Pov Pa / Picking Up Sticks

Site of Documentation
Ban Na Ouane, Luang Prabang, Lao PDR

Description

*Picking up Sticks* is a game of speed and hand-eye coordination that has been enjoyed by generations of children living in the village of Ban Na Ouane near Luang Prabang. In it, players have to throw a small stone into the air and before catching it, pick up sticks and handle them in a particular sequence of movements.

Who Plays?

This game requires at least three players (boys or girls), aged between 7 and 12 years old.

Accessories/Equipment

Each player needs to have 10 small sticks to play. Sticks should be slim and of equal length. They can be found on the ground, cut from trees or alternatively they can be made (by the children’s parents) by cutting strips from bamboo. In addition, the game also needs a small stone or lime that will be thrown into the air by each of the players.

Time and Place

On average, a game of *Picking up Sticks* takes around 20 to 30 minutes to play. It is best played in an open space that has a smooth concrete ground, such as a school courtyard or the porch of a house.
Skills, Strategies and Qualities of a Good Player

Requiring speed and accuracy, the best players of *Picking up Sticks* possess exceptional coordination and are quick with their hands. These skills are easily developed through practice. Those that play frequently often become very precise and have the competitive advantage against others. A key strategy for winning the game is to throw the stone up as high as possible so that players have more time to handle the sticks.

Popularity

*Picking up Sticks* is very popular and is played every week by the children of Ban Na Ouane. Players enjoy learning how to become quick with their hands and testing their skill against that of their peers. Most children were taught this game by their friends or family. It is primarily played by girls, although boys also play from time to time.

History of the Game

Traditionally a girl’s game, *Picking up Sticks* has over recent decades become more widely played by boys. The rules of the game have also evolved over time. For example in the past, if a player was intentionally distracted by another player and therefore failed their turn, then that player would be allowed to move up to the next level. Nowadays, the players simply begin their turn again.

How is the Game Played?

**Step 1.** First, the players play *Rock, Paper and Scissors* to decide who will start the game.

**Step 2.** There are two levels which both have to be completed to win the game.
LEVEL 1

1. To begin Round 1 of the first level, the player has to place their sticks on the ground in front of them and using their right hand, throw up the stone. While the stone is in the air, the player must pick up one stick from the ground with his right hand and pass it to his left hand, catching the stone as it comes back down with their empty right hand.

2. The player will then go on to repeat this process nine more times, until all of their 10 sticks are held in their left hand, after which they will move on to Round 2.
3. When the players have mastered picking up one stick at a time, the game becomes more challenging. In the rounds that follow, players have to pick up more and more sticks: In Round 2, the process is similar, with the stone being thrown, sticks being picked up by the right hand and passed to the left before catching the stone as it falls back down. The only difference is that in this round the player must pick up two sticks (rather than one) when they throw the stone. In Round 3 it is the same process, only this time picking up three sticks, in Round 4 they must pick up four sticks and so on.

4. There is no penalty if a player does not pick up the sticks but manages to catch the stone. As long as they catch the stone they can try again. If the player drops the stone, they must wait for their next turn to try again. Once a player succeeds in picking up all of their 10 sticks they only have one more task to master. Here, they have to throw the stone up in the air, pass all 10 sticks to their right hand and back again to their left hand before catching the stone again. Each player must repeat this movement five times to complete the level.
LEVEL 2

1. In Level 2 of the game the sequence of movements becomes more complicated. The first player must throw up the stone and while it is in the air, pick up one stick with their right hand and place it in between one of the spaces between the fingers of their left hand before catching the stone. The first stick must be placed in the space that lies between the players’ thumb and index finger (labelled A). On the players’ next turn the stick must be placed in the next space (labelled B), moving with each turn to the neighbouring space until all four spaces between your finders are filled.

2. Once all the spaces between the fingers on their left hand are filled with sticks, a new sequence of movements begins. This time the player must throw the stone and while it is in the air pick out the stick from space A and hold it in his left armpit, before catching the stone.

3. Next, they will throw up the stone and while it is in the air move the stick from space D into the empty space A before catching the stone.

4. Finally, they will throw up the stone, pick up one of the sticks from the floor with their right hand and put it in space D before catching the stone. The cycle then repeats with each stick moving in this sequence: from space A to the armpit, then from space D to space A and then from the floor to space D. Players have to remember that they must be holding four sticks between their fingers before taking the stick from space A and putting under their arm. Sticks will always move from D to A, while the sticks in spaces B and C stay put, until there are no sticks left on the floor.

5. After this sequence has been repeated a number of times, the player should be left holding only two sticks in spaces B and C. One at a time, they must move the sticks to space A, and then from space A into their armpit. At the end of the game the player must be holding all 10 sticks in their armpit.

6. In this final phase of the game there is no penalty if the player drops one or more sticks from their armpit. The first person to complete all of the tasks in Level 2 wins the game.
Rules

1. Sticks can only be handled while the stone is in the air.

2. If a player drop the stone then they have to wait until their next turn to try again.

3. Players must complete their tasks in the order of sequences as defined by each level. If a player gets confused and fails to do so, it will be the next player’s turn.

4. If a player is intentionally distracted by another player, he will be allowed to take his turn again from the same place.