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Tips for Teaching with Math Games

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Tips for Teaching with Math Games

by Laura Candler



Who doesn't love a game? In the math classroom, games offer an engaging alternative to worksheets, allowing students to work with others and have fun while learning. They're perfect for practicing new skills or reviewing previously-learned content. Math games are extremely versatile and can be used in cooperative learning teams, in small group instruction, or in math centers.

The key to using math games effectively in the classroom is to develop clear and specific management systems and procedures. Students need to know when they can play the games, where to go to play them, how to choose a partner, and a host of other procedures. After you decide which procedures will best fit your learning environment, be sure to explicitly teach those procedures to your students.

Teaching Sportsmanship

Before you start using math games in your classroom, it's helpful to teach a mini-lesson about sportsmanship. The younger your students, the more guidance they will need with social skills development, but even older students can benefit from a short review of what it means to be a good sport.

T-charts are very effective when teaching social skills, and I've included two that work well for this lesson. You can find these charts on pages 5 and 6, or you can create your own.

If you use the T-chart titled, "What is Sportsmanship?", ask your students what they think it means to be a "good sport" and what it means to be a "poor sport" when playing games. Record their ideas in the appropriate columns on the class chart. During the brainstorming session, ask them not to name specific people or incidents that others would know about to avoid embarrassing anyone. You should end up with a list of behaviors such as bragging, taking turns, congratulating the winner, smiling, grabbing materials, not following the rules, pouting, etc. Remind students that it's no fun to play with a poor sport!

What is Sportsmanship?	
Good Sport	Poor Sport

How to Be a Good Sport	
Looks Like	Sounds Like

If you prefer, you can tackle this topic by focusing on what it means to be a good sport and avoiding any discussion about bad sportsmanship. Use the other T-chart for this session, and ask your students what they think it means to be a good sport. Then have them imagine what they would observe if they saw students who were good sports playing a math game

together. How would someone know the students are being good sports? What would an observer see? How would the players act? Record what others would see in the “Looks Like” column. Then ask them to think about what an observer would hear. What would good sports say to each other? Record those responses in the “Sounds Like” column. Display the completed chart for students to refer to when playing games.

One way to avoid conflicts among students is to teach them strategies for common game tasks such as deciding who goes first. Rather than arguing, they can flip a coin, play Rock-Paper-Scissors, or toss a die. After you address these issues with mini-lessons, you’ll find that your students enjoy playing games more and get along better with their peers. If some students continue to have difficulty, remind them that although they might not win every game, they are all winners because they are having fun while learning!

Using Math Games in Learning Centers

Using math game centers is a way to help students keep skills sharp throughout the year. You may want to set aside 15 to 20 minutes a day for students to work in math centers. Having them play the games first thing in the morning as other students arrive can keep them on task and energize them for the day. You can also encourage students to use these activities when they have finished other assignments or while you are working with a small group.



Using Math Games in Cooperative Learning Teams

Math games work well in cooperative learning teams during whole group instruction. After you introduce a skill, demonstrate it, and check for understanding, you can have students play a game to practice the skill. When you use games in cooperative learning teams, each team will need a copy of the game materials, and all teams will be engaged in playing the games while you serve as a facilitator. This gives you the opportunity to walk around and work with individual students who may need extra help.

Another way to use games in cooperative learning teams is for reviewing several different skills before a test. If you choose to use games this way, you’ll need a different game for each skill and rotate the games from team to team every 10 to 15 minutes. Sometimes you can use the same game but simply create different problem cards or task cards for each skill.

Record-Keeping and Written Responses

Dry erase boards are great for having students work out problems during math games which discourages students from guessing. Digital tablets with apps like ShowMe or Chalkboard also work well if you have access to the technology. Most games are self-checking so there might not be a need for students to keep a record of their work. However, if you do want to hold them accountable, have them work out the problems in a math journal or on paper to turn in to you later.



Tips for Choosing Math Game Partners

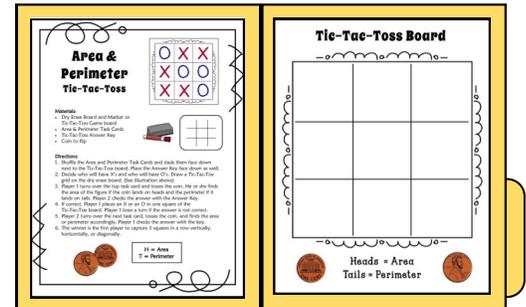
You can allow students to choose their partners or choose for them, depending on the type of activity and your objectives. You may want to alternate between the two options.

- **Student Choice** - Students don't have many opportunities in the classroom to choose who they want to work with, so this might be an appropriate time to exercise that option. Students who choose partners usually work together better than assigned partners, but if they always choose the same partner, they will miss out developing important social skills and getting to know their classmates. To prevent this problem, ask them to choose a different partner each day of the week.
- **Teacher Choice** - Random partners don't work well because math games that rely on skill to win aren't fair if one player is much more proficient than the other. If a student who works quickly is placed with a student who works more slowly, they will both be frustrated. Try to pair students with partners who have similar skill levels and who work at a similar pace.



Organizing and Storing Games and Materials

Taking time to organize and store materials now will save you time later. If you laminate the materials, you'll be able to use them for many years. Many of the games work well as file folder activities, too. Just glue the directions and the game board to the inside of a folder and laminate it for sturdiness and durability. An alternative is to use 9" x 12" envelopes. Glue the directions on the outside and store the game materials inside the envelope.



You might also want to set up a plastic shoebox-sized container with commonly used game materials like spinners, dice, calculators, and so on. The leader can grab a plastic tub of materials and bring it over to the group when the games are distributed.



How to Choose Appropriate Math Games

You can create your own games, but they are time-consuming to make. If you purchase ready-to-use games, be sure to preview them carefully to make sure they are appropriate for your students. Look carefully at the math problems to make sure they are the right level, and be sure an answer key is included.

If you're an upper elementary teacher who enjoys teaching with math games, check out my [Math Games Mega Bundle](#). All 16 games are engaging, fun, and most importantly, effective learning tools. To preview every page in each of these math games, click over to the [Math Games Mega Bundle](#) page in my TpT store and click the game title links in the description.



How to Be a Good Sport

Looks Like

Sounds Like



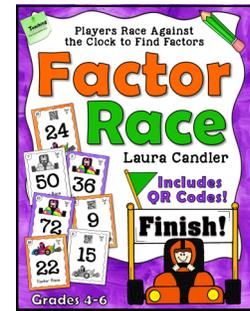
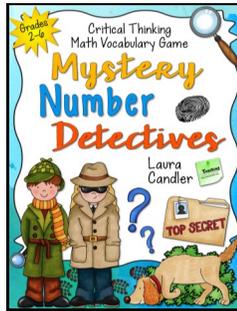
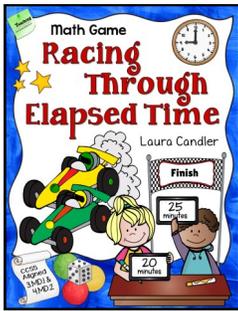
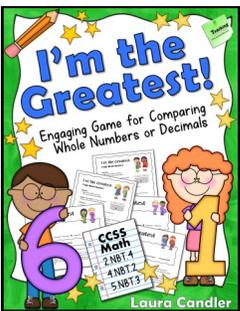
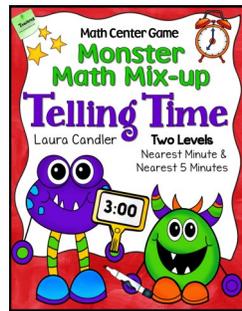
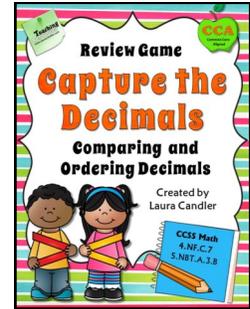
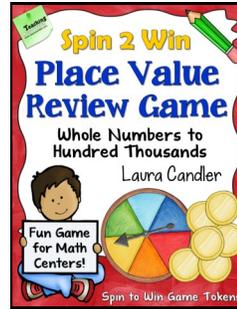
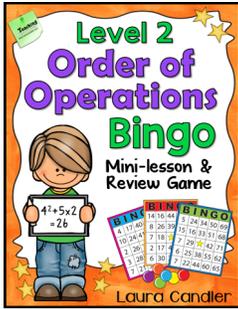
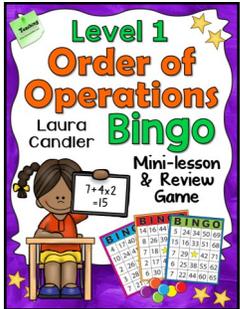
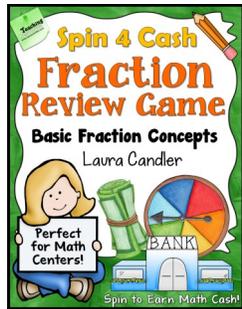
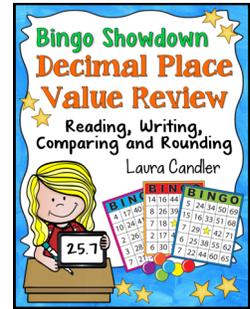
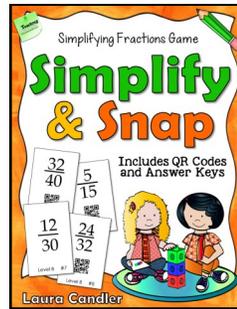
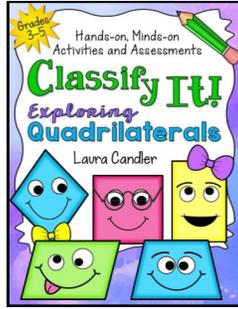
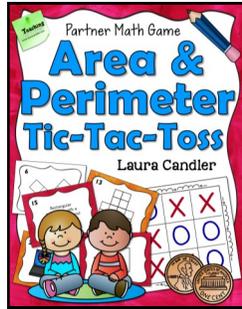
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