



 PLAYWORKS
SCHOOL
RE-OPENING
WORKBOOK!

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PRE-COVID TRANSITION



COVID TRANSITION



Introduction: Transitions

This is a moment of unprecedented transition for the US – and for the world more broadly. Re-opening the economy – and our schools – will involve decisions based on incomplete information that must be made in an environment that, at best, would be described as uncertain. This workbook is an effort to bring a little bit of ease to this transition by offering up some guidance around how infusing play and playfulness into the process can help.

Ease may feel like a funny goal in this moment when the stakes feel so high and emotions are running so strong. But the idea of making the inevitably difficult process of re-opening schools less painful has a lot to offer it, not the least of which is setting the process up to succeed.

Twenty-four years of leading Playworks has provided us with the opportunity to see the very practical ways that play contributes to building schools where students feel a sense of belonging, agency and sustained motivation. Beyond its impact on students, we've seen how building a playful school culture directly benefits the grown-ups involved as well, ultimately changing their relationships with students and thus their experience of work.

Back in the very early days of Playworks when we were still called Sports4Kids, we had a partnership with a program called Seneca Center. Seneca is still around – they’re now called the Seneca Family of Agencies – and they run amazing programs for kids with mental health issues. In the 90’s when we were working with them, we had a staffer named Justin Robinson – he went by JRo – who was placed at one of their schools with the assignment of modifying our recess program to fit within the Seneca model. JRo had a big head of curly hair, and there were numerous conversations with the Seneca staff about their concerns that agitated students might pull it.

The most memorable thing about this partnership, however, was when JRo described at one of our staff meetings how the faculty at Seneca handled transitions. JRo explained that according to his Seneca co-workers, transitions were when things were most likely to break down and thus deserved special attention. They had established a whole protocol around preparing the students before leaving their classroom - reviewing what they were about to do and all the steps involved – mindfully making their way through space to the playground and then circling up once arriving to acknowledge having arrived and to review what was coming

next. Similarly, at the end of every recess, the students would circle back up to provide some closure and to review the transition back into the classroom – going through all the steps and calling out ways they would need to adjust their behaviors, modulating their voices and energy levels as they went back inside.

It all seems blindingly obvious from the vantage point of two decades later, but those shared lessons became integral to our understanding at Playworks of how best to set kids up for success at recess.

If you haven’t spent a lot – or any – time thinking about recess lately, it would probably startle you to learn how frequently we have been told over the years that students simply didn’t know how to play. We’ve also heard that student behaviors were so challenging that schools had elected to eliminate or withhold recess because it was simply too risky, or too likely to interfere with teaching and learning, or too much of a distraction. Lately, we have become increasingly concerned that our return to schools in this Covid-adjustment period we will again raise concerns that letting students out to play is simply just too much.

The lessons from Seneca about transitions

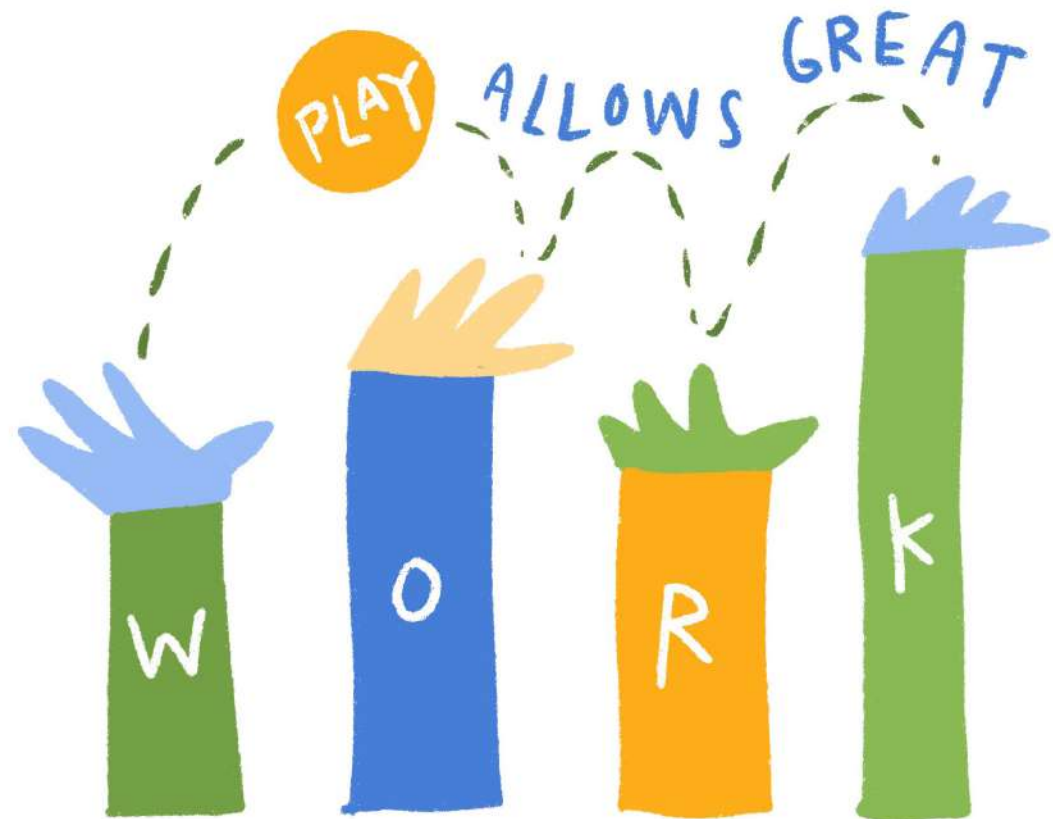
have implications for grown-ups as well. From little things like the beginnings and endings of meetings, to big things like starting and stopping relationships, transitions are very often when things break down. And just like with children, playfully and intentionally designing these transitions for adults can do a lot to ensure that things go more smoothly.

PLAY ISN'T THE OPPOSITE OF WORK.

One of the biggest challenges we have faced at Playworks over the years has been overcoming people's assumption that play is the opposite of work, that it takes away from learning and that it creates an environment that is lacking the 'seriousness' that redressing academic inequities demands. Bringing up the importance of play in the midst of considering the challenges we face in mitigating the health risks of Covid-19 feels similarly fraught.

The answer to these concerns is the same. Brian Sutton-Smith said it best perhaps: "The opposite of play is not work.¹ The opposite of

play is depression." Play does not detract from learning, it is learning. Play does not diminish seriousness, it encourages a level of intrinsically motivated engagement that makes seriousness possible. And play does not distract from addressing the very real health risks of Covid-19, it offers a strategic approach for doing exactly that by designing student practices that are based on an understanding of rules, rituals and referees that has survived evolution.



¹Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play*, Harvard University Press, 1997

This is not an academic treatise on play or game theory, though we will reference some of the lessons from those disciplines. It's not a book about brain science or biology – though again, when it serves our arguments, we will happily include them. This is intended to prompt the imagination of a popular audience that is justifiably concerned about how we re-open schools in a way that is best for our students, our educators and for society at large.

Our experience running Playworks has demonstrated that play has everything to teach us about managing risks, generating new possibilities, dealing with the unexpected and navigating ambiguity - and thus could not be more timely. We are also convinced that if we fail to incorporate play into the re-opening of schools, we will miss an important opportunity to attend to our children's physical and emotional wellbeing and inadvertently compound the situation's challenges.

This is an invitation. In the midst of all the craziness, this is an invitation to consider the possibility that play and playfulness have a significant contribution to make in how we approach the re-opening of our schools. Fundamentally, this is an invitation to trust your intuition – as an educator or a parent

or a person who cares about kids - and to simultaneously respect the concerns of the moment by closely adhering to the protocols called on by health professionals, while centering the importance of relationships in emotionally managing the situation. This is an invitation to suspend your disbelief that there is any way to do this that is joyful.

At Playworks we have practical experience leveraging the power of play to radically transform school environments – starting with school playgrounds and spilling into classrooms, hallways, cafeterias and gymnasiums. We have discovered time and time again that thoughtfully designing play opportunities for kids, and prioritizing student agency and leadership in how this play happens, contributes measurably to students' social and emotional wellbeing, not to mention their learning. And we are confident that there is an application for this knowledge in this particular moment.

Admittedly, this is an unprecedented situation, and so the ideas contained herein are being offered up for your consideration as you develop your plans to meet the regulations that schools and districts have developed. As such, we also want to invite you to contribute meaningfully to our understanding of what

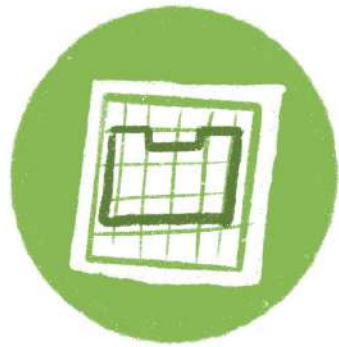
works and what doesn't. Our commitment in this moment is to learn and to share our learnings. Based upon the stories that we hear about things educators actually try, both successfully and not, along with the lessons learned from the real experiences of re-opening (and then possibly re-closing and re-re-opening), we will compile a more comprehensive response to the moment to be published by Jossey-Bass in the Summer of 2021. If you are open to being a part of this effort we would be extremely grateful. You can sign up to be involved on our website at: www.playworks.org/workbook

We really want to learn more about what you're thinking and trying - and to encourage you to share your ideas so that other people can learn with you.

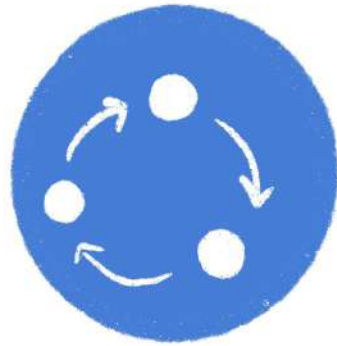
Besides signing up to be a part of our on-going research at www.playworks.org/workbook you can share visuals on our Instagram @playworksreopeningworkbook and use the hashtag #playworksreopeningworkbook on Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn posts - and wherever else your social media wanderings take you!

SHARE
YOUR
IDEAS





SPACE



RITUAL



RULES



REFEREES



RECESS &
GAMES

About This Workbook

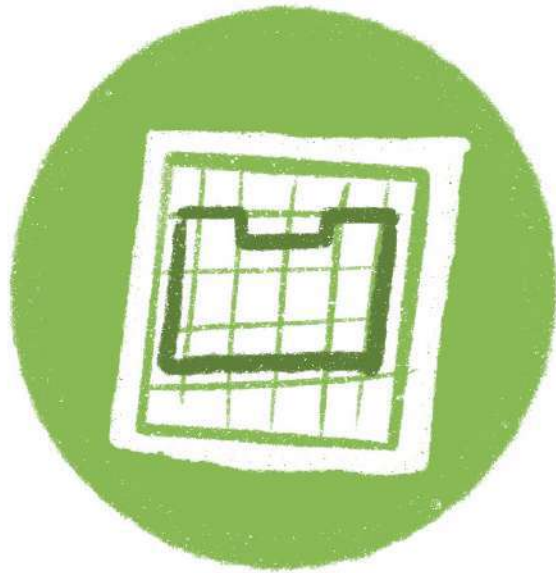
This workbook is divided into five sections: Space, Rituals, Rules, Referees and Recess and Games. In each of the first four sections we offer ideas, suggestions and activities to help you frame the approach your school takes to realizing the guidance that is being offered by the CDC and your local health authorities. Because what we know about Covid-19 is changing so rapidly, it is possible that something we suggest in this initial book will become outdated before we are able to address the changing information. If at any time you feel as though our guidance contradicts

what you are being instructed to do by health professionals it is critical that you follow the guidance of the health professionals.

In Space, Rituals, Rules and Referees, we'll offer suggestions for ways to approach the safety guidance you receive in different phases of the re-opening: prior to students returning – either physically or remotely, once students have returned, and as things shift and adapt. We'll also call out different audiences – students, teachers, parent/families, administrators and para-educators – with an eye towards prompting your thinking across roles, and recognizing that

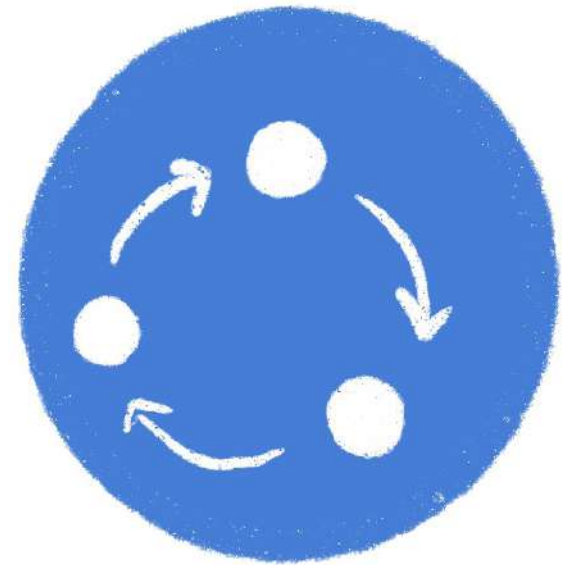
this is a moment in which the roles we have traditionally played may need to shift.

The Space, Rituals, Rules and Referees sections all have interactive activities that are described in the body of the narrative and then supported with reproducible worksheets that provide instructions, space to do the exercises, and a place for notes to yourself (ideas that arise or questions that need more consideration) at the end of every section. We also provide a second worksheet page that is intended to help you translate the first activity into concrete action – affectionately referred to as the Magical Bonus Concrete Activity Page. Additionally, we’ve included a Gratitude Bubble on this page to nudge you to remember to make a little extra effort to express thanks in this moment.



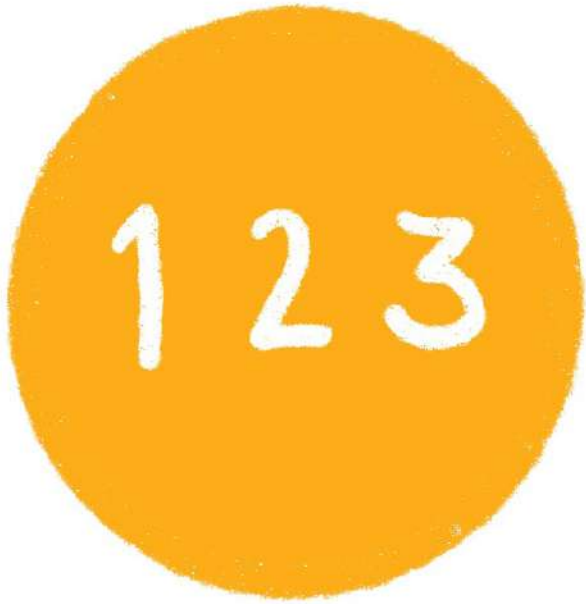
SPACE

In Space, we'll look at where learning happens - inside, outside and remote, considering the flow and experience of human bodies that you want to promote. To do this, we'll take you through some exercises that can help you re-imagine how these spaces are used and engage students in co-designing your space use plans. We'll also take a closer look at the attributes of different spaces, considering ways to make the most of these qualities as opposed to forcing different spaces to be proxies for things they are not.



RITUAL

Rituals, will offer ideas for explicitly addressing our collective needs through activities, habits, celebrations and routines. From the First Day to the schedule, and from handwashing to passing in the halls, designing rituals to foster buy-in and engagement represents a powerful opportunity to infuse the school environment with a bit of magic.



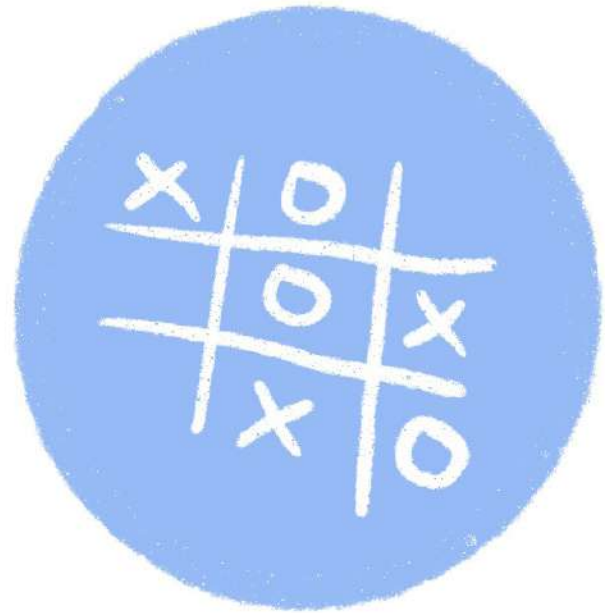
RULES

In Rules, we'll wrestle with the question of how to translate the constraints that Covid-19 requires of us into rules that students understand and around which they feel ownership. How might we turn staying 6' apart into a game? How might we shift the feelings around wearing a mask from "have to" to "get to"? How might we get hundreds of kids excited about washing their hands both thoroughly and efficiently multiple times throughout a school day?



REFEREES

In Referees, we'll talk about grown-ups and students and sharing responsibility – and gratitude - for keeping people physically and emotionally safe. We will describe how the design of these expectations creates huge opportunities to promote learning, empathy and engagement. The section on Referees will also consider how re-imagining our different roles can lead to building an experience that not only serves students well, but also addresses the very real needs of educators and parents in this stressful time.



RECESS & GAMES

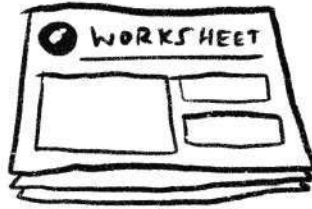
Finally, in the Recess and Games section we will offer up tactical suggestions for managing recess along with a library of our favorite activities. The game library includes activities adapted to meet physical distancing requirements while still promoting social connection, along with modifications so that games that can be played at home.

HOW TO USE THIS WORKBOOK:

DOWNLOAD AND/OR PRINT:



1 JUST THE NARRATIVE



2 JUST THE WORKSHEETS



3 JUST THE GAMES

4 THE WHOLE THING

LISTEN:



NARRATED BY THE AUTHOR!

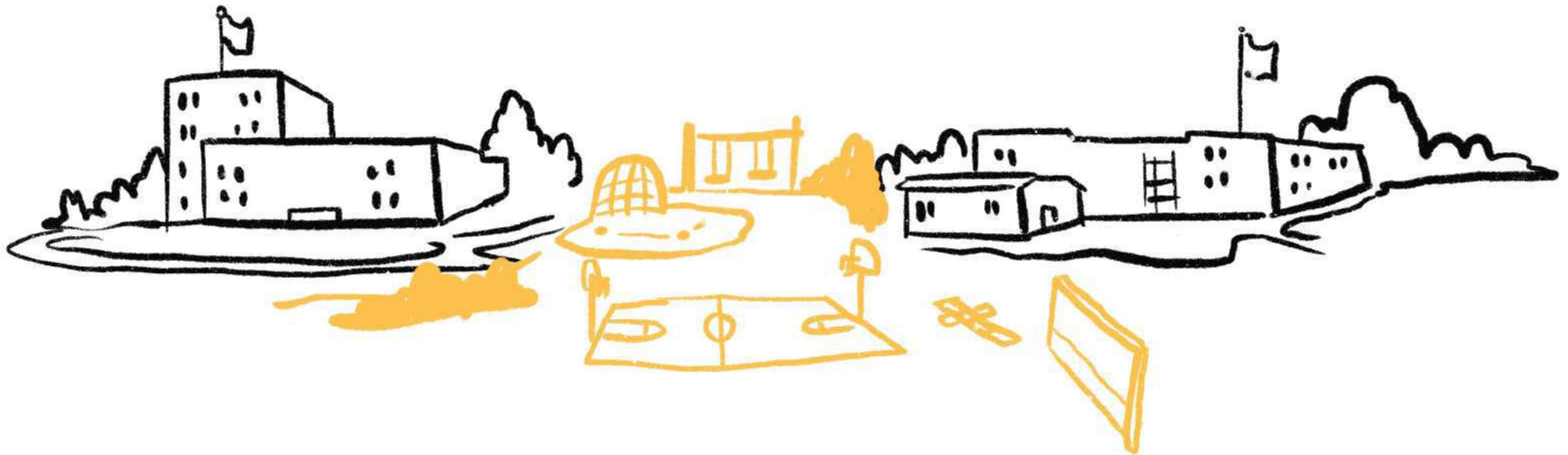
5 THE ULTRA EXCELLENT AUDIO VERSION!

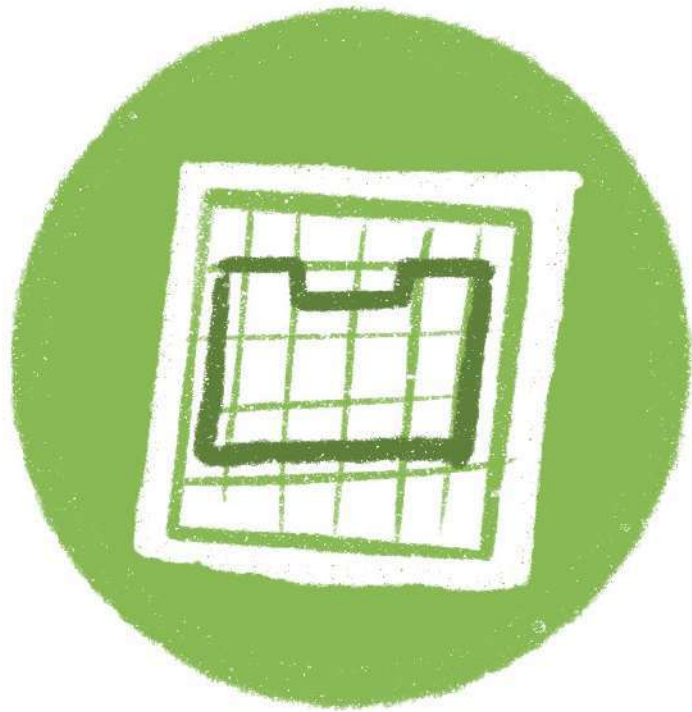
This workbook is intended to be interactive, and to this end the layout has been designed to be both print and user friendly. In terms of printing, we've created two options. The first option is that you print out the whole shebang. The narrative sections are organized as a double page layout and the worksheet activity pages and Recess and Games guide are single page layout. In order to save trees, we suggest printing double sided. The second option allows for printing out the more interactive pieces – the worksheets and games – while reading the narrative piece online. We've also designed the book to be printed in black and white, but if you're going to print one page in color, we recommend the Emotion Wheel at the end of the Referees section.

A third option - for those of you who favor a podcast-approach to consuming content - is to download the narrative as audio files and listen while you go about your business! More information on all the options can be found on our website at www.playworks.org/workbook

We hope this workbook offers you some inspiration and encouragement as you approach the challenging tasks this moment requires. We are eager to be of service and to learn from your experiences so that moving forward we can share the best practices that enable the healthy social connection education requires. We are also confident, based on 24 years of partnering with schools, that if any group of humans can rise to this occasion, it is our teachers. Time and time again we have witnessed educators do whatever it takes to support our students and it is our privilege to be your partner in this work now. Thank you.

THANK
YOU!





SPACE

The very first place that Playworks ran a program was at a school in Berkeley, California that was temporarily housing two schools while the visiting school's building was being retrofitted. The situation was less than ideal because of space constraints, but the two schools managed to achieve a quiet détente, with the exception of sharing the playground.

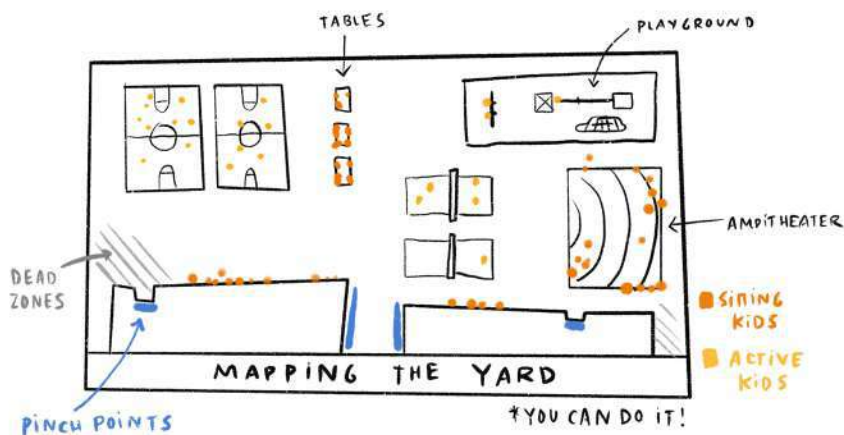
All of the students were understandably a bit put out – the ones whose school was being retrofitted were in an unfamiliar place, and those whose school had been “invaded by newcomers” were feeling crowded. Initially told that the groups were never to intermingle, the kids complied and played in their designated areas.

Playworks' recess coach – a woman named Andrea - worked with the teachers and administrators from both schools to devise a plan, mapping the yard and sequencing both activities and transitions to and from classes and the cafeteria. As the year progressed, the tensions between the two staff would wax and wane, but the students themselves began to interact in passing, and ultimately asked Andrea if they might occasionally play together. With permission from the principals, Andrea organized a lunchtime kickball game that brought the older kids into contact with one another, and ultimately became such an important focal point of the schools, it managed to also bring the staff together when they came out to see for themselves.

In the years since, we've encountered any number of situations where navigating the school space was held up as the defining

obstacle to achieving healthy play. From rooftop playgrounds in New York City and San Francisco, to having portable classrooms plopped in the middle of the schoolyard unexpectedly mid-year, play's inherently adaptive nature has been flexed to address the challenges. Many the side of a portable has been transformed into a wall-ball court and "fire feet," a rapid foot shuffling that combines high leg activity with slow physical motion, can enlarge even the tightest of spaces.

The biggest obstacles to space management, we have found, are usually human. From schools merging to charter schools renting out space from traditional schools, the "facility" challenges which have stuck out as stickiest have most often been those where the issues of space were bumping up against deeply felt emotions.



And it is precisely for this reason that we recommend that schools start by "Mapping the Yard." Just as it sounds, we suggest that school leaders draw their outside play area, indicating on the map how the different areas are used throughout the day. People get very creative using different colors to map the concentration of activity and time – identifying pinch points, small areas where lots of kids have to pass through in a short window of time, and dead zones, areas that receive remarkably little use. Once the map of how things currently are is created, we ask school leaders to draw out a map of how they'd like the space to be used and to invite the teachers and students to engage in the mapping exercise as well.

There are a few different lessons that this exercise offers. The first is that many people are immediately intimidated by anything that involves drawing and that the older we get, the more likely there will be resistance to thinking visually. The second observation is that for a lot of people, it simply never occurred to them to think about this space as a design lever in creating the experiences they seek. A lot of the teachers think of the playground as a "given," and see the patterns of play that emerge organically as fixed and somehow immutable.

Many, if not most, admit to never having considered it before.

This moment, as you are thinking about the return to school, is the perfect time to map your space. Our suggestion is that you embark on a pretty ambitious mapping exercise, including indoors, outdoors and separately, the remote space that you either will, or may, be using at some point during the year. And we'd recommend bringing a similar approach to the one we use in Mapping the Yard.

We've included a mapping worksheet to help you get started at the end of this section. Start by drawing out how you have historically used your indoor and outdoor spaces. Play around with noting how students and teachers flow throughout these spaces throughout the day. It may be useful to make lists of the strengths and challenges that these different spaces offer. What works? What doesn't?



Once you have the historic uses, create a blank map – an outline - of the indoor and outdoor spaces (xeroxed multiple times). This provides a great canvas to explore different scenarios and options and creates an opportunity to engage other staff in thinking about how you want to prepare your space before students physically return to school. Making your ideas visible in this way can also help you see things differently and communicate your ideas more powerfully. The maps you create in these exercises can also be useful as you move forward throughout the year. Consider how you might want to display these original maps as artifacts that can be celebrated and revisited as tools that help your community adjust as things change or if/when challenges arise. And if you are going to have an environment in which parents are asked not to come into the building, how might you use the maps to invite their participation in a more distanced way?

Mapping is also a great opportunity to get people up and moving around – both in meetings among staff prior to students' return, and with the students once they are in session. Asking students to measure the space using their own bodies as opposed to a measuring tape creates an excellent way to introduce different math and problem-solving

skills. Having students work in small groups - working collaboratively while observing physical distancing requirements – can provide a chance for them to practice with the new rules while engaged in a project that invites them to be a part of solving for the challenges these requirements present.

The Value of Multiple Perspectives

One of the most important things to consider when space planning is the question: “How do we let people contribute?” The process you put in place for “deciding” on how space will be laid out and used can be a springboard for inviting the community – staff, families, students – to be actively engaged in co-constructing the re-opening of your school. While at first blush this may seem like more work, it also represents an opportunity to engage people in a way that will ultimately contribute to their understanding and acceptance of the decisions made – saving you time and stress in the long run. Co-constructing the new environment also creates a path forward for adapting decisions when the situation changes.



Navigating ambiguity is challenging in the best of times, and people tend to respond to moments of extreme uncertainty by either operating in absolutes or avoiding decisions altogether. But this is not a moment when either response will serve us well. As futurist Bob Johansen puts it, “the future will reward clarity but punish certainty.”² This is neither a time for retreating into a room to “figure it all out,” nor for burying one’s head in the sand. Ensuring that the decision-making process is a visible one that engages a wide variety of perspectives can help bring greater clarity to the process.

Engaging everyone in the design of the new environment has the added benefit of bringing multiple perspectives to bear that may contribute to better decisions. What are teachers worried about? What do students know about their own experiences of navigating the spaces? What have parents heard their kids’ discussing?

A great exercise to help in the exploration of other perspectives is shadowing. The Shadow a Student Challenge is an initiative to inspire administrators to spend a day once a year literally shadowing a student as a tool for promoting a deeper understanding of the

student experience. As we re-open schools, dedicating the time to shadowing a student represents a great way to better understand the impact of the changes you put in place and to better anticipate where things are likely to break down.



Barry Svigals, the architect who helped redesign the elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut after the school shooting there has spent much of the last few years thinking about the challenges inherent in, as he puts it, “designing simultaneously for fear and joy.” He describes schools as “a problem in choreography,” and focuses on students’ physical experience of a space - looking at everything from the portal – how it feels to enter a school – to heat mapping more fugitive or counter-spaces like hallways and bathrooms as a way to better understand how a building’s layout contributes to social interactions.

² Bob Johansen, *The New Leadership Literacies: Thriving in a Future of Extreme Disruption and Distributed Everything*, Berrett-Koehler Publishers Inc., 2017

In this Covid-responsive moment, these “counter-spaces” – think recess, buses, afterschool, bathrooms, cafeterias, doorways and hallways – will become far more significant, and require far more attention. This is important not only because it will require focus and choreography, but also because these are places where students have traditionally had more freedom and choice. Whether it is conscious or not, greater regulation of these spaces will have an impact on the student experience and their sense of agency. The extent to which students can be engaged in designing both the changes and the regulation of these changes may have a significant impact on compliance and, more importantly, how it feels to be at school.

Inside, Outside and Remote

Another key to effectively mapping and planning your available spaces is recognizing the attributes of a given space - be it in the classroom, the hallway, on the playground, in the cafeteria, or in a Zoom room. The school experience can be qualitatively improved by focusing on maximizing a given space’s strengths as opposed to trying to force a space to be a proxy for something it isn’t. Said another way, a Zoom room isn’t a classroom,

but it does have some cool attributes unto itself. What kind of learning can students do at home that they can’t do in school? The cafeteria might not be where you are going to eat lunch given Covid-19, but how else might you use a big space like that? If being outside is viable from a weather perspective, what kind of teaching and learning can you do best out of doors?

Think-Pair-Share

What follows is a list of space prompts to consider as you prepare for re-opening and to experiment with when students return. Consider using a Think-Pair-Share approach to exploring these ideas. Think-Pair-Share (TPS) is a collaborative approach to problem-solving that, while often used for students, can be very effective with grown-ups, too. This strategy involves initial individual reflection on a problem or a question, followed by a paired discussion and then a larger group conversation. The partner discussion is intended to maximize participation and presenting to the larger group as a team can ease anxiety around group engagement while promoting greater investment in the process.

The questions below are broken down into topics for staff, older students, younger

students, and for students to discuss with their families. The TPS worksheet that follows can be copied or distributed virtually.

For staff:

How might we decorate the entry in a way that calls attention to the idea of returning to school? What experience of re-entering school do we want to create for the students?

How might we commemorate the first day of school if we are starting remotely?

For staff and older students:

If we use a schedule that involves different shifts, how might we create space for students to socially connect with students outside their class? How might we use asynchronous activities? How might students connect remotely? What activities would lend themselves to being done while physically distanced and outside?

What are non-traditional uses for spaces – like the cafeteria – that would allow you to repurpose these spaces safely?

What are alternative uses of existing resources – like school buses being used as wifi hotspots – that might address a new need?

For staff and students of all ages:

How might we make standing in line more fun? How might we design the way we enter and exit the building? What games could we play while in line? How might we turn it into a competition? What songs could we sing?

How might we use the space in a way that helps with being cleaned?

If we are going to eat lunch in the classroom, how might we shift the space for lunchtime to make this experience more special?

What are the options for using the outside for class time?

How might you use color coding, signage and directional markings – on the walls and floors – to help with the flow of human bodies?

For students with their families:

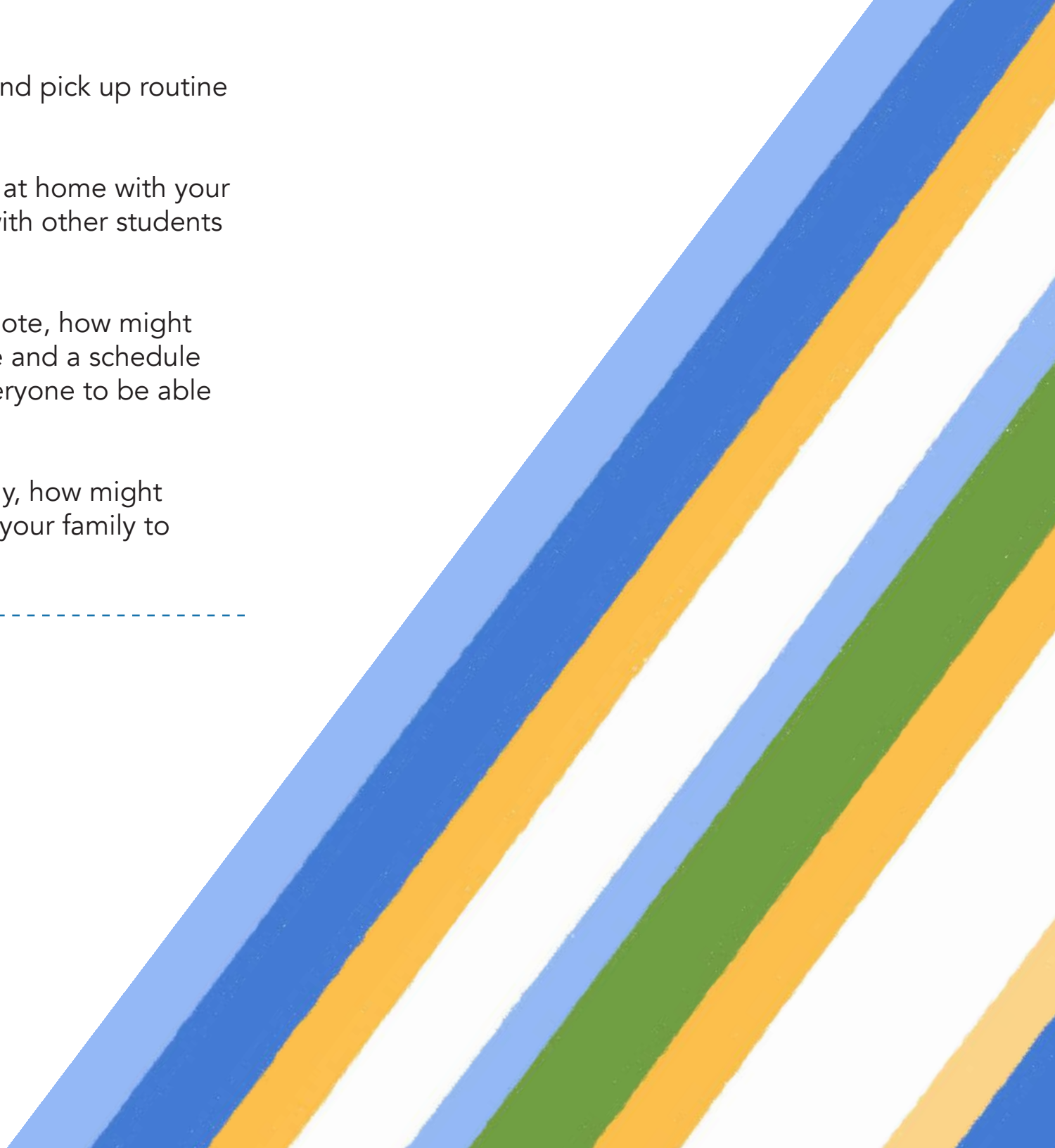
If parents and other family members are not going to be allowed into the building, how

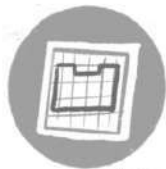
might we design a drop off and pick up routine that works and feels good?

What activities might you do at home with your family that you could share with other students and their families?

When learning has to be remote, how might your family set up your space and a schedule that makes it possible for everyone to be able to focus?

When recess happens virtually, how might you invite other members of your family to participate?





SPACE: THINK, PAIR, SHARE!

INSTRUCTIONS: ① REFLECT INDIVIDUALLY ON THE PROMPTS ② PAIR UP & DISCUSS WHAT YOU'D LIKE TO SHARE WITH THE GROUP - CHOOSE 3 INSIGHTS ③ BASED ON THE DISCUSSION, WHAT PROTOTYPES WOULD YOU LIKE TO TRY?

WORKSPACE:

① WHAT I THINK:

② WHAT MY PARTNER THINKS:

② WHAT WE WANT TO SHARE:

③ IDEAS TO TRY:



MAGICAL MAKE IT CONCRETE ACTIVITY SHEET

**SPACE:
MAPPING**

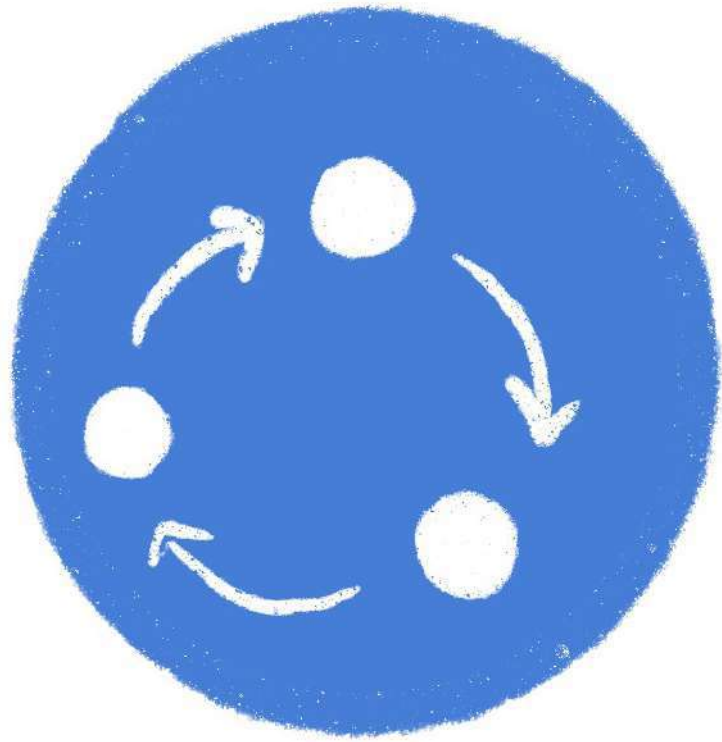
INSTRUCTIONS: DRAW A MAP OF THE SPACES WHERE TEACHING & LEARNING WILL TAKE PLACE AS YOU REOPEN. THIS MIGHT BE INDOOR & OUTDOORS AT SCHOOL AND/OR YOUR REMOTE SPACES. WHAT CAN YOU DO TO MAKE THESE SPACES SPECIAL? ENCOURAGE PARTICIPANTS TO MAKE & SHARE MAPS TOO!

MY SCHOOL:

MY REMOTE SPACE:

THIS MAKES ME
THINK I SHOULD
THANK:





RITUAL

In 2004, prior to Playworks providing programs outside of the Bay Area, we were invited to come to Baltimore to meet with some leaders at the Johns Hopkins Institute for Summer Learning. We decided to bring a team of four staff: our founder Jill Vialet accompanied by three others – David Gallagher, Paul McAndrew and Lamar Kendricks.

Since we had been considering the possibility of expanding nationally, this was a good time to make some school visits so that we could better understand how – and if – our approach might work in other parts of the country. At their first principal meeting, Jill and Lamar found themselves waiting in the school office. Eventually the principal, Mr. Thomasberger, showed them into his office and seated them in kid-sized chairs, making Lamar's large 6'2" frame look almost comical. Jill launched into a description of the Playworks model, explaining the different program components and how we worked with schools in California.

Mr. Thomasberger nodded throughout, but when Jill concluded, he simply shook his head and offered up, "Well, it all sounds great, but it would never work here."

Jill asked a follow up question to better understand this reaction: "Is it the cost?"

"No, it's not that," Mr. Thomasberger explained. "We don't have recess."

Up until this point, Lamar had literally said nothing other than "hello." But in response to Mr. Thomasberger's statement, he leaned forward in his tiny chair and asked, "But what

about when they go out for break time?" Mr. Thomasberger was a bit surprised by Lamar's somewhat abrupt question, but explained patiently, "We don't have recess. They don't go out."

Lamar wasn't convinced. "But what about the kindergarteners?"

Mr. Thomasberger shook his head no.

Lamar pressed on, "What about when they're done with lunch?"

Mr. Thomasberger was now getting a bit annoyed with Lamar's questions and responded definitively, "Our students don't go outside. Our students don't know how to play."



And that was when Lamar visibly dug in. "Mr. Thomasberger," Lamar replied, his tone shifting from befuddled to imploring, "let me take your students out for recess today."

The principal shook his head dismissively. "Not possible," he said. "The playground is a mess and it's not in the schedule."

But Lamar wasn't to be dissuaded. "Just fifteen minutes during one of your lunch periods. Jill and I can wait. We'll even go outside and help get the yard ready."

Lamar wasn't going to give up, and after much back and forth, and clearly against Mr. Thomasberger's better judgment, it was decided.

When lunch time came around, Mr. Thomasberger escorted Jill and Lamar to the cafeteria where 120 4th and 5th graders were bouncing off the walls. There were two lunch ladies dressed in starched white uniforms standing at each of the exits and the din made it almost impossible to converse. Amidst all of this, Lamar strode to the middle of the cafeteria and clapped his hands rhythmically. A few kids looked in his direction, but the chaos continued. Undaunted, Lamar repeated the clap. This

time a few more kids looked at Lamar, some repeating the rhythm. On his third attempt, the vast majority of the students repeated the clapped rhythm and the space fell silent, with the door-guarding lunch ladies looking visibly concerned.

Lamar used his best playground voice to introduce himself, "Hi, I'm Coach Lamar!" He paused, waiting for a greeting in response and, getting none, he tried again. "Really? C'mon, I'm visiting all the way from California – is that the welcome I get? Let's try that again. Hi. I'm Coach Lamar!"

The students responded, admittedly with a skeptical tinge to their voices, in unison, "Hi, Coach Lamar..."



Lamar smiled approvingly and pressed on. "OK, your principal has invited me to take you all out for recess today," (there was a spontaneous and incredulous cheer in response to this news) "and I need you to do three things to make it happen. First, I need you to finish up your lunches. Second, I need you to clean up your area. And third, I need you to line up by class so that we can all go down to the playground together. I really need you to do this well so that we can show Mr. Thomasberger you can handle it."

And just like that, the kids had eaten up, cleaned up and lined up. Lamar and Mr. Thomasberger led the students down to the playground, where Lamar circled the students up. "Here's the deal: there are basically two major rules. First, no throwing up and second, no bleeding."

The kids were now officially convinced that Lamar was from another planet. He laughed, "OK, not really, but you get my drift, right? We're going to be safe and have fun and so I'm going to ask you to use good judgment while we're out here playing so that you can get to do this again. We're going to break into three groups, so let's count off by threes." Lamar pointed to each student as they went

around the circle counting 1-2-3. "And now I want the one's to come with me to play Gaga Ball, the two's are going to go with Jill to play Switch and the threes are going to start with Mr. Thomasberger on the play structure."

The kids started to move, but Lamar caught them up. "Wait, wait, wait. We don't break out into groups until I say the magic word. What should that be today?"

One student quickly offered up "Throw-up!"

Lamar responded, "I think that's technically two words, but let's go with it. Throw-up!"

The students ran to the three designated areas and with a bit of instruction moved quickly into playing. About seven minutes in, Lamar called out "Superhero pose!" and stood like a Heisman Trophy statue, with all the students immediately freezing into different variations of heroic stances.

He switched the group stations and allowed the students to play for the remainder of the fifteen minutes before clapping rhythmically as he had done in the cafeteria. This time, all of the students immediately copied the rhythm and froze quietly.

"Let's circle up!" Lamar then took the students

through a quick debrief of their time, with each student saying one word describing their experience as they went around the circle. "You all were amazing today but I need one more favor from you. Line back up by class and go back into the building the same way you came out here. I need you to show Mr. Thomasberger and your teachers that you got this!"

The students did exactly as they were asked. Mr. Thomasberger smiled at Lamar with a look of begrudging respect, "We should talk," he said to Jill.

The best part was the reaction of the two lunch ladies who came literally running across the school yard to give Lamar a hug and express their thanks. "Will you be back tomorrow?"

While rituals are frequently associated with the religious, the dictionary defines them as ceremonies consisting of a series of actions performed according to a prescribed order. In its adjectival form, it is defined as "arising from convention or habit." And while Lamar's adventure at the elementary school in Baltimore was neither conventional nor habitual, he did manage to engage the students by employing a number of different ritualistic elements. From the rhythmic clapping to the circling up to the

superhero poses, Lamar's efforts to ensure that the students were engaged - and not merely compliant - was facilitated by his use of these tools.

As we prepare to re-open schools, it is worth considering the moments that might benefit from the intentional design of rituals to ease transitions and promote understanding and engagement. From a celebration marking the First Day back - remotely if that is how you are re-opening or physically when that is allowed to happen - to moments recognizing the shifts between in-person and remote learning, creating ceremonies to bring attention to these moments can make a huge difference in setting both students and educators up to succeed.

Rituals are also important in building trauma-sensitive environments. We'll talk more about this in the Referees section, but rituals can significantly improve the experience of school for students who have been exposed to trauma by creating routines that give them greater visibility into the process and a greater sense of control over the world around them.



Play theorists have long compared play and religious rituals, the most notable being Johan Huizinga who compared play to the sacred in his 1938 book *Homo Ludens*:

*"All play moves and has its being within a playground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course. Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual, the "consecrated spot" cannot be formally distinguished from the playground. The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function playgrounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, round, hallowed, within which rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart."*³

Rituals are essentially a form of play that enable teams to get in sync both emotionally and mentally. Intentionally designing activities that promote this level of alignment and cooperation, while perhaps requiring a greater outlay of effort initially, represents a significant opportunity to promote engagement in the long run. Just as physically mapping the space allows for a better understanding of space as a design lever, rituals allow for the mapping of time, intentionally creating experiences that help you achieve your goals.

Many school staff already have rituals that they don't think of as rituals – from the staff meeting to professional development days, setting up classrooms before school starts to packing up at year's end. This year represents an important opportunity to make some conscious decisions about how you are going to set up, meet and adapt to change.

If you are bringing on new staff in this moment, how might you quickly make them feel a part of the team? If check-ins are more difficult because of the new schedule, does it make sense to create a buddy system? What are the major timeline markers for this year and how do you want to acknowledge them?

Storyboarding to co-design Rituals

We talked about developing maps as artifacts in the section on spaces. In this section we want to encourage you to consider prototyping different activities - essentially creating experiential artifacts intended to elicit feedback from the participants, with the feedback being the most important part of the process. Testing intentionally and obviously imperfect artifacts invites authentic and honest engagements with the ideas involved, and is a powerful springboard for creating a sense of belonging among participants. People know they truly belong when their opinions are solicited and acted upon.

**PEOPLE KNOW THEY TRULY BELONG WHEN
THEIR OPINIONS ARE SOLICITED AND
ACTED UPON.**

What follows is a list of suggestions for designing and testing playful rituals. Your goal isn't to get these absolutely right from the start, but to experiment with ceremonies and activities that give both students and staff cues for how best to interpret the moment, along with the opportunity to make sense of, and prepare for, change.

In looking at these, we'd like to propose you consider using a storyboarding approach as a first step. This is a way to make your ideas more tangible by drawing out the steps in a person's experience. The key is to draw out each step as a way to refine the idea.

To do this, start by choosing an imaginary participant and try to get as specific as possible – for example, a 2nd grade girl named Jenna who loves four square and drawing. For any scenario that you choose to explore, map out each step of your imaginary person's experience – literally as step-by-step as you can make it – from their perspective and with as much detail as you can imagine. It's good to make notes about what you think they might be feeling throughout the experience. Be sure to indicate the key decision points and maybe jot down some notes about alternative experiences your person might have had if other decisions

had been made. Don't worry at all about your sketching – a good stick figure is all you need.

Once you have the story mapped out, share what you've created with your team or have your students share with their classmates, paying special attention to the different decision points and the alternative experiences you imagined. If you're feeling bold, you can even invite groups of staff and students to act out the storyboard to make the experience that much more real.

The First Day

The First Day back to school is always an important one, and this year will be no different. Whether you are opening remotely or in-person, the first day back from the Covid-19 closures represents a singular opportunity to signal to students, staff and families how you hope to proceed with the school year. We know you have a lot to consider about the first day. Are you going to acknowledge all that has transpired while you have been apart? Are you going to give people a chance to connect with their classmates and teachers from the previous year to achieve some closure? How do you want to introduce everyone to the new procedures that are in place and the expectations you have

around how these procedures will be adhered to? How are students and staff expected to navigate the inevitable variations in rule interpretations? And what can students and staff and families expect about how future changes will be communicated? What is the new schedule? Once you have physically re-opened, what happens if the school has to close again, or if someone gets sick and cannot come to school? If you are going to give students and staff a voice in determining how things are different, this is the place to start.

While it might be ideal to have absolute answers to these questions, it is probably more realistic to acknowledge that you have a plan, but recognize that it will be important to remain flexible (Remember: “The future will reward clarity and punish certainty...”). A ritual on that first day – and maybe the whole First Day is one giant ritual – that clarifies the plans that you do have, inviting participants in to understand and ask questions and to engage with the plan – represents an important chance to show rather than tell how this year will be different. Preparing rituals could help your staff and students transition together in a way that feels good and stabilizes the approach you are hoping will see you all through.

Consider the following:

- How and who do we invite to participate in the first day ritual? Do parents and families have a role to play, even if they are asked not to be physically present on the school grounds?
- How do you ensure that the folks who are the most nervous about staying safe are allowed to ask for - and get - what they need?
- What physical activities and artifacts might you incorporate - building a portal, creating maps, signage and color-coding – that send visual signals helping staff and students interpret expectations both verbally and non-verbally?
- If students are being broken into smaller groups, what asynchronous activities might you have them engage in that still allow for connection with their friends not in their pod?
- What opportunities can you create for students to talk about what they experienced while sheltering in place?
- What activities might contribute an element of magic to the proceedings?

- How might you engage students in translating the physical constraints that Covid-19 requires into behaviors and practices and in determining how to hold one another accountable to these agreements?

Shifting from Remote to In-person and Back Again

Just as you might design a ritual to transition from the classroom out to recess - and back again - a ritual that marks the transition from in-person learning to remote can also help students and staff feel more prepared to navigate the different demands that these two environments require. The rituals can be differentiated for schedules that are hybrid as opposed to schools where there is a need to close again because of a resurgence of Covid-19. It's also worth considering having some sort of ritual for students and staff who need to stay home because they - or someone in their family - are sick.

Developing rituals for these occurrences can help to make the process more visible to students and to mitigate the worries that students may have. One important aspect around creating activities to acknowledge these transitions will be including the opportunity for students to ask questions and to have the process reviewed. Rituals around these experiences also can help communicate adaptations

that may need to occur during the year as the situation changes.

Examples of activities/rituals might include closing and opening circles where students can share something they are looking forward to, a game of charades where students act out something that happened, interviews with family members, writing letters to people who need to resume sheltering in place and a virtual potluck, encouraging students and staff to virtually share their favorite foods from home.

Cleaning

There will be potentially a lot of cleaning that needs to happen as a part of re-opening schools - from the classrooms to the hallways to recess and PE equipment. Rituals can help to support - and express appreciation for - the cleaning staff and others who may have to deal with these heightened demands. These might be designed in conjunction with the custodial staff who could advise on the set up that would be most helpful, and identifying student roles such as helping with recess equipment management. Weekly gratitude reflections - creating cards and other art to share with people in the community who are helping to keep everyone safe - can also shift the dynamic

so that there is a shared sense of responsibility for these tasks.

Handwashing

Frequent handwashing throughout the day is going to require some significant coordination. Making it fun – adding a song element like “**Slippery Fish**” for the younger students or an intramural competition for the older students – can ensure greater buy-in. Shared student responsibility and oversight – a handwashing equivalent to crossing guards – that is shared and where there is a formal “changing of the guard” (like at Buckingham Palace) can also make the process more manageable.

Eating Lunch

If your school is electing not to use the cafeteria, but rather to have students eat lunch in the classroom, rituals around how that transition happens and creating weekly special events – eating with the teacher, a virtual lunch guest, or themed lunch discussions – can offer some differentiation from continued time in class. It’s also worth having the students take on leadership for managing classroom clean-up after lunch.

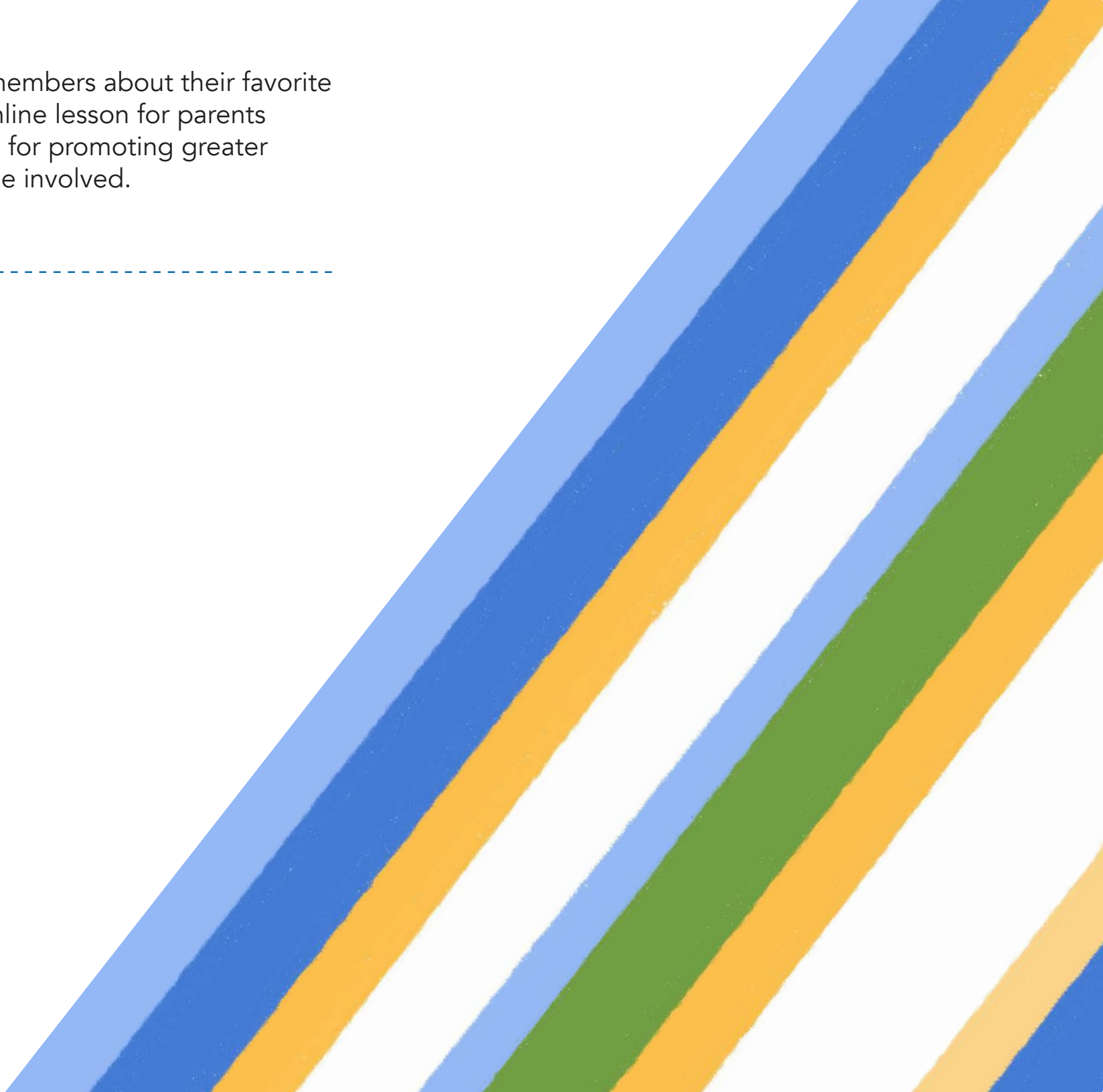
Recess and asynchronous games

More specific guidance on recess and games is offered at the end of this guide, but some rituals around recess – like the transitions from the story about Lamar – can really help to ensure that the shift from classroom to playground and back again goes well. If your school is coordinating recess in smaller groups, students may be disappointed that they aren’t able to connect with other friends. Setting up virtual tournaments or activities that allow the different groups to participate in the same activities but asynchronously – and to then discuss virtually – can re-create some of the experience of social connection that they are missing.

Engaging Parents and Families

In an effort to prevent the spread of Covid-19, many schools will elect to prohibit parents and other adults from entering the school buildings. Creating other rituals that invite family members into the classroom virtually can help to mitigate anxiety this may cause (especially for the parents of younger students), and may additionally create a good bridge for the support that may be needed for remote learning. Having students lead these family info sessions – sharing the school maps they make,

interviewing family members about their favorite books, leading an online lesson for parents – can be a great tool for promoting greater empathy for everyone involved.





RITUALS: STORYBOARDING

INSTRUCTIONS: CHOOSE AN IMAGINARY PARTICIPANT AND A SITUATION (THE FIRST DAY, SHIFTING FROM REMOTE TO IN-PERSON, CLEANING THE CLASSROOM, ETC.) AND STORYBOARD THEIR EXPERIENCE. WHERE MIGHT A RITUAL IMPROVE THEIR EXPERIENCE?

WORKSPACE:

YOU GOT THIS! →

HOW TO DRAW A PERSON:

•	i	⊂	⊂
---	---	---	---

IMAGINARY PARTICIPANT: _____
SITUATION: _____

ONCE UPON A TIME...	AND EVERY DAY...	UNTIL ONE DAY...	AND EVER SINCE THEN...
BECAUSE OF THAT...	BECAUSE OF THAT...	UNTIL FINALLY...	RITUAL IDEAS:



MAGICAL MAKE IT CONCRETE ACTIVITY SHEET

CHEER DESIGN

INSTRUCTIONS: CONSIDER ONE OF THE EXPERIENCES FROM YOUR STORYBOARD. DESIGN A CHEER TO SUPPORT THE EXPERIENCE!

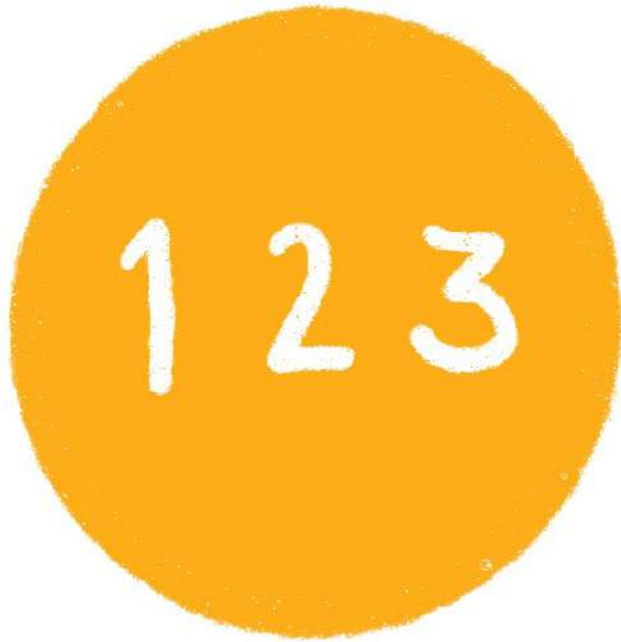
1 THEME IDEAS:

2 LYRIC IDEAS:

3 MOVEMENT / SOUND IDEAS:

4 THE CHEER!

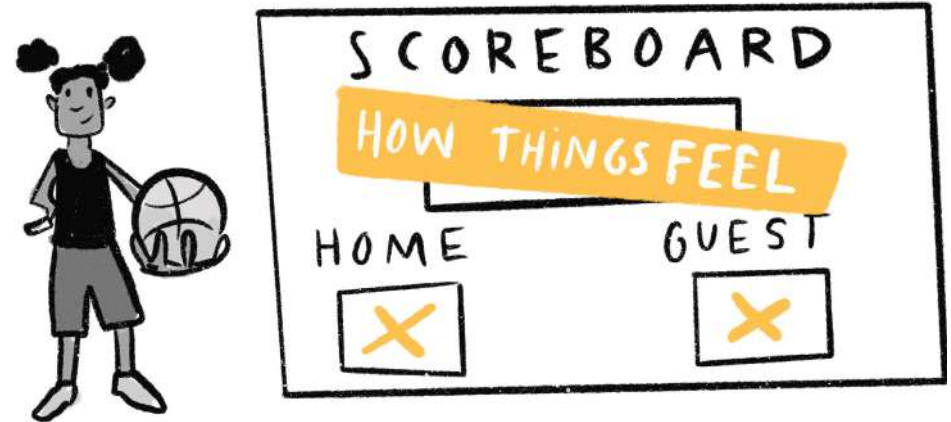




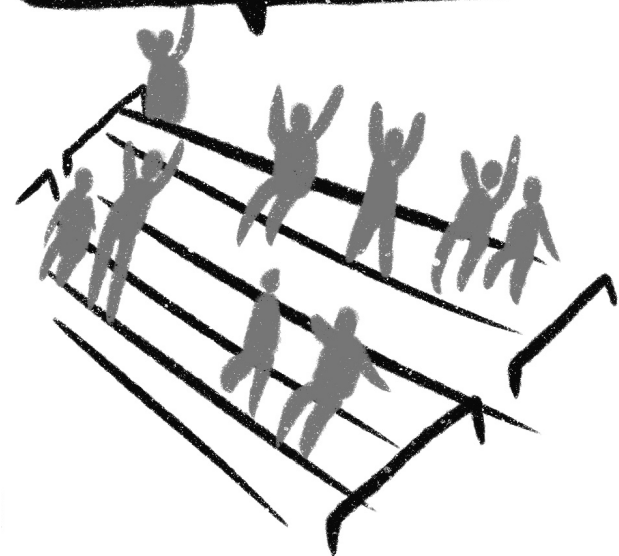
RULES

During the third year of running Playworks – then Sports4Kids – we decided to offer a girls’ basketball league. It was inspired in large part because we were noticing that regardless of who our staff person was, boys were more likely to jump into recess activities than girls were. We were interested in shifting that pattern by providing girls with an opportunity outside of recess – a basketball team – to build social connections that might spark and support participation at recess. The leagues

were ultimately very successful, but along the way there were some bumps and these bumps seemed to stem largely from the issue of keeping score.



GREAT PASS!



While we are fans of competition – it’s probably fair to say that some Playworks staff border on being obsessed with competition – our experience has been that sometimes it can get out of hand. And that is precisely what happened when we launched our first league. So, we talked about it – with the kids and the families - and while not everyone agreed, we ultimately decided to stop keeping score. Keeping score was a distraction from the joy of playing that wasn’t contributing as much as to the experience as it was taking away. Our intention was to run a league that introduced the girls to the game, the skills, and the experience of being on a team, and so we simply stopped keeping an official score.

The results were fascinating. Once the initial grumbling stopped, the whole focus of the game shifted – for the girls, the coaches and the fans. It should be noted that many of the girls did still try and keep score in their heads, and there were innumerable instances of girls erroneously insisting that their team would have won, if we’d been keeping score.

Perhaps most notably, though, the behavior that shifted most was that of the families in attendance. When we were keeping score, the cheering and comments that emanated from the fans were focused 100% on the winning and

losing. Grown humans actually cheered when 9 year old kids missed a shot. But when we took the scoring out of the equation, the cheering started to focus on great passes – made by either team – and there was a palpable sense that we were all in it together.

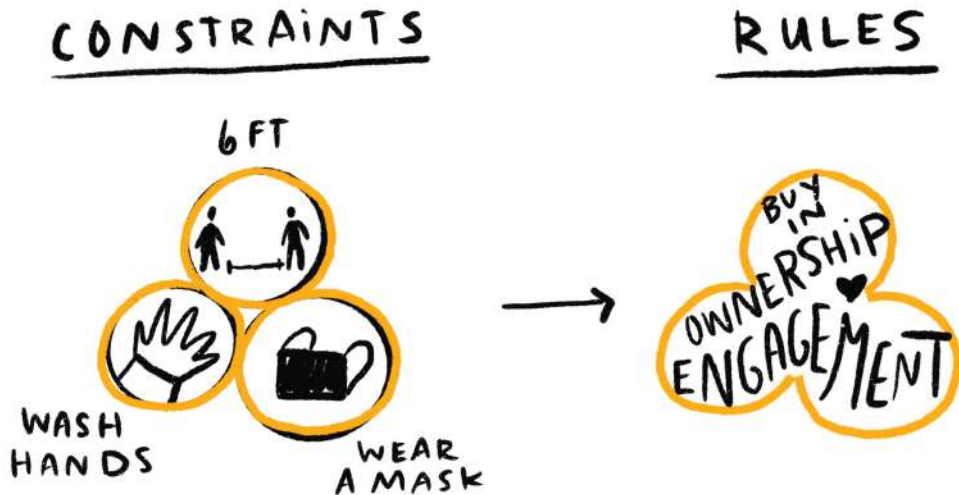
It should also be noted that as Playworks has grown, we’ve let the different regions determine how they want to handle the question of keeping score. Many do, some don’t. A few run regular seasons without keeping score and introduce a tournament at the end of the season that includes score-keeping, in the belief that they have had the opportunity during the regular season to build skills and relationships and expectations around behaviors that set the score-keeping experience up for success.

At the heart of this whole conversation is the question of how we translate what is required in this moment into rules - the critical word in this sentence being how. One of the things that has been made abundantly clear in all our years of running Playworks is the importance of how things feel. Paying attention to that, above all else, has been our single best predictor of success.

THE IMPORTANCE OF
HOW THINGS FEEL.

The interesting thing to consider in translating the requirements of Covid-19 into rules for how a school operates – just reducing it to the purely technical and logistical – is that there’s really not that much to consider. We are being asked to make decisions in a situation that is defined by uncertainty and incomplete information, so unless you feel a bit uneasy, you are fooling yourself. But, as of this writing, the things we seem to actually know are:

1. Masks are good
2. Being outside is better, and
3. As always, it’s useful to wash your hands.
4. It’s really hard not to touch your own face.



We titled this chapter “Rules” because rules are central to play. We know of lots of groups who avoid all the negative connotations of the word by focusing on agreements or guidelines, but we wanted to lean into claiming rules, not as something limiting, but like the three-point line in basketball or the 5-7-5 syllable structure of a haiku, as something that has the potential to spark creativity.

Russian developmental psychologist Lev Vygotsky described play as “imagination in action,” and as a means for children to make sense of the world. Vygotsky also saw play as the process by which children learn the skills of self-regulation. He explained that in play,

“at every step the child is faced with a conflict between the rule of the game and what he would do if he could suddenly act spontaneously. In the game he acts counter to what he wants . . . [achieving] the maximum display of willpower.”⁴

For schools to be successful in creating the conditions that do not contribute to the further spread of Covid-19, they are going to need students’ assistance through self-regulation. That is, in the end, the only way this thing works. So, given this, and given all the challenges of

just running a school when things are “normal,” what should you do? What rules should you put in place, and how in the world do you ensure that they are followed? In some ways, the questions that Covid-19 raises about how to run a school are surprisingly similar to the regular issues that educators face.

The folks at [Center for Inspired Teaching](#) have framed it as the tension between engagement and compliance. Their vision for teachers is that they become “Instigators of Thought,” humans whose job description is focused on promoting authentic engagement and getting kids to think for themselves. This moment, if it does nothing else, offers an extraordinary opportunity to do exactly that. Just as we have suggested that you co-construct the space and the rituals for this new phase of educating, we strongly advocate for co-creation of the rules that will guide you in this time.

Starting from scratch isn’t necessary though. A great place to start is with the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP)’s [COVID-19 Planning Consideration: Guidance for School Re-entry](#). They offer principles and age specific recommendations. And our Recess Considerations and Games section also provide some great guidelines with which

to start. That said, there is a lot to be gained from considering how your school may want to customize the rules and practices that you adopt.

Making up the Rules

Game designers have a lot of different theories about what makes for a great game, but there is general agreement on four essential components. A game needs a goal, rules (things you can do), restrictions (things you cannot do), and acceptance of these previous three things by the players. In preparing the rules for your school re-opening, it is useful to think along these same lines. Can you get really clear about the goals? What things are students and teachers allowed to do – and what are they not allowed to do? And, finally and perhaps most importantly, what needs to happen to ensure students and teachers accept these goals, rules and restrictions?

It’s worth noting some of the other characteristics that game designers call out as important, including surprise, consistency, inclusiveness, creative control by the participants, freshness and tension. It may seem like a stretch to consider how making up rules around Covid-19 for your school might

incorporate students' creative control, surprise or freshness – and you may feel (understandably and justifiably) that you really, really don't want any added tension. Our hope in simply raising the qualities that contribute to a good game is to prompt a mindset that is open to something slightly more creative.

At Playworks, we also rely on a framework we call the six simple principles of play to guide us in designing activities and events:

Taken in combination, the game designers' focus on making sure that you have clear goals, rules, restrictions and acceptance, along with these basic principles of play, provide a solid approach to translating the restrictions of Covid-19 into practices that are set up to succeed. That said, it feels important to acknowledge that there are justifiable worries specific to this moment that add difficulty points to actually putting these ideas into place. Safety worries are real – as they always are in schools – but the stakes feel higher in this moment.

Safety and risk are complicated issues in any undertaking involving kids. We need our children to experience physical and emotional risk if they are to grow up and

6 SIMPLE RULES OF PLAY

- 1) PLAY SHOULD HAPPEN EVERY DAY
- 2) CHOOSE PLAY, CHOOSE HAPPINESS
- 3) KIDS HAVE THE TOOLS TO RESOLVE CONFLICT
- 4) ADULTS PLAY TOO – AND MODEL TRUST, POSITIVITY & INCLUSION
- 5) PLAY IS **NOT** A REWARD TO BE REVOKED
- 6) **EVERYONE** IS WELCOME TO PLAY ♥

become functioning adults, but it is also our responsibility to protect them from excessive risk. Different people have different risk tolerances and there are no absolutes in determining the appropriate level of risk in the best of circumstances.

In a Covid-responsive world, there will inevitably be tensions among people who have a wide variability of comfort with different risks, accompanied by the inevitable awkwardness of learning new social practices. Are you comfortable with me being without a mask if I am 6' away and we are outside? How do you communicate friendliness when wearing a mask? How much information should co-workers share about their respective social bubbles? If

I'm a parent and my child is at school, what are the implications for my family in relationship to other families in my child's classroom?

Assumption Storming

Assumption storming is a design technique that is essentially a brainstorm session in which you list out the assumptions for your project. In this moment, assumption storming represents an important opportunity to consider all the ways your school has historically operated – all the assumptions about how school works – and to consider how some of these previously non-negotiables might now be reconsidered. Assumption storming can also be a useful in sparking innovation by flipping assumptions. For example, one opportunity for sparking creativity around Covid-19 compliance might include first having your staff list out all the assumptions they have around complying with the physical distancing requirements and then “flipping” them – stating the opposite as an assumption.

For example, assumptions might include “The youngest students are incapable of staying 6’ apart,” “Teachers are going to have to spend a significant amount of time ensuring compliance with the social distancing rules,” and “Students

aren't going to want to wear masks.” Flipped, the assumptions are “The youngest students are going to be the best at social distancing,” “Teachers won't be the primary people ensuring compliance with the social distancing rules,” and “Students are going to be excited to make and wear masks.” While the initial “flipping” doesn't get directly to the heart of how these changes might occur, it does create an important mindset shift that can help with generating innovative solutions.

What follows is a list of areas ripe for assumption storming.

Spitting

One idea is to start your rule-making process with guidance around spitting. Intentionally starting with something that is likely to prompt giggles and some groans of “Ooooh, gross!” has the benefit of disrupting the usual classroom conversation for the better. It's also fairly non-controversial as rules go, especially important in this moment, and, as such, offers up a good opportunity for developing and testing a process. Have your students list out all their assumptions about spitting and then try flipping them. Based on the assumptions and the insights that flipping them offers, what rules

would they propose? What are the assumptions about what happens if someone does spit? What are the assumptions about helping people remember? Lastly, what, if any assumptions do the students have about how you might revisit the rules to discuss if they're working and how you might fix the rules if they're not working?

6' apart

- *What are your assumptions about adults maintaining the adult-to-adult distance?
- *What are your assumptions about desk set up?
- *What are your assumptions about who is enforcing physical distancing?

Handwashing

- *What are your assumptions about the number of times each person is going to wash their hands each day?
- *What are your assumptions about waiting in line to get to the sink?
- *What are your assumptions about how the younger students will be organized to wash hands?

Masks

- *What are your assumptions about who will wear masks?
- *What are your assumptions about students wearing masks?
- *What are your assumptions about how it will feel wearing a mask?
- *What are your assumptions about how families will feel about masks?

Transitions

- *What are your assumptions about hallways?
- *What are your assumptions about the beginning and ending of the day?
- *What are your assumptions about student roles in handling different moments of transition?

Lunch

- *What are your assumptions about eating lunch in the classroom?
- *What are your assumptions about how school lunches work? What happens if a student forgets her lunch?

123

RULES: ASSUMPTION STORMING/ FLIPPING

INSTRUCTIONS: LIST THE ASSUMPTIONS YOU HAVE ABOUT HOW COVID-19 WILL IMPACT YOUR RE-OPENING/RETURN TO SCHOOL. THEN, STATE THE OPPOSITE (FLIP IT!) WHAT IDEAS DO YOUR FLIPPED ASSUMPTIONS GIVE YOU?

WORKSPACE:

MY ASSUMPTIONS

HOW WILL STUDENTS & ADULTS RESPOND?

WHO WILL BE RESPONSIBLE FOR SAFETY & COOPERATION?

FLIPPED ASSUMPTIONS

EXCITING IDEAS!



RULE PROPOSALS

INSTRUCTIONS:

TAKE 1-2 OF YOUR IDEAS FROM THE ASSUMPTION-FLIPPING EXERCISE AND PROPOSE A FEW RULES THAT WOULD HELP MAKE THEM HAPPEN!

EXCITING IDEA #1:

PROPOSED NEW RULE:

WHO IS THIS RULE FOR?

WHEN WILL YOU NEED TO REVISIT THIS RULE?

EXCITING IDEA #2:

PROPOSED NEW RULE:

WHO IS THIS RULE FOR?

WHEN WILL YOU NEED TO REVISIT THIS RULE?

THIS MAKES ME
THINK I SHOULD
THANK:





REFEREES

Coach Kaitlin had only been working at her school in Fall River, Massachusetts for a few weeks when a couple of teachers pointed out a student named Adonis and warned her that he could be disruptive. Kaitlin didn't think too much about it, other than to be slightly relieved that Adonis didn't seem particularly interested in the activities she was running out on the playground. But in the spring when Kaitlin announced she would be organizing a co-ed volleyball team to participate in the Playworks

league, Adonis showed up and announced his interest in being on the team.

Sure enough, Adonis proved to be kind of difficult to work with. He was openly disrespectful on occasion and had a hard time getting along with his teammates. Kaitlin did all the things we had coached her to do, redirecting him as possible and focusing on things he did right, and slowly but surely she began to notice modest, incremental improvements. It wasn't a dramatic shift until the sixth week of the season when Adonis had a really exceptional game. Not only did he play well, serving for seven consecutive points, but he was positive with his teammates, liberally dispersing high fives, and gracious with the opposing team. Kaitlin was feeling incredibly proud of herself, and even acknowledged feeling a bit smug when thinking about the teachers who had initially tried to warn her.



The 7th week of the season was the final week, and the game fell on the evening before Kaitlin was scheduled to announce her last squad of Junior Coaches for the year. Junior Coaches are the youth leaders that Playworks relies on to support our school staff, and our primary strategy for ensuring that kids really come to have ownership over recess. It's a big honor among students and a highly coveted role. Kaitlin was seriously considering making Adonis a Junior Coach.

But on the evening of the last match, the wheels came off the cart. Adonis didn't just lapse back into his old disruptive ways, he was more challenging than Kaitlin had ever seen him, throwing the ball at one of the players from the other team, calling his teammates names when they lost a point, and ultimately storming out of the gym - loudly and dramatically - during the end of season awards ceremony.

OUR JOB IS TO SEE
THE BEST IN KIDS

Later that night, when Kaitlin was making the list of Junior Coaches that she would post the next day, she was at a loss. She couldn't imagine inviting Adonis to be a Junior Coach after his display that evening. What message would it send to the other kids? Or for that matter, to Adonis? But then she thought about what she had heard Playworks staff say over and over: that our job is to see the best in kids, no matter what they did. And so, almost against her better judgment, Kaitlin put Adonis on the list. "Our job is to see the best in kids"

The next day Kaitlin posted the list on the Playworks bulletin board, and all the kids rushed to the board to see if their names were there - everyone except Adonis. Kaitlin watched as the other kids moved away - some excited to be chosen, others disappointed - and slowly, and only after everyone else was gone, Adonis went up to confirm what he knew to be true. Kaitlin could see from his body language that he was just going up to confirm that he wasn't on the list. In that moment she understood Adonis' behavior the evening before as an effort to control the outcome. Even if it wasn't the outcome he really wanted, at least he would know what was coming.

Seeing his name on the list visibly surprised Adonis and he turned around quickly to see if anyone was watching. He walked directly over to Kaitlin and said “Coach, can we talk outside?” He then headed out the double doors and onto the playground, not even looking back to see if Kaitlin was following. When Kaitlin caught up to him, she didn’t know what to expect.

“Coach K,” Adonis began hesitantly. “Well, I just wanted to say thank you for having me on your volleyball team.”

Kaitlin responded, “Of course, Adonis, it was a pleasure to have you on the team.”

Adonis appeared genuinely confused by this response, and teared up as he asked, incredulously, “It was?”

Kaitlin said later that she knew that no matter how it turned out, she had made the right decision including Adonis as a Junior Coach. That no ten-year-old should ever wonder if it was a pleasure to have him on your team. At least for that moment, she had made sure that Adonis knew that she believed in the best in him.

When students ultimately do return to school,

there is good reason to believe that many of them will be bringing along a fair bit of trauma. From more extreme experiences of food and housing insecurity and violence to the more mundane (but potentially traumatic nonetheless) experiences of missing friends and routine disruption, it is highly likely that re-opening will be significantly impacted by the behavior issues that these experiences trigger.

It seems worth mentioning that, just as this applies to students, many educators and administrators returning will also be experiencing their own trauma. New staffing structures will exacerbate this, compounded by the likelihood that many teachers may be either unable – because of health or age reasons that make it unsafe – or unwilling to return, creating a demand for new and less experienced teachers in a moment that is even more demanding than the past.

There was some debate internally around titling this chapter “Referees” – grounded largely in concern that it sounded too authoritarian and not enough like an ally or champion for the players. We use the term in the sense of a referee as “one to whom a thing is referred.” The titling is also a nod to Brian Sutton-Smith’s writing, insisting that children who “are introduced into civilization under the control

of ludic regulations (rituals, rules, referees and so on)" are "likely to be more sophisticated in their mature social lives and more diplomatically adept in the everyday social relations."⁵

The goal of this section is to prompt consideration of how you might create shared responsibility for referee-ing amongst both staff and students. How might families be engaged to help bridge remote and in-person learning, providing supports that encourage engagement, as opposed to enforcement?

The role of referees is best considered as an adjacency to rule design. Referees are critical to the process of framing the goals, establishing the rules and restrictions and then ensuring acceptance. Intentionally designing the process for referee-ing, along with designating the humans responsible, can dramatically change the experience for everyone involved. And agreeing to revisit the referee experience creates the expectation at the outset that the role of referee will be dynamic, giving students a greater sense of visibility into the process.

Are the referees getting the support they need?

Are there ways that they might engage differently with the rules?

Are the rules changing?

Are other people interested in taking turns as referees?

Empathy interviews

This moment represents an important opportunity to reconsider all sorts of roles. Even if you do nothing radically different with the roles you already have, this is a chance to consider how you might acknowledge and intentionally design different experiences to ensure that everyone at your school feels as though they belong and are invited to make the best contribution they can. To generate ideas on how best to create the conditions that enable this, we recommend starting with empathy interviews.

Empathy interviews can be conducted by your staff and by students and family members, and even just a handful of 20 minute conversations can have a significant impact. Whether the interviews are of peers or across groups that interact less often – for example having students or teachers interviewing custodians, the school

⁵ Brian Sutton-Smith, *Play Theory: A Personal Journey and New Thoughts*, American Journal of Play, Vol 1, No. 1, 2008

secretary or the cafeteria staff - the goal is to promote understanding of the current situation and its challenges from a different perspective. Like the shadowing activity we described in the Rituals section, empathy interviews are intended to surface aspects of the experience that might not be evident at first glance and to reveal solutions that might not be discovered otherwise.

Good empathy interviews focus on open-ended questions that encourage the interviewee to talk about – and sometimes even discover – what is important to them. Questions focus on how the interviewee feels, and the interviewer is encouraged to both listen deeply to responses, while also observing body language and reactions that either confirm – or sometimes contradict – what is being said.

The interviewer should strive to create a comfortable setting for the interviewee – easing into the conversation by sharing some basic information and finding connection, and starting out with questions that encourage a positive experience – like asking the interviewee about an experience that delighted them, and encouraging the interviewee to “show” (using stories) as opposed to “tell” whenever possible.

It can be helpful to do empathy interviews in pairs with one person asking the questions and the other person taking notes. And ask if it’s OK to take pictures. Having a phone picture of the person you interviewed can help later when you are thinking about/discussing the things you learned in the interview.

Some important tips to keep in mind:

- *Keep your questions short and open-ended
- *Ask one question at a time
- *Encourage stories
- *Don’t suggest answers. When in doubt, stay quiet
- *Explore feelings
- *Seek clarification – don’t assume you know
- *If the conversation gets stuck, ask why
- *Express your gratitude

Below are some suggested people to interview along with some starter questions to consider. Many of the questions work equally well for different people and you likely have other questions you’d also like to ask. Go forth and empathize!

Custodian

Can you walk me through your average day before Covid-19?

What would I find surprising about your work?

How are you feeling about your job in this moment?

Principal/AP

Tell me a story about a time when you felt like you were really successful in your job.

How did you get involved in education?

What worries you most about re-opening our school?

School Secretary

How did you become a school secretary?

What's your favorite part of working in a school?

Cafeteria Staff

What other jobs have you had? How does this job compare?

Tell me a story about a memory you have of the cafeteria?

How did you feel coming back to school after the closure?

Substitute Teachers

What is the most surprising thing about being a sub?

How did you decide to become a substitute teacher?

Can you describe your job for me? How do you think the teacher you are substituting for would describe it?

Para-professionals

Tell me about a memorable day at school.

How does it feel to be a para-educator?

How does this job compare to other jobs you have had?

Nonprofit/Afterschool Partners

Describe the first time you ever came to this school.

Could you share how you feel about your work right now?

What's your favorite part of your job?

Parents/Family Members

What are you most excited about doing when Covid-19 is over?

What's your best memory from when you were in school?

What worries you about me going back to school?

Students

Tell me a story about something that happened during shelter-in-place

What were you looking forward to most about coming back to school?

What did you like about not having to go to school?



REFEREES: EMPATHY INTERVIEWS

INSTRUCTIONS: INVITE SOMEONE FROM THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY TO HAVE A CONVERSATION WITH YOU ABOUT RE-OPENING. PREPARE YOUR QUESTIONS AND ENCOURAGE STORYTELLING & REFLECTIONS ON YOUR INTERVIEWEES FEELINGS. TAKE NOTES AND BE SURE TO ASK "WHY" WHEN SOMETHING SURPRISES YOU. AS ALWAYS, BE SURE TO EXPRESS YOUR GRATITUDE!

WORKSPACE:

I'D LIKE TO HAVE A CONVERSATION WITH:

- _____
- _____
- _____

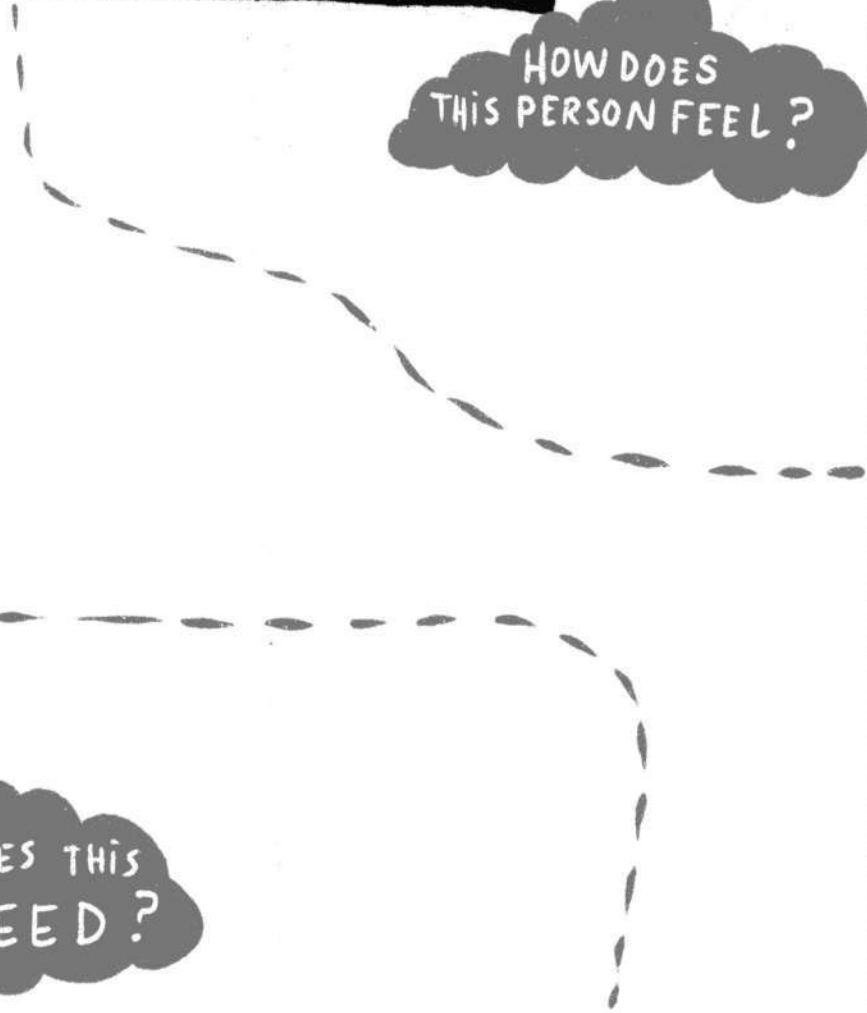
NOTES FROM OUR CONVERSATION:

HOW DOES THIS PERSON FEEL?

QUESTIONS I HAVE FOR THEM:

WHY?

WHAT DOES THIS PERSON NEED?



Magical Bonus Make It Concrete Activity

One way to translate the empathy interviews into something concrete is by creating a classroom charter or a school mission. Both are similar in that they hold out a vision for how they want the classroom – or school – to feel and all that they want the students and staff to achieve – and then work backwards to determine the rules and promises and guidelines that will help make it happen.

There are lots of resources online for this process, we recommend Yale's RULER Program as a great place to start. Instead of typical classroom rules that are teacher-directed, the CHARTER is an agreement that is based in feelings. The process starts with the question 'How do we want to feel at school?' and then, 'How will we make sure to feel these feelings?'

For pre-K- 5, each class works together to build their own CHARTER which is then signed by all students and teachers, who share equal ownership in its values. Since the CHARTER is created completely by the students, and rooted in their feelings, they feel bound to it in an authentic way.





MAGICAL MAKE IT CONCRETE ACTIVITY SHEET

CLASSROOM
CHARTER

INSTRUCTIONS:

USE THE EMOTION WHEELS ON THE NEXT PAGE TO HELP YOU ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

HOW DO WE FEEL
RIGHT NOW?

HOW CAN WE MAKE SCHOOL
A PLACE WHERE WE FEEL
HOW WE WANT TO FEEL?

HOW DO WE WANT
TO FEEL AT SCHOOL?



THIS MAKES ME
THINK I SHOULD
THANK:



THE EMOTION WHEEL!

USE THIS WHEEL
TO HELP
YOUR STUDENTS
(AND YOURSELF)
IDENTIFY HOW
THEY'RE FEELING.

I'M FEELING...



① CHOOSE A COLOR IN THE MIDDLE ② CHOOSE ANY 3 WORDS ON THE OUTSIDE OR MAKE UP YOUR OWN!
* SOMETIMES IT HELPS FOR ADULTS TO GO FIRST.

Footnotes

Page 8 “The opposite of play is not work...”
Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play*, Harvard University Press, 1997

Page 34, “The future will reward clarity...”
Bob Johansen, *The New Leadership Literacies: Thriving in a Future of Extreme Disruption and Distributed Everything*, Berrett-Koehler Publishers Inc., 2017

Page 55, “All play moves...”
Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A study of the Play-element in Culture*, Beacon Press, 1955

Page 77, “At every step...”
LS Vygotsky, *Play and its role in the mental development of the Child*, 1933

Page 96, “are introduced into civilization...”
Brian Sutton-Smith, *Play Theory: A Personal Journey and New Thoughts*, *American Journal of Play*, Vol 1, No. 1, 2008



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