

PlaySense

What Would Mary Poppins Do?

I want to be more like Mary Poppins. Instead of screeching at my children like the Wicked Witch of the West to clean up yet another big mess they've made, I want to burst into song and, with that "spoonful of sugar," watch the work get done.

I want to be Poppins-esque not only because it would make me feel better about my mothering, but also because I know how important play is. As a pediatric occupational therapist who works with children, I use game playing as a primary way of helping children remain open to their lessons. I know that fun makes *everything* go down more easily and that the fun of play is how children learn.

So, over the years, I have devised some games that I use with my own and other children to make the things we have to do more enjoyable. I don't use games every time, but whenever I do, a potentially bad moment is turned into a fun one.

Play, humor, and laughter release a hormonal, natural high. It's organic, it's free, and it's an all-natural joy jumper—and best of all, it gets the job done.

Pile It Up

I came up with this lighthearted way of clearing up a mess when I'd returned from an out-of-town workshop, and my young daughters had been left in the company of their loving but not particularly tidy father. I came home to two very happy, healthy girls, but to get to them I had to wade through 5 days' worth of strewn clothes, game pieces, stale slices of toast, and other flotsam and jetsam. I was delighted to be home

by Barbara Sher, MA, OTR,
The Gameslady

and, fresh from a workshop on singing games for children, I wanted to keep my good mood, practice what I'd learned—and get this overwhelming cleaning job done.

I decided to throw everything, regardless of what it was, into one big pile in the middle of the room, and then sort it all out. To the tune of “The Bear Went Over the Mountain,” I began tossing everything into the pile while singing, “Put everything in a pi-ile, put everything in a pi-ile, put everything in a pi-IIIILE—in the middle of the room! The middle of the room, the middle of the room, put everything in a pi-IIIILE—in the middle of the room!”

My 5-year-old was immediately suspicious that this might be work, but I reminded her that it had to get done no matter what, so we might as well have some fun. She understood, and she and her sister and I tossed everything that was out of place onto the pile, singing and giggling as we made long shots and high tosses.

The rooms were quickly cleared of debris, except for the

big mound in the middle of the living room. We sat around it as if it were a campfire. I held up each item and, in rhythmic sing-song, said, “A sock, a sock, where does it go?” Someone would answer “The laundry basket!” We did this for each item, and soon the big pile had been separated into smaller piles of books, blankets, laundry, and toys. Everyone was then assigned some piles to put away, while I swept the floor. Within a relatively short time, the house was inhabitable again, and we were all still in good moods.

Pile It On the Bed, Too

We've since used this method often, whenever my daughters' bedrooms—or mine—get in that state of overwhelming messiness. At these times, we pile everything on the bed so that the floor and all other areas are clear. Once that's done, the project feels doable—now only *one* pile on the bed needs sorting, instead of the entire room.

You can organize the “putting away” aspect according to your child's skill level. A mobile child who can sort will be able to put objects in the correct drawer or on the right shelf. Another child might need to have the toy basket put near her chair, and her job is to toss the toys in the basket. Another child might do best at just dropping dirty clothes in the hamper.

I don't have a song for this work, but having an uncluttered house again and everyone helping in their way sure makes me feel like singing. ♦

Barbara Sher, MA, OTR, is a pediatric occupational therapist who has published seven books on children's games. Some of the ideas for this article are from Spirit Games. You can check out her books and workshops in any online bookstore or on her Web site, www.gameslady.com. Requests for presentations or comments can be e-mailed to barbara.sher@gmail.com.