gigantic giant steps and mincing baby steps to get there, you will end up with children who are in a much better mood.

The second chapter includes lots of fun games you would do one-on-one with your little one. They work in particular on the foundational sensory and motor skills on which all other skills are built. As with other games in this book, you only need to look around the house to find the materials you need to engage and lengthen your baby's attention.

The third chapter is full of progressive games. Progressive games continually change to challenge different skills, but each series of games can be done with just one easy-to-find material. For example, kids can start by jumping over a rope that is slowly raised, requiring increasing strength to jump over it. This same rope can then be slowly lowered so that children have to continually adjust their posture to go under it without touching it. The rope can even be wiggled so children have to manage their timing to make it over without the wiggly rope touching them, and so on. Most of the links to videos are in this chapter so that you can access visual information on how to play each set of games. These games can be played in the inclusive classroom or with any mixed group of young children, such as siblings and neighbors.

Chapter Four, written by occupational therapist Karen Beardsley, provides therapy games for a wide range of children from ages three to twelve. Karen is very experienced and knowledgeable and has that same

let-it-be-fun spirit. Her games include ones played in small spaces, such as “Flipping Pancakes,” and others that are played outdoors, such as “Flying Meteorite.” The games are organized by type of skill you want to focus on. Karen also contributed the appendix for home therapists and parents who are thinking of inviting a home therapist to work with their child.

The fifth chapter presents group games for children ages three to fifteen. Each game has a single theme, and there is a large range of games to accommodate the different interests of the various ages. An example of a game for little ones is stacking cans in “Can You Do the Can-Can,” whereas older children enjoy “Bowling for Dollars.” One group game has older kids making up a cool group dance, and another has preschoolers jumping on letters.



## The Stories

Scattered throughout are personal stories that tell of experiences I have had with children I work with, as well as my own children and grandchildren. My hope is to give you a sense of who I am, to show you real ways that games can fit into daily life, and to amuse you with tales of the joys and frustrations of being with children.



# Acknowledgments · - - - - -

## Barbara's

My guiding plan when working with children in a classroom is to include everyone. To that aim, I use games in which there is room for children of differing skills to play together. These are games that can also be played at home and in neighborhoods where children of varying ages and abilities play together. To see which games work best, I needed playful teachers, aides, and parents and, most important, scores of children!

I am so appreciative of all the children at all the Head Start centers who played with me and would enthusiastically greet me when I came in the door, *knowing that a game was coming*. Big love also goes to their teachers, who were and are enthusiastic about my bringing games into their classroom, especially Quin Besong, Miranda Smith, Juana Atalig, and Ivan Garces, the amazing impresario for our shows.

It may take a village to raise a child, but it also takes a dedicated team to make a difference in the life of a child with special needs. I work with such a team. They are a group of fine people who know how to laugh and play and care. There is an expression that goes, “If you’ve seen a child with autism, you’ve seen a child with autism,” meaning that like all children, each child with autism has his or her own unique interests, skills, strengths, and needs. One size does not fit all. One way of working with children is not “the” way.

I’m grateful to our Dream Team, who understand this and work toward knowing each child well. They are the special education teachers and the related service staff in the Early Childhood Department of the Northern Mariana Islands Public School System: Leilani Nielsen, Mary-Margaret Peyton, Yoli and Chrislaine Lely, Rose and Jerry Diaz, Joe Cruz, Jacob Villagomez, Mark and Patty Staal, and Mercy Tisa and Marlon Cabrera—the

last of whom captured most of the great video shots of kids playing the Progressive Games and Short Group Games.

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