

Infants & Toddlers

Learning Through Rhythm & Rhyme

Boost babies' skills by taking advantage of rhythm and rhyme by Alice Sterling Honig, Ph.D.

Early on, babies reveal how much rhythms are a part of their very being. Just a few weeks after birth, rhythmic patterns of sleep and eating become clear to sleep-deprived parents.

Rhythms characterize body functions such as eating and toileting. Some children have much more predictable rhythms than others. Some babies turn red in the face just after a mid-morning nursing and have strong bowel movements. Others have bowel movements on a much less rhythmic schedule. In this case, a teacher cannot count on a pattern to signal a baby's hunger pangs or readiness for elimination. Rhythmicity in bodily functions is partly an inborn temperament trait.

Rhythms as Signals

Rhythms are so comforting to babies that they often use rhythmic rocking when bored or lonesome. Some babies will twist their hands in front of their eyes and stare at them while lying in a crib. Some babies rhythmically rock back and forth while sitting away from any toys on the floor. These actions signal that a baby needs more variety in intimate back-and-forth play with a caring adult. Crib toys, overhead mobiles, lots of floor time on the tummy, and time together in turn-taking talk will replace a baby's need for rhythmic rocking.

Using Rhymes and Songs

Rhythmic songs help infants and toddlers enjoy group time. Seated together on the floor in infant seats, 8- to 10-month-olds bounce up and down as a teacher pounds out the familiar and strongly emphatic rhythms of a nursery rhyme. Mounted on the nursery rocking horse, a high-energy toddler vigorously and happily "rides" as his teacher recites the rhythms of the nursery rhyme "Ride a Cock Horse to Bambury Cross." Hearing rhymes adds to the pleasure of babies' vigorous body bouncing. Children with high energy levels can especially profit from adults reciting a rhyme in time to bouncing, running, or jumping.

Toddlers love rhymes and repetitive rhythms. At group time, even shy toddlers who only whisper the words often participate in the bodily motions of "The Wheels on the Bus."

Promoting Language Learning

Preschoolers who reach kindergarten without recognizing rhymes have a more difficult time with early school literacy experiences. Some preschoolers struggle to understand that two

words rhyme when they end in the same sound. However, research shows that even young toddlers practice their own made-up rhymes such as “oogie, woogie, poogie” over and over. Teachers can support emerging literacy by emphasizing rhyming poems and games.

Becoming aware of rhyming sounds boosts brain activity and a child’s early literacy ability. Adding singsong rhyming words to requests for attention is an effective way for teachers to get toddlers to listen to what they say. Rhymes and rhythms add zest and humor and increase toddler cooperation in the classroom. ECT

Alice Sterling Honig, Ph.D., is a professor emerita of child development at Syracuse University. She is the author of *Secure Relationships: Nurturing Infant-Toddler Attachments in Early Care Settings*.