



Babies and Toddlers Need Language Play Too

Playing orally with nursery rhymes, both traditional and modern, is especially magical. From very early in infancy, babies respond to their rhythms and rhymes, tickles and bounces. It does not matter that babies cannot understand the words. When adults regularly do rhymes with babies, those babies are learning about much more than language. Through eye contact and mutually responsive interaction, they discover the delight of shared pleasure and the solid basis this brings to relationships. The gentle touch that many of the rhymes invites helps babies recognize their physical boundaries.

Babies also become familiar with the rhythms, sounds and conventions of our language. They learn that if they listen and wait just a little, something pleasurable happens – the tickle or bounce at the end. Although they cannot articulate it, this is the beginning of knowing that rhymes have a structure that they can predict. Babies who have favourite rhymes anticipate their endings and crow with glee the moment you begin. As babies begin to understand the content of the rhymes, those rhymes also become their first stories, complete with characters and happenings that can be pictured in the mind.

Not all rhymes are the same and some tend to appeal sooner than others:

- *For newborns and very young babies:* Rhymes that have a gentle physical element, working down the face, patting the feet, giving a little bounce and drop, such as *Shoe the Wild Horse*.
- *For older babies:* Rhymes with more elaborate language and often, though not always, more boisterous actions, such as *Father and Mother and Uncle John*.
- *1½ - 2 years:* Rhymes like *Dr. Foster Went to Gloucester* that rely less on a physical punchline and more on story.
- *2 - 2½ years:* Simple fingerplays, such as *Put Your Finger in Foxy's Hole*, which they can do on their own or with an adult's help.
- *2½ - 3 years:* More complex fingerplays and rhymes that invite large miming actions, like *Up, Up the Candlestick*. Adult help may well still be needed. Also good are nonsense rhymes such as *Dilly Dilly Piccalilli* that are silly or whimsical, now that the children have a strong enough grasp of what's real to begin to enjoy spotting what's not.

Children who have had rich language experience begin to enjoy listening to simple stories when they are about two years old. Now playing with rhymes complements listening to stories. Rhymes that preschoolers enjoyed in one way when they were smaller can now to be enjoyed in other ways. Bouncing rhymes like *Father and Mother and Uncle John* can be acted out. Touching rhymes like *Shoe the Wild Horse* can be done on a friend, parent or doll. As the children gain more ease with language and movement, they take possession of the material they like and use it actively in their own way in their play.

Shoe the wild horse,

make a fist and tap firmly on the ball of the foot

Shoe the mare

tap on the heel

But let the little coltie

Go bare, bare, bare.

stroke length of sole as you say "bare, bare, bare"

Father and Mother

And Uncle John

Went to the market one

by one

bounce the baby on your knee, facing you, in time to the beat

Father fell off,

tip the baby to one side (gently at first)

Mother fell off

tip to the other side

But Uncle John went on

and on and on and on...

bounce baby in time for as long as you both feel inclined

Put your finger in Foxy's

hole

make one hand into a loose fist, poke the index finger of your other hand in

Foxy's not at home.

wiggle finger around and shake your head

Foxy's out the back door

Picking on a bone.

poke the finger through so it sticks out the back side of your fist.

Dr. Foster

Went to Gloucester

In a shower of rain.

He stepped in a puddle

right up to his middle

And never went there again.

Up, Up, the Candlestick

hold one forearm up to make a candle

Went little mousy brown

run the fingers of the other hand up to the top

She ate a bite of candle

close fingers over top of candle

Then she couldn't get back

down.

shake head

She cried out, "Grandma,

Grandma!"

cup hands and call

But Grandma was in town

shake head

So she curled herself into

a ball

hunch shoulders, curl over

And rolled herself back

down.

roll hands over and over down to floor

Dilly dilly piccalilli,

Tell me something very silly.

There was a chap,

His name was Bert,

He ate the buttons

Off his shirt.

Clyde Watson, Father Fox's Penny Rhymes