

LearnEnglish Family



learning
together is fun!

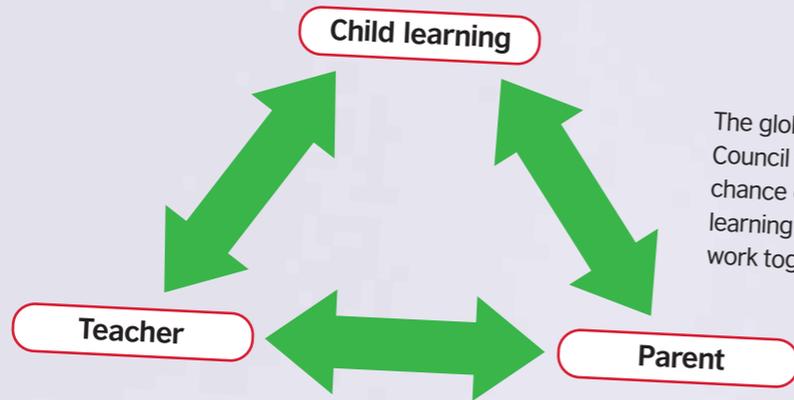
Learning English through
sharing rhymes

Foreword

Getting involved in your child's learning can have a positive impact upon both their attitude and the speed at which they learn. When parents help their children outside the classroom, there are real benefits for children's achievement inside the classroom.

Jim Knight, the UK's Minister of State for Schools and Learners: 'Parents have six times more impact on the learning of primary age children than teachers do.' There are some simple steps you can take to encourage your child and build their confidence in using English.

British Council educational experts have developed new LearnEnglish Family products and services in order to support parents. We hope you enjoy using these products with your child. After all, learning together is fun!



The global experience of the British Council tells us that children have more chance of being successful with their learning when teachers and parents work together.



Using rhymes

Simple rhymes are thought to be innate in most cultures. From the time young children begin to talk, many enjoy playing and experimenting with sounds by themselves – a precursor to later enjoyment of rhymes. Most seem to have skills and a built-in drive that enable them to imitate the sounds and pick up the language and special rhythms of rhymes.

Picking up and repeating the particular language of rhymes is another form of play for young children. They learn rhymes unconsciously and effortlessly; it is not the laborious task it can be for some adults.

By playing with the short texts of rhymes, children explore the mechanics of the English language. They find out how language works and become familiar with the relationship between the 44 sounds of English and the 26 alphabet letters – information which helps them when they begin reading to decode the sounds that make up words. The value of this type of language-play with rhymes in early learning is both underestimated and undervalued.

There is a difference between rhymes and simple poems for young children. Rhymes, in general, are short and depend on the melodic use of the voice to recite the text that includes rhyming words, and the repetition of sounds and words in attractive, easy-to-copy rhythms. The traditional and well-known rhymes are sometimes classified as Mother Goose rhymes or nursery rhymes. Many, like 'Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star' and 'Humpty Dumpty', are considered part of British culture.





'First poems', on the other hand, generally depend less on the playfulness of the language, and more on the meaning, which evokes feelings, imagination and the discovery of ideas beyond the child's own environment. First poems may be traditional or modern; they are a natural progression from early rhymes. They are usually less well known and less likely to be handed down from generation to generation like nursery rhymes.

Why rhymes?

Rhymes are portable playthings. Parents and children can say them at any time or in any place to change a mood or fill a bored moment with fun. Rhymes need no toy, equipment or even a book to set a scene; they depend on the sound of the voice reciting the language to stimulate play. Some may be accompanied by physical actions, which help to confirm understanding and act as an aid to memorisation.

A rhyme, for young children, is a complete, short experience, which fits well with their limited attention span. It is like a compact story: it has a beginning and an end, and its own content. Once children have worked out these sequences, they feel confident, as they know that the language content is fixed, even if the speed of reciting might alter to match a mood. The attractive, playful language – often similar to that used in television commercial jingles – and the short text make it easy and quick to memorise.

Young children want to communicate immediately in English and are frustrated that they can't say what they want. Rhymes give them the opportunity to feel that from the first sessions they can 'say a lot of English and say it quickly just like adults'. Deep satisfaction that motivates does not come from having fun playing games in English, but from persisting until a defined task, like knowing a rhyme, is successfully completed.



Learning to speak English may seem daunting to some young children; knowing rhymes can provide motivating stepping stones that encourage them, especially in the early stages of learning English, when they feel progress is not fast enough for them.

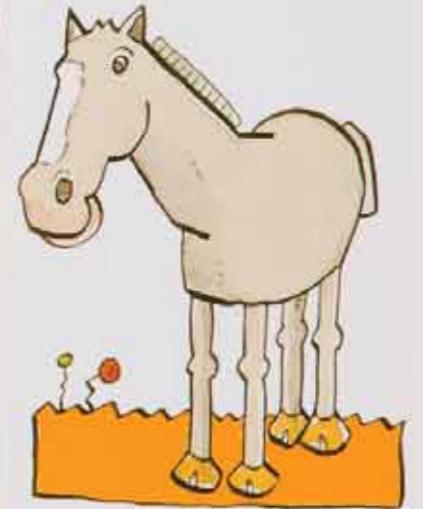
Young children, who are sometimes shy about speaking English, often begin to speak by sharing rhymes with an encouraging adult. Through sharing a fixed, fun text, their confidence grows until they find they can say most of a short rhyme by themselves.

Selecting rhymes

It is important to build up a collection of rhymes (a rhyme bank). To do this, parents should be prepared to introduce one or two new rhymes each week, depending on their length and children's interests and readiness to learn. Some days children are more receptive to new material and it is important to adjust to these moods.

Rhymes can be found in:

- **story rhyme picture books** – one rhyme to a complete picture book such as *In the Dark, Dark Wood* by Jessica Souhami, published by Frances Lincoln
- **rhyme anthologies** – books with a selection of rhymes and possibly fewer illustrations to support the text such as *Number Rhymes to Say and Play!* by Opal Dunn and Adriano Gon, published by Frances Lincoln/Mother Goose Sterling Publishers
- **traditional rhymes** – *The Ladybird Book of Nursery Rhymes* – *Humpty Dumpty*



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Family members – it is a good idea to learn rhymes already known to family members as it extends sharing and also motivates children to join in.

When collecting rhymes parents need to select those they themselves enjoy, bearing in mind:

- children's increasing level of English
- children's developing interests and gender needs – boys in particular enjoy the physical action in:

Jeremiah, blow the fire,
Puff, puff, puff.
First you blow it gently . . .
Then you blow it rough.

- the need to transfer useful language to daily conversation
- the need to include, if possible, some rhymes known to the extended family
- the need to include rhymes with names that can be personalised by changing to family names:

Diddle, diddle dumpling,
My son John,
Went to bed
With his trousers on.

- the need to include some rhymes that can be extended into family activities or routines:

I scream,
You scream
We all scream for ice-cream
What would you like?
Chocolate, lemon, vanilla or . . .
One is for you/ And one's for me.

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There is a wide selection of rhymes to meet most needs:

Hello or goodbye rhymes

Hi Mary!
How are you?
Fine, thanks.
What about you?

Action rhymes and finger play rhymes

10 fingers,
10 toes,
2 eyes
And a round nose.

Rhyme games

Acker Backer, Soda Cracker, Acker Backer Boo!
Acker Backer, Soda Cracker
Out goes YOU!

One potato, two potatoes, three potatoes, four,
Five potatoes, six potatoes, seven potatoes, more?
One banana, two bananas, three bananas, four . . .



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Themed rhymes

Two big apples
Under a tree.
One is for you
And ones for me.

Rain, rain, go away!
All the children want to play.
Rain, rain, go away!
Come again another day

Traditional rhymes/Mother Goose rhymes

Twinkle, twinkle, little star
How I wonder what you are
Up above the world so high
Like a diamond in the sky
Twinkle, twinkle, little star
How I wonder what you are.

How to say a rhyme

The way a rhyme comes alive depends on how parents use their voice, eyes, facial expression and body language (see the British Council booklet *Speaking English with your child*).



'Two big apples' is taken from *Number rhymes to say and play* by Opal Dunn and illustrated by Adriano Gon, published by Frances Lincoln Ltd, copyright ©2003.



To engage a child's attention, the introduction of a new rhyme needs to be a dramatic experience in which the voice shepherds the child through the rhyme. As children, whose hearing is more acute than adults, become more familiar with a rhyme, they learn how to read the adult's emotions through their voice and no longer need the support of the physical actions. When this happens the child often takes over the physical actions and the parent can stop doing them.

Quite a few traditional rhymes can be both said and sung. Initially it is better to say the rhymes so the child has only one learning task – to pick up the words. If the child has to learn the tune at the same time as the words, they have to learn two things at once, which might be more complicated for some children.

Some children, who learn to sing a rhyme first, find that they have difficulty in transferring the sung language to the spoken form; this results in them 'singing language' when they transfer some phrases to a dialogue.

Understanding a new rhyme

Rhymes are made up of fixed phrases or blocks of language which are put together to make a rhyme. Children pick up these fixed phrases often without noticing the smaller function words like 'the' or 'for', which they hear as part of a block (e.g. 'one's for you') not as individual words.





In many rhyme books there is a supporting picture that helps understanding. If there is no picture, parents can draw a quick sketch or show toys or real objects to support the meaning. Any translation of words should be done in a whisper and only once, repeating the English word afterwards.

Introducing a new rhyme

Parents need to use parentese language (see the British Council booklet *Speaking English with your child*) to introduce new rhymes. The language in short rhymes is generally easy to imitate and pick up, so parentese techniques soon become less used as the child picks up more of the rhyme.

If children are to consolidate their learning, they need time to browse in order to work out and compare words, sounds and meanings in their own way and time. Children should not be hurried and made to work at an adult's speed, especially in the initial stages of learning a new rhyme. Repetition may seem boring to adults, but it is important to children as it gives them opportunities to subconsciously revise language and sounds. It also gives them an opportunity to confirm what they know, which gives them self-confidence.

Say the rhyme, slowly dramatising it, supporting the meaning with actions, pictures or real objects. If there



are no set actions, invent simple actions as physical involvement helps memorisation and the movement creates a 'feel good' factor. Stress the important words and rhyming words and, where necessary, whisper a translation.

Once a new rhyme becomes well known, children are ready to take turns, each of you saying a line. Taking turns is an important skill to learn as it entails listening carefully and taking a risk, as well as having empathy for the other speaker and judging when they are going to speak.

Although children may know most of the rhyme by heart, they may not be ready to initiate saying a rhyme alone.

Informal rhyme sessions

The more rhymes are said in families, the quicker their simple everyday language becomes part of children's life and speech. Building up a personal collection of rhymes is important, as the more rhymes children know, the more rhymes they want to know. Saying rhymes is fun!

Parents and children can recite one or two rhymes in a free moment such as while waiting in a supermarket queue or on a long journey. Parents need to start these sessions off, but children like to add their own suggestions. Children often need to repeat a rhyme; the second recitation gives them a chance to reflect and improve the way they say it. Children are continually revising their pronunciation, but revision cannot take place if they are hurried and there are not opportunities to practise. New rhymes are better left for formal rhyme times.



Rhyme times

Planned rhyme times should include:

- old favourites
- recently learned rhymes
- the latest new rhyme.

It is a good idea to start with one or two favourites, as this helps children switch from thinking in their home language and get used to listening to and using English. The number of times a favourite rhyme is repeated depends on the mood of the child. The second repetition should include more sharing and the third, if the mood is right, should give children an opportunity to say the rhyme, or part of it, alone.

The length of a planned rhyme time depends on whether it is a single session or is the introductory warm-up to an English session (see the British Council booklet *Speaking English with your child*). It is fun to write out a programme in advance, using first lines, so that children already reading in their home language can work out the programme. Later, when children know quite a few rhymes, they can be asked to plan their own programme.

Rhyme shows

For special occasions like an adult's birthday, for example, you could plan a rhyme show in which children recite two or three rhymes. Children like opportunities to show their skills and the praise received does much to motivate them. The preparation for the show is important as it gives children a valid reason to keep practising and revising their pronunciation and performance.



Choral speaking can be fun too, when parent and children take turns to speak alone or together. Shy children can be members of the chorus until they have the courage to perform alone.

Recording

MP3 players with space to record rhymes provide excellent opportunities to:

- listen to a recording
- make a recording
- play back a recording and see where language can be improved
- make a second, improved recording.

Children are critical of their 'mistakes' and most want to re-record each time, persisting until they are satisfied with their pronunciation.

Making rhyme books

Children who already know the Roman alphabet and the sounds of the 26 letters are often keen to know how to read and even handwrite rhymes. Make a copy of a well-known, simple rhyme, read it together and then let children try saying it aloud while pointing to each word in turn (self-dictating). Children soon discover that they can read something simple in English. Let them decorate the rhyme





sheet, which gives them time to browse over the text. When they have completed a few sheets, make them into a rhyme book. Depending how advanced they are at writing in English, let them make their own contents page and front cover.

Next time you make a book, some children might like to handwrite the rhymes themselves. They might also like to make birthday or celebration cards.

These self-made books may inspire children to write their own rhymes. Some children begin creating their own rhymes by personalising those they know or making up their own rhymes by recycling blocks of language from other rhymes. Encourage them, as this is a form of creative writing.

Looking at rhyme picture books also provides opportunities for browsing. Begin with story rhyme books, as children will find they can self-dictate and 'read' the stories, as the language is supported by the many illustrations. Anthologies can demotivate beginners as they usually include a lot of rhymes children do not yet know orally.

Reading rhymes

Research has shown that 'reading' simple rhymes children already know by heart is an important step in the process of learning to read fluently. Dictating a known rhyme while pointing to the written words in the text is exciting for children, as they find they can read something in English.

Go to bed late,
Stay very small.
Go to bed early,
Grow very tall.



At this stage, children can read only language they already know orally in the fixed phrases of rhymes. This 'reading' leads them on to recognise the shapes of recurring words and later to build up their own banks of words they can recognise and 'read'. At about the same time they begin to analyse the sounds of words they recognise (see the British Council booklet on *Learning English through sharing picture books*). A favourite game to encourage is collecting rhyming words, like 'four', 'door', 'more', 'floor', 'saw'.

Parents – and teachers – are not always aware of this important step in learning to read that occurs naturally with children, who are familiar with, and enjoy, many simple rhymes.

Children who can read rhymes naturally progress to reading simple poems. Children's ability to pick up rhymes and poems by heart, if nurtured beyond the age of about eight, seems, like acquiring languages, to become a lifelong skill.





www.britishcouncil.org/parents

One of a series of booklets commissioned by the British Council to support parents:

- *How children learn English as another language*
- *Speaking English with your child*
- *Learning English through sharing picture books*
- *Learning English through sharing rhymes*

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