

'Poison Ball' or a magic potion? Secrets within an infamous game

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Poison ball and other closely related games such as 'dodge ball' have been associated with Physical Education classes throughout history. These games involve a ball being thrown at opponents within a confined space. The fundamental motor skills of running, dodging, throwing and trapping are required to play the game competently. The purpose of this article is to acknowledge the concerns surrounding poison and dodge ball and to delve below the surface level to explore why it has over a long period of time been a popular choice for teachers. This article will also explore the notion of poison ball as a quality game and what value lies within the game. I will argue that such recognition could potentially assist teachers in their future choices and implementation of games.

Conversations amongst educationalists regarding Health and Physical Education (HPE) practice will often accept that poor teaching surrounds poison and dodge ball games. This was evidenced by the Position Statement released in 2006 by the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE), an association of the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance (AAHPERD). 'The Position on Dodgeball in Physical Education' states that "dodgeball is not an appropriate activity for K-12 school physical education programs" (NASPE, 2006, p. 1). The rationalisation for this is understandable as it certainly does not describe implementation of an inclusive game:

The students who are eliminated first in dodgeball are typically the ones who most need to be active and practice their skills. Many times these students are also the ones with the least amount of confidence in their physical abilities. Being targeted because they are the "weaker" players, and being hit by a hard-thrown ball, does not help kids to develop confidence.
(NASPE, 2006, p. 2)

My experiences of poison ball in HPE do not fit this description of dodge ball. A simple rule change where the throw becomes an underarm roll along the ground enables the game to optimise safety and all players to competently master one of the simple yet necessary skills. With this rule change there are suddenly no 'weaker' players as referred to by NASPE and all children are able to grow in confidence. Thus, the experience becomes enjoyable for everyone, as a direct result of thoughtful teacher choice and pedagogy. This may be what is happening in the implementation of this game in many HPE classes which supports why; "The arguments most often heard in favour of Dodge Ball are that it allows for the practice of important physical skills – and kids like it." (NASPE, 2006, p. 2). The question that needs to then be asked is not why do teachers continue to choose a game of bad practice but rather 'Why has poison and dodge ball been a popular game over a sustained period of time?' I think that the key question is

that the differences between the various opinions may evolve from different practical experiences. The varying implementations of this game I believe relates directly to the expertise of the teacher to enable quality learning for all students.

Believe it or not, I use poison ball as a model for pre-service teachers to assist them in identifying quality games. Not many educationalists would be brave enough to admit this after reading the NASPE position statement. The version of the game that I model is presented below and as identified, this version of poison ball promotes the aspects of quality games that are popular amongst all students and teachers (Figure 1). The quality game aspects include that it is:

1. Safe for all players.
2. Inclusive – all players can participate. This involves having the skill level to participate safely and at an enjoyable level.
3. Engaging – the players' participation is optimised. Waiting time is eliminated or minimal.
4. Enjoyment is prioritised.

Figure 1. Key aspects of quality games.

Playing the game

As mentioned earlier, you will notice that within this version of poison ball some rules have been supplemented or adjusted to promote the key aspects of quality games (Figure 1). By understanding these aspects it is suggested that teachers will be able to apply the same principles to any game for implementation. Teachers have many games on offer and can easily research these through various means; in the ACHPER Active and Healthy magazine, text books, observe in a school yard or find on a games' website. Hence, this version of poison ball offers teachers a platform for identifying the key aspects of quality games and enables them to confidently choose a game that potentially is inclusive. This approach is also, one where changing particular rules when needed to suit their context, is a possibility. It also allows and enhances teachers to identify the necessary skills that the children require to optimise quality outcomes for learners.

Equipment: Each game requires a number of markers (approximately 12), three soft balls (approximately the size of a size 5 basketball) and a class set of bibs/sashes.

Playing Space: Grassed/ asphalt area.

Formation: This game can be played amongst a whole class (20-30 children) or can be easily played using two smaller games (10-15 children). A space of 20 metres wide and 20 metres long would be needed to implement with a full class. (Note that a

small sided game is likely to last less time but will be more likely to provide each student with greater opportunities to practice the skills and strategies of the game.)

Instructions: The markers are set out to make a large circle. Three children volunteer to begin outside the circle while the remaining children begin inside the circle (Figure 2). The children inside the circle are 'dodgers' and wear a coloured sash/bib so that they are easily recognised. The children outside the circle are 'rollers'. The aim of the game is for the rollers to roll the ball along the ground and hit the dodgers inside the circle. The dodgers' objective is to move around the inside space, staying within the boundaries of the markers and avoid being hit by the ball/s. When hit by a ball the dodgers leave the circle, remove their sash and position themselves at a cone as a roller.

Teaching Tips:

- It is recommended that soft pvc volleyballs or foam balls be used (Figure 3). Also, flexible field markers or flat markers are preferred (Figure 4) so that children can step on them safely and not twist or turn their foot awkwardly.
- To maximise safety the children must roll the ball along the ground (Figure 5) and a successful hit on a dodger is below the knee (Figure 6).
- All players need to be competent at following the correct technique for rolling a ball. This involves bending one knee and releasing the ball at ground level (Figure 5). This skill needs to be assessed and if required, practised before beginning the game. During the game feedback can be given to the children in a sensitive and positive manner to assist.
- When a dodger becomes a roller they are to stand at a marker which indicates their space. The rollers only move off their cone to gather a ball coming towards them if they are the closest roller. When all cones are filled the new rollers stand in-between the cones.
- Begin playing with one ball. As the players become familiar with the game and evidence an understanding of all rules and skills then another ball can be added.

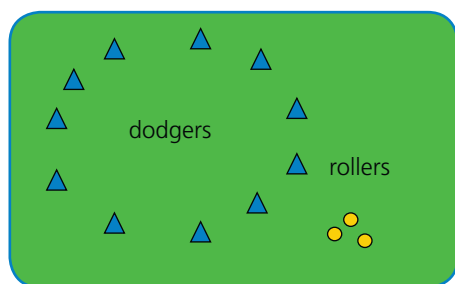


Figure 2
Poison Ball
positions and
set up.



Figure 3 Dodgers evading the poison balls.



Figure 4 Flexible field markers.



Figure 5 Ball must be rolled.



Figure 6 A successful hit – below the knees.

- Minimise the time rollers can hold the ball e.g. 3 seconds
- The game can be terminated by the teacher when they deem in the best interest of all players. That is, this version of the game is not classified as a 'last person standing'.
- When beginning a new game acknowledge the players who survived as dodgers and rotate the players starting as rollers.

Variations:

The game could be simplified or extended to suit the particular context. It may be more suitable for the markers to be closer, thus creating a smaller circle, which simplifies the game for younger children who are limited in strength. The smaller sized circle also makes it more difficult for the dodgers with older students, as they have less space to move about in. An extension can be varying the fundamental motor skills for the rollers to a chest pass, shoulder pass, handball or rolling using non preferred arms. The rule, hitting dodgers below the knee, needs to remain at all times for safety.



The dodgers can change their locomotor movement from running and jogging to skipping, galloping, jumping or side stepping movements. Also, the advanced dodgers can dribble a basketball continuously while dodging the poison balls (pvc volleyballs). The teacher can decide if/when to introduce new balls and when less is preferred, and the time that rollers can hold the ball for.

Focus Questions:

Focus questions that assist children to identify the choices they are making during the game include:

- Where are the spaces inside the circle and outside the circle?
- How can the rollers as a team cover the spaces?
- How can the dodgers' best use their space?
- How can dodgers look at all the balls?
- Which roller is in the best position to chase the ball?
- How can rollers work as a team to hit a dodger?
- How can the rollers ensure that everyone has a roll?

Student Reflections:

- Think about the time when you were a dodger for the longest period of time. Was it the most you moved about?
 - Why were you able to stay in for so long?
 - Where did you stand in relation to the rollers?
- When rolling did you talk to each other to help? What did you say?
- Did you improve your dodging and rolling? Why do you think this was?
- What skills do you need to have to play this game safely?

The reason I am fond of this game is because it demonstrates how a traditionally popular yet at times unsafe game can be made safe and inclusive through simple rule changes. Furthermore, all players are involved and engaged. If they are not dodging then they are rolling. The children could compete against themselves rather than the other players and measure the amount of time that they remain as a dodger. Finally, within this quality game the children have optimal practice of their running and jumping, dodging, throwing and trapping skills, and the game situation enables for this to be done progressively under increased pressure.

References

National Association for Sport and Physical Education. (2006). Position on dodgeball in physical education [Position statement]. Reston, VA: Author.

About the Author

Tim is a Senior Lecturer at Monash University - Gippsland campus where he coordinates the Health and Physical Education (HPE) discipline stream within the Bachelor of Primary Education course. He is an experienced classroom and Health and Physical Education (HPE) Primary school teacher and Head; Foundation Stage and Key Stage One (3-7 years) in an English International school (Qatar). In 2006 he was the Australian Council for HPE (ACHPER) Teresa Carlson Award recipient (Queensland branch) for his outstanding dedication to the teaching of HPE and promotion of its benefits within the community. He can be contacted via email timothy.lynych@monash.edu

A little ray of sunshine...

Vitamin D is essential for healthy bones, muscles and in the prevention of osteoporosis. The best natural source of vitamin D is the sun's ultraviolet (UV) rays.

When UV levels are low (below 3), schools are advised to put the hats away and ensure staff and students get some sun for vitamin D. In the southern parts of Australia, UV levels are below 3 for most or all of winter. During these times of low UV, staff and students need to expose their face, arms and hands (or equivalent area of skin) to midday winter sun for 2-3 hours spread over the week. Those with naturally very dark skin may need 3-6 times this amount. Sun protection is not required during these low UV periods, unless near highly reflective surfaces such as snow, outside for extended periods or if the UV reaches 3 and above.

In the northern parts of the country, UV levels remain high (3 and above) throughout the year and sun protection is required all year round. For these locations, aim for a few minutes of mid-morning or mid-afternoon sun exposure each day to the face, arms, hands (or equivalent area of skin). Be extra cautious in the middle of the day when UV levels are most intense. People with naturally very dark skin may require three to six times this amount of sun.

SunSmart's tips to help your school get some sun exposure for vitamin D:

- Upload SunSmart's UV Alert widget to your school website to know the times when sun protection is and isn't required.
- Share the vitamin D message with families using SunSmart's vitamin D information sheets available in 12 different languages.
- Visit the SunSmart website where students can create a personalised vitamin D poster or work through the free vitamin D tracker tool (also available on the free SunSmart smartphone app) to assess if they're meeting their daily sun exposure requirements.
- Physical activity assists with production of vitamin D, so if you're in the southern parts of Australia, get your students outside and active in the middle of the day in winter.
- Clothing acts as a barrier to vitamin D absorption, so if you're in the southern parts of Australia, put away the hat and roll up the sleeves when you're out on yard duty in winter.
- SunSmart's secondary school online lessons and Real Stories web hub includes cross curricular vitamin D activities for Yrs 7-12.
- SunSmart's free Interactive White Board (IWB) lessons are suitable for P-6 and include interactive tasks, quizzes, games and videos.
- Remember, student excursions to the snow still require full sun protection.

For more information and resources visit sunsmart.com.au.