



## HEALTH

# Games of Mental Skill and Endurance

## ESSENTIAL UNDERSTANDINGS

- Identity
- Lifeways

## LEARNING OUTCOMES

Students will participate in playing traditional Native American hand games.

## ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

How does careful observation help in team sports?

## LOGISTICS

- Where does the activity take place?  
*Classroom or outside*
- How are the students organized?
  - Whole class
  - Teams: 2 – 4
  - Pairs
  - Individually

## TIME REQUIRED

One hour

## Overview

Tribal nations and Indigenous communities throughout North America have always enjoyed games and athletic activities that provide entertainment, teach skills of physical and mental endurance, promote tribal values such as teamwork and fairness, and allow individuals and teams to challenge themselves in competition. These games and activities range from the simple hand (or “stick”) game that dates back thousands of years to the modern-day Indian Relay Races that often draw large crowds. Even in the pre-contact era there were some similarities in the games played by tribes in a given region or even in completely different parts of the country, but there were also many variations in the rules, materials, and methods of play.

In this lesson, students will learn how to play one version of the hand game and will hear about some of the variations in the playing materials and rules used by different tribes in Oregon. Students will learn to take cues from opponents to identify the hand that holds the chosen item.

The hand game is deceptively simple. There are no complicated rules, equipment, or instructions, and even speaking is not necessary, which makes it an ideal game for multiple age groups or people from different languages. In traditional Native cultures,



such games were often used to teach children about etiquette, fair play, and how to be respectful of team members and opponents. That said, hand game competitions were—and are—often intense, and they are part of many contemporary tribal social gatherings. Some versions of the hand game are even designated as Class I gaming in many tribal casinos.

While focused on physical education, this lesson reinforces two important concepts that are woven throughout this curriculum. First, students will learn that while there are many similarities across tribal nations and Indigenous communities—including some of the games they play—Native American people are far from homogeneous and in fact represent a rich diversity of unique cultures. Second, students will be encouraged to think about how the specific natural environment in which a given tribe lived—its ancestral territory—shaped its identity and culture in both large and small ways. Understanding this strong connection to place is essential to understanding and respecting Native American cultures in Oregon and across North America, past and present.

## Background for teachers

### Useful websites

*Certain Gambling Games of the Klamath Indians* by George A. Dorsey <https://anthrosource.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1525/aa.1901.3.1.02a00030>

**Stick game simple version** <https://www.webpages.uidaho.edu/~rfrey/pdf/329/stick%20game.pdf>

## STANDARDS

### Oregon physical standards

**PE.4.8.4** – Cooperates with classmates on problem-solving initiatives using self-directed behaviors.

**PE.4.8.5** – Applies rules and etiquette by acting as an official or modifying physical activities/games and rhythmic activities.

**PE.4.8.5** – Demonstrates the importance of social interaction by helping and encouraging others, providing support to classmates.

## MATERIALS

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

- For each pair of teams (three to four students) you will need 12 straws and four small sticks (about 3.5 inches long), including two that are wrapped with a string of leather.
- You will need a way to play music for the class.

## VOCABULARY

**Bones** – Small sticks used as playing pieces in the hand game. There are typically four bones: two have marks on them and are referred to as “male” and the other two are unmarked and are referred to as “female.” The bones are also typically wrapped in buckskin.

**Scored** – A small groove that is cut into a solid object. Scoring the bones helped to keep the buckskin wrapping more secure.

**Video of making and playing hand game set** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U0obm-P2xlk>

***Games of the North American Indians* by Stewart Culin available in print and at** <https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=OoIOAQAAMAAJ&pg=GBS.PP1>

### Key ideas

Gambling is an integral part of this traditional game, which is classified by the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act as a Class I game. This classification means that tribes can make their own regulations, such as how and when to play. More information can be found at <https://www.nigc.gov/images/uploads/NIGC%20Uploads/aboutus/2016FactSheet-web.pdf>

In traditional Native cultures the hand game was nearly always accompanied by drumming and singing. These songs were meant to cheer on and give power to the hider while also distracting the guesser. This lesson incorporates music but does not involve Native drumming. Native songs and drumming styles are unique to each tribe and are passed down from generation to generation. As such, they are part of tribal identity. For this reason, it would not be appropriate to use traditional songs and drumming—even on a recording—while teaching this lesson.

In addition, students should be discouraged from mimicking Native singing and drumming styles. While the intent of such actions may be to emulate rather than denigrate, mimicking or borrowing Native songs and drumming styles is a form of cultural appropriation.

When possible, teachers are encouraged to connect with tribal members who may be willing to share knowledge about hand games or traditional songs. Some tribes or tribal members have also shared hand game songs on YouTube, although these should only be used to provide context and should not be used while playing the hand game in the classroom.

- **Fast Handgame Song by Bryan Hudson Jr.** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eEgDluZ7Mlc&list=RDPJfutklQhYk&index=2>
- **Wellpinit Stick Game 2010** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ng-8cRCwr8UY&list=RDPJfutklQhYk&index=5>

- **Stickgame Arlee Powwow** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UTN-LA97MI8c&list=PL9259B3FAB5994A7E&index=4>
- **Handgames Clip 3** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ljk9Q0DMRX-Q&list=PL9259B3FAB5994A7E&index=7>

Traditionally, each tribal nation also had its own variations on the game, such as the type of playing pieces used, the amount of time someone was allowed to guess, and the type of instrument used for counting.

## Considerations for teachers

### Assessment

- Teachers will observe how students play as part of a team and how they use the equipment.
- Teachers will review exit ticket.

### Practices

There should be enough equipment for two teams of three to four students each. Emphasize that each person on a team should have the opportunity to be both the hider and the guesser.

### Learning targets

- I can follow the rules in order to play a traditional Indigenous hand game.
- I can explain the ways in which hand games are similar across various tribes and also unique to individual tribes.

## Options/extensions

- Students can create their own hand game materials. Have them find or bring small sticks or rocks to use as the bones. They can decorate or wrap their bones with cord, yarn, string, leather, or buckskin. Also have them gather a set of sharpened counting sticks that they can decorate. Traditional hand game sets were unique and were treasured by individuals and handed down to family members.
- Explore hand game songs and compare the beats and rhythms of each. Have students choose which songs seem to work the best for distracting the guesser. Be sure to monitor the types of songs carefully as many songs posted online may not be actual hand game songs or may not have been shared by tribal members.
- Student teams can compete in a bracket to identify who is the best hider and who is the best guesser.
- Students can create their own songs of celebration and support, although these songs should not mimic traditional Native drumming and singing styles.

## Reflection/closure

Have students reflect by asking if they thought the game was easy or difficult to play and why.

Sum up the lesson by providing students with an exit ticket to answer the questions:

1. Why might the materials of hand games change over time or differ from tribe to tribe?
2. How do individuals help or hinder teamwork in a game?

## Appendix

Materials included in the electronic folder that support this lesson are: None

---

## Activity 1

# Introduction to the hand game

*Time: 5 – 10 minutes*

---

Students are introduced to the game and to the differences in how it is played by various tribes in Oregon. The teacher will also use a PowerPoint presentation to connect students to various tribal locations and regional features and to show the differences between the game pieces used by various tribes.

### **Say:**

*What are some games that you play with friends here at school? What are some games you play with friends or family members at home? Are there games that you play with people who are either much younger or much older than you? What are some games you play that involve some luck or some guessing?*

*We're going to play a game that has been described as a "simple kind of hazard." It's easy to learn and play, but it will take a lot of skill to not be distracted and to pick up clues from your opponent. As we play, I want you to think about how we use clues to anticipate what our opponents are thinking and are about to do.*

*Tribal nations all across North and South America have played and continue to play some variation of this game for thousands of years. There is some historical evidence that it is one of the oldest games in the world. It has been called many different things, including the "hand game" and the "stick game," and the playing pieces have also been called "bones," "sticks", and other names. In addition to the bones, there are sticks that are used to keep track of the count or score of the game, and players often have their own design for these counting sticks.*

### **Slide 1**

*Today, we're going to use these small sticks as our 'bones.' In the hand game, one person is designated as the hider, and they get one marked or "scored" bone and one unmarked bone. The point of the game is to guess which hand holds the marked bone.*

---

## Activity 1 (Continued)

### Slide 2

*Oregon has nine federally recognized tribal nations. Can anyone name at least one of these tribes?*

### Slide 3

*You will notice there are several tribal nations along the western side of the state, up and down the coast. From the north to the south there are the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde; the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians; the Confederated Tribes of Coos, Lower Umpqua, and Siuslaw Indians; the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians; and the Coquille Indian Tribe. The Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs are located in northcentral Oregon near the Deschutes River. The Confederated Tribes of Umatilla Nation is located in the northeast part of the state. The Burns Paiute Tribe is located in the southeast near Malheur and Harney Lakes, and the Klamath Tribes are located in the southcentral part of the state near the California border. These areas represent the current tribal headquarters.*

*There were many variations in tribal culture depending on the natural environment in which they lived, and this variation also appears in the way they played games.*

### Slide 4

*Located along the Umpqua River, the Cow Creek Band used bones that were a little over 3 inches long. They were actually made from hollow bones. The marked bones were scored, which helped to keep the buckskin or leather strand tied to it. They also scored the ends of both bones.*

### Slide 5

*The Siletz People used the same size bones, with a leather band around the middle.*

---

## Activity 1 (Continued)

### Slide 6

*Along the Hood River, the Wasco Nation called the game tlukuma, and they cut a groove and marked the end, but instead of going around the bones, they made five deep incisions at the end called yakimutema, and the bones were a little bit shorter at only three inches long. The unmarked bones were called “cola” meaning man, and the marked bones were called “skaguilak,” meaning woman.*

### Slide 7

*The Klamath Tribes called the game loipas. The bones for them were called Skútash and instead of carving into the bones to help the buckskin or leather band stick, they used sticky black gum from plants. There was anywhere from six to 12 sticks to help keep track of which side was correctly guessing. Again, each tribe played for a different number of points, and the counting sticks were made from materials such as willow branches that were light, portable, and sturdy. The Klamath Tribes called these kshesh and painted them red with a point at the end, while the Siletz had a black burned band at the top.*

### Slide 8

*The Umatilla tribe tied the two bones together and wrapped a cord around one of them.*

---

## Activity 2

# Playing the hand game

*Time: 20 – 40 minutes*

---

Students will split into small groups to play against each other.

### **Say:**

*We're going to get into our teams [split into groups of three or four] and sit facing each other. As I pass out the materials the two teams have to decide who will be the first hiders and who will be the first guessers. Everyone will get to play and have a turn, and the most important part is how to decide and how to get along so we can all enjoy the game.*

*Divide the straws evenly between the two teams and place them on the ground in the middle. The person who is the hider will put one marked and one unmarked bone in their hand and shake. Count to 15 to make sure it's really good and shaken up, then hide one bone in each hand. The guesser will tap the hand they think has the marked bone. If they are correct, they get to move a straw to their side. If they are incorrect, they move one of their straws to the other player's side. Keep the same guesser and hider until all the straws are on one side. [The teacher can also call time, to ensure everyone gets a chance to play both roles]. Then we will switch teams and roles. Again, this game has to be played fairly. For those who are watching, your job is to cheer on the hider or the guesser.*

Allow students to play for the designated time.

---

### Activity 3

## Distractions during hand game play

*Time: 30 – 45 minutes*

---

Traditionally, during hand game play, team members not acting as hiders would often sing songs and cheer as part of a distraction. Team members and hiders would also make funny faces to distract the guessers from carefully watching the hider. In this round, students will practice this distraction technique by singing along to the radio or other familiar songs.

**Say:**

*During hand game tournaments, there was often betting, so while the hider was mixing up the bones and switching between hands, people would put down goods such as clothing. Today, some people play using money. In addition to the betting, there was singing and drumming to add to the distraction of the guesser, and these traditions continue. We will not be imitating hand game songs, but we will use music. Native hand game songs are unique and are shared while playing. Unless we have been taught specific melodies and song lyrics, we don't want to imitate them because that could be seen as mocking or without good intent. Instead, we've got some songs that have a fast beat and that we can sing loud. Remember, the intent of the songs was to cheer on the players and to have fun while being distracting to the guesser. The songs weren't meant to be mean-spirited.*

*Good hiders will cross their hands to the beat of the music. Excellent hiders can use this opportunity to switch the bones from hand to hand without giving away which hand has the marked bones.*

*So, now we're going to add some music. Practice to the beat and rhythm. Team members can sing along and sing loud, but you should stay seated and keep your hands and feet out of the playing area.*

Allow students to play for the designated time. Ensure all students are following the grade level standards and applying etiquette such as good sportsmanship (e.g., shaking hands after turns, saying 'good job' to opponents on wins, supporting the differences between cheering versus taunting).