

# PLAY IDEAS BANK

Practical Ideas for Creative Play  
A comprehensive collection for Playworkers & Playschemes everywhere

No 20

# PARACHUTE PLAY



I don't know who first discovered what a wonderful piece of play equipment an old parachute is, but over the last ten years they have swept the playscheme world. These days it's fairly easy for playschemes to get hold of a parachute, and all groups soon develop their favourite games. However, newcomers to parachute play need to know where to start, and even old hands sometimes run out of ideas...

Our parachute play leaflet has been written and drawn by Harry Shier and features material that originally appeared in PLAY-TIMES magazine.

## How to get hold of a Parachute

There may be an organisation in your area from which you can borrow or hire a parachute. Try your nearest Play Resource Centre or local Play Association; someone's bound to know where to find one.

If this proves unsuccessful, or if you decide you need your own parachute:

- Try to scrounge one; try air force bases, parachute clubs or anywhere else you think parachutes may be lurking. It helps if you have a contact, that is, if you know somebody, or somebody who knows somebody at the relevant establishment, so ask around.
- Several of the major educational suppliers now sell "Play Canopies", i.e. imitation parachutes: Beautiful colours, but rather expensive and not the same quality as the real thing.

## Looking After a Parachute

Golden Rule: A stitch in time saves a lot of aggro.

A parachute that is intact and used sensibly is unlikely to tear, even under considerable strain (like someone jumping out of an aeroplane and hanging from it). But if you see any small rips or tears in your parachute, stitch them up as soon as possible, because they can easily get much bigger, especially if kids put their arms, or heads through the holes. If you have to use a torn parachute avoid any games that will put too much stress on it.

## The Games

The following is a collection of parachute play ideas from a wide range of sources. Parachute Games do not have fixed sets of rules, or even fixed names, so please don't treat these

as official or definitive instructions. There are lots of variations and different ways of doing things. Also, they won't all work with any particular group, or situation. If something doesn't go down well with your group, either see if you can change it to suit yourselves, or go on to something different.

## How many players?

For most games you need enough players to spread out comfortably around the edge of the parachute. This starts at about 15 for small chutes, and big ones can take up to 50. Everyone from toddlers to adults can have fun with a parachute, and people with disabilities needn't be excluded if you choose the activities carefully and adapt where necessary.

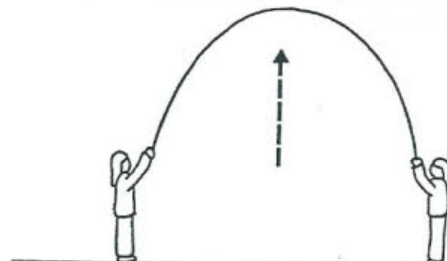
## Mushroom

This is not so much a game, more an essential starting point for parachute play.

Get everyone to spread out the parachute and hold the edge, spaced out more or less evenly so they're standing in a circle. Pull the chute taut and lower it to ground (or knee) level.



On the appropriate magic word ("Mushroom" is traditionally used, but you can choose your own) everyone pulls the chute upwards (don't let go). It will fill with air and rise up like a giant mushroom – or igloo. Then it will slowly collapse back down again. To get it as high as possible, everyone must take a couple of paces towards the centre as the chute rises. It's good to practise this so that the group can learn to work effectively as a team and get the chute really high. It won't work without co-operation.



## Variations

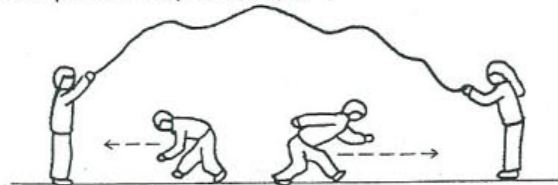
Once you've mastered the basic mushroom it's fun to experiment. See what happens if:—

- Everyone mushrooms then runs to the centre, still holding the chute.
- Everyone mushrooms then lets go, especially outdoors on a windy day.
- Everyone lets go at exactly the same time. If there isn't any wind, the chute will retain its perfect mushroom shape and rise straight up in the air. Indoors it may go up to the ceiling. To get this right it's best for someone to shout "One . . . Two . . . Three . . . Go," or words to that effect, immediately after the "mushroom" instruction. For everyone to let go at exactly the right instant will take practice and concentration.

Groups of children who haven't played with a parachute before will probably be delighted and fascinated by the effect for quite a while before you move on to any other games. It's particularly spectacular when the sun is shining down through the chute, and you may even be lucky enough to get hold of a multi-coloured parachute!

## Change over

Mushroom the chute, then the leader calls out a description that identifies one or more of the players, for example: "Everyone with brown eyes", "everyone wearing something red", "everyone whose name begins with J", "everyone who had cornflakes for breakfast". Those described have to let go of the chute and run underneath it to the opposite side before the chute comes down on top of them (not that it matters if it does come down on top of them). Once the group have got the idea, let everyone have a go at calling out a description. Either take it in turns round the chute, or ask people who have thought up a good one to put their hands up when they want a go.



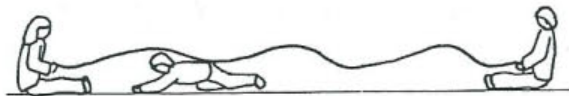
Or you could try a parachute version of "musicless chairs". Number the participants by threes round the chute, so you have equal numbers of ones, twos and threes evenly spread out. Mushroom the chute then call out a number and also who or what you would like them to become as they cross under the chute. For example: "Mushroom . . . Number ones are penguins", "Mushroom . . . Number twos are ballet dancers", "Mushroom . . . Number threes are combine harvesters", and so on. All the people with that number have to cross under the chute before it comes down, being as much like whatever it is as possible. Take it in turns to call.

## Jaws

Appearing in "More New Games" under the name of "Swamp Chute", somewhere along the way this game has become known as Jaws, and the original alligators have become sharks.

Everyone sits on the floor in a circle, holding the parachute stretched out with their legs underneath it. The chute is the sea, and they are all sitting on the beach, happily dipping their toes in the water. By shaking the edge of the chute, it can be made to billow, producing a realistic wave effect. You can make gentle ripples or you can have a storm blow up with enormous swells. Once the waves are going well, someone is selected to be a shark and disappears under the chute. They move around underneath, and because of the waves it's difficult to know where they are. The shark chooses a victim and grabs them by the feet. The victim is supposed to give an appropriate agonised scream and disappears under

the chute. This person now becomes a new shark. To prolong the game, you can have the original shark revert to being a bather, and to make it more lively you can have several sharks in there at once.



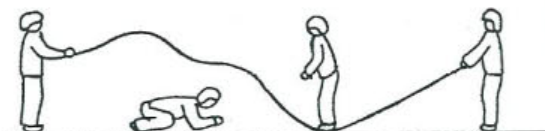
When you are ready to finish the game, it becomes, "once a shark, always a shark", so that in due course everyone has been grabbed, and the whole group are sharks. For even more excitement you can introduce various freak weather conditions such as typhoons and cyclones, or you can have a killer whale which goes in after the sharks.

## Parachute Criss-cross Names

You can use the shark-infested seaside theme for a useful name-learning game. All sit with legs under the chute as for Jaws. In this version the shark (or it could be a crocodile, giant squid, or whatever underwater predator takes your fancy) has to announce the name of an intended victim on the other side of the chute, before leaving its place. It then disappears under the chute and heads for the named victim. To escape, the victim must also become a shark (or whatever), but again cannot leave her place until she has announced the name of an intended victim, and so it goes on. If a shark arrives at the victim's place to find the victim gone, then he takes that person's place and is no longer a shark. If the victim panics and can't come up with a name quickly enough, thus getting caught by the shark, he or she is theoretically eaten, but then starts off as a shark again to keep the game going.

## Cat and Mouse

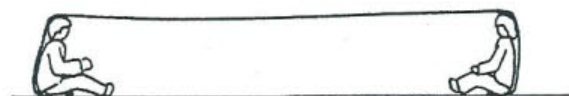
Everyone stands in a circle holding the chute stretched out about waist height. Someone becomes a mouse and goes underneath. Someone else becomes a cat and goes on top. The cat tries to catch the mouse, but with everyone else billowing the chute it's impossible to see where it is.



Every now and then you can give the cat a clue by lowering the chute to reveal the mouse, then raise it again to help the mouse get away. You can have two or three mice, and two or three cats, whatever works best, but change them around frequently.

## Tent Chute

Again, not so much a game, but a starting point. Have everyone mushroom the parachute and pull the edge they're holding over their heads and behind their backs and then sit down on it, stretching it taut.

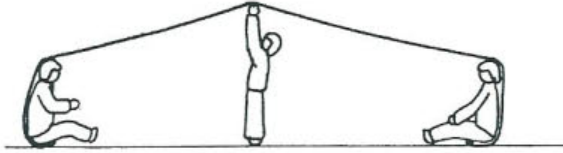


Everyone is now sitting in an instant tent — a new enclosed, and rather strange environment. This is an ideal time to play some of the quieter sitting-in-a-circle games (lots of them in the Great PlayTimes Games Kit).

Alternatively you could use it for story-telling, or make use of a captive, or at least cocooned, audience to give out instructions or information about what you're going to do next. Or try all swaying together in a circular motion.

## Tent Pole

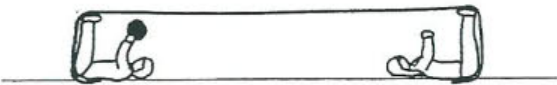
While you're in the tent, try this: One person is selected to be a tent pole and stands in the middle, holding the centre of the chute as high up as possible. The tent-pole person calls out someone's name and goes and sits down in that person's place. The person called has to rush to the middle and take up the role of tent-pole before the chute comes down. Repeat the procedure as long as you feel like it. This is another of those useful games that helps you get to know everyone's name.



There's also a variation of Tent-Pole called Jellyfish. In this version, all the seated people sway about as much as they can, the aim being to make it as difficult as possible for the tent pole to stay upright. From the outside, the chute should look like a gigantic quivering jellyfish.

## Upside-down-tent

An alternative way to make a tent is to have everyone lie on their backs under the chute, heads to the middle with their feet up in the air. Stretch the chute tight and tuck the edge under your backs so it holds your legs up.



You can bring in a soft foam ball and use your hands to bounce it around inside the tent.

## Tortoise

The chute becomes a giant tortoise shell with everyone underneath on hands and knees. The idea is to make the tortoise move about, but remain all in one piece. Once it starts to move well, the tortoise can tackle an obstacle course, appropriate to the ability of the participants.



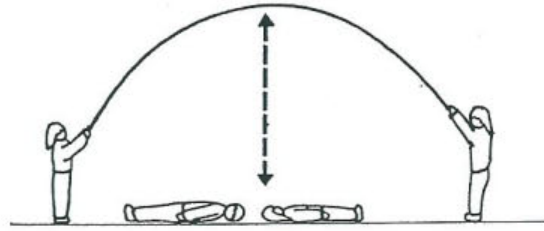
## Chute Lift

A co-operative trust game. Several players lie on the chute, feet to the centre. Others lift up the edges so their bodies rise up (but feet remain down). They can then be swayed gently. Take turns in the middle.



## Air conditioning

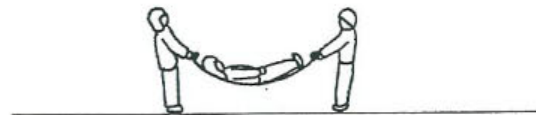
For recuperation after an energetic game. Hold the chute stretched out and have about a third of the people lie on the ground under it (best with heads near the middle). The rest mushroom the chute up and quickly pull it down again repeatedly.



Air rushing in and out cools those underneath like a giant fan, and the sensation of watching the chute rise up then come down on top of you is very strange. Change round so everyone has a go underneath.

## Hammock

Get everyone to roll the chute up from the edge towards the centre. Stop when you've got a circle of about six feet diameter left. Let a volunteer lie on this and be swung backwards and forwards or side to side. (You can also toss them up in the air, but please be careful not to drop anyone). Rolling the chute up like this is also a good way of getting everyone to help when it's time to put it away.

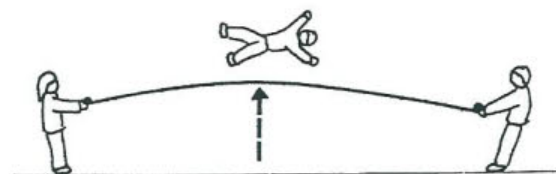


## Catapult

All hold the chute stretched out but roll up the edge a bit to get a strong grip. Lower chute to the ground and get a small child (preferably a volunteer) to lie in the middle.



On the word of command, all stand up and pull the chute taut at waist height. The child in the middle will rise into the air. Be very careful not to let the child fall back to the ground with a bump. Now look for more volunteers.

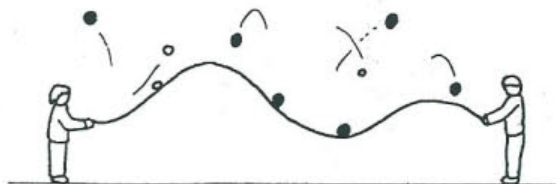


## Ball Games

Most of these games can be played with balls of different kinds: Tennis balls, footballs, beach balls or even a giant earthball. Different sizes of balls will change the way the game goes, so feel free to experiment.

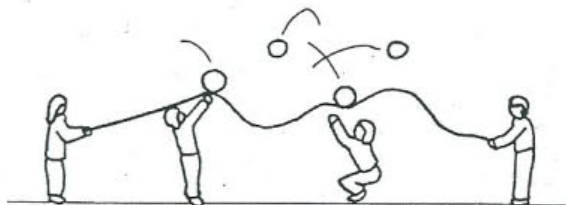
## Popcorn

Start with everyone holding the chute stretched out. Throw as many balls as you can find on top of the chute, then see how quickly you can throw them all off (without letting go of the edge of the chute, of course). Alternatively, have half the players trying to keep them on the chute while the other half try to throw them off.



## Bouncing Balls (or Pushoff)

This time have two or three people under the chute. They have to try to push the balls off, while everyone else tries to keep them bouncing.



## Competitive chute-ball

Mark a line across the diameter of the parachute. Have equal teams hold the edge of the chute on either side. Throw a ball into the middle. The aim is to get the ball off the chute

## Other Ideas

Take the parachute to the park or playing field on a really windy day. See what you can make it do. You could try attaching some long strings to it to increase the possibilities.

The ultimate extension of this idea is the Playsail. This is an enormous, usually rectangular, piece of parachute material (say, 72 feet long and 48 feet wide) with hundred foot nylon ropes attached to the corners and the middle of the long sides. You take it out on a windy day, and with lots of help and a bit of practice you can get it to soar into the air. There aren't many of these in circulation at the moment, but you could always make one!

Simply placed flat on the floor, a parachute provides a well-defined circular area, which is useful for lots of games. It might be an island to try and stay on, or a swamp to try and get out of. If you use it like this, take all shoes off first, and don't do it outdoors where the chute will get all muddy.

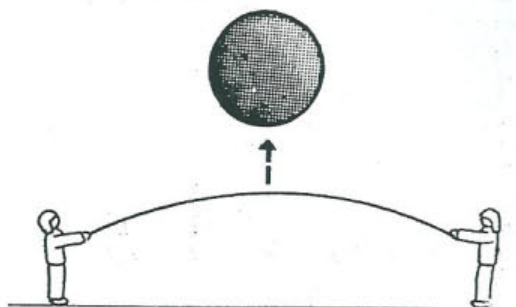
Little kids of pre-school age love to crawl and jump about on a billowing parachute, if there are enough big ones around to keep it billowing. Introduce imaginative stories for fantasy play — lost in the waves or up in the clouds.

A parachute can make all kinds of fantasy play environments when children put their imagination to work. They can

on the other team's side of the line, and stop it coming off on your own side of the line (i.e. if possible, to throw it over the other team's heads). You mustn't let go of the chute or intentionally touch the ball with any part of the body. Keeping score is optional. After several minutes of wild flapping with little progress, the players usually realise that teamwork, co-ordination and strategy are needed to flick the ball over the other side's heads. This game uses up a lot of energy.

## Original Chute-ball

Best played with an earthball, you simply place the ball in the middle of the chute and by all pulling upwards and outwards, throw the ball as high in the air as possible.



This game can be played using small children instead of an earthball. See "Catapult".

## Rollerball

Everyone holds the chute taut. Place a large ball near the edge. Try to make the ball roll around the edge of the chute. To do this, someone starts the ball rolling. As it comes towards you, you lower the edge you are holding, and as it goes past, you raise your edge. When all the players do this in synchronisation, it creates a kind of wave going round the edge of the chute and pushing the ball round in front of it in a smooth steady circle. It cannot be done without concentration and co-operation, but it is very rewarding for a group eventually to achieve a smooth, continuous motion. Once you've done this, accelerate, then try changing direction.

crawl under it, or drape it over things to make caves, dens, hideouts and tents. You can hang it from the ceiling for a big top, or make a weird underwater world. There are enormous green parachutes that can be hung up to make the canopy of a tropical jungle.

## Inventing games

Inventing your own games is easy with a parachute. Kids are bound to have plenty of ideas and there must be lots of great parachute games still waiting to be discovered. By the way, if you come up with a really good one, why not let PlayTimes know about it, and we'll tell the world.

## Further Information

*THE GREAT PLAYTIMES GAMES KIT* (available from NPFA, £3.00) includes ten of the best of these games in an easy-to-use card file, along with 200 more of the best play-scheme games. It also has a very comprehensive bibliography on games.

*THE NEW GAMES BOOK* (ed. A. Fluegelman, pub. Sidgwick and Jackson, 1978, £5.50) and *MORE NEW GAMES* (A. Fluegelman, pub. Dolphin Books, 1981, £5.95) between them have a lot of these games, and also some pretty photographs of people playing with parachutes.

For more Play Ideas Bank leaflets go to:

[www.grcltd.org](http://www.grcltd.org)