



# How to Use Competitions and Games in the Lifestyle Change Program

A resource for Lifestyle Coaches to motivate participants and help them achieve their lifestyle change goals.

NATIONAL  
DIABETES  
PREVENTION  
PROGRAM



Centers for Disease Control and Prevention  
National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion  
Division of Diabetes Translation

# Purpose of Using Competitions and Games

As a Lifestyle Coach, you want to help your participants make lasting lifestyle changes to reduce the risk of type 2 diabetes. Making these changes can be hard. Friendly games and competition can help program participants form healthy habits and stay motivated. After all, even small lifestyle changes can be a “win” for your participants.

This document is your guide for using competitions and games to deliver the National Diabetes Prevention Program (National DPP) lifestyle change program. It outlines the benefits of competitions and games, ways to prepare to use competitions and games, and ideas for activities.

## Benefits of Competitions and Games

Motivation is key to a participant’s success in the National DPP lifestyle change program. Motivation is defined as the general desire or willingness to do something. Multiple studies have shown that games help motivate people to learn.<sup>1</sup> Getting someone motivated to learn creates brain activity that allows the formation of memories.<sup>2</sup> This can improve learning outcomes.

It is important to understand two types of motivation: extrinsic and intrinsic. **Intrinsic motivation** is when a person does something out of personal interest or enjoyment, rather than because of an outside force. **Extrinsic motivation** is when a person does something for a reward, prize, or other incentive. When it comes to lifestyle change programs, both types of motivation play a part in engaging participants.

When you provide rewards and other sources of extrinsic motivation to program participants, you support positive outcomes in people who may be hard to inspire. Research has shown that when students played games as part of classroom activities, those who participated in a competitive version of the game learned more than their peers.<sup>1</sup> People also receive more benefits from competition when they compete against peers rather than competing against an imaginary or virtual opponent.<sup>3</sup> These findings show why it is important to include an element of competition in your engagement strategies.

Participants who are engaged are more likely to stick with the program and have stronger intrinsic motivation,<sup>3</sup> which can improve program retention. You can use competition-based learning to help your participants be active in learning the material. This approach will help participants believe that their actions can improve their lives. This belief is called self-efficacy. Self-efficacy determines how people feel, think, motivate themselves, and behave.

## Preparation for Competitions and Games

Before you launch a competition, you will need to think through how to improve program outcomes, keep participants safe, protect their well-being and privacy, and motivate them to meet their goals. Remember, your organization is responsible for having procedures in place to ensure safety and compliance with the [Diabetes Prevention Recognition Program \(DPRP\) Standards](#) and a CDC-approved curriculum.



### ***When preparing for competitions and games, ask yourself:***

- *What program or curriculum goals am I trying to promote?*
- *How can I keep all participants comfortable and safe during these activities?*
- *What should be the measure of success, and how should I reward it?*

## Keep the Focus on Learning

Remember that competition is a means to an end. Any activity you choose should focus on teaching participants about a specific topic to help them improve their health or well-being. Emphasize accuracy when you pose questions related to curriculum materials. You should recognize everyone who gets it right rather than declaring one winner.

For example, you could lead a competition that teaches people how to read nutrition labels. The winners of this competition should include all participants who correctly locate the information on the label. This makes your competition about learning how to read nutrition labels. On the other hand, if your competition is about who is first to locate the information on the label, the competition is not based on whether all participants learned something new.

## Encourage Participation and Cooperation

Make sure all participants are comfortable and know that competitions and games are optional. These activities should not create division in the class but instead be a fun way to learn. Cooperation among participants is important since some people respond better to working with others than to being singled out. You should encourage everyone to participate, even those who favor working independently and may not clearly appreciate the value of the activity.

## Tell Participants the Goal of the Activity

As you introduce a game or competition, make sure your participants clearly understand what they will learn from it and how it will benefit them. To do this, choose competitions and games that align with one or more of the approved goals of your lifestyle change program or a specific curriculum module.

Let's look again at the competition involving reading nutrition labels. In this case, you would tell participants that the activity is designed to help them learn about nutrition and how to read these labels. You should also tell them that the activity is helping them form a habit of reading nutrition labels before purchasing items.

## Choose the Type of Competition That Fits Your Group

When participants try to beat their own best time for a competition—for example, a 5K road race—it is called a self-based competition. In other cases, people compete against others. They can do this individually or in a group.

In an individual-based competition, your participants compete with one another. For example, they might compete to see who can record the most minutes of physical activity.

In a group-based competition, members of a group work together. For example, you might split participants into two groups, with each trying to report more days of physical activity than the other.

Any of these approaches can help your participants learn and make important behavior changes. Choose the type of competition that you think will be most useful for your participants.

## Keep Participants Motivated and Safe

### Consider Using Personal Commitment Statements

Engaging participants more actively in program sessions requires participant buy-in. To achieve this goal, consider having your participants write individual commitment statements. You can adapt the following example, which is in the National DPP [Personal Success Tool](#) (PST) modules (see Pledge 1 in the Commit to Change module).

*I, [Name], make this pledge to myself, and commit to participating in and completing my CDC-recognized diabetes prevention lifestyle change program to lose weight, adopt a healthier lifestyle, and reduce my risk of type 2 diabetes.*

*My goal for the next six months is to [goal].*

*It's important to me to make a lifestyle change because I want to [source of inspiration].*

*In order to achieve this goal, I will:*

- 1) [Step One]
- 2) [Step Two]
- 3) [Step Three]

Individual commitment statements help your participants reflect so they can set concrete goals, identify what motivates them, and choose steps to take. These statements are a good way for participants to clarify for themselves what makes them ready and willing to take steps toward lifestyle change.



### Encourage Participants to Talk With Their Health Care Providers

If you have not done so already, encourage participants to talk with their health care provider before making a change to their lifestyles. This may not be necessary for activities that do not involve physical activity or a change in diet. You can suggest questions for them to ask their provider. Here are some ideas for participants to consider:

- **Physical Health:** It's been a while since I've been active. Will that affect my ability to be physically active again? Will my age affect my physical limitations?
- **Underlying Health Conditions:** Do I have other underlying health conditions that will affect my ability to participate in activities? These may include trouble breathing, heart concerns, bone or joint problems, chest pain, dizziness, or high blood pressure.
- **Medications:** Is there anything I should know about how medications I take may affect what I eat or how active I am?
- **Mental Health:** If I have a family or personal history of mental illness or eating disorders, do I need to approach changes to eating or activity in a particular way? Will competitions or other games cause unhealthy stress or anxiety?

Before starting any competition or game, remind participants that they should follow their health care provider's recommendations. If an activity feels uncomfortable in any way to them, they can decide not to do it.

#### QUICK TIP

Have participants check with their health insurance providers to see if they offer any benefits for reporting on wellness activities like the ones they will do in your program.

## Keep Participant Information Private

Your organization must protect the privacy and confidentiality of participant information and follow all relevant federal, state, and local laws on information collection, storage, use, and disclosure. This includes laws related to the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA).

As a Lifestyle Coach, make sure to collect information in a way that identifies individual participants as little as possible. For example, instead of using weight measurements or calorie counts as the measure of success, use incremental differences or percentage changes in people's weight or activity level. This approach will give people more privacy. The focus should be on motivating people, not collecting information that could be sensitive or private.

## Choose Appropriate Incentives

An incentive, or a prize awarded to an individual, is often given at the end of a competition or game. You might consider the following types of incentives or prizes as part of any games or competitions:

- Cash incentives.
- Gift cards, vouchers, or other noncash incentives.
- Prizes, products, certificates of achievement, or other nonfinancial incentives.
- Mixed incentives.

Get to know the interests and motivations of your participants before you pick an incentive. Remember that incentives should align with the goals of your program. For example, offering dessert as a prize in a lifestyle change program would not be appropriate. To read more about incentives and the research behind their effectiveness, see the [Emerging Practices: Guide for Using Incentives to Enroll and Retain Participants](#) on the National DPP Customer Service Center.

Make sure to get clear guidance from your organization about what incentives are permitted. Don't make plans or promise incentives to participants until you get this guidance.

Some organizations that fund lifestyle change programs have their own rules about incentives. For example, if your organization is part of the Medicare Diabetes Prevention Program (MDPP) expanded model, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) will not pay for incentives as part of this program. Although CMS will not fund these incentives, you can still offer them if they meet other requirements for MDPP suppliers.



**King's Daughters Medical Center** has found that using an online quiz tool called Kahoot for trivia games reinforces information and helps staff assess how well participants are retaining information.

### QUICK TIP

Many organizations that offer prizes use items that align with the weekly lesson. For example, they might give out a pedometer for a lesson on physical activity tracking or a portion plate for a lesson on healthy eating.

Another option is to look for ways to share participants' victories with their friends, family, or other community members. Many people are motivated by public affirmation, or positive statements and encouragement from others. However, be sure to get participants' consent first.

# Ideas for Meaningful Competitions and Games

Use the examples in this section as inspiration to get you started.



## ***When preparing for competitions and games, ask yourself:***

- *What will get my participants excited?*
- *At what point in the program do I plan on starting a competition or game?*

## Choose a Curriculum-Inspired Activity

If you want to teach one or more CDC-approved curriculum topics using competitions and games, this table will give you some ideas for activities you might introduce for each content area. These activities can be introduced during the week a related module is being taught.

Content Area	Overview	Sample Activities
Physical Activity	Activities should encourage participants to become more active and get the recommended minimum of 150 minutes of physical activity each week.	<p>Suggest that your participants compete to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Get the most minutes of physical activity over a set time period.</li><li>• Complete the most workouts over a specified time period.</li><li>• Get the most peers or family members involved in a fitness challenge outside of class.</li><li>• Try the greatest variety of types of activity.</li></ul>
Healthy Eating	Healthy food habits can focus on all areas of healthy eating, including grocery shopping, cooking, eating out, and tracking consumption.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Ask participants to vote on their favorite healthy meal or snack.</li><li>• Have participants compete to see who can increase the number of vegetable servings they eat in a week.</li><li>• Challenge participants to achieve a weight loss goal as a group.</li></ul>
Manage Stress	The lifestyle change program curriculum includes several topics related to coping with personal struggles. Examples include reducing stress, developing a healthy mindset about change, and developing better sleep habits.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Challenge participants to complete a daily activity to improve their well-being. These can include meditation, self-reflection, journaling, art or music activities, and mindfulness exercises.</li></ul>
Heart Health	Game-based learning, where participants interact through a game to get or reinforce knowledge, can be used to teach people about heart health. You can write questions based on your curriculum.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Test the class with a trivia or <i>Jeopardy!</i> game on curriculum materials related to heart health.</li><li>• Use an online quiz tool, such as Kahoot or Mentimeter, to test retention of material.</li></ul>

## Use Classroom Gamification to Inspire Your Participants

You may want to have a competition that is ongoing across several classes of your program. You can help improve participants' drive and performance by using a point system, scoreboards, or items such as badges or stickers to recognize individual achievements. This is called gamification, and studies show it helps people learn.<sup>3</sup> Rewards can range from stickers for each accomplishment to an incentive for the participant who is in the lead after a set period.

As discussed earlier in this guide, you can use self-based, individual-based, or group-based competition in your program. Gamification can be adapted for self-based competition to account for people being at different levels of motivation and ability. For example, participants can outline a personal set of goals. These goals might include how many pounds they want to lose or specific changes they want to make to reduce stress. You can award points when participants make progress toward meeting their goals. Awarding points for these personal goals puts the focus on the important lifestyle changes being made, not on tangible rewards like cash or prizes.

You can also apply gamification to individual-based competition by setting up scoreboards to record when participants accomplish specific tasks related to your program. For example, participants might earn points for each class they attend or each entry they make in their physical activity log.

## Create a Buddy System

Putting participants into buddy pairs can be an effective way to encourage your participants to bond with each other. Buddy pairs can help each other outside of the classroom stay on track to reach their lifestyle change goals. They can encourage each other, share advice, or work on goals together.

Each week, you can encourage buddy pairs to share success stories about how they held each other accountable. For example, they could talk about how they explored a new hiking trail together to increase their physical activity. You can add a competitive element by having the class vote on their favorite success story each week.

Keep the competition friendly and good-natured. This will strengthen the relationship classmates have with each other. This approach will help you achieve the program goal of fostering community support within the class.

## Game On!

Using competitions and games helps to foster a closer community and improve program attendance. You also help participants learn and retain information. You can use these techniques at any point during the program.

If you have questions about how to add competitions and games to your sessions, visit the [National DPP Customer Service Center](#) and submit a Technical Assistance request by selecting "Contact Us/Contact Support" at the top of the homepage. The Customer Service Center can also help answer any questions on how to deliver the National DPP lifestyle change program.

## References

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