



## **Creative icebreakers for children and families**

We all have some tried and true ways to warm up groups of children and families in creative arts sessions, but who doesn't love gathering new ideas too? ArtPlay began the 2019 Artist Learning program with a 'swap meet' in which artists generously shared their finest icebreaker activities with each other. With so many creative minds in the room, we not only learned a bagful of new tricks, we developed some great variations on many of the activities which are included in this summary.

Some of the icebreakers listed here were invented by the facilitating artists and some were learned by them from others. Once in the public realm, it can be difficult to identify the origins of creative warm up games and this workshop was undertaken in the spirit of open-source sharing. We respect artists' intellectual property so if you feel that yours or someone else's has not been properly acknowledged in this summary, please do contact [artplayforartists@melbourne.vic.gov.au](mailto:artplayforartists@melbourne.vic.gov.au)

### **Connector web**

#### **Artist**

Georgia Ensor

#### **Materials/equipment**

A ball of wool

#### **Space**

Room for a group to stand or sit in a big circle.

#### **Suggested age group**

Ages 8+

#### **Instructions**

The facilitator starts holding a big ball of wool. They say their name and mention up to three other things about themselves (e.g. My name is Georgia. I am a vegetarian, I have a son and I like the feel of mud between my toes.) Other group members listen and if they have a connection with what the previous person has said (e.g. they also have a son) they raise their hand and say 'Connect!' The facilitator holds the end of the wool and throws or rolls the ball to that person who then shares their name and connections.

You will end up with a visual web of connections between all participants. People can be as general or specific with what they share so there is generally not an awkward last person time drag. Don't forget to allow the last person to catch the wool to say their name and potential connections. The group now has a basis for conversation with everyone in the room.

## **Variations**

To reinforce what the group now knows about everyone, the game can be done in reverse. The last person repeats the name and connection they had with the previous person, while throwing the ball back to them. As that person winds up the slack wool, they repeat the name and connection they had with the person they caught the wool from. Continue back to the start, until the wool is completely wound up.

## **Copy Me**

### **Artist**

Jennifer Andersen (learned from Julia Reid)

### **Materials/equipment**

Sound system or portable speakers

### **Space**

Room for a group to dance

### **Suggested age group**

Ages 7+

### **Instructions**

Participants are grouped facing the facilitator, sitting or standing according to need. The facilitator explains that when they see someone busting out a cool dance move, they will do that move themselves and announce, 'Copy me!' Everyone copies that move until the facilitator says, 'Back to your own dancing.' The originators of the copied moves are not identified, but the facilitator should try to copy a move by everyone in the group if possible, so everyone experiences the private satisfaction of having their movement acknowledged and celebrated.

## **Object portrait**

### **Artist**

Georgia Ensor

### **Materials/equipment**

A3 sheets of paper

Drawing implements (e.g. crayons, pastels, pencils, charcoal)

### **Space**

Chairs and tables, or space on the floor to draw on.

### **Suggested age group**

Ages 9+

## **Instructions**

Everyone writes or thinks of eight objects that they identify with. They then have five minutes to sketch portraits of themselves, using these objects.

The facilitator does a quick demonstration, talking as they draw: 'I like records so that becomes my face shape. I like pesto pasta so that's my hair. I like grapes which become my eyes, here's a chocolate bullet for a nose, my mouth is a platypus, and my ears are the fists of my baby son.' You can get pretty weird. Children love this game because there's a strict time limit and it is open ended so the drawings can't be representational. The finished drawings can be used to start conversations with other people in the group, discussing what they like and finding points of connection. When doing this, encourage people to say what they are sure they can see (e.g. 'I see a banana for a mouth' or 'I see something yellow for a mouth') rather than to guess or ask what each object is (e.g. 'I see a yellow torpedo' or 'Is that a banana?').

## **Sound Garden**

### **Artist**

Brendan Ternus

### **Materials/equipment**

None

### **Space**

Room for the group to form a large circle, sitting or standing according to need.

### **Suggested age group**

All ages, but younger children usually need more support choosing a sound that they can comfortably repeat in rhythm.

## **Instructions**

Each person devises an improvised repeating sound using their voice or body. A conductor/gardener explains how their various hand actions will initiate sound and indicate volume changes. Using these actions, they guide the group to create a dynamic overlapping 'sound garden', cueing each person to add their own to the mix, and conducting each sound's volume up and down. Participants can be given a turn at being the sound gardener.

## **Variations**

Ask everyone to include their own name in their sound.

Ask everyone to find an object and to use it to make their sound.

## **Transfer drawing**

### **Artist**

Loukia Vasiliades (A description of Dennis and Eric Oppenheim's use of this game as Live Art can be found in the [Playing Up](#) resource)

## **Materials/equipment**

A long sheet of paper stuck to a wall or paper on enough easels for half the number of people in the group.

Drawing implements (e.g. crayons, pastels, charcoal)

Sound system

## **Space**

Room for the group to stand comfortably in pairs in front of the wall or easels and to form two long lines perpendicular to them.

## **Suggested age group**

Ages 6+ for the basic version

## **Instructions**

Participants stand in pairs in front of the paper, one person behind the other. The person in front holds something to draw with. The facilitator puts on some music and the person at the back, responds to it, drawing on the back of the person in front with their forefinger. The person in the front transfers what they feel onto the paper.

## **Variations**

There are endless variations and extensions to this activity e.g. change the music, use different colours each time you swap who is doing the finger or pencil drawing, or use the drawings as the basis for another artwork such as a wire sculpture.

Tunnel transfer: Form two long lines with each person facing the back of the person in front of them and transfer the drawing all the way along the line. When the person in front of the paper has transferred the drawing onto the paper they go to the back of the line and become the instigator of the next drawing. This takes time so if you want to speed things up you can do this in canon with, for example, the second, fourth and last people in the line simultaneously initiating drawings.

For vulnerable groups or with people who are unknown to each other, each person initiating the drawing should ask permission to touch the person in front. Alternatively, instead of using their finger to draw on the backs, people can use a paintbrush or other object. They can also draw on the other person's hand rather than their back.

## **Magazine tagging**

### **Artist**

Jens Altheimer

### **Materials/equipment**

A bucket

A newspaper or magazine rolled lengthwise and secured with tape

### **Space**

Open space minimum 10 metres x 6 metres; 8-10 chairs in a semi-circle

## Instructions

The group sits on the chairs. A bucket is placed upside down about 7 metres directly in front of the centre of the semi-circle. One person doesn't have a chair. They walk left to right and back in front of the sitting people, dragging a rolled magazine on people's legs. When they decide, they gently tap one person on the knee with the magazine roll, run to the bucket, place the roll on top, run around the back of the bucket, and run back to the chairs. The tapped person jumps up as soon as they are tapped, runs to the bucket, grabs the roll and tries to tap the tapper before they sit down in the now vacant chair. If they manage to do so, they now run back to the bucket, place the roll on it and try to sit before the other person grabs the roll again and taps them. Continue until someone manages to sit in the vacant chair. This may happen immediately or take a bit longer. The person left holding the magazine and without a chair then starts from the beginning, dragging the magazine across the knees of the participants.

## Creative Shapes

### Artist

Kate Barnard

### Materials

None

### Space

Large open space for people to move easily in.

### Instructions

This activity gets people moving, encourages team work, and starts creative juices flowing. Guided by the facilitator, participants move around the space in different ways (e.g. on tip toes; like they have a secret; like they are moving through honey; as low as possible to the floor). The facilitator asks people to get into groups of two or three and to make a simple shape with their bodies (e.g. a triangle or circle). People return to another interesting way of moving around the room. The facilitator asks people to get into groups of four, and to make a more complex image with their bodies (e.g. a shoe that has been chewed by a dog). The groups keep getting larger and the scenes more complex until the whole group is making a scene or fantastical object (e.g. a day at the beach or a machine for cutting the toenails of a dragon).

## Chicken and farmer

### Artist

Originally learned from [Born in a Taxi](#).

### Materials

Sound system

### Space

Large open space for people to move easily in.

### Suggested age group

Ages 6+

## **Instructions**

Participants form pairs and choose one person to be a chicken and the other to be a farmer. To music, the person impersonating a chicken tries to touch their 'beak' (which can be their nose or one hand shaped like a beak, depending on how difficult you want to make this) on the outstretched hand of the farmer, which is kept just out of their reach.

## **Variation**

This game is like one-handed tag: Person A holds a hand behind their back, palm up. Person B tries to tap this hand while person A keeps it out of reach. Swap roles when person A is tagged.

## **Air painting**

### **Artist**

Jennifer Andersen

### **Materials**

A piece of A4 paper for each person

Sound system for playing music

### **Space**

Large open space for people to move easily in.

### **Suggested age group**

Ages 4+

## **Instructions**

The group is instructed to make a paint brush with their piece of paper (no tape or scissors allowed). The facilitator guides the group in 'painting' a scene in the air with their brushes using a script like this:

'Pick up your paint brush, dip it in the paint jar front of you and paint a huge cloud. Blow it up into the sky. Oh no, it's raining! Paint the rain. Paint the lightening. Paint hail! Quick, paint a door so you can go inside out of the storm. Uh-oh, it's not a house, it's a rocket ship. Paint everything you can see in it. There may be dials, screens, a chair, or maybe a sandwich or a cactus. The rain has stopped so open the door and jump out of the rocket ship.'

Participants form pairs. Everyone dances to music until the facilitator stops the music and calls, 'Freeze!' One member of the pair unfreezes and 'paints' a portrait of the other person. Swap.

To finish, the facilitator tells everyone to paint a cushion on the ground, blow on it to dry the paint, and to sit on it.

## **Variation**

This activity can be done sitting down. The aim is to attune people to the visual environment, so they can also use their brushes to outline or colour in everything they see in the room (e.g. windows, chairs, the light fittings)