



# Circle games for groups

Harry Shier

Tried and tested circle games to use facilitating participation  
processes with groups of children and young people



With thanks to



**Save the Children**  
Nicaragua

## Circle games for groups

**Tried and tested circle games to use facilitating participation processes with groups of children and young people**



Extract from *"Participación de Niños, Niñas y Adolescentes en el Mundo Real: Caja de herramientas para capacitar a personas adultas"*, by Harry Shier, published by Save the Children Nicaragua in 2013.

Original Spanish version available at:

[https://www.harryshier.net/docs/Participacion\\_caja\\_de\\_herramientas.pdf](https://www.harryshier.net/docs/Participacion_caja_de_herramientas.pdf)

English translation by Harry Shier.

Cover illustration by Harry Shier

With thanks to CESESMA for supporting all the projects and activities where these games were developed and tested

All photographs by CESESMA, taken and reproduced here with informed consent of the children and young people featured.



**Save the Children**

Nicaragua



Promoción y Defensa  
de los Derechos de la Niñez



This English version published by Protagonismo,  
an imprint of [www.harryshier.net](http://www.harryshier.net), August 2023.

# Circle games for groups

---

## Contents

Foreword to the English edition	2
1. The Invisible Ball	3
2. Alphabetical Names	4
3. Cumulative names	5
4. How did I get here?	6
5. The Mail	7
6. Three-ball game	8
7. A What?	9
8. Where the cocks bark and the dogs crow	10
9. The Magic Backpack	11
10. What are you doing? (Lies)	12
11. Leader of the Orchestra	13
12. Good news, bad news	14

---

# Circle games for groups

## Tried and tested circle games to use facilitating participation processes with groups of children and young people

---

### Foreword to the English edition

This collection of games for groups first appeared in Spanish in my book *"Participación de Niños, Niñas y Adolescentes en el Mundo Real: Caja de herramientas para capacitar a personas adultas"*, published by Save the Children Nicaragua in 2013.<sup>1</sup>

Talking with colleagues recently, I realised it might also be of use to English-speakers, hence this new English language version.

The games shared here are ones I used to use regularly in my work with children and young people in Nicaragua from 2001-2012. Some I learnt earlier when I worked in playwork in the UK, and others I learnt from my colleagues in Nicaragua. Many have changed from the versions I originally learnt, with elements of my own added over the years.

These are all circle games; that is, you start with all players in a circle. For some it's best to have everyone sitting, for others standing, but in most cases it doesn't matter. Most need no preparation or equipment, but a few need one or more small balls, and one needs an empty backpack or box.

Note also that none of these games have winners or losers, or involve teams, or anyone being eliminated from the game. Everyone is involved from start to finish, which is essential if you want the games to contribute to solidarity and belonging, as well as fun in your group.

Some games are enhanced if players bring imagination and self-expression, even flair, to the game, but none should put anyone under undue stress, even the nervous and timid. I believe joining in games should always be optional – maybe encouraged, but never forced.

Though I would usually use the word "facilitator" to describe the person in charge, here I have used the old-fashioned "leader", because I think these experiences work best if you are prepared to own the leadership role.

I hope you find them useful, and always appreciate feedback.

HS, August 2023.

[www.harryshier.net](http://www.harryshier.net)

[harry@harryshier.net](mailto:harry@harryshier.net)

---

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.harryshier.net/docs/Participacion\\_caja\\_de\\_herramientas.pdf](https://www.harryshier.net/docs/Participacion_caja_de_herramientas.pdf)



## 1. The Invisible Ball

**When to use it:** To learn each other's names in a new group. To take away our nervousness in a new group.

**Resources:** A ball (or anything that can be thrown and caught).

### Instructions:

1. Everyone standing in a circle.
2. Leader says "From \_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_" (Your name and the name of another player), and throws the ball to this person. This person catches the ball and says "Thank you \_\_\_\_\_. From \_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_". (Name of person who threw the ball, their own name, and another person's name). Continue like this for a while.
3. When everyone has the idea of the game, change the ball to an invisible ball, and continue exactly as if it were a normal ball.
4. You can change the ball several times for different kinds of invisible balls and other invisible objects, for example a big heavy ball, a balloon, an egg.
5. It must be emphasized each time that the rules of the game remain the same: Upon receiving the ball, everyone must say "Thank you" and the name of the person who threw it, then mention their own name and the name of the person to whom they will throw it. This way we will learn everyone's name quickly.



## 2. Alphabetical Names

**When to use it:** To learn each other's names in a new group. To build group solidarity and practice teamwork. Also encourages people to think about the importance of one's own name (this is important in a community where a formal birth certificate is hard to come by).

**Resources:** None.

**Instructions:**

1. Everyone in a circle, seated or standing. There should be an empty chair or other marker to the left of the leader.
2. Explain that we are going to reorganise ourselves in alphabetical order (by first, or preferred, names). Letter "A" will be to the left of the empty chair, with the alphabet running clockwise around the circle until letter "Z" is the leader's current position (i.e. to the right of the empty chair).
3. Ask people to compare names with the people they are sitting next to. If they are already in alphabetical order (i.e. with the person nearest to A on the right and nearest to Z on the left) they stay put. If not, they change seats.
4. Keep this going until all are in alphabetical order around the circle.
5. Ask everyone to introduce themselves, at the same time answering these questions:
  - How did you get your name (who gave it to you and why)?
  - Do you know where it comes from, and what it means?
  - Do you like it? (If not, what would you prefer to be called?).(Note: For a large group, you can reduce or eliminate this part).
6. Optionally, as appropriate to the situation, you can finish with a short reflection on the importance of names and the right to a name.





### 3. Cumulative names

**When to use it:** To learn each other's names in a new group. To build group solidarity and practice teamwork.

**Resources:** Nothing

**Instructions:**

1. Everyone in a circle, seated or standing.
2. The leader introduces her/himself saying their name (first name or name they wish to be known by) preceded by a word they feel describes them and starts with the same letter as their name. For example: "I'm Helpful Harry", "I'm Marvellous Mary".
3. The person to the left of the leader reintroduces the leader, and then introduces themselves in the same way; for example: "He is Helpful Harry and I am Clever Claire".
4. Continuing round the circle, the next person reintroduces the first two people and then her or himself, for example: "That's Helpful Harry, this is Clever Claire, and I am Peaceful Patrick".
5. Continue like this around the circle, with each player repeating all the previous presentations and adding their own. If anyone forgets a name or description, the others must help. Likewise, if anyone has difficulty thinking of a description that begins with the same letter as their name, others may offer suggestions.
6. Having gone right round the circle, to finish, the leader has to repeat all the names and descriptions.



## 4. How did I get here?

**When to use it:** To learn each other's names in a new group. To take away our nervousness in a new group.

**Resources:** Nothing

**Instructions:**

1. Everyone in a circle, seated or standing.
2. The leader introduces themselves, and tells the group how they travelled to the event or activity, mentioning a means of transport (usually, but not necessarily, invented) that begins with the same letter as their first name, for example, "I'm Harry, and I came here by helicopter", "I'm Laura and I came in my Lamborghini", "I'm Brendan, and I came flying on the back of a giant butterfly".
3. The person to the left of the leader introduces themselves the same way, and so it continues around the circle, with each person in turn introducing themselves and mentioning their mode of transport. If anyone has difficulty thinking of a means of transport that begins with the same letter as their name, others may offer suggestions.





## 5. The Mail<sup>2</sup>

**When to use it:** To integrate and enliven the group. To take away our nervousness in a new group.

**Resources:** Nothing, but everyone should sit on chairs.

**Instructions:**

1. Everyone seated in a circle with the leader in the centre without a chair. The leader is the mail carrier, and says: "I have mail for everyone ...", and completes the sentence with a description. For example: "...for everyone with black hair", "...for everyone who is 16 years old", "...for everyone who lives in Managua". Each person to whom this description corresponds must get up and swap chairs with another player. The others do not move.
2. Meanwhile the mail carrier looks for an empty chair to sit down. If they find one, another person will be left without a chair so becomes the new mail carrier.
3. The new mail carrier repeats the process, saying, "I have mail for everyone ...", and adding a description of their own choice.
4. And so the game continues, for as long as people are having fun and time permits (and hopefully everyone gets to be mail carrier at least once).

**Note:** At the beginning, when the leader is the first mail carrier, they should accidentally-on-purpose fail to find a chair the first few times, so they remain mail carrier. In this way they can provide a variety of examples of descriptions and ensure everyone understands the process before they eventually find a seat so others get to be mail carrier.



---

<sup>2</sup> Also known as "The sun shires on".

## 6. Three-ball game

**When to use it:** To enliven the group. To build group solidarity and practice teamwork. To take away our nervousness in a new group.

**Resources:** Three small balls (tennis balls are ideal, but any kind will do).

**Instructions:**

1. Everyone standing in a circle. The leader has the three balls.
2. The leader explains that we are going to throw a ball from person to person until each person in the group has received the ball and thrown it on to someone else (who has not had it previously). The last person will throw the ball back to the leader to finish the sequence. Mention that it is important that everyone remembers who they received the ball from and who they threw it to.
3. Practice this, so the ball is thrown to each person in turn and back to the leader. Repeat, always using the exact same sequence of players, to be sure everyone can remember the sequence, and the whole sequence can be completed quickly without mishaps.
4. Explain that we are now going to try the same sequence with two balls in quick succession. The leader starts the sequence as before throwing a ball to the second player, who throws it on to the third player. As soon as the third player has thrown the ball on, the leader throws a second ball to the first player, so two balls are now in play, both following the same sequence, one behind the other. Practice this a few times as necessary, so ensure the sequence can be completed quickly without mishaps, both balls returning to the leader.
5. Now try with three balls, the second starting a few seconds after the first, and the third a few seconds after the second. Practice as necessary, until the three-ball sequence can be completed quickly without mishaps, all three balls returning to the leader.



## 7. A What?

**When to use it:** When the group needs fun. To build group solidarity and practice teamwork.

**Resources:** Two objects: anything that can be passed from person to person.

**Instructions:**

1. Everyone in a circle, seated or standing. The leader has the two objects.
2. The leader passes an object to the player to their right, saying "This is a dog" (or whatever else they want). This player asks "A what?", and the leader answers "A dog".
3. The second player passes the object to the next player to their right and says "This is a dog." This player asks "A what?", but the other player acts like they have forgotten and turns to ask the leader "A what?".
4. The leader answers, "A dog". The second player turns to the third player and repeats "A dog". The third player now passes the object on to the fourth player, saying, "This is a dog". This fourth player asks, "A what?", and the third player, acting like they have forgotten, turns to ask the player on their left, who in turn turns to ask the leader, who answers, "A dog".
5. In this way, we continue to pass the object around the circle. As each player passes it, they say, "This is a dog", but each time, the question "A what?" has to be passed from person to person back to the leader, and the leader's response passed back from person to person to the player who has the object, before they pass it on to the next person and say what it is.
6. When the "dog" has gone about half way round the circle, the leader starts passing another object around the circle to the left, saying in the same way "This is a cat", with successive players asking, "A what?", thus following the same procedure as with the dog, but in the opposite direction.

**Notes:** When a player receives both objects at the same time, it is very difficult to continue. It is not necessary to complete the circle, and a common way to finish the game is with everybody laughing as the whole process collapses in confusion. However, if the group is motivated, they can try again. With concentration and teamwork, it is possible to complete the process so the dog and cat cross paths in the middle, and both get round the circle and back to the leader. If your activity involves several sessions, it is a good idea to come back to this game in a subsequent session to see if the process can be completed successfully the second time.





## 8. Where the cocks bark and the dogs crow

**When to use it:** To enliven or integrate the group. When they need to have fun.

**Resources:** Nothing.

**Instructions:**

1. Everyone in a circle, best standing.
2. Each person has to mention the name of a different place. It can be a town, city, neighbourhood, even a foreign country. It can be where they live, where they come from, or simply a place they would like to visit. Ask everyone to repeat their chosen place out loud. Remember, everyone must represent a different place.
3. The leader goes to the centre of the circle and says, "I have heard that in \_\_\_\_\_ (mentioning the name of one of the places) the cocks bark and the dogs crow."
4. The person who has chosen this place goes to the centre of the circle and confronts the leader, explaining that this is an offensive falsehood. They say, "Where the cocks bark and the dogs crow is in \_\_\_\_\_" (mentioning another place).
5. The leader then goes back to their place in the circle. The person who represents this new place now goes to the centre and accuses the speaker of spreading false rumours. They end up saying that the cocks bark and the dogs crow in another place (mentioning another of the chosen place-names).
6. Thus the game continues until all the places have been named, and each player in turn has denied that the cocks bark or the dogs crow in their place. As the game goes on, if players have difficulty thinking of a place not yet mentioned, others should help them.

**Note:** This is more fun if players act with feigned indignation, and strongly defend the honour of their chosen place. It is easier once the group has lost any initial nervousness.



## 9. The Magic Backpack

**When to use it:** To enliven and integrate the group. To encourage participants to use their imagination.

**Resources:** An empty backpack (but any bag or box can be used).

**Instructions:**

1. Everyone in a circle, either sitting or standing. Put the backpack in the centre.
2. Explain that this backpack is magical. Each person who looks inside it will find something inside. Each person will find something different, and, while they can see it, feel it and handle it perfectly normally, it will be invisible to everyone else.
3. Explain that each player in turn will approach the backpack and look inside. They will mime taking the item they find out of the backpack, holding and using this imaginary object as if it were a real object. As it will be invisible to everyone else, the others will have to guess what it is.
4. The leader should start to set an example. Approach the backpack, look inside and take out the imaginary object found within. Mime holding and using the object so that others can guess what it is. (For example, if it is a hairbrush, you mime brushing your hair with it. If it is a kite, you mime launching it into the air and controlling it with the string).
5. Once the correct item is guessed, the next person takes their turn. Continue till everyone has had a turn.

**Notes:**

- The order of turns can be (a) going round the circle, (b) the person who guessed correctly goes next, or (c) each person goes when they feel ready, in no particular order. Use whichever method seems best for your group.
- As a variation you can specify a "Tardis backpack", which means the items inside it can be bigger than the backpack itself, so you could find a horse or a motorcycle etc.
- If the group enjoy this game, and time allows, you can give everyone a second go.



## 10. What are you doing? (Lies)

**When to use it:** To enliven and integrate the group. To encourage participants to use their imagination. To practice non-verbal expression.

**Resources:** Nothing

**Instructions:**

1. Everyone in a circle, either sitting or standing.
2. The leader moves to the centre and begins to mime a common, everyday action.
3. The player who was to the left of the leader walks up and greets them and asks, "What are you doing?"
4. The leader answers with a lie. That is to say, they say they are doing something different from the action they are actually miming. For example, if they are miming washing a dog, they might reply, "I'm eating an ice-cream."
5. The player now has to mime the action the leader mentioned (which is different from what they were actually doing, because they lied). The leader returns to their place in the circle. The next player (going round the circle) now approaches and the procedure is repeated.
6. Continue around the circle till everyone has had a turn. To finish, the leader will have to ask the last player what they are doing, and mime the (false) answer they give.

**Note:** With some groups it may be necessary to add a rule that actions considered as vulgar or inappropriate are excluded. The leader should rely on their awareness of and sensitivity to the group.





## 11. Leader of the Orchestra

**When to use it:** To encourage or integrate the group. To pay more attention to what is happening in the group.

**Resources:** Nothing.

**Instructions:**

1. Everyone in a circle, either sitting or standing.
2. Explain that the group are going to be the members of an orchestra, and will mime playing different instruments.
3. Find a volunteer to be a "detective." This person leaves the room temporarily. While they are outside, the group chooses someone to be the leader of the orchestra<sup>3</sup> (It is important not to say the leader's name out loud in case the person outside overhears).
4. The leader of the orchestra chooses an instrument and mimes playing this instrument. Everyone else copies what the leader is doing by miming playing the same instrument. After a few seconds, the leader changes to a different instrument, and when they do this, everyone else has to follow the leader by changing their instrument immediately.
5. Practice changing instruments a few times, then, while the orchestra is still playing, call the detective back. The detective stands in the centre of the circle while the orchestra is playing. The leader has to keep changing the instrument from time to time, with everyone else following. The detective tries to guess who the leader is.
6. When the detective guesses the leader, find another volunteer to be a detective (one option is to let the previous leader be the next detective). Send them out of the room, choose a new leader of the orchestra, and repeat the process.



---

<sup>3</sup> In this game the "leader of the orchestra" is one of the players, not to be confused with the group leader referred to in other games.

## 12. Good news, bad news<sup>4</sup>

**When to use it:** To enliven or integrate the group. To promote creative thinking.

**Resources:** Nothing.

**Instructions:**

1. Everyone in a circle, sitting or standing.
2. The leader says "Good news, good news" and continues by making up some news that has something to do with the topic of the day.
3. The player to the left of the leader says "Bad news, bad news", and in a similar way, makes up some bad news. The bad news should continue on the same theme, and maintain a logical connection to the previous good news.
4. The third player says again "Good news, good news...", and adds another piece of good news. Each successive piece of news, alternately good or bad, has to stick with the same theme and keep a logical thread with the previous news.
5. Continue like this around the circle, each good news followed by bad news and vice versa.

**Example:**

Player 1: "Good news, good news. The kids here are well organised".

Player 2: "Bad news, bad news. The adults don't take them seriously."

Player 3: "Good news, good news. The kids are organising an advocacy campaign".

Player 4: "Bad news, bad news. They don't have resources to make their campaign effective" etc. etc.



---

**THE END**

---

<sup>4</sup> This game was borrowed from the long-running BBC radio show "I'm Sorry I Haven't a Clue".