

Rhymers Are Readers: The Importance of Nursery Rhymes

Why Is This Important to My Child?

Language Development

When children hear nursery rhymes, they hear the sounds vowels and consonants make. They learn how to put these sounds together to make words.

They also practice pitch, volume, and voice inflection, as well as the rhythm of language. For example, listen to how you sound when you ask questions. Do you sound different when you tell a story?

In nursery rhymes, children hear new words that they would not hear in everyday language (like *fetch* and *pail* in “Jack and Jill went up the hill to fetch a pail of water”).

Nursery rhymes are short and easy to repeat, so they become some of a child’s first sentences.



Cognitive Development

Since nursery rhymes are patterns, they help children learn easy recall and memorization.

Nursery rhymes usually tell a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end. This teaches children that events happen in sequence, and they begin to learn how to understand stories and follow along.

Nursery rhymes use patterns and sequence, so children begin to learn simple math skills as they recite them. Many rhymes also use numbers, counting, and other math words that children need to learn, such as size and weight.

Nursery rhymes also introduce alliteration (“Goosie Goosie Gander”), onomatopoeia (“Baa Baa Black Sheep”), and imaginative imagery. Children hear these rhymes and act out what they imagine the characters are doing.



References

- Kenney, S. (2005). Nursery rhymes: Foundations for learning. *General Music Today*, 19 (1).
- Monro, F. (Senior Speech-Language Pathologist). Nursery rhymes, songs and early language development. Interior Health Authority.

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Physical Development

Children develop their mouth and tongue muscles by using the different sounds in the rhyme.

Rhymes that involve movement help with coordination.

In dramatic play, children use their whole bodies to act out the nursery rhymes they hear.



Social/Emotional Development

Sharing nursery rhymes provides a safe and secure bond between parents and children.

Positive physical touch between a parent and a child or between children, for example, during clapping rhymes, is important for social development.

Funny nursery rhymes allow children to develop a sense of humor.

Nursery rhyme characters experience many different emotions. This can help children identify their own emotions and understand the real emotions of others.

When children act out the nursery rhyme stories they hear, they learn to imagine, be creative, and express themselves.

Nursery rhymes teach history (“Ring Around the Rosie”) and connect children to the past.



References

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Tony Stead, senior national literacy consultant for Mondo Publishing in New York, described research showing that in 1945, the average elementary school student had a vocabulary of 10,000 words. Today, children have a vocabulary of only 2,500 words.

"That is disastrous," Mr. Stead said. "So many parents are not reading to their children anymore." A lot of problems, he added, come from children not memorizing rhymes, the bread-and-butter of traditional early children's literature.

"Listening comprehension precedes reading comprehension," Mr. Stead said. "In order for a child to understand what they are reading, they have to be able to hear the language first. A lot of the traditional rhymes, such as 'Jack and Jill' and 'Humpty Dumpty,' were repetitious and allowed us to memorize basic structures and patterns in the English language, then put it together. It's important that young children learn to memorize through verse.

"Research shows children learn more in their first eight years than they do in the rest of their lives. This is a powerful time to teach them to be readers and writers. Instead of enhancing children's imaginations, today's media have stunted it. Rhyme is important in developing phonemic [hearing] awareness in children. It's harder in elementary school to teach kids to read when they do not have oral support. Kids are unable to paint pictures in their heads unless they read. Now they all have pictures painted for them through TV and video. When kids have to create their own stories, they rely on what they saw on television last night rather than form it in their minds. Traditional cultures handed stories down through talk. They didn't have picture books back then. The power of a parent or teacher sitting down and telling a story, allowing kids to paint pictures in their heads, is a very powerful tool. Most of our problems could be solved if parents could be reading to and talking to children from birth, giving them a solid oral language basis. These days, the TV is on during dinner." [Alderman, K., & Alderman, D. Why nursery rhymes? Retrieved from www.dannyandkim.com/WhyNurseryRhymes.html]

Nursery rhymes and songs can be used anywhere at any time. As such, they are one of our most transportable forms of play. Here are some of the ways fingerplays, rhymes, chants, and songs teach children concepts and skills and even provide emotional support.

1. Language Development. As children recite rhymes and sing songs, they are learning new vocabulary and how to articulate words, modulate their voices, and enunciate clearly. They are simultaneously practicing pitch, volume, and voice inflection while experiencing the rhythm of language. They learn to pronounce words easily by saying them over and over again and by practicing them without effort or the pressures of criticism.

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2. Reading Skills. In almost all fingerplays, the hands move from left to right. This left-to-right directional motion is important for children to experience, since it prepares them for the order of the written word in English. (When you read to your children, let them follow your finger, tracing the words so they also absorb this concept from the written words in a book.) A second important reading concept that children must experience fully before they can become good readers is story sequence. They need to absorb how the sequence of what happened first, second, third, etc., and last affects the story so they can retell it in the order the events occurred.

3. Math Concepts. There is frequent use of counting in young children's songs and rhymes, in both a forward and backward direction. Children learn to add as they count forward and subtract as they count backward. Other stories and songs explore words that describe size ("Billy Goats Gruff") and weight ("The Three Bears") and use math-related words to define concepts such as many, few, plenty, and so on. This contributes to the child's basic math foundation, which will later help in math abstractions.

4. Creative Dramatization. Rhymes and songs provide great building blocks for creative dramatics. Children love to act out the rhymes as they say them, dramatizing the actions of the characters with their whole bodies or using their hands and fingers. When children are encouraged by an adult to display their creativity in an atmosphere that is free of criticism, their sense of self is strengthened and their confidence in expressing themselves is increased.

5. Comfort and Support. Nursery rhymes and songs are "places" young children can retreat to when they feel lonely, sad, or bewildered by their world. If a child is away from Mom or Dad and feeling alone, they can call upon a song they shared and be reminded of the times and the feelings they had when they sang it together.

References

- Anderson, P. F. (2005). The mother goose pages. Retrieved from www-personal.umich.edu/~pfa/dreamhouse/nursery/reading.html
- Kenney, S. (2005). Nursery rhymes: Foundations for learning. *General Music Today*, 19 (1), 28–31.
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- Neuman, S. B. (2004). Learning from poems & rhymes. *Scholastic Parent & Child*, 12 (3), 32.