Capture the Flag Rules

A simple printable game guide for backyard summer camp, family game night, or neighborhood play.

How it works: Capture the Flag is a classic team game where each team protects its own flag while trying to sneak into the other team's territory, grab their flag, and bring it safely back home. Players are safe on their own side, but once they cross into enemy territory, they can be tagged and sent to jail.

1. Game Setup

- **Choose the boundaries:** Divide a large backyard, park, field, or gym into two equal sides. Mark a center line so everyone knows where each team's territory begins.
- **Create team bases:** Pick a home base or safe zone for each team on opposite ends of the playing area.
- **Set up jail:** Choose one jail area for each team, usually off to the side but still inside that team's territory.
- **Hide the flags:** Give each team a flag, bandana, bright cloth, cone, or other easy-to-spot object. Each team gets a few minutes to hide its flag somewhere in its own territory. The flag should be visible enough to be found, but not so obvious that the game ends in thirty seconds.

2. Basic Gameplay

- **Split into attackers and defenders:** Some players run into enemy territory to search for the flag. Others stay back to guard their own flag and tag opponents.
- **Know when you are safe:** You are safe while standing on your own team's side. Once you cross the center line into the other team's territory, you can be tagged.
- **Go to jail when tagged:** If an opponent tags you while you are in their territory, go directly to their jail area.
- **Win the game:** The first team to capture the other team's flag and carry it back across the center line to its own side wins.

3. Jail and Rescuing Teammates

- **Getting rescued:** A teammate can free you by running into enemy territory and tagging you while you are in jail.
- **Free walk back:** After a rescue, both players get a safe walk back to their own side. During this walk, they cannot be tagged, tag anyone else, or grab the flag.
- **Choose your house rule:** Before the game starts, decide whether one rescuer can free one jailed player at a time or the whole jail at once. For backyard games, one-at-a-time usually keeps things simpler.

4. Flag Carrying Rules

- **Carry it, don't hide it:** Once a player picks up the other team's flag, they must carry it back toward their side. No hiding it under clothes, tossing it across the line, or handing it off unless your group decides to allow passes.
- **If the flag carrier is tagged:** Decide before you play whether the flag returns to its original hiding spot or gets dropped where the player was tagged. The tagged player goes to jail.

- **Keep the rules clear:** For younger kids, the easiest version is usually this: if you get tagged with the flag, the flag goes back to its hiding place and you go to jail.

5. Quick Backyard Rules to Agree On Before You Start

- **No rough tagging:** Use light tags only. No tackling, grabbing, pushing, blocking, or dragging players.
- **Stay in bounds:** If a player runs out of bounds, they return to their own side or go to jail - choose the rule before the game begins.
- **Keep flags visible:** Flags can be hidden cleverly, but they should not be buried, locked away, placed too high to reach, or hidden inside someone's clothing.
- **Set a time limit:** If no one captures a flag after 20 to 30 minutes, call a reset, move the flags, or declare the team with fewer players in jail the winner.

> ***Camp counselor tip:*** *For bigger groups, have one adult or older kid act as the referee. Their job is not to become a professional sports official. Their job is to keep the game moving, settle arguments quickly, and remind everyone that light tagging means light tagging.*