

3.4.3 Nine Stones

Brief description, and rules of the game

Nine Stones is a playful, team-based game where students use imagination, problem solving, and exploration while competing. The attacking team tries to knock down and rebuild the “castle,” while the defending team chases them and attempts to tag them with the ball. The game encourages creativity in finding new strategies and fosters curiosity and openness as children experiment with different ways of cooperating, moving, and achieving their goals.

Skill focus

- **Primary Skill Focus**
 - Critical thinking
- **Complementary/Secondary Skill Focus**
 - Problem-solving
 - Creativity
 - Curiosity, sense of wonder and openness

Age group	Student number	Duration
9-10 years old	whole class working in small groups (min. 6 players, ideally 8-12 players)	20-30 minutes

How to play - brief game rules

1. Preparing the Play Area: Stack 9 stones, plastic cups, or building blocks in the centre of the play area to create the "castle." Mark a throw line 9 steps away from the castle.
2. Dividing Teams: Split players into two equal teams: attackers and defenders.
3. Gameplay:
 - Attackers take turns throwing the ball to knock down the castle.
 - Once the castle is down, attackers start rebuilding it.
 - Defenders retrieve the ball and try to "tag" (lightly hit) attackers with the ball.
 - Attackers can move within the play area while trying to rebuild the castle.
4. Winning: Defenders win if they tag all attackers before the castle is fully rebuilt. Attackers win if they rebuild the entire castle before all team members are tagged.
5. New Round: The winning team becomes the attackers in the next round.

Indoor/Outdoor Classroom layout notes

The game requires a spacious indoor (gym) or outdoor (schoolyard) area with a clearly marked play zone using chalk or tape.

How does this game develop the primary skill?

Nine Stones develops critical thinking by putting children in dynamic, problem-solving situations where they must analyse, evaluate, and make decisions quickly. Attackers need to consider how to rebuild the castle efficiently while avoiding being tagged, requiring them to plan and adjust strategies in real time. Defenders must observe patterns of movement, anticipate the attackers' choices, and decide how to act collectively, which strengthens analytical reasoning and situational awareness. Both teams are encouraged to test different approaches, assess outcomes, and learn from both successes and failures. Throughout the game, students practice weighing options, predicting consequences, and adapting to changing conditions, all of which are fundamental elements of critical thinking.

What do we want to achieve regarding primary skill development (student understanding and/or behaviour)?

As a result of the activity, learners:

- Can identify effective strategies.
- Can compare alternative approaches and make informed decisions under pressure.
- Demonstrate flexible thinking by adapting plans when circumstances change.
- Learn to consider multiple perspectives while solving problems.
- Engage in reflective thinking by observing the results of their own and others' actions.
- Evaluate what worked well and what could be improved and apply these insights in subsequent rounds.
- Strengthen their ability to think logically, anticipate outcomes, and collaborate effectively.
- Maintain critical awareness of both their own and others' strategies.

Suggested use, and practical examples

- As a team-building activity in Physical Education lessons, the game can be effectively used as it simultaneously requires physical activity, strategic thinking, and cooperation. Students do not compete based on individual performance; instead, they coordinate their movements, decisions, and communication in order to achieve a shared goal. During the game, roles such as builders, defenders, or distractors naturally emerge, which supports the development of responsibility and attentiveness to peers. Thus, in Physical Education lessons, the activity not only contributes to the development of physical endurance and coordination but also strongly promotes social learning and creative problem-solving.
- During school trips, the game serves as an ideal community-building activity, as it requires minimal equipment, is easy to implement outdoors, and quickly engages students in a shared experience. By stepping outside the usual classroom environment, students have the opportunity to experience the joy of cooperation in a new and more relaxed setting. Joint strategy-building and playful competition strengthen the sense of belonging, while students remain physically active, connect freely with one another, and create positive shared experiences that contribute to long-term class cohesion.
- On sports days, the game offers an alternative to traditional competitive events, as it rewards not only speed or physical skill but also creative thinking and teamwork. It allows students with diverse abilities to participate as equal contributors in a shared activity.

Success is not determined by the performance of a single “strongest” or “fastest” student, but by the team’s ability to adapt flexibly, pay attention to one another, and make collective decisions. This makes the game particularly well suited for inclusive and accessible sports events.

Materials and tools needed for implementation

- 9 small, stable stones, cups, or building blocks
- 1 soft ball (e.g., foam ball)
- chalk or tape to mark the play area

Guiding questions

- What patterns do you notice in how the other team moves, and how can that help your team plan?
- If one approach isn’t working, what alternative strategy could you try next, and why?
- Which part of the game is most challenging right now, and how could you adapt your plan?
- What do you think will happen if you change the way you rebuild or defend the castle?

Tips and Tricks for dealing with challenges

- **Challenge:** Safety risks during movement and throwing
Tip: The teacher should choose a soft ball and use light, non-injurious materials for building the tower (e.g. plastic cups or building blocks).
Trick: Using colourful, highly visible materials is not only safer but also more motivating and provides visual support that helps students follow the game more easily, especially younger children or those who are more easily distracted.
- **Challenge:** The game becomes predictable over time
Tip: With more advanced groups, the teacher can introduce changing conditions that encourage students to rethink their strategies.
Trick: For example, a time limit for rebuilding the tower can be introduced; or a scoring system that rewards not only winning but also creative solutions; or playing with multiple balls, which increases complexity and requires a higher level of cooperation.
- **Challenge:** Uneven participation within the team
Tip: The teacher should deliberately draw attention to the fact that every team member plays an important role in achieving collective success.
Trick: Temporary role assignments can be used (e.g. “builder”, “observer”, “defender”), with roles rotating each round so that every student has the opportunity to try out different responsibilities.

Difficulty level tailoring

Beginners (6-7 years old): The game is played with smaller teams and a simplified castle (fewer stones or cups). Attackers focus on knocking down and rebuilding with guidance from the teacher, while defenders observe and tag carefully. Children are encouraged to verbalize their decisions (“I will rebuild here because...”) and reflect briefly on what worked or didn’t. This level develops basic critical thinking by helping students notice patterns, evaluate immediate options, and make simple strategic choices while feeling safe to experiment.

Advanced learners (8-9 years old): Teams are larger, and the castle is full-sized. Attackers and defenders are encouraged to plan multiple moves ahead, considering not only immediate consequences but also possible reactions from the other team. Children discuss potential strategies with teammates, test hypotheses during play, and adapt in response to opponents' actions. This level strengthens analytical reasoning, situational awareness, and flexible problem-solving, while fostering collaboration and critical reflection on outcomes.

Experts (9–10 years old): The game is played with full teams in larger play areas, with added complexity such as time limits, multiple castles, or variable rules (e.g., certain zones cannot be crossed, or only certain players can rebuild). Attackers and defenders must coordinate advanced strategies, anticipate counter-strategies, and make split-second decisions. Children are encouraged to observe, analyse, and critique their own strategies and those of opponents, discussing what worked and why. This level intensively develops critical thinking, strategic planning, and adaptive decision-making under dynamic conditions.

Debriefing and reflection questions

- Which strategy worked best for your team, and why do you think it was effective?
- What unexpected outcomes happened during the game, and what did you learn from them?
- If you could play again, what would you do differently to make better decisions?
- How did your team's choices influence each other, and what does that teach about planning and collaboration?

