

THE CONTRIBUTION OF RHYMES TO EARLY SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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These are Lisa's fingers
These are Lisa's toes
This is Lisa's bellybutton
Round and round it goes.

The moon is round
As round can be
Two eyes, a nose, and a mouth
Like me!

Rhymes such as these have been passed down through generations of the English speaking world. Other cultures have their own children's rhymes. Although child-rearing practices and expectations vary widely both within and across cultures, rhymes are a pleasurable way for parents to relate to their children and they serve to cement the parent-child relationship. Helping parents learn rhymes and lap games to play with their babies can promote healthy social-emotional development, particularly in the first years of life.

Birth to 3 months of age

At birth, babies are exquisitely prepared for human interaction (Stern, 1985). During periods of quiet alertness they orient to the environment and show a preference for human faces and the female voice, particularly their mother's voice. They can imitate facial expressions and locate odours, preferring the smell of their own mother's milk. They communicate in a variety of ways (e.g. crying, smiling, gazing and turning away, facial expressions, movement), and they take turns in interactions, initiating and responding to others. This readiness for social interaction means that babies need at least one partner. For both parent and baby, there is a process of getting to know one another. The baby shapes the adults' behaviour and responses and the adult influences the baby's behaviour and responses.

In these first months, babies establish patterns for feeding, sleeping, soothing and staying alert and interested in the world. For this, they need the help of stable adult partners, usually their parents. Through this process, the foundations for attachment to specific people are laid, and babies start building a consistent sense of themselves and other people, and a memory of being

with their parents. These memories contain sensations involving sight, sound, smell, and body posture, as well as the emotional tone of the experience, that is, the way it feels to be with the parent (Stern, 1985).

The contribution of rhymes

At this early stage, several things happen when parents repeat a familiar rhyme to their baby.

1. Babies are provided with the kind of repeated experiences that they need to learn. There is now good evidence that in this early stage of social-emotional development, brain development is affected by experience (Perry & Pollard, 1998). Each new experience in infancy builds new pathways in the brain and repetition strengthens neural pathways and learning (Courchesne et al., 1994).

2. Rhymes involve interactions between parent and infant that provide the kind of sensory experiences babies need to learn, including close physical contact, touch, movement, face-to-face contact at an optimal distance for infants' visual range, and varied auditory experiences (i.e. *sounds* of words, *rhythm* of verses, and intonation or *emphasis* of words).

Research tells us that in the first 3 months of life, the regions of the brain with the highest metabolic rate are those that process sight, sound, movement and touch. Thus early learning occurs mainly through sensory processes (i.e. vision, hearing and physical sensation) during repeated experiences.

3. Rhymes and interactive games help babies begin to control physical sensations, emotions and attention. Rhymes also help parents comfort their infants and put them to sleep OR keep them alert and content. When parents learn to read and respond sensitively to their baby's signals, they find that some rhymes are good for entertaining a wide-awake baby, while others are better for helping a tired baby fall asleep. They may also find that for some babies, the best rhyme for soothing is no rhyme at all.

4. Building repeated parent interactions with babies contributes to a baby's growing familiarity and attachment to parents.

3 to 6 months

This is a time of intense social interest for a baby and there is a marked increase in wakefulness and the length of the baby's sleep periods (Lichtenberg, 1983). Social smiling and eye contact become much more intense, animated and responsive to parents' cues (Emde et al., 1976). Cooing is added to the baby's vocal repertoire. The baby can express pleasure and displeasure more clearly, and shows a greater interest in and ability to explore the environment. Babies start to sit up and reach for objects, e.g. pulling at parents' ears, hair or glasses, or putting put food in their parent's mouth.

Parents play an essential role in the baby's emotional development and need to read and respond sensitively to the baby's communication and emotions. At this stage, babies elicit a particular kind of response. Their irresistible smiles entice "baby talk" (i.e. raised pitch, reduced speed, increased inflection), exaggerated and animated facial expressions, and physical contact such as the tickling in the rhyme "round and round the garden." The baby is an active partner in these interactions, both inviting and responding, sending messages with its body and voice that say "too much" (e.g. turning or looking away, moving less, frowning or looking worried) or "too little" (e.g. a beaming smile, kicking feet, looking expectantly, etc.). With a parent's help, babies begin to learn about controlling their emotions and level of excitement, social contact and interest in the world. Parents help their babies maintain a *comfortable* level of emotional arousal and interest.

The contribution of rhymes

This stage has been called "the golden age of lap rhymes" (Lottridge, 1999) as children are now particularly receptive to the kinds of social experiences involved in rhymes and lap games. The following are some of the ways in which rhymes can contribute to social-emotional development:

1. Rhymes provide the kinds of social interactions babies are now intensely interested in and the kind of experiences they are now more capable of — more animated and "readable" responses and more coordinated reaching and grasping. Their new social interactions help babies build more detailed memories and images of themselves.
2. Rhymes use the kind of language that babies at this stage respond to best — high in pitch, slow in pace, clearly enunciated and highly intonated (musical). This kind of speech helps babies isolate the individual sounds in the language spoken and trains the infant's ability to hear the individual sounds (phonemes) in words clearly. This development of phonological awareness in turn supports the child's speech development and later reading ability (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).
3. Rhymes provide the kind of repeated sensory experiences including vision, hearing, touch and movement that facilitate infant learning. Sights, words and actions become linked together to

establish early language, cognitive and motor knowledge. Many lap rhymes give information in simple ways that babies can easily absorb about names for body parts, where these body parts are and what they can do. This helps them to develop a better sense of where their bodies begin and end and how their bodies feel and can move.

4. Rhymes can play an important part in helping babies regulate their emotional arousal, social contact and interest in the world when parents are sensitive to their infant's signals and cues. After repeated rhymes and interactions become familiar, babies can then be active partners in these interactions, anticipating what is going to happen, communicating, and learning to keep their emotions at comfortable levels.

Parents can learn to help their babies maintain interest by slight changes that introduce novelty into a familiar routine. By watching for and responding to the baby's signals, parents can see how much excitement and animation a baby needs. Does the baby need more excitement and animation, or less? Is the baby inviting and responding to interactions (e.g. wriggling in pleasure, smiling widely, kicking his feet in anticipation) or sending messages that say "too much" (e.g. turning away, frowning, looking distressed or crying?) Too much excitement might overwhelm the baby, causing withdrawal or distress. Too little variation fails to hold the baby's attention.

5. Rhymes that are a regular and repeated part of parent-infant interactions contribute to the formation of the infant's attachment to parents through building internal images or memories of parents' physical appearance, the types of interactions and experiences that happen with parents, and how it feels emotionally to be with them.

7 to 18 months

Around seven to nine months, a significant cognitive development allows children to begin to be able to keep an idea in mind. This ability is called object permanence (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). Now babies can "understand" that people and things still exist, even when not in view. They can also imitate what they have seen or heard right after seeing or hearing it, and can plan simple actions (e.g. getting something out of reach either by moving or getting someone else to do so by pointing and vocalizing).

Babies are more mobile at this age and they begin to develop the motor skills of crawling, standing, walking and climbing. Moving away from their parents to explore is made easier because they can maintain an image of the parent, at least for a brief time, and they can return to their parent for physical contact (e.g., a cuddle or some lap time) and then go off again when ready. This process is known as "emotional refueling" (Mahler, 1967).

Parents find it easier to read and respond to babies at this stage because they are more purposeful or intentional. Babies now communicate more effectively using gestures and understandable words/sounds and for new reasons, not just to have their needs

met (e.g. to call attention to themselves or ask for help). They check for their parent's emotional reactions in new or unfamiliar situations in order to seek reassurance and for help in interpreting the world. This process is known as "social referencing" (Lewis, 1987). Babies also share an experience by pointing or looking from an object, to their parent, and back again. All this enables the child to function more independently at a distance from parents. The baby can be self-directed and still maintain emotional contact with parents by checking in visually from time to time. However, the child is still dependent on parents (or other familiar adults) to maintain a sense of security, and still needs the parent for soothing, reassurance and emotional information — Is this a safe place? Am I okay? Isn't this the most amazing toy you've ever seen? Look what I can do!

Parents provide a "secure base" giving the baby opportunities to practice independence while maintaining emotional contact as the baby moves away and returns for "refueling." Parents admire the child's accomplishments and adjust to the individual style of the child (e.g. more active, adventurous children need the parent's help to recognize safe limits, whereas more cautious children may need reassurance and encouragement to explore.) Parents also respond to and interpret the child's attempts to communicate. At this stage, only the parents or other regular caregivers truly know what the child means. Being understood is a powerful experience.

With the support of parents, children thus develop greater initiative and confidence in their ability to communicate their needs and greater confidence in their parents' ability to read and respond to their communications. Attachment is well established and children's internal models of themselves and parents are also better developed. The emotional tone of parent-child interactions has laid the foundation for how children think and feel about themselves and how they think and feel about others. Children now have a growing sense of their own ability to plan and carry out actions and influence the actions of others.

The contribution of rhymes

1. Rhymes can provide wonderful opportunities for children to use their new social and emotional capacities:

a) Around 12 months, babies begin to imitate what they see and hear. Rhymes provide opportunities to imitate words and actions, especially when they are repeated and become more familiar. When parents recite rhymes using actions, facial expressions, intonation, pauses and words, they provide natural opportunities for children to read and respond to verbal and non-verbal social cues. Once a rhyme becomes familiar, the child can anticipate what comes next and take a turn doing the next action or saying the next word. How can any child resist completing, "We all fall . . .?"

b) At this age children are developing the ability to form intentions and make decisions. Opportunities to take the lead and have their parents follow help them to develop a positive, confident

sense of their abilities. At this stage, parents must often say "no." Being able to request familiar rhymes and interaction games, often a favourite one over and over, can help young children feel good about what they know and can do.

c) Rhymes involve more than just words and actions. They involve an emotional undercurrent that may range from excitement, anticipation, surprise, joy, to love, gentle caring, comfort and reassurance. As children become better able to communicate and read emotions, having a parent respond accurately to their emotional cues gives the experience of being understood and validated. Parents' responses may also give the child the experience of being able to control or regulate her own intense emotions. Repeated rhymes provide opportunities for parents to read and respond to the infant's emotions and to provide just what is needed at that moment.

2. Rhymes continue to promote language and communication skills. They provide repetition of familiar words and actions, and opportunities for imitation, turn taking, making requests and having requests understood. Children learn new words and gain a sense of what those words mean through the actions and responses that accompany them. Rhymes also help them learn the rules for interacting with others—taking turns, asking questions and responding.

3. When parents and babies play together regularly in familiar ways, babies experience success and confidence in their own abilities and confidence that their parents will read and respond to them in the way they need. Such experiences support the attachment between parent and child. At this stage, infants need their parents' availability as a "secure base"—monitoring the physical and emotional distance of the baby and maintaining emotional contact through familiar, shared experiences, admiring the child's skills, and adapting to the individual style of the child.

The contribution of parent-child group programs

Group parent-child programs that include rhymes, lap games and finger plays such as the Parent-Child Mother Goose Program¹ not only teach rhymes to parents and children. They also support the emotional well-being of infants by providing parents with social supports that enable them to be more emotionally available to their children and thus more successful as parents.

Such programs strive to make parents feel welcome. They listen to parents' needs and experiences, and encourage them to share their own rhymes and interaction games. In turn, parents are helped to feel less isolated and alone and more valued as members of a community. When parents feel valued and emotionally connected, they are better able to help their children feel valued and emotionally connected. This is essential in making a difference in the lives of the parents and children.

1. *IMPrint*, Volume 3, Spring 1992, p.8.

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