Educational Resources

Food-in-the-Balance Game
Youth Activity for Grades 1–12

As a complement to the CRS Helping Hands meal-packing event our parish will be involved in, try this simple, cooperative game of balance and movement that can be played by all age groups or with a mixed group of older and younger children, or children and adults. The beauty of this game is in unpacking—that is, revealing—the principles of service, justice and Catholic social teaching. Discussion questions appropriate for various age groups are included.

Materials Needed

One beanbag for each player will be needed to balance on his or her head; if you don’t have beanbags, you can use dried beans in ziplock bags, wicker breadbaskets, paper bowls, books, a shoe or slipper from the player’s foot, and so on.

A CD player, Mp3 player or portable stereo.

Global music or other fast-paced recorded music; alternatively, play live music on a guitar or a rhythm instrument.

For grades 5–12, flip chart and pens.

For grades 9–12 only: a copy of the Catholic Relief Services Guiding Principles, some of the main principles of Catholic social teaching found here: crs.org/about/guiding-principles.cfm

Food-in-the-Balance Game Rules

While the music is playing, players balance beanbags on their heads and walk around the room. Players who lose a beanbag while the music is playing must freeze until another player—without dropping his or her own beanbag—retrieves the frozen player’s beanbag and returns it to him or her.

When the music stops, everyone freezes. If everyone still has beanbags on their heads when the music stops, the group wins that round.
Before handing out the beanbags, explain the rules of the Food-in-the-Balance game. If you haven’t done so already, explain the context of the game:

**[Note to game leader: Share the following with the group]**

When our parish holds our CRS Helping Hands activity, we will be packing food and raising money to send to the African country of Burkina Faso. In Burkina Faso, many farmers are poor and don’t have transportation—not even donkeys or bicycles, let alone cars or trucks. So, it’s the job of the women to walk many miles to get or deliver food, water or firewood. The women typically carry these loads on their heads so they can keep their arms free for the long journey or to carry children on their backs.


So, inspired by these women, we’re going to try this ourselves by playing the “Food-in-the-Balance” game in which we carry a beanbag on our heads while the music plays.

Here are the rules again:

1. While the music plays, move around the room while balancing a beanbag on your head. When the music stops, everyone must freeze. If everyone has a beanbag on his or her head when the music stops, the group wins the round.

2. You can’t touch your own beanbag—you can’t hold it on your head, catch it or pick it up if it falls.
3. If your beanbag falls off your head, you must stand completely still until another player retrieves the beanbag and places it back on your head—without losing his or her own beanbag in the process. If your helper loses his or her own beanbag, the helper must also freeze along with you until someone else retrieves your or the helper’s beanbag.

4. When you lose your beanbag, you may not call for help. You must wait quietly until someone comes to help you. Players with beanbags, though, can make noise or call out suggestions.

5. When a helper puts your beanbag back on your head, you can start moving around the room again.

Once everyone understands the rules, hand out the beanbags to all. Have a helper control when the music starts and stops.

As the group moves to the music, watch the group dynamics. Make note of the following:

- Is this game easy or difficult for the group as a whole?
- Are most players helping others? Do some players never help others? Do some players always come to the rescue?
- Are some players particularly good at keeping their beanbags in place? Do you notice if they have a strategy?
- Do some have great difficulty balancing their beanbags? Do any get routinely overlooked and have to wait a long time until someone helps them?

You’ll share these observations, as appropriate, in the unpacking of the activity.
When the music stops, ask those who have lost their beanbags to raise their hands so you can count how many beanbags were dropped.

Encourage the group to have fewer drops in the next round. After a round or two, ask the players if they have ideas on how to make their score even better.

Play three or four rounds—whatever you have time for. You do not have to achieve a perfect round. End the game if the group gets restless or tires of the activity. For very young children, stop after three rounds.

**Variations**

- Allow people who lose their beanbags to call for help.

- For older youths or adults, make the game more challenging by having the players join hands and form closed groups of two or more. Without dropping their hands or losing their beanbags, members of the groups must walk around while the music is playing. If even one member’s bag drops, the entire group must freeze and wait for another group to help them. However, if a member of another group loses one or more of their bags, the helping group may free up two hands in their group to return the beanbag(s) to the owners’ heads. The rest of the helpers’ hands must remain joined.

- Increase the silliness factor—and perhaps the level of difficulty—by using players’ shoes instead of beanbags. Everyone takes off one
shoe and places it on his or her head. Other balanceable objects include slippers brought from home, wicker breadbaskets or paper bowls. Do not use plastic plates or bowls, which are prone to breaking when they fall.

Postgame Discussion

Ask all age groups the questions that follow.

1. How many people went through the whole game without losing your beanbag? What was your secret?

2. How many people lost your beanbag at least once? What was that like? Did anyone have to wait a long time for help to come? How did you feel as you waited?

3. Did anyone lose your beanbag while trying to help others? What was that like for you?

Share some of the group dynamics that you witnessed, pointing out how the group, as a whole, did in the difficult task of helping one another.

Quick Wrap-Up for All Ages

(if you don't have time to unpack further)

Wrap up the game with the following:

This game is a little like what we will be doing during our CRS Helping Hands event. We will be providing food for people who are hungry right now. But we also will be helping in another way. Notice that the point of the game was for everyone to be able to carry his or her own beanbag. You didn’t carry the beanbag for someone else. You helped others get the beanbag back on their head, so they could enjoy the game and even help others.
When we send our food and our money to Burkina Faso, we also will be supporting programs that fight poverty so that people no longer need our emergency food to feed their families. These programs will help them afford to buy or grow what they need to live healthy lives.

**Unpacking Further With Children in Grades 1–4**

Picking up from the players’ comments and your own observations, make the following points:

- When you walked around with your beanbag on your head, the game was fun. But it was not so fun if you lost your beanbag and had to wait around for someone to help you. When people are poor, especially when they are too young or too old or too sick to get enough food, it must feel a little bit like losing that beanbag. Sometimes they have to wait until food comes. Sometimes it takes a long time for people to notice that they are in need.

Some people were able to keep their beanbag on their heads very well. They had a choice. They could protect their own beanbag, or they could take a risk and help someone else—even if it meant they might lose their own beanbag. The point of the game was for everyone to have a beanbag on their head when the music stopped.

That sounds like a game Jesus would like. Helping may be risky, but if everyone is doing it, then you’ll always have help if you are in need. In everyday life, there will be times when you have the means to help others in need and times when you will need help from them.

- This game is a little like what we will be doing during our CRS Helping Hands event. We will be providing food for people who are hungry right now. But we also will be helping in another way. Notice that the point of the game was for everyone to be able to
carry his or her own beanbag. You didn't carry the beanbag for someone else. You helped others get the beanbag back on their head so they could enjoy the game and even help others.

• When we send our food and our money to Burkina Faso, we also will be supporting programs that fight poverty so that people no longer need our emergency food to feed their families. These programs will help them afford to buy or grow what they need to live healthy lives.

Unpacking Further With Children in Grades 5–8

Picking up on the players’ comments and based on your own observations, make the following points. Emphasize the principles of Catholic social teaching (which have informed the CRS Guiding Principles; see crs.org/about/guiding-principles.cfm) that they illustrate. As you name a specific Catholic social teaching, write it on the flip chart.

• Those of you who lost your beanbag found you had to wait awhile for someone to help you. It was especially frustrating if no one noticed you. You couldn’t play the game and you couldn't help others. When people are poor, especially when they are too young or too old or too sick to get enough food to keep from going to bed hungry at night, it must feel a little bit like losing that beanbag. Sometimes they have to wait until food comes. Sometimes it takes a long time for people to notice that they are in need.

• When you are in a situation in which people ignore you and you cannot participate fully, you may feel like you are less important than other people in your community. As Catholics, we believe that all human life is sacred and has dignity, and we must do all we can to protect it.
• To do well in this particular game, we had to remember that everyone had a right to some help if they lost their beanbag. And those who had a beanbag on their head had a responsibility to help those who had lost their beanbag. In the same way, people have the right to have their basic needs met, and they have a responsibility to care for others in need.

• Sometimes you were the one who had the beanbag on your head. It was your job to help others. When you noticed someone and went to help that person, you were in solidarity with him or her. You wanted to help that person get back in the game—even if it was risky for you. And if you had lost your own beanbag, you knew what it was like to need help and to get it.

• This was a group game. The Christian life is like this game. We are social—that is, we rely on one another. The point of the game is for everyone to play, but you must cooperate for that to happen. When everyone is still wearing their own beanbag, it’s all good. We might call that the common good. And, when everyone helps each other in the game—without teachers doing it for you or pointing out who needs help—that kind of problem solving at the basic level is called subsidiarity, and you did it very well.

• When you helped those who lost their beanbags, you were opting for the poor, which means you put others’ needs before your own. You were making sure to spread the resources equally, which illustrates stewardship.

• All these words on the flip chart are guidelines that Catholics live by. They are called the principles of Catholic social teaching because they help us create a just society.

When we have our CRS Helping Hands event, we will be living out these principles. We will be making it possible for Catholic Relief Services to provide food for people right now so they don’t have to wait for it any longer. When we send our food and our money to Burkina Faso, we will also be supporting programs...
that fight poverty so that people no longer need our emergency food. These programs will give them skills and opportunities so they can buy or grow what they need to live healthy lives.

**Unpacking Further With Teens**

Provide each player with a copy of the CRS Guiding Principles, some of the main principles of Catholic social teaching found here: crs.org/about/guiding-principles.cfm. Explain that these principles, drawn from Catholic social teaching, underlie all of the work Catholic Relief Services does.

In either a large group or in small groups, ask the group members to name examples from the Food-in-the-Balance game that illustrate the principles on the copy of CRS Guiding Principles. Use the talking points from “Unpacking Further With Children in Grades 1–4” as a guide to prompt them if they get stuck. They can share their final answers in either a large group or in small groups.

Conclude with the following:

When we have our CRS Helping Hands event, we will be helping to put these principles of Catholic social teaching into motion. We will be making it possible for Catholic Relief Services to provide food for people right now so they don’t have to wait for it any longer. But we also will be supporting CRS programs that fight poverty so that people no longer need our emergency food. These programs will give them skills and opportunities so they can buy or grow what they need to live healthy lives.