

Playground Games: Stew Pot and Beyond

By Patricia Bullington-McGuire

AUCP has its own individual culture that expresses itself in particular ways. Some of that culture is driven by adults, like the “AUCP-isms” we use when instructing the children—encouraging the kids to use “gentle hands,” for instance. But much of the AUCP culture is created and maintained by the children themselves, and as a result can be somewhat baffling for the adults in our community.

The playground provides many prime examples of this. The kids all seem to know instinctively what the expectations are for their games, but for us grown-ups things are not always so clear. Just what are rules for Stew Pot, anyway?

With the hope of clearing up matters a bit, I have provided step-by-step instructions for some of the more commonly played AUCP playground games, like Stew Pot and Gingerbread. I have also included a few less-common games. Hopefully these will provide some variety for those times when playing yet another round of Stew Pot seems like it might cause you lose all grip on your sanity and send you running for the hills.

One important note: While many of the AUCP games involve kids being chased by adults, the unspoken rule is generally that the kids will get away in the end. Actually being caught can be quite frightening for some of our students. On the other hand, being able to evade the grown-ups gives the children a feeling of power and autonomy that can be very exciting for them.

Stew Pot: This is a perennial favorite on the AUCP playground. The “stew pot” is usually either the tire swing or the area enclosed by balance beams near the monkey bars. The children decide which ingredients they will be (either realistic ingredients like carrots, or silly ones like dirt) and the adult “chef” stirs the stew with an imaginary spoon. At some point, the chef realizes some additional ingredient is needed and tells the children to stay put while he or she gets it. Once the chef’s back is turned, however, the ingredients escape from the stew pot and run off. The chef then chases the ingredients until they all get back into the pot. The mixing then starts over again.

Gingerbread: The game closely resembles Stew Pot, but the roles are based on the classic Gingerbread Man fairy tale. The adult plays the baker and acts out mixing the dough and shaping it into gingerbread people (played by the children). The gingerbread is put into the “oven” (lined up against the fence) to bake, but when the baker opens the oven to check the gingerbread, they all run away with the baker chasing behind them.

Ring Around the Rosie: This is a classic, of course, but do you know the second verse? To start, everyone holds hands and circles around, singing, “Ring around the rosy, a pocket full of posies, ashes, ashes, we all fall down,” falling onto the ground at the end. The second verse then follows: “The cows are in the meadow, eating buttercups, lightning, thunder, we all jump up!” At this point the children all jump to their feet and usually start the whole thing over again.

Goats and Troll: This game is also based on a fairy tale *The Three Billy Goats Gruff*. The adult plays the troll and the students play the billy goats. The troll hides under the bridge portion of the playground structure and challenges the students who cross by saying, “Who’s that tripping over my bridge?” The child acts out the role of one of the billy goats and either says, “Don’t eat me, the next billy goat is much bigger,” or say they will throw the troll into the river. Alternately, the troll can try to “eat” the goats by reaching for them from below while they scamper away.

What Time Is It, Mr. Wolf?: The adult plays the wolf in this game. The children stand facing the wolf with a good bit of space in between. The kids ask, “What time is it, Mr. Wolf?” and the adult replies with a time, for instance three o’clock. The children take the same number of steps toward the wolf (three steps for 3:00, for example). Once the children get close, though, the wolf answers the question by yelling, “Dinnertime!” The wolf then chases the children until they get back to their home base.

Honey, Do You Love Me?: The players stand in a circle with one person (“It”) in the middle. “It” walks up to someone and asks, “Honey, do you love me?” The other person must then answer, “I love you, honey, but I just can’t smile,” without giggling or smiling. “It” then makes silly faces or otherwise acts goofy to try to make that person laugh—no tickling, though; that’s cheating. Once someone starts to smile or laugh, they get to be “it” instead.