



“Are You Square?”

A Game for Developing Self-Control and Social Skills

by Eitan Eldar, Don Morris, Ron DaCosta, and Tali Wolf

The game “Are You Square?” (hereafter referred to as RUS), has been designed as a context for evaluation of self-control and social skills. Furthermore, RUS serves as an ideal context for exposing students to frustrating situations and teaching them coping and collaboration skills. This article presents the rationale for the game and describes its implementation. Appropriate equipment and rules are offered with adaptation ideas for a variety of educational goals and settings.

RUS involves four groups or individuals based in four stations (e.g., hula hoops can mark the stations) that contain an equal number of objects (e.g., rings). The game challenges participants to collect as many objects as they can from other stations and place them in their own station in a limited time frame. This article will show how RUS allows physical education to be a supportive context for the improvement of personal and social skills (Cooper, 1982; Eldar, 2001, 2002; Gough, 1997; McKenney & Dattilo, 2001).

Physical education can be a supportive arena for helping children develop appropriate and effective social skills. There have been many studies and discussions on the influence that physical education has on social-skill development in students. Morris (2003) offers a historical review of research in regards to whether or not engagement in physical education classes can properly influence social behavior development.

Most educational programs address inappropriate behaviors with behavioral consequences. Moreover, parents and educators frequently remove or mask frustrating triggers in order to eliminate unpleasant situations and ease emotional reactions from students (e.g., refraining from corrective feedback; eliminating learning challenges; teaching according to students’ requests). This “walking on egg shells” strategy may achieve a temporary relief based on a short-term “tactical behavior,” but it lacks education on self-control and frustration coping. Furthermore, this strategy may strengthen the student’s undesirable behaviors and even cause him or her to exhibit aggression, in order to

remove learning demands and complex challenges. RUS is designed to teach students how to identify difficulties and deal with frustration if it emerges.

After a substantial review of the literature, coupled with over 30 years of public school and university teaching, the authors have concluded that physical education is one of the best school venues to promote positive social behavior. However, this does not occur unless specific strategies are employed. One such strategy involves the willingness and ability of teachers to design activities that address social-skill development. It is based on the ability to create, alter, and modify game designs in order to promote specific educational outcomes.

RUS serves as an example of a game that is designed to promote self-control and other specific social behaviors such as teamwork and respect for others. It is important to note that it is the game’s design and structure that offers students the opportunity to acquire these social skills. The game should be played in a physical education context that is adapted and designed to support, and thereby promote, the same social behaviors (Hellison, 1995).

The authors do not claim to show a direct link between participation in physical education games and behavior improvement. We know that participation in games could change behavior for better or worse. Therefore, the intervention aspects of this game are based on implementing behavioral procedures within a physical activity context (Eldar, 2001).

Developing Self-Control

RUS should gradually and systematically expose students to frustrating triggers associated with their behavior difficulties. These frustrating triggers are seen in RUS when one student takes an object from his or her opponent’s station, in the scramble of many students vying to take the same object from the same station, or when time runs out and students have not returned to their station, and must return the collected object to its “home” (see rules section

and variations section for more explanation). Students will effectively learn self-control and other social skills if exposure to these aversive triggers (Friman, Hayes, & Wilson, 1998) is also followed by a pleasant sensation (e.g., success in completing a learning task). In fact, this is a desensitization procedure (Taylor & Arnou, 1988; Wolpe, 1958) in which the frustrating triggers are presented during a favored physical activity and game. Students are taught to identify the aversive triggers, experience self-control in their presence, and at the same time emit appropriate behaviors leading to success. A more complicated process involves the identification of precursors (Smith & Churchill, 2002) to inappropriate behavior. Such precursors appear following a specific trigger (e.g., an object is taken from a station by opponents) when students have failed to change their behavior chain (e.g., experience control and proceed with the game) and prior to emitting an extreme and intolerable behavior (e.g., quitting the game and offending others). The RUS context is ideal for teaching students to identify precursors before escalation. Precursors can be recognized as changes in tone of voice, pace of movement, content of verbal behavior, aggressive thoughts, etc. Students may experience self-control in such occasions using self-instruction, seeking peers' support (encouragement to continue), or even by quitting the game temporarily, "breathing deeply," and returning.

Equipment and Game Set-up

The four corners of a court form the stations in the game. The stations are marked by an object, such as a hula hoop. Some identical objects such as balls or bean bags are placed within each station. Stations are placed an equal distance from one another (a distance that is suitable for running), so that the playing area is a square. Objects are divided equally among the stations and are placed within the station. Participants are arranged in four equal groups. Each group sits in its own station (e.g., around a hula-hoop). See figure 1 for a visual image of the set-up.

Rules of the Game

The challenge of the game is for players to bring as many objects from other stations as they can to their own station. The group with the most objects is the winning group (see figure 2). Important rules for the game include the following:

- When the opening whistle sounds, each player runs to any station of choice, picks one object, and carries it to his or her own station.
- Each player can take only one object at a time.

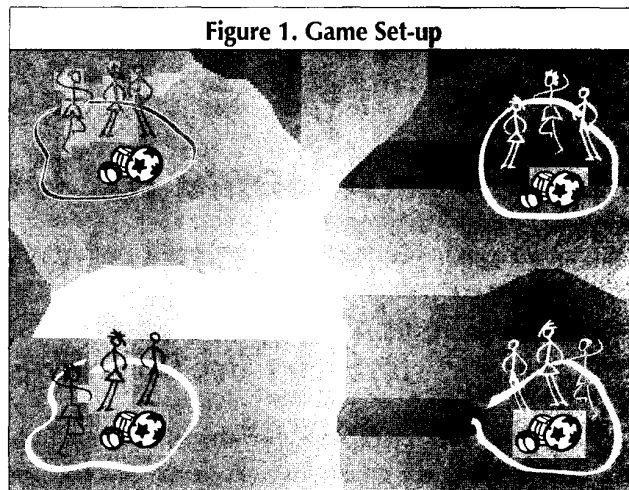


Figure 1. Game Set-up

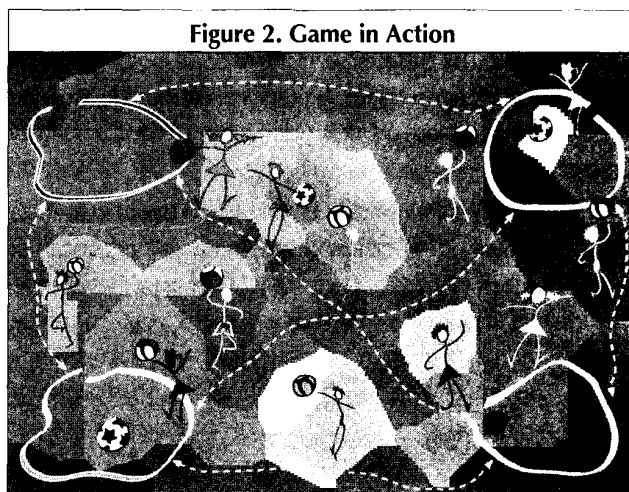


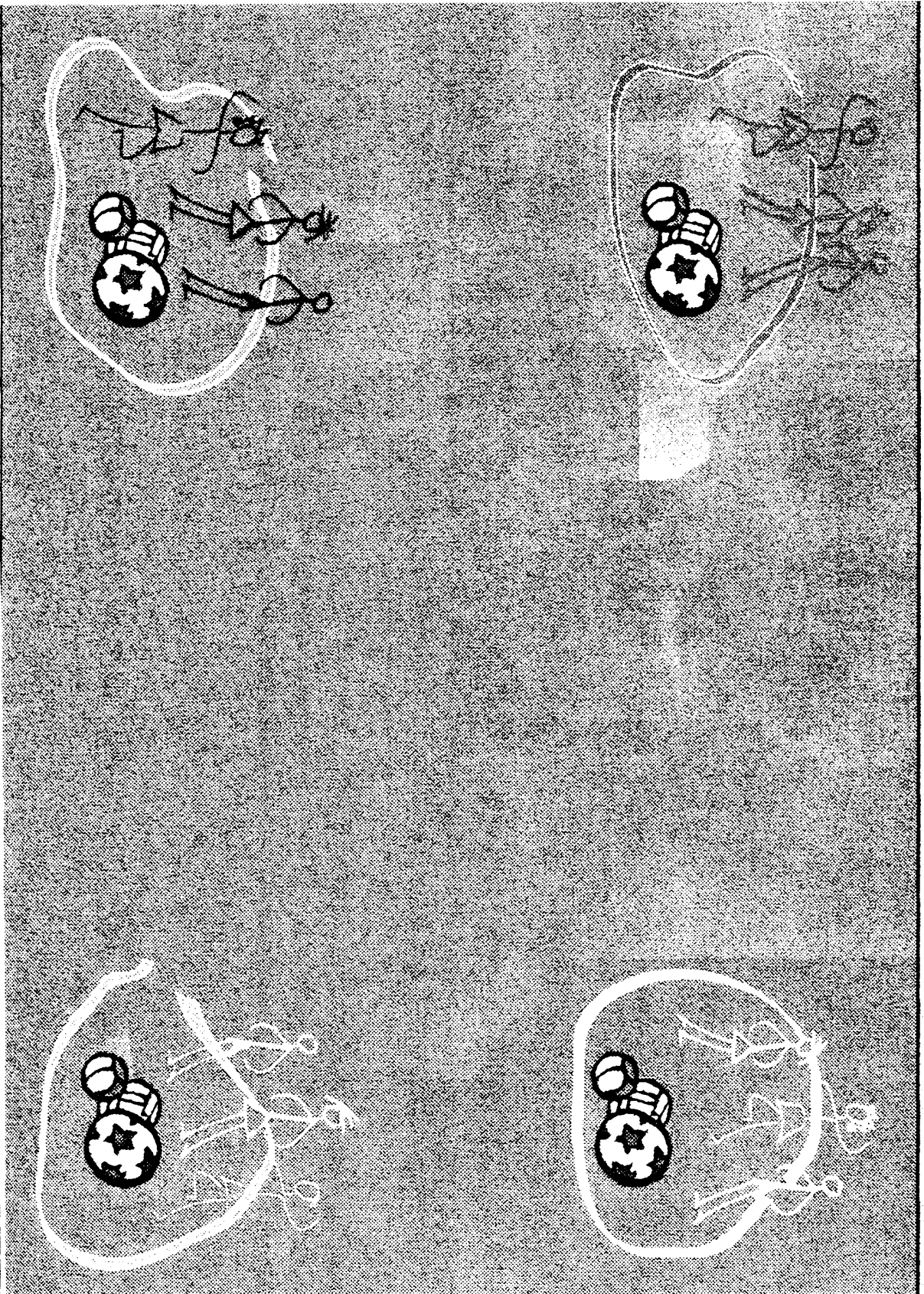
Figure 2. Game in Action

- Players cannot interfere with players from other groups (e.g., no blocking, pushing, etc.).
- Players cannot hide or block a hoop that "holds" the acquired equipment.
- The typical duration of the game is one minute (the duration must match the difficulty level of the activity).
- When the ending whistle sounds, the objects in each station are counted. Only objects that are within the boundaries of the station will be included. If the players do not arrive to their station by the ending whistle, they must leave the object on the floor and return to their station. A more advanced stage requires players to return the object to the station from which it was taken (this requires a high level of self-control).

Recommended Variations for RUS

1. *Moving objects (e.g., rings) from station to station*
 - Balancing—Players put the ring on their head during transition from station to station.

Figure 1. Game Set-up



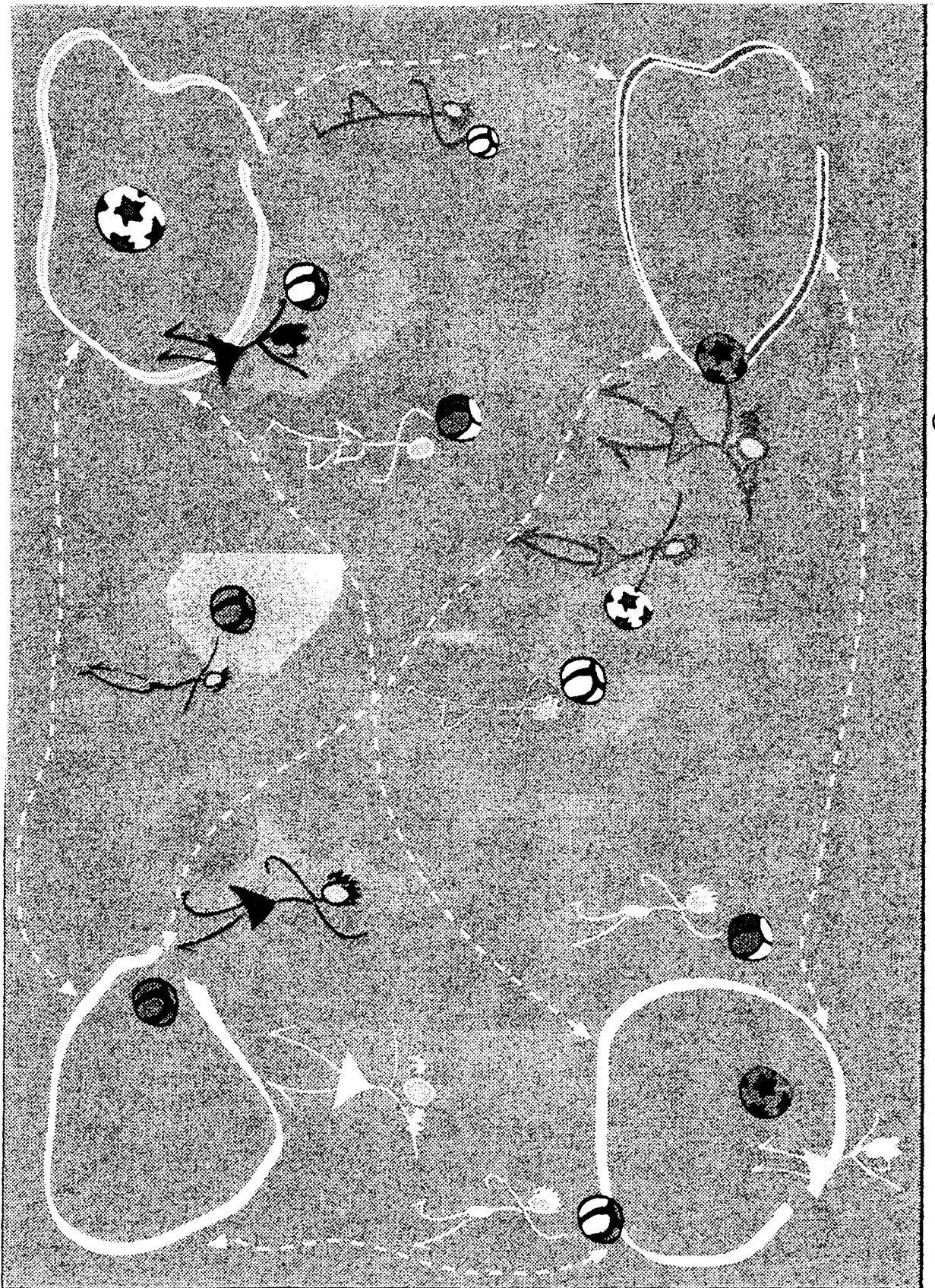


Figure 2. Game in Action

Figure 3. RUS Game—Inappropriate Behavior Observation Form

Observer: _____ Date: _____ Hour: _____ Lesson number: _____ Remarks _____

Game No.	Defending Station	Throwing object	Passivity	Carrying more than 1 object	Using verbal violence	Using physical violence	Not responding to signal	Total
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- Pushing—Players push the ring with the leg or hand while the ring stays constantly on the floor.
- Dragging—Players put their leg into the ring and drag it onto the floor.
- Shooting—In each hoop there is a standing stick, fixed to a base, to thread rings, and instead of putting the ring in the hoop, shoot the ring to the stick.

2. Moving between stations

- Walking (players walk forward, backward, sideways)
- Running, skipping, galloping, crawling, rolling, jumping on both feet or one
- Skating
- Cycling (outside of the gymnasium)
- Swimming (in a swimming pool where distances between stations are equal)

3. Forming the station

- Draw/mark with chalk or colored tape on the floor or with a stick on the sand
- Use hula-hoops or ropes
- Use boxes made of plastic or hard paper (this becomes the receptacle in which objects are placed)
- Use tables that are upside down for shooting rings
- Use car tires

4. Objects in the stations

- Objects should be easy to handle and “eye catching.” Examples are rubber rings, beanbags, corks, balls, cubes, and ropes.

Adding obstacles between the stations

Adding obstacles may increase the level of difficulty and make the exhibition of self-control more challenging. Examples of obstacles are benches or balancing beams; cones (so that students have to move between or above them); or hula hoops (students have to jump through them).

Teaching Considerations

It is recommended to practice the basic game until students reach proficiency and a sound understanding of the rules. Then, various modifications can be implemented in order to achieve educational goals. Students are welcomed to offer adaptations and rule changes. The process of rules negotiation is essential for discussing moral values and holding students accountable for keeping them.

In order to promote self-control, a few strategies may be implemented:

1. Discuss difficulties with students following the game and prior to the next game in the series. Have students identify their own “breaking points” (losing control) and suggest strategies to overcome (e.g., self-instruction; peer cuing).
2. Provide positive examples of students who exhibited self-control. Demonstrate precursors to inappropriate behavior and practice their identification.
3. Provide feedback to students. Collect data regarding students’ performance and provide immediate feedback following the game (data collection form is presented in

figure 3). Feedback relates to violations of game rules. Each violation is tallied to enable a summary of overall inappropriate behaviors in a specific time frame. Have students observe their peers and discuss their performance following the game. Graph data highlighting students' progress and post the graphs on the gymnasium walls.

4. Increase the level of difficulty gradually, enabling the desensitization of inappropriate student responses and thus strengthening their self-control. Discuss similar situations in natural settings to promote generalization.

Levels of Difficulty

A basic assumption in RUS is that lack of self-control is more prominent when the level of difficulty increases. In such a case, aggression may appear in the absence of self-control. Such a tendency is typical to competitive games (Bay-Hinitz, Peterson, & Quilitch, 1994) like RUS.

Once the basic game has been learned and practiced to a satisfactory level of self-control, the level of difficulty may be gradually increased in four areas:

1. Complexity—A higher level of thinking can be required in order to meet the new challenges. For example, tell students that objects collected by each team should be of the same color. Or, add a few additional objects termed "viruses" to the game and mark them differently (e.g., different color). Participants should get rid of them so they are not "caught" with a "virus" in their station when the game terminates.
2. Duration—A higher duration of the game increases the level of difficulty. For example, give students an extra 30 seconds to collect as many objects as possible (the basic game takes 60 seconds).
3. Intensity—This will increase the opportunities to respond under a certain time frame. For example, the number of times that a student travels between stations will combine with the number of objects collected, to calculate the team's final score. This will encourage students to increase the intensity with which they run from station to station.
4. Distracters—Add "masking" stimuli that may interfere with the task required. For example, produce a loud noise in the game area, interfering with teammate communication, such as game strategy. Allow outsiders (non players) to give leading or misleading advice to players.

Conclusion

RUS is characterized as a strenuous activity involving cooperation, planning, and tactical thinking. In addition, RUS

helps students deal with stressful situations, frustrations (such as those discussed previously), joy, and upsets. It does, in fact, represent a "reflection of life" in which various dynamic situations that have boundaries and rules are presented in a short time period. The game should repeat the activity portion a number of times. The structured framework is easily adaptable in order to produce pedagogical outcomes and specifically to assist with self-control development. The following are also advantages of using RUS as the educational context for learning self-control and social skills:

- A game is a supportive structure for the development of values and social/personal skills. Most students favor it over group discussions alone on the same concepts.
- RUS is designed to include all skill, fitness, and motivation levels found within the class population, yet it brings participants to a state of physical and mental exhaustion very rapidly. In such a situation there is a tendency to lose control, and thus concepts like "self-control" and "respect for others" are inherent in this game.
- With proper programming (Stokes & Baer, 1977), self-control and social skills can be generalized to other contexts (e.g., classroom, home).
- Both physical education teachers and classroom teachers can implement RUS.
- Game design is flexible and multiple levels of difficulty can co-exist. The game is comprised of short segments, allowing corrections and repeating chances for success.
- RUS involves individual and collaborative efforts (e.g., students' participation contributes to a team score), enabling the design of various learning opportunities.

RUS is a multipurpose game. It is fun to play and encourages activity among students. The game may be integrated into any existing physical education curriculum, and should be consistently presented in a few consecutive lessons. It may also be used for assessment purposes by recording and evaluating the difficulties students experience while the level of difficulty increases. The pre-programmed increase in the difficulty level of a certain area (e.g., complexity) may trigger a behavior change in certain students (e.g., inability to deal with cognitive complexity). Such information may lead to further support and didactic enrichment delivered to the students in need.

Students can take part in data collection and the public posting of individual and group performances. They can also teach the game to younger students in their school and monitor their progress. A consistent and prolonged implementation of RUS is a powerful tool for achieving educa-

tional goals and emphasizing the vital role of physical education in school curriculum.

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