



LEAD WITH PLAY

A Playworks Activity Guide for
Afterschool Teams

How to use this guide

Every activity in this guide can be used with both adult staff and children. Games are organized by purpose, including icebreakers, brain breaks, cooldowns, and check-in questions. Each activity also includes a "Why it works" note highlighting the benefits you can share with your team.



ICEBREAKERS

These activities can help participants learn names, find common ground, and feel comfortable in a group



1 Hi, My Name Is...

A fast, low-stakes name game that gets everyone moving and meeting each other.

HOW TO PLAY

- At a given signal, everyone starts moving around the space.
- When they meet someone, they shake hands and introduce themselves.
- Players try to meet as many people as possible in one minute.
- At the end, see how many names people can remember.

WHY IT WORKS

Low pressure, high energy, works instantly with any group size. No one is put on the spot because everyone is doing the same thing at the same time.

Full instructions: playworks.org/game-library/hi-my-name-is/

2 I Love My Neighbor

A get-to-know-you game that surfaces surprising commonalities across a group.

HOW TO PLAY

- Players stand in a circle, with each player standing next to a cone. There should be one fewer cone than players. One player starts in the center.
- The center player says, "I love my neighbor, especially my neighbor who..." and finishes the sentence with something that is true about themselves. For example: "...who has a dog."
- Anyone who shares that characteristic, including the center player, must move to a different cone. Players cannot move to the cone they were just standing at or a cone directly next to it.
- One player will be left without a cone. That player moves to the center and becomes the next caller.
- Continue playing until everyone has had a chance to be the caller.

WHY IT WORKS

Players discover interesting facts about each other that they may otherwise never know. It's energizing and leaves the group ready for whatever is next.

Full instructions: playworks.org/game-library/i-love-my-neighbor/

3 Popcorn

A simple challenge game that gets players moving and focused.

HOW TO PLAY

- Players stand in a circle. One player starts with a ball or other lightweight object.
- The first player tosses the ball straight up, claps once, and catches it.
- If successful, they try again on their next turn, adding one more clap before catching the ball.
- If they miss the catch or aren't able to complete the claps, they keep trying that same number on their next turn.
- Each player gets one toss per turn. See how many claps each player can work up to.

Full instructions: playworks.org/game-library/popcorn/

WHY IT WORKS

Everyone is rooting for each other and working toward a common goal. It's low-stakes, and the natural progression keeps the energy building throughout.

4 If You Really Knew Me...

A paired sharing activity that builds genuine connection in just a few minutes.

HOW TO PLAY

- Pair everyone up and decide who is Partner A and who is Partner B.
- Partner B speaks for one minute, finishing the sentence "If you really knew me, you would know that..." as many times as they can, each time sharing something new about themselves.
- Partner A listens attentively without interrupting; no responding, just receiving.
- After one minute, switch. Partner A shares while Partner B listens.
- Debrief: invite a few pairs to share one thing they learned about their partner.

Full instructions: playworks.org/game-library/if-you-really-knew-me/

WHY IT WORKS

Most icebreakers are about talking, but this one is equally about listening. It's a quiet, surprisingly powerful way to build trust quickly, and the sentence structure makes it easy for everyone to jump in and play.

BRAIN BREAKS

Use these activities when energy is lagging or attention is drifting. A quick brain break can help get everyone moving, laughing, and refocused.



5 Zip, Zap, Pop

A sequencing and focus game that sharpens listening and concentration in minutes.

HOW TO PLAY

- Stand in a circle. Learn three moves: Zip (hand on top of head pointing sideways), Zap (hand below chin at shoulder), Pop (point with both hands to anyone across the circle).
- The sequence is always Zip → Zap → Pop. The leader starts with Zip, passing it to a neighbor.
- Zip and Zap travel around the circle; Pop sends the sequence to anyone across.
- If a player hesitates, they step out and can try to distract others from outside the circle.

WHY IT WORKS

The game requires focus and attention without feeling like work. Players outside the circle keep the energy up for everyone still in it.

Full instructions: playworks.org/game-library/zip-zap-pop/

6 Gotcha!

A seated listening game that grabs player's attention.

HOW TO PLAY

- Sit in a circle. Extend your left hand flat, palm up, toward the person next to you.
- With your right hand, hold your pointer finger pointing down into the center of your neighbor's left palm.
- The leader tells a story and players listen for the secret word (e.g. 'Gotcha!').
- When the word is heard, try to grab the finger in your left hand while pulling your right finger away from your neighbor.

WHY IT WORKS

The entire group must listen carefully at all times because you never know when the word "gotcha" is coming.

Debriefing can also be a natural conversation starter. Try asking "what made it hard to focus? What helped?"

Full instructions: playworks.org/game-library/gotcha/

7 The Big Cheese

An elimination game with lots of energy, silly moves, and no extra set up necessary.

HOW TO PLAY

- Learn the three cheese moves: Cheddar (hands circled in front), String (arms stretched overhead), Stinky (wave hand in front of nose).
- One player is the Big Cheese. They lead a call-and-response: 'I am the Big Cheese!' / 'You are the Big Cheese!'
- On the count of three, everyone, including the Big Cheese, shows one of the three moves at the same time.
- Players who match the Big Cheese are out. Last one standing becomes the next Big Cheese.

WHY IT WORKS

The game has a great mix of unpredictability and silliness that gives even the most reserved person in the room a reason to laugh. Use it when the group needs a reset after a long period of sitting.

Full instructions: playworks.org/game-library/the-big-cheese/

8 Land, Sea, Air

A high-energy movement game that gets everyone on their feet and moving.

HOW TO PLAY

- Designate three zones or positions: Land (stay in place), Sea (jump forward), Air (jump back).
- The leader calls out "Land!", "Sea!", or "Air!" and everyone jumps to the correct position.
- The leader speeds up the calls — and can also repeat the same word to try to catch people moving when they shouldn't.
- Players who move to the wrong spot or move on a repeat call are out, or simply laugh and keep playing.

WHY IT WORKS

The game requires quick thinking as players have to listen, process, and move all at once. It's over in three to five minutes, leaves the room energized, and works whether you have five people or fifty.

Full instructions: playworks.org/game-library/land-sea-air/

COOL DOWNS

These activities help bring a group back down, transition out of high-energy moments, and close with intention.



9 Five Finger Breathing

A simple breathing exercise that can be done quickly and quietly

HOW TO PLAY

- Hold one hand out with fingers spread wide.
- Use the pointer finger of your other hand to trace the outline of your hand.
- Breathe in slowly as you trace up each finger. Breathe out slowly as you trace down the other side.
- By the time you've traced all five fingers, your breathing has slowed.

WHY IT WORKS

The intentional breathing and tracing gives the nervous system something concrete to do. This activity can be especially useful after high-energy activities or moments of conflict or disagreement.

Full instructions: playworks.org/news/back-to-school-claps-cheers-and-cooldowns/

10 Bumblebee Breath

A gentle buzzing breath that creates a unified sound across all participants

HOW TO PLAY

- Open your mouth wide and take a slow, deep breath in.
- Gently bring your teeth together and breathe out slowly, making a soft buzzing sound, like a bumblebee.
- The buzzing continues until the breath is completely out.
- Repeat 3-4 times. Invite players to notice how their body feels different by the last breath.

WHY IT WORKS

The concentrated breathing technique helps to slow things down while the shared buzzing signals that everyone is back together and ready to move on to the next task or activity.

Full instructions: playworks.org/news/back-to-school-claps-cheers-and-cooldowns/

11 Match Me

A simple mirroring activity that quietly brings a group's focus back to the leader.

HOW TO PLAY

- The leader says "Match me" in a calm, quiet voice and performs a simple physical action (e.g. touch your nose, hands on shoulders, a silly pose)
- Everyone in the group immediately copies the exact movement.
- The leader layers or changes actions slowly, one at a time, until the whole group is moving together and attention has settled.
- Continue until the room is quiet and focused, then transition naturally into the next activity or instruction.

WHY IT WORKS

You can't match what you can't see. This activity requires the group to slow down and pay close attention to a leader who is using their movement to set the tone for others to follow.

Full instructions: playworks.org/resource/back-to-school-refresher-for-recess-monitors/

12 Alligator, Alligator

A call-and-response attention-getter that gets a group snapping back to focus.

HOW TO PLAY

- The leader calls out "Alligator, alligator!"
- The group responds "Chomp, chomp!" while making a chomping motion with their arms: both arms extended, snapping together like an alligator's jaw.
- Repeat once or twice until the group is focused and ready.
- Try adding different animal names, sounds and movements for even more fun.

WHY IT WORKS

The chomping motion gives everyone something physical to do with their energy, which makes it easier to redirect than with a verbal cue alone.

Full instructions: playworks.org/resource/back-to-school-refresher-for-recess-monitors/

CHECK-IN QUESTIONS

Quick prompts to open any group session with intention.

HOW TO PLAY

- At the beginning of every meeting, spend a few minutes to connect with and get to know your teammates.
- Take time for each person to go around the group and answer a question to help everyone get to know each other.
- If it is a large group and time is limited, you can ask questions that require short or one word answers.

WHY IT WORKS

A good check-in question signals that this is a space where people matter, not just their output. When staff practice this with each other, they build the same habit they will bring to the kids in their program.

EXAMPLE QUESTIONS

- How would you describe your day as a weather report?
- If I went looking for you at recess in 2nd grade, what would you be doing?
- Flashback to your 2nd grade self: what did you want to be when you grew up?
- If you could have any kind of pet, what would you choose?
- What would you title your autobiography?
- If you could choose any superpower, what would it be?
- Who is one person you would love to have dinner with — past, present, or fictional?
- If you had a time machine, where (or when) would you go first?
- If you were to perform in the circus, what would you do?
- What's your favorite comfort food?
- What's your favorite season and why?
- What was your favorite TV show when you were 10?
- What's your favorite movie?
- What is your favorite holiday?
- What was the last song you listened to and enjoyed?
- What is a song you love to sing out loud?
- What song would you use to describe your mood today?
- What is your go-to karaoke song?
- What song would you pick to have a dance-off to?
- If you won a round-trip ticket to anywhere in the world, where would you go?
- Describe your perfect vacation.
- If you were stranded on an island, what are three things you would bring?
- When packing for a trip, what is the one thing you always pack first?
- What is your earliest memory of travel?
- If you could follow any singer or band around the world on tour, who would it be?

Looking for more game ideas?

Every game in this guide comes from Playworks' free Game Library.

Explore hundreds of games organized by skill, group size, and setting at playworks.org/game-library