

Native American Games

Easy to prepare, fun to play!



Native American games provide an inexpensive and effective way to help children explore **traditional** Native American culture. To share this culture with children is to introduce them to an important part of our nation's heritage. Each part of our nation was home to different native tribes, so through games we can explore even the heritage of the Native Americans that inhabited our particular region.

These games are easy and inexpensive for you to re-create on your own. Because Native Americans had to find or make everything they needed, you don't need a lot of expensive or fancy materials to re-create these games. As they did, you can find the materials you need for playing these games in your own environment, and apply your own creativity as you wish.

These games demonstrate some important aspects of Native American values and way of life. First, they show kids that despite the gap in time and culture, Native American kids liked to have fun just like kids today. And they are fun, they involve suspense, or competition, or a skill challenge, just like today's games. Children learn about aspects of Native American life through the objects of these games.

Pebble Patterns

In order to grow up to be skilled at hunting, gathering, and staying safe in the wild, Native American children had to learn to be extremely observant of their natural surroundings. This game was played by many tribes throughout the continent to challenge and develop this skill.

Players would gather about thirty pebbles of varying size and color. One player would create a pattern or design out of some of the pebbles, at the appropriate level of difficulty for the other player or players. The other player(s) would study the pattern for a specified time before the pattern was covered or destroyed, and then re-create this pattern to the best of their ability. As skills develop, this game becomes more and more complex!

You don't have to use stones for this game. If you have a button box, paper cut-outs, or even coins, for example, you already have what you need to try this game at home.

Keeper of the Fire

This game was played by many native tribes in the plains, woodland, and coastal areas of the continent. This one teaches stealth and keen listening skills, which were other important skills for survival in the wild.

This game can be played indoors or outdoors, and all you need is a blindfold and three items representing firewood. Craft sticks bundled with yarn or even paint stir sticks work fine. The "chief" (best if it's an adult) will place the wood in front of the Fire Keeper, who is seated on his or her knees, hands on lap, and blindfolded. The rest of the players, the Wood Gatherers, will be seated a distance away. The chief declares, "Wood Gatherers, we need wood!", and points to one of the wood

gatherers, whose job it is to stealthily creep up on the Fire Keeper and steal his wood without being detected and tagged by the Fire Keeper. One point per wood piece collected. Wood gatherers may not "rush" the Fire Keeper, as the object is stealth, and the Fire Keeper may only remove his or her hand from her lap to attempt to tag a Wood Gatherer.

When the Wood Gatherer's turn is finished, he or she may play the role of the Fire Keeper.

Plum-pit or Bowl Toss Game

This is one of the many games of chance enjoyed by Native Americans throughout our continent. To play this game, some Native American tribes would use 5 plum pits as dice. Each plum pit would have one undecorated side, and the other side would feature a design image, with two plum pits sporting the same image and the other three with another image. Players took turns placing the plum pits in the bowl and then tossing them at once into the air, letting them fall into the bowl or onto the ground. They would be awarded points based on what combination of blank and marked sides they landed. Players would be collect counting sticks (small twigs) for each point earned.

If you don't wish to eat five plums and decorate the pits, you can re-create this game using a margarine tub (decorated as you or the child wishes) or any bowl you choose. As dice you can use cut-out shapes or milk jug lids. Choose two designs, and with permanent marker draw design A on two lids and design B on the other three. Place the dice in the bowl, and give them a good toss.

Tally which sides are facing up, and score as follows:

| | |
|-----------------------|----------|
| 1 of "A" or "B" | 0 points |
| 2 "A"s | 3 points |
| 3 "B"s and two blanks | 3 points |
| 2 "A"s and 3 "B"s | 3 points |
| 4 marked sides up | 1 point |
| 5 blank sides up | 1 point |
| 5 marked sides up | 8 points |

Start with 50 counting sticks, which can be craft sticks or toothpicks. Players take turns tossing the dice and collecting counting sticks, one stick for each point earned. When all counting sticks are gone, count them up to see which player has the most.

For More Games...

There is a great number of indoor and outdoor Native American Indian games that children and adults can enjoy at little cost or inconvenience. They are a great way to bridge the gap between our plugged-in, materialistic culture and a very different yet very significant part of our cultural history. If you wish to learn more games, try the following books:

More Than Moccasins: A Kid's Activity Guide to Traditional North American Indian Life by Laurie Carlson. Chicago Review Press, Chicago, 1994.

Handbook of American Indian Games, by Allan and Paulette Macfarlan. Dover Publications, Mineola, NY. Reprinted in 1985.

