



PHYSICAL EDUCATION

Let's Play Hand Game!

ESSENTIAL UNDERSTANDINGS

- **Since Time Immemorial**
- **Identity**

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Students will

- understand the Hand Game has been played since time immemorial,
- learn how to play a traditional Native American game, and
- demonstrate teamwork, respect, and focus during gameplay.

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

- Why are Native traditions like the Hand Game still important today?

REQUIRED TIME

- 30 minutes

Overview

Students are introduced to the traditional Native American Hand Game (also known as Slahal or Stick Game), which is a guessing and hiding game played by many Tribes across the Pacific Northwest. Through play, students experience cultural traditions that demonstrate how Native peoples have lived on this land for countless generations, since time immemorial. Students learn that games are an important part of Native identity and community life today.

Background for Teachers

The Hand Game (Slahal/Stick Game) is one of the oldest games played by Native peoples across the Pacific Northwest, including Oregon Tribes such as the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, and Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians. Many different Oregon Tribes play versions of this game, each with their own specific traditions. This game has been passed down through generations since time



immemorial and continues to be played today during Tribal gatherings, ceremonies, and community events.

The Hand Game is unique because it brings together entire communities. Adults, children, and elders all participate together. Families teach the game to their children, and children grow up playing alongside their parents and grandparents. This multi-generational participation strengthens family bonds and ensures cultural knowledge passes from one generation to the next.

Today, Tribes across the country continue to hold major Hand Game tournaments and competitions. These events can last for days and draw participants from hundreds of miles away. Teams travel to compete, prize money can reach thousands of dollars and entire communities gather to watch, cheer and celebrate. These modern competitions show that Native American traditions are living, thriving parts of contemporary Native life.

The Hand Game involves teams hiding small objects (traditionally carved bones or sticks) in their hands while the opposing team guesses which hand holds the object. It's often accompanied by traditional songs, drumming and rhythmic movements that serve both to concentrate the hiders and distract the guessers.

STANDARDS

Oregon Health Education Standards

- **PE.4.1.1:** Follows the rules & parameters of the learning environment.
- **PE.4.1.4:** Works cooperatively with others in a variety of class environments (e.g., small and large groups).

KEY WORDS and IDEAS

- **Since Time Immemorial:** So long ago that no one can remember when it started.
- **Identity:** Who you are, including your family, culture and traditions.
- **Hand Game (Slahal):** A traditional Native American game of guessing and hiding.
- **Traditional:** Something that has been passed down from ancestors for many generations.
- **Respect:** Treating others, their traditions and their culture with kindness and honor.
- **Guess:** When you try to figure something out without knowing for sure.

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This game, connected to the Essential Understanding, Since Time Immemorial, demonstrates that Native peoples have lived in and engaged with the land we now call Oregon for countless generations—long before written history or European contact. The Hand Game is not a borrowed tradition; it has been part of Native cultures since time immemorial and represents the continuous presence of Indigenous peoples on this land. It is connected to the Essential Understanding, Identity, because The Hand Game is more than entertainment—it's a vital part of Native identity that connects people across generations. Playing it helps preserve culture, teaches important values like respect and community cooperation and maintains connections to ancestral traditions. The fact that major competitions continue today, with both youth and adults participating, demonstrates a vibrant and evolving Native identity in the 21st century.

MATERIALS

What materials are needed for students to engage in this activity?

- Small objects for hiding (smooth stones, large beads, or wooden tokens)—one per group
- Optional: Simple hand drum or rhythm sticks for traditional music element
- Chart paper for key words
- Student self-assessment

Considerations for Teachers

Practices

While teaching this lesson, the following principles can help guide your decision-making and engagement with students.

- Focus on teaching the Essential Understandings through this traditional game.
- When sharing content with students, address the "why" not just the "what"—explain why this game matters to Native communities.
- Highlight that Native Americans are living communities with ongoing traditions.
- Acknowledge that many different Oregon Tribes play versions of this game, each with their own specific traditions.

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- Ensure your teaching practices are accessible and appropriate for Native and non-Native students
- Emphasize respectful participation rather than competition

Assessment

During this lesson, observe and listen to students during discussions and gameplay to determine how their learning is progressing. Note what students say and do in relation to the success criteria and use this information to inform next steps. Listen for student comments; observe respectful participation and teamwork. At the end of the lesson, use the self-assessment tool to support students as they gauge their understanding of the Essential Understandings.

Success Criteria

- Students can explain that the Hand Game has been played by Native peoples since time immemorial.
- Students can respectfully play the Hand Game, following the rules and working with their team.
- Students can explain why traditional games are important to Native identity and community.

For the following activities, use the slide deck to support your implementation.

Opening

Time: 5 minutes

Step 1:

Begin in a circle and activate students' prior knowledge.

- Ask students: "Have you ever played a game where someone hides something, and you try to find it?"
- Let 2–3 students share briefly.

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Step 2:

Bring a small basket with items to share (like stickers, pencils or small healthy snacks).

Introduce the Hand Game.

- Show students a small object (bead, token or smooth stone)
- Explain to students: "Today we're going to learn a special game that Native kids and adults in Oregon have been playing since time immemorial—that means for a very, very long time, even before anyone wrote things down."
- Share, "This game is so important that Native families still have big competitions today, where teams from different Tribes come together to play!"

Step 3:

Show the video, [Alive and well in Indian Country - Slahal, the Stick/Hand Game](#), of a Tribal member talking about the game.

Main Activity

Time: 20 minutes

Step 1:

Learn the basic rules (5 minutes)

- Demonstrate: One team (hiders) hides the objects in their hands behind their backs, then brings their hands forward.
- The other team (guessers) points to which hand they think holds the objects.
- If the guessers are right, the teams switch roles; if they are wrong, the hiders get a point.
- Emphasize to students that "This isn't just about winning—it's about having fun together and learning from Native traditions."

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Step 2:

Practice round (5 minutes)

- Play one round as a whole class while you model the game play.
- Focus on turn-taking, respectful guessing and positive responses.
- Introduce a simple clapping rhythm while hiding (a traditional element).

Step 3:

Small-group play (10 minutes)

- Divide students into groups of 4–6 students.
- Each group plays several rounds, rotating roles.
- Circulate, encouraging teamwork and respectful play.
- Add optional elements: humming, gentle swaying or clapping rhythms.

Closing

Time: 5 minutes

Step 1:

Reflect with students, asking questions such as

- "How did it feel to play this ancient game?"
- "What makes this game special for Native communities?"
- "Why do you think Native families still play this game today and even have big tournaments?"
- "How is it special that kids and adults can play this game together?"

Step 2:

Connect back to Essential Understandings.

- Share with students that "This game shows us that Native peoples have been living here since time immemorial, and their traditions are still alive today."

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- "Playing games like this is part of Native identity—it's one way Native families and communities stay connected to who they are."
- "Adults and children play together, and they even have big competitions that bring tribes from all over the country together!".

Step 3:

Support students to conduct a self-assessment based on the success criteria. There is a self-assessment handout at the end of the lesson plan.

Extension Activity

Time: 10 minutes

Art Connection: Students draw pictures of themselves playing the Hand Game with a partner, including elements they remember (circle formation, hidden hands, smiling faces). They can write or dictate one sentence about why the game is important to Native peoples.

Additional Resources

Tribally Created Curriculum

- 2nd grade math lesson by [The Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde](#), [The Salmon & the Eel – Even & Odd](#)

Hand Game and Slahal Information

- [Slahal Wikipedia Article](#): Comprehensive overview of the game's history and modern tournaments
- Cascadia Department of Bioregion, [Slahal Games](#): Detailed cultural context and oral traditions
- National Library of Medicine, [Native Games](#): Educational resource on traditional Native games

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Modern Tournament Examples

- Battle of Nations Stick Game Tournament: Major tournament with 177 teams competing for \$30,000 first prize
- [Lakota Nation Invitational Hand Games](#) - Multi-tribal competition

Video Resources



- YouTube: Search "Native American Hand Game" or "Slahal Tournament" for authentic gameplay footage
- Canyon Records: "Stick Game Songs of the Paiute" by Judy Trejo for traditional music

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Student Self-Assessment

Directions for teachers: Read aloud the lesson Success Criteria in the first column to students. Have them indicate if they were able to meet the criteria by marking it on the handout, with hand gestures, or by sharing aloud. Ask students to explain why they chose “not yet” or “yes” to a peer.

Can I...	Not Yet	Yes
		
explain that the Hand Game has been played by Native peoples since time immemorial?		
participate respectfully in the Hand Game?		
explain why traditional games are important to Native identity?		

If you circled "Not Yet," what is one thing you want to learn more about?

If you circled "Yes" what is one thing you enjoyed most about playing the Hand Game?

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