

More Math Games & Activities
from around the
World



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1 Three-in-a-Row Games

In most parts of the world people play some form of three-in-a-row games. The object of the game is to place your three markers in a row on the game board. You have probably played Tic-Tac-Toe. Many of these games are more complicated than Tic-Tac-Toe.

All the games are for two players, sometimes for two teams. You can also play them by yourself. Pretend that you are two people, and play on both sides of the board. This is a good way to learn a new game, or to work out the fine points of strategy, as though you were solving a puzzle.

The games in this chapter gradually become more complicated. They begin with a simple game called Nine Holes from England, with three counters for each player. As you go through the chapter, the games will

require more counters. Finally you come to Murabaraba from southern Africa, in which each player starts with 12 counters. Of course, the game board also becomes more complex as you go from one game to the next. In the last activity you will analyze the connection between the type of game board and the number of counters.

These games call for two kinds of counters or markers. Kings and princes used to play with beautiful pieces made of gold and ivory. Ordinary people used stones or seeds, or peeled and unpeeled twigs. You can also use red and black checkers, or two kinds of coins, or make your own special counters.

Game boards for three-in-a-row games have been found scratched in the stones of the rooftop of an ancient Egyptian temple built 3,300 years ago, and in several other ancient sites. The games in this book come from many parts of the world. Look up these places on a map or globe.

Wherever you might travel, you will probably find that people play some version of these games. Although you may not be able to speak their languages, you can make friends all over the world with three-in-a-row games.

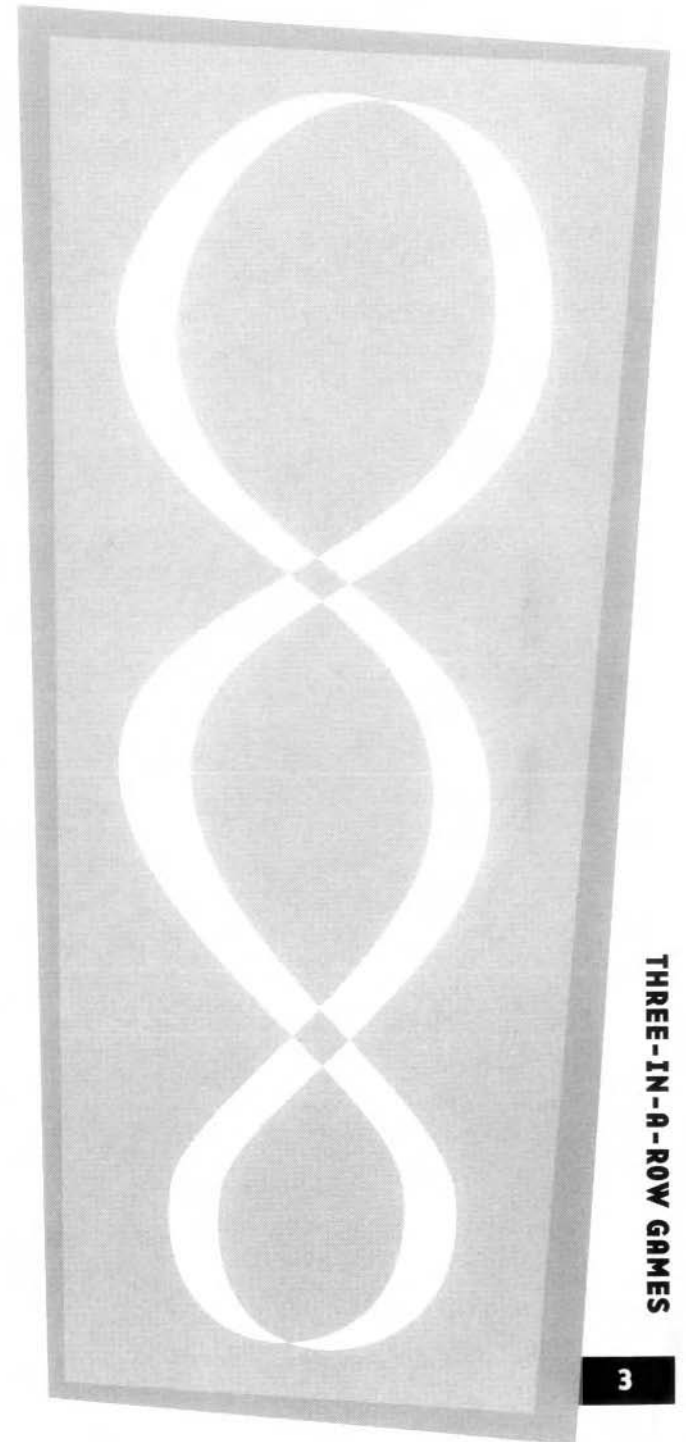
TIPS TO THREE-IN-A-ROW FUN

Three-in-a-row games require several types of game boards. You will probably want boards that will last for a while. Draw the lines neatly with a ruler on paper, and glue the paper to cardboard or mat board. It's a good idea to make a pattern on a sheet of scratch paper first.

Some people play games just to win and they get upset when they lose. Playing a game should be fun. When one player always wins, the other player must always lose, and may give up after a while. Helping an opponent to improve his or her skills makes the game more interesting for both players.

Each player should have an equal chance of winning. In some games the first player to move is more likely to win. Players should take turns going first in this type of game.

You may want to vary the games. A slight change in the rules, or in the shape of the game board, or in the number of counters may call for an entirely different strategy. Just be sure that both players agree on the new rules before the game starts.



Nine Holes from England

Nine Holes is one of the simplest of all the three-in-a-row games. Very young children can learn to play it. I read in a book on African games that four-year-olds in some parts of Africa like to play games similar to Nine Holes. They learn to take turns and to think about their moves. They also learn that there is no point in getting upset when they lose a game. Nine Holes is a good introduction to Tic-Tac-Toe and other three-in-a-row games.

Long before anyone had heard of Tic-Tac-Toe, people were playing Nine Holes. It was a favorite among the boys who herded sheep and cattle. While the animals were feeding in the pastures, two boys would agree to draw the game board on the ground. They would dig three rows of holes, three holes in each row. They would gather three stones of one kind and three of another kind, and be ready to play.

The seventeenth-century English poet Michael Drayton described the scene:

The unhappy wags, which let
their cattle stray,
At Nine Holes on the heath
whilst they together play.

Some of these “unhappy wags” invented strange rules for the game. On the Salisbury Plain, in southern England, the counters were not stones, but wooden pegs stuck into the earth. The players had to get down on the ground and pull out the pegs with their teeth!

In many old English churches one can find sets of holes or lines for three-in-a-row games. Centuries ago the few boys who were lucky enough to go to school in England usually attended church schools. The boring lessons seemed to go on forever, and the boys were often tempted to sneak in a quick game of Nine Holes.