



# Babies and Toddlers Need Language Play Too

Playing orally with nursery rhymes, both traditional and modern, is especially magical. From very early in infancy, babies respond to their rhythms and rhymes, tickles and bounces. It does not matter that babies cannot understand the words. When adults regularly do rhymes with babies, those babies are learning about much more than language. Through eye contact and mutually responsive interaction, they discover the delight of shared pleasure and the solid basis this brings to relationships. The gentle touch that many of the rhymes invites helps babies recognize their physical boundaries.

Babies also become familiar with the rhythms, sounds and conventions of our language. They learn that if they listen and wait just a little, something pleasurable happens – the tickle or bounce at the end. Although they cannot articulate it, this is the beginning of knowing that rhymes have a structure that they can predict. Babies who have favourite rhymes anticipate their endings and crow with glee the moment you begin. As babies begin to understand the content of the rhymes, those rhymes also become their first stories, complete with characters and happenings that can be pictured in the mind.

Not all rhymes are the same and some tend to appeal sooner than others:

- *For newborns and very young babies:* Rhymes that have a gentle physical element, working down the face, patting the feet, giving a little bounce and drop, such as *Shoe the Wild Horse*.
- *For older babies:* Rhymes with more elaborate language and often, though not always, more boisterous actions, such as *Father and Mother and Uncle John*.
- *1½ - 2 years:* Rhymes like *Dr. Foster Went to Gloucester* that rely less on a physical punchline and more on story.
- *2 - 2½ years:* Simple fingerplays, such as *Put Your Finger in Foxy's Hole*, which they can do on their own or with an adult's help.
- *2½ - 3 years:* More complex fingerplays and rhymes that invite large miming actions, like *Up, Up the Candlestick*. Adult help may well still be needed. Also good are nonsense rhymes such as *Dilly Dilly Piccalilli* that are silly or whimsical, now that the children have a strong enough grasp of what's real to begin to enjoy spotting what's not.

Children who have had rich language experience begin to enjoy listening to simple stories when they are about two years old. Now playing with rhymes complements listening to stories. Rhymes that preschoolers enjoyed in one way when they were smaller can now to be enjoyed in other ways. Bouncing rhymes like *Father and Mother and Uncle John* can be acted out. Touching rhymes like *Shoe the Wild Horse* can be done on a friend, parent or doll. As the children gain more ease with language and movement, they take possession of the material they like and use it actively in their own way in their play.

**Shoe the wild horse,**

*make a fist and tap firmly on the ball of the foot*

**Shoe the mare**

*tap on the heel*

**But let the little coltie**

**Go bare, bare, bare.**

*stroke length of sole as you say "bare, bare, bare"*

**Father and Mother**

**And Uncle John**

**Went to the market one**

**by one**

*bounce the baby on your knee, facing you, in time to the beat*

**Father fell off,**

*tip the baby to one side (gently at first)*

**Mother fell off**

*tip to the other side*

**But Uncle John went on**

**and on and on and on...**

*bounce baby in time for as long as you both feel inclined*

**Put your finger in Foxy's**

**hole**

*make one hand into a loose fist, poke the index finger of your other hand in*

**Foxy's not at home.**

*wiggle finger around and shake your head*

**Foxy's out the back door**

**Picking on a bone.**

*poke the finger through so it sticks out the back side of your fist.*

**Dr. Foster**

**Went to Gloucester**

**In a shower of rain.**

**He stepped in a puddle**

**right up to his middle**

**And never went there again.**

**Up, Up, the Candlestick**

*hold one forearm up to make a candle*

**Went little mousy brown**

*run the fingers of the other hand up to the top*

**She ate a bite of candle**

*close fingers over top of candle*

**Then she couldn't get back**

**down.**

*shake head*

**She cried out, "Grandma,**

**Grandma!"**

*cup hands and call*

**But Grandma was in town**

*shake head*

**So she curled herself into**

**a ball**

*hunch shoulders, curl over*

**And rolled herself back**

**down.**

*roll hands over and over down to floor*

**Dilly dilly piccalilli,**

**Tell me something very silly.**

**There was a chap,**

**His name was Bert,**

**He ate the buttons**

**Off his shirt.**

*Clyde Watson, Father Fox's Penny Rhymes*