

Ch. 3: On-the-Spot Game-Maker

There's a hidden skill every substitute teacher develops out of sheer necessity: the ability to invent games on the fly. It's not something you learn in a training manual. No, this is survival. Because when a classroom full of restless students starts giving you *that look*—you know, the one that says, “We’re two seconds away from chaos”—you have to think fast.

And thus, the art of on-the-spot game-making was born.

The first rule of substitute game-making? The simpler, the better. If it requires more than two rules, you're already losing them. I once tried to teach a group of fourth graders a modified version of charades called “Guess the Animal.” It sounded foolproof in my head: act out an animal, and your team guesses. But somehow, by round two, it had devolved into interpretive dance battles, with one kid pretending to be a “fire-breathing hamster.”

The second rule? Use whatever you have. No supplies? No problem. Crumpled paper becomes makeshift snowballs. A whiteboard marker transforms into a baton for relay races (that don't involve running—safety first). Even the desks can serve as barriers for an impromptu version of dodgeball that involves absolutely no throwing of objects (because I learned *that* lesson the hard way).

Then there's the game every sub falls back on: *Silent Ball*. A marvel of simplicity, it's equal parts thrilling and a miracle-worker for classroom management. The rules are as follows: throw a ball (or imaginary ball, in desperate times) to someone else. If you talk, you're out. If you miss, you're out. And the best part? It's *silent*. For a glorious ten minutes, the room is quiet except for the soft plop of a Nerf ball hitting hands.

But beware: kids will always find loopholes.

“Can I whisper?”

“What if I *mouth* words?”

“If I accidentally hum, does it count?”

By the end, you're making up amendments to the rulebook like a referee in overtime.

One time, I got desperate and invented a game called “Sub Says,” a budget version of Simon Says. The twist? I was allowed to throw in nonsense commands, like, “Sub says pretend you're a spaghetti noodle” or “Sub says bark like a seal.” It worked brilliantly for about three minutes—until one kid decided to “freeze” as spaghetti for the rest of the game, no matter how much I begged him to move on.

And then there's the challenge of naming these creations. Kids take this very seriously. If the name doesn't spark joy, they'll flat-out refuse to play. I once called a game “Word Relay” only to be met with groans. One student boldly declared, “That sounds boring. Let's call it *Lightning Brain!*” And suddenly, everyone was on board. Never underestimate the power of branding.

But the greatest thrill of substitute game-making? When the kids actually think you're a genius.

"Did you just make that up?" they'll ask, wide-eyed.

"Yep," you'll say, trying to sound nonchalant while suppressing a grin.

"Wow," they'll whisper as if you've just pulled off a magic trick.

Of course, not every attempt is a success. There was the ill-fated "Four Corners," where I forgot to specify that running wasn't allowed. Watching 20 kids try to run to another corner of the room, full of desks and chairs, was less *a get the wiggles out exercise* and more a *live reenactment of a disaster movie*.

And then there was my attempt at "Math Jeopardy," which I thought would be a hit. But apparently, giving points for solving math problems isn't as exciting as I'd hoped. One kid raised their hand and asked, "Can't we just play Silent Ball instead?" Ouch.

Still, for every flop, there's a shining moment where your hastily invented game saves the day. Like when I turned a vocabulary review into a game of "Word Treasure Hunt," where even the most reluctant learners joined in. Or when I made up "Desk Olympics," a series of challenges involving paper airplanes and bottle flips, and the class erupted into cheers when someone stuck the landing.

At the end of the day, being an on-the-spot game-maker is more than just a way to fill time. It's a testament to creativity, adaptability, and the sheer willpower of a sub trying to make it to the final bell.

Because let's face it—when the kids leave the room and shout, "Can we play that game again next time?" you know you've earned your place in the hall of substitute teacher legends.

Ch. 4: Teacher for a Day? More Like Professional Name-Forgetter

A teacher's brain is truly something to behold. They can not only memorize every student's name, but also recall their favorite book, their best friend, and the exact amount of chocolate milk they can down before recess. It's impressive—almost magical. As a substitute, though, I'm not blessed with this superpower. Instead, I walk into class and see twentyish eager (or not-so-eager) faces, each silently daring me to remember their name by the end of the day. Spoiler alert: I never do.

From the moment I introduce myself, I know I'm fighting a losing battle. "Good morning, everyone! My name is Mr. Henry, and I'm your substitute today." I barely have time to finish my greeting before hands shoot up. "Hi, my name's Jacob," says a kid in the front row. "Nice to meet you, Jacob!" I say, mentally logging it away. Except two minutes later, another kid shouts, "Wait, *I'm* Jacob! He's Jake!" Now, I have two Jacobs, one Jake, and a sinking realization that this is going to get much worse before it gets better.

By mid-morning, the confusion reaches its peak. There's a Sarah and a Sara (one insists her name is pronounced "Suh-RAH," but good luck distinguishing it when thirty other kids are shouting "Sarah!"). There's also a Jack and a Jackson who spend most of the morning pretending they can't hear the difference between their names. "I was talking to *Jack*," I say. "Did you mean *Jackson*?" comes the immediate reply, accompanied by exaggerated shrugs, snickers, and an occasional eye-roll (thanks Suh-RAH).

Eventually, I resort to my emergency plan: generic terms of endearment and random descriptions. "Hey, buddy!" I call out, pointing vaguely. "You with the red shirt!" and "The one standing by the window!" become my go-to moves. I half expect one of the kids to say, "My name is 'Standing by the Window,' thanks," but fortunately, they giggle and move on.

And then there's the inevitable joker. Every class has one—the kid who insists on giving you a fake name just to see how long it'll take you to catch on. "My name's Bob," says a tiny, mischievous girl who couldn't look less like a Bob if she tried. I play along, calling her Bob for as long as I can until someone finally cracks and yells, "Her name's Emily!" Emily laughs, completely unfazed, and I swear I see the real Bob (yes, there's an actual Bob) give her a nod of respect.

But even when I think I've finally nailed a few names, there's always a curve ball. Like the twins. Oh, the twins. They'll insist they're *so different*—one wears a blue hoodie, the other wears green—but I'll call on one twin only to realize I'm talking to the wrong one. "I'm *Aidan*," he'll say, exasperated. "That's *Ethan*." And then I have to apologize to both twins, who seem mildly offended that I haven't memorized their every feature within ten minutes of meeting them.

At lunchtime, I find myself scanning my attendance sheet like it's a treasure map. Maybe, just maybe, I'll get one more name right before the bell rings. But when I try, I'm immediately corrected. "It's not *Ellie*; it's *Elle*." Or, "I prefer to go by my middle name, *Dominique*." At this point, I just nod politely and think about how much easier it would be if everyone had name tags.

Speaking of name tags—sometimes, they do have them. But these tags are never where they're supposed to be. Either the kids cover them up, or they've "accidentally" swapped with a friend. I once confidently called on "Nathan" for an answer, only for him to reveal with a smirk that he was actually "Lucy." I learned to check for giggles before trusting name tags again.

By the end of the day, I've fully embraced my role as Professional Name-Forgetter. I wave goodbye to "You in the red sweater" and "The kid who loves dinosaurs," promising to remember their names next time (I won't). The regular teacher will likely hear about my struggles, but that's okay. The kids had their fun, I survived, and maybe—just maybe—I'll remember one or two names if I'm ever lucky enough to sub for the same class again.

Because while I may not have the superhuman memory of a full-time teacher, I like to think there's a charm in my creative attempt at name recall. At least, that's what I tell myself when I accidentally call Jack "Jake" for the tenth time. No matter what, I'll always remember one name: "Bob." Thanks for that one, Emily.

Ch. 5: The First Grade CEO

If there's one thing I've learned about first graders, it's that they're born leaders. Or at least, they *think* they are. Meet the First Grade CEO: the child who knows the schedule better than I do, and lets me know about it.

They run the classroom with the confidence of a Fortune 500 executive and aren't afraid to interrupt a lesson to keep the "company" (aka our classroom) on track.

It starts the moment I let them into the room. While I'm glancing at the teacher's neatly typed lesson plan, the First Grade CEO is already assessing the situation, clipboard in hand. "We're supposed to do reading first," one declares, arms crossed, with the authority of someone who has been running this operation for years.

I make the rookie mistake of saying, "Thanks, but I've got it." The First Grade CEO nods like they're humoring me but promptly stations themselves nearby, ready to jump in at a moment's notice.

When I deviate even slightly from the sacred schedule, they pounce. "We're supposed to go to music *now*," they insist, pointing to the clock like they're managing a tight production schedule. "If we're late, Mrs. Anderson will say something!" Never mind that Mrs. Anderson isn't even here today; the First Grade CEO won't let her legacy be tarnished.

During the morning meeting, I was halfway through explaining an activity when the CEO raised their hand. I pause, thinking they have a question. "Actually, we're not supposed to do this until after snack time," they announce loudly, earning nods from their board of directors—aka the other first graders who also think they run the room.

And then there's the interrupting. Oh, the interrupting. I'll be mid-sentence, enthusiastically reading *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, and the CEO will chime in like a pop-up ad. "Um, you forgot the part where he eats the plums."

"I'm getting there," I assure them.

"But it's important," they say with the conviction of someone defending a quarterly earnings report.

Their dedication to the schedule is both impressive and exhausting. Heaven forbid I take five extra minutes to finish a craft project. "We're supposed to clean up *now*!" the CEO shouts, clapping their hands for emphasis. "If we don't, we'll miss recess!"

And don't even get me started on lunch procedures. The First Grade CEO has memorized who sits where, who gets hot lunch, who needs extra napkins, and who will inevitably spill their milk. "Joey can't sit next to Emma," they warn. "They'll argue about who will get Superstar today. But we all know it won't be either of them."

Despite their interruptions and micromanaging tendencies, I must admit that the First Grade CEO keeps me on my toes. By the end of the day, I'm almost grateful for their constant vigilance—almost.

As I'm cleaning up, the CEO approaches me one last time. "You did pretty good today," they say, like a boss giving a performance review. "But next time, don't forget, we have a snack before math."

“Noted,” I reply, barely suppressing a laugh.

The First Grade CEO taught me that sometimes leadership comes in small packages—with big voices. While their constant reminders can make the day feel like a never-ending board meeting, their dedication to keeping the wheels turning is admirable. So, I say let them lead, even if it means getting interrupted every 30 seconds. After all, who else will keep me from forgetting about music class?

Ch. 6: The Power of the Word “Yet”

As a substitute teacher, I’m not just stepping into a classroom; I’m entering a parallel universe where a single word holds more power than I ever could have guessed.

That word? *Yet*.

It sneaks in during math time when a student, with a world-weary sigh beyond their years, moans, “I don’t know how to do this.” I start to nod sympathetically, but then I hear another student, the wise sage of the third grade, pipe up: “Well, you just don’t know how to do it *yet*.”

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