



Every Child a Talker

Rhyming, singing, reading and spelling

Children love it when we sing to them, and all over the world parents sing to their children as soon as they are born. Most songs for children rhyme, and this is no coincidence.

Rhymes for babies, such as 'round and round the garden like a teddy bear' and 'this little piggy went to market' are perfect for fun and bonding. They also tune baby into the sounds of the language that you use. As he grows we introduce nursery rhymes and songs such as 'Twinkle twinkle' (still the most popular rhyme in the UK), 'Humpty Dumpty' and 'Little Miss Muffet'. When he attends nursery or pre school he will become familiar with 'Wind the bobbin up' and 'Incey wincey spider'. Most of these songs rhyme, are very repetitive and have fun actions to copy.

Popular children's programmes such as 'In the Night Garden', have characters who sing nonsense songs like 'Makka Pakka akka wakka mikka makka moo'. You might be worried that this type of nonsense (which incidentally children love) might be harmful for speech development. My view is that children's rhymes often contain nonsense words, (what does 'Hickory dickory dock' mean?!), but this is important. Why? Because rhymes and playing with sounds are vital for speech development, and lay the foundation for reading and spelling.

If a child is to grow to pronounce words well, he needs to learn a lot about the sounds of his language. This includes knowing what sounds are in his language, and how to pronounce them. In the early stages, before 18 months, children experiment by babbling, playing with sounds and trying to copy what adults say to them. The more practice they can get, and the more speech they hear that is repetitive and easy to remember, the quicker they will develop speech and language. Singing and rhyming are ideal as they are fun, repetitive, and usually involve some actions and funny noises ('Row row row your boat/Gently down the stream/If you see a crocodile/ Don't forget to scream!')

So what about the connection between rhyming, reading and spelling? In order to be able to read and spell, children need to have a very strong awareness of spoken sounds and how these link to writing. If we know that 'mat, hat, cat' sound the same, then we can quickly learn how to read and spell them.

Unfortunately English is probably the most difficult language in the world to read and spell, because how we say a word can often bear no relationship to how it is spelled. We have words like 'night' even though it rhymes with 'kite'. To learn to read and spell English we need to have a very sophisticated knowledge of sounds. Rhyming gives us this. The more we can play with sounds, the more chance we will have of being able to read and spell. Literally, 'a rhyming child is a reading child'.

So get singing and rhyming with your children now... and have fun while you are helping them to speak and learn!

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