

Rhymers Are Readers: The Importance of Nursery Rhymes

What Can I Do for My Child?

When using nursery songs and rhymes with your child, you are engaged in a social routine that encourages turn-taking skills, which are critical for the development of conversation. You foster responsiveness, and, through repetition, you help your child learn to anticipate what's coming next. Young children are able to respond to rhythm and tone before they understand language, but both have a common foundation of tone patterns, stress, and rhythm. The words used in nursery rhymes and songs help a child develop language comprehension as they learn to associate key words with people, objects, and events in their daily lives.

For Babies to Toddlers (0–2 years)

- If a rhyme mentions a body part, such as the nose or feet, touch the child's nose or wiggle his or her foot.
- If you are reading from a book, point to the pictures as they are mentioned in the rhyme.
- Act out the actions as they are mentioned, and let your child imitate you.
- Sing songs or recite nursery rhymes in a singsong voice.

Birth to three months: During this development period children may enjoy movements to help them get to know their body, important people in their life, and their surrounding environment. Developing close bonds with caregivers is what is important. Try activities such as “This Little Piggy Went to Market,” “Hickory Dickory Dock,” or “Round and Round the Garden.” Sing lullabies like “Rock-a-Bye Baby,” “Bye Baby Bunting,” “Hush Little Baby,” or “All Through the Night” while rocking and cuddling your child. Use nursery rhymes such as “Georgie Porgie Pudding and Pie,” “Hey Diddle, Diddle,” and “Little Miss Muffet.” Often a baby can be calmed by a gentle, human voice.

Three to six months: Most babies at this stage are very social and eager to learn all there is about their world. A child can communicate with different cries to express boredom, frustration, hunger, impatience, or discomfort and will babble and experiment with different sounds for self-entertainment. Knee ride songs such as “To Market, To Market,” “Ride a Cock Horse,” and “Trot, Trot, Trot, Trot” are great at this stage. Try saying rhymes as your baby is bathed, such as “Rub-a-Dub-Dub.” “Eensy, Weensy Spider” is another well-known rhyme, song, and fingerplay. You might enjoy dancing with your baby to songs like “The Bear Went Over the Mountain,” “You Are My Sunshine,” and “Teddy Bears’ Picnic.” Try reciting nursery rhymes such as “Old King Cole,” “There Was a Crooked Man,” or “There Was an Old Woman.” “Pat-a-Cake” is another popular interactive game.

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For Babies to Toddlers (0–2 years), continued

Six to nine months: At this stage a baby is becoming much more mobile—sitting, crawling, standing, and getting into everything! Your baby’s constant babbling is beginning to sound more like real words. Their “baby talk” has a range of tones similar to adults, such as in questions, commands, and descriptions. Knee bouncing rhymes as well as ankle rides like “Tom, Tom the Piper’s Son” and “Humpty Dumpty” are often enjoyed now. When washing you might use songs such as “This Is the Way We Wash Our Hands.” You could introduce simple instruments to accompany your songs like a shaker, rhythm sticks, bells, or a pot and wooden spoon for a drum. Other suggestions include “A-Hunting We Will Go,” “The Grand Old Duke of York,” and “She’ll Be Coming ’Round the Mountain.” For rhymes, use “See Saw Marjory Daw,” “To Market, to Market,” and “Leg Over Leg.”

Nine to twelve months: Now your baby will be climbing, crawling, cruising, and possibly walking. It is important to talk to your child about everything and to provide names for things. They are imitating language, and some words may even sound like real words. They are starting to recognize and meaningfully use the rhythms, tones, and facial expressions of language. Try adding action games such as “Jack and Jill,” “Head and Shoulders,” “Old McDonald Had a Farm,” and “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star.” As interest in words grows, continue reciting nonsense verse and more complex rhymes so they can hear the richness in their language. Even tongue twisters like “Peter Piper” are great. Some rhymes like “The Muffin Man,” “Jack Sprat,” and “Little Tommy Tucker” are good to try; and reading stories, longer nursery rhymes, or rhymes from Dr. Seuss can be part of your child’s bedtime routine.



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For Toddlers (2–4 years)

- Ask questions to extend the stories, such as “Where did Little Miss Muffet go when she ran away?” or “What do you think happens next?” Let children imagine.
- Give them rhyming riddles to solve. For example, “I’m thinking of a word that rhymes with ‘go.’ I can tie it on a present or put it in my hair. What word could it be?”
- Focus on counting and alphabet rhymes to help them begin learning those skills.

For Older Children (4–5 years)

- By this age most children have memorized their rhymes. Use this time to teach them the meaning behind some of their favorites. Read books and stories on the history behind rhymes such as “Hey Diddle, Diddle” or “Ring Around the Rosey.”

