Sammie Swim Home!

A K–2nd Sturgeon Passage & Survival Game

Age: K–2nd
Time: 20–30 minutes
Setting: Gym, field, or open space
Group Size: Whole class (15-25 students)
Instructor Skill Level: Beginner-friendly (or non-specialist)

Big Idea (Say aloud)

“Sturgeon have to swim home to have babies. But the river gets harder and harder to swim through as time goes on. Let’s see what happens, and how we can help.”

Learning Goals

Students will:

1. Understand that Sturgeon need to move through rivers
2. Experience how human changes make rivers harder
3. Learn that people can also help Sturgeon

Materials

1. Two long ropes, pool noodles, or tape lines for “river banks”
2. Optional: cones, chairs, or students as obstacles
3. Optional: cones, chalk, or hoops to mark a Sturgeon ladder

Roles

1. Most students are Sturgeon
2. A few students or adults act as obstacles
3. Everyone gets a turn to be a Sturgeon

How the Game Works

1. Sturgeon line up at one end of the river
2. On “Swim!”, Sturgeon move to the other end
3. If gently tagged, the Sturgeon goes to the side
4. After each round, pause for a brief reflection
5. Add one new challenge each round

The Five Rounds (Increasing Difficulty)

Round 1: Easy River

Concept: Natural river, no obstacles

Setup: Only river boundaries

Script: “Long ago, rivers were open and easy to swim. Ready? Swim!”

Outcome: Most Sturgeon make it through

Ask: “Was that easy or hard?”

Round 2: Hungry Animals

Concept: Natural predators

Add: One or two students or teachers become birds who gently tag Sturgeon. If tagged, step to the side and then become a bird who can tag.

Script: “Some animals will eat Sturgeon. That’s part of nature. If you are tagged by these birds, you will also become a bird who will eat more Sturgeon for lunch. Ready? Swim!”

Outcome: Fewer Sturgeon make it through. They become anglers in the next round.

Ask: “Is this normal in nature?”

Round 3: People Fishing

Concept: Human pressure

Add: Anglers stand in the river. They cannot move. Use a dot marker to help students stay in place. Birds continue to catch Sturgeon.

Script: “Some people catch Sturgeon. If they tag you, you will become an angler too. Anglers cannot move from where they are fishing. Their feet must stay put. These 2 friends will still be birds flying around too. What happens if too many Sturgeon are caught? Ready? Swim!”

Outcome: Noticeable decrease in Sturgeon

Ask: “What changed this time?”

Round 4: The Big Wall (discussion only)

Concept: Dam blocking the river

Add: Everyone who was tagged in round 3 stand shoulder-to-shoulder across the river

Script: “Now there is a wall in the river. Do you think any of the remaining Sturgeon would get through with this wall?” *[kids answer no]*

Pause here and let students react.

Ask: “How do you think the Sturgeon would feel with this wall in the way?” “Is this fair to the Sturgeon?” “What could we do to allow the sturgeon to pass through?” *[Kids will suggest making a hole in the wall, or demolishing the wall].*

Round 5: The Sturgeon Helper

Concept: Sturgeon passage and restoration

Change: We will implement the kids’ idea from the previous round; effectively creating a fish ladder or a dam removal. For a fish ladder; partner up and play rock paper scissors to determine who can be a sturgeon again if there were none left. Mark the ladder with cones. For a dam removal, everyone becomes a sturgeon again.

Script: “People noticed Sturgeon were stuck. So they built something to help. Your idea was to *[repeat their idea].* Let’s try that. Do you think it will help? Ready? Swim!”

Outcome: Some or all Sturgeon make it through again

Ask: “Did helping the river help the Sturgeon? What would help even more?”

Simple Wrap-Up

Have students sit together and ask:

1. “What made getting up river the hardest?”
2. “Can people hurt rivers?”
3. “Can people help rivers?”

Beginner-Instructor Friendly Teaching Tips

1. Use big gestures and expressive storytelling
2. Celebrate Sturgeon that succeed
3. Pause dramatically when the river is fully blocked
4. Tell the lesson like a story, not a lecture

Instructor Cheat Sheet

1. If you remember nothing else: Start easy and add one problem at a time
2. End with hope and solutions
3. Ask a thoughtful question after each round

Sources and Inspiration

This lesson adapts and simplifies core concepts from:

1. *Sturgeon Hurdle: A Game of Obstacles to Survival:* *https://drive.google.com/file/d/17t-yKoZcg2OOOD2KU5TmFfBstUwr9aY9/view?usp=sharing*
    a. I enjoyed the “rounds” in this version, and the inclusion of Indigenous Sturgeoning practices, I think my version should include more Indigenous perspectives like this - but is the way “Sturgeon Hurdle” includes it an appropriate way to do so?
    b. I felt the 6th grade level was too complicated for the K-2nd gap that Mark identified
2. *MN DNR Run for Your Life Cycle – Sturgeon Version:* *https://drive.google.com/file/d/1PbQdkM8_ciqSjwU7oWpyr2LpEFnhd6ER/view?usp=sharing*
    a. Again, too complicated for K-2nd gap