

Action Rhymes and Games for Children

- are familiar and provide a link between home and school
- are memorable, motivating and fun
- provide lots of natural and enjoyable repetition
- provide a secure, non-threatening framework for learning

- allow for verbal and non-verbal participation
- provide opportunities for physical movement and drama
- help to develop social skills and motor skills
- help to develop creativity and the imagination

- help to increase children's confidence and self-esteem
- add variety and a change of pace to classroom activities
- build on children's pleasure with playing with sounds
- reinforce structures and vocabulary
- help to improve all aspects of pronunciation

- appeal to different aspects of children's multiple intelligences
- help children begin to develop their own individual learning styles and strategies
- can be easily integrated with topic or story-based work
- reinforce knowledge, understanding and skills in other areas of the curriculum e.g. numeracy

- can be used as warmers, closers or to focus attention
- help create a sense of achievement and success
- introduce children to different aspects of culture from the English-speaking world
- help develop a positive attitude towards learning a foreign language
- provide a vehicle for English going out of the classroom and into the playground and/or home

Action rhymes and games provide wonderful opportunities for getting children to use and respond to language in contexts which they can relate to and which they find non-threatening, motivating and fun. Children are much more likely to join in spontaneously and naturally with action rhymes and games than they are, for example, to practise a dialogue. As well as developing language, action rhymes and games contribute to children's overall education by developing thinking skills, social skills, motor skills, the imagination and creativity. Significantly for us as teachers, they also provide a framework which enables us to manage our classes effectively as well as to promote pleasure and enjoyment in learning English.

In this article, I would like to explore some practical ideas and techniques suitable for different ages and stages of children at infant and primary school. The main focus will be on suggesting ideas and techniques which are generative and can be adapted or applied to different language, contexts and ages.

ACTION RHYMES

The following are examples of action rhymes which highlight different features and ways in which they can be used:

1 Exercise rhyme

*First touch your toes
Next run on the spot
Then stretch your arms
And bend a lot
After that look up
Put your arms up high
Imagine you can touch the sky
Finally relax, sit down and then
Close your eyes and count to ten!*

(C. Read & S. Salaberri)

- Although some of the vocabulary in the rhyme is challenging e.g. 'bend', 'stretch', contextualisation through the actions makes it immediately comprehensible.
- From a classroom management point of view, a rhyme like this can be very useful for harnessing children's physical energy positively at the start of a lesson. At the end they're all sitting down with their eyes closed (well, half of them may have their eyes closed!) and you can begin your lesson.
- As a follow-up, older children can be asked to create their own simple exercise instructions using sequencers e.g. *First, next, then*, etc. and action words in pairs. They can take turns to give their instructions to the rest of the class. (These do not need to rhyme!).
- With younger children, alternative gym sequences using much simpler language (e.g. 'Do this! Do this! One, two three!') can be used as a positive way of focussing attention and harnessing physical energy in the same way.

2 Everybody listen

*Everybody listen
And look at me
Touch something ... RED
When I count to three
One... two... three...*

(traditional)

- A rhyme like this can be adapted to many other lexical areas e.g. parts of the body, classroom objects, clothes, actions, shapes, pictures on posters, flashcards or in the coursebook etc.

- It can easily become part of a familiar repertoire of activities that you do regularly with the children using different vocabulary, for example, as a warmer or closer, or if you need to re-focus attention during the lesson.
- It requires no preparation and no materials (and it is often the simplest ideas we have 'up our sleeves' that work best!).
- The pause in the rhyme after 'When I count to three' gives children thinking time before responding and this helps ensure that everyone can participate successfully.

3 The duck has a baby

*The duck has a baby
What does it say?
Quack, quack, quack
All the day*

(adapted from a rhyme by M. de Boo)

This rhyme can be taught with flashcards of different animals e.g. duck, cow, horse, sheep, cat, dog. The children say the rhyme first with the whole class, then in two groups and then in pairs, using picture cards. By the time they do pairwork, the rhyme is familiar and becomes part of a structured game, with children turning over and winning cards as they ask and respond to their partner's questions.

- A rhyme like this relates well to a popular topic with young children (farm animals) and can easily be linked in with storybooks or songs on the same theme.
- The question and answer pattern in the rhyme helps to initiate children in discourse skills and social skills, such as listening to each other and taking turns. In order to learn how to work with others, young children need to be supported by controlled frameworks and lots of explicit modelling, especially at first.
- Children become familiar with chunks of language e.g. *What does it say?* which can later be extended to other contexts. They also acquire pronunciation and intonation for asking questions in a natural way.
- The rhyme introduces cultural input – the noises different animals make in English. It can also easily be extended to teach the names of baby animals, e.g. 'The duck has a duckling', or other animals, if children are ready for this.

CREATING A SEQUENCE OF WORK

Action rhymes and games are often used as the springboard for a whole sequence of work. An example of this is based on the chant below:

The pizza train

*Mushrooms, mushrooms
Cheese, tomatoes, cheese, tomatoes
Sausages, bacon, sausages, bacon
Chicken and ham, chicken and ham
Chicken and ham, chicken and ham
Red and green peppers, red and green peppers
Olives, onions, olives, onions
Tu-na, tu-na*

(C. Read & A. Soberón)

Possible stages for the sequence are as follows:

- 1 Draw the shape of a pizza in the air – children guess the food.
- 2 Elicit things you can have on a pizza – use to revise vocabulary
- 3 Listen to the chant – How many things are on the pizza? What are they?
- 4 Check answers and put up flashcards on the board in the order of the chant

- 5 Children "read" the flashcards and say the chant with you
- 6 Children practise the chant in pairs, saying it rhythmically and doing train movements with their arms
- 7 Children stand up and act out the pizza train chant (classroom management note: individual carriages are less risky than a whole class train!)
- 8 Give out a handout with a picture of a pizza. Children secretly choose three food items from the flashcards on the board and draw or write the names on the pizza.
- 9 Children find their pizza partner ie someone with the same pizza ingredients as themselves. They can either ask in groups or stand up and walk round the class to do this e.g. *Have you got bacon on your pizza? / Yes, I have.*
- 10 Once they've found their partner, children invent a name for their pizza, e.g. Supergiant pizza, and write or complete a simple description, e.g. *The Supergiant pizza has got cheese, bacon and sausages. It's delicious!*
- 11 Children make a class menu of all the different pizzas.
- 12 Children prepare and act out a role play in a pizza restaurant, e.g. *Can I have a Supergiant pizza, please? / Yes, here you are. / Thank you.*

A sequence of work like this is likely to extend over two or more lessons, depending on the length of lessons, the age and level of the children and the size of the class. In terms of Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligence theory, the activities in the sequence are designed to appeal to children with different learning styles, strengths and combinations of intelligences, thereby helping to make learning accessible and memorable to all the children:

- Verbal-linguistic intelligence:** repeating the chant, writing a description, doing the role play
- Musical intelligence:** the rhythm of the train in the chant and the crescendo on the hoot (tu-na) in the last line
- Kinesthetic intelligence:** moving like the train, finding a pizza partner
- Visual-spatial intelligence:** "reading" the pizza flashcards, drawing food items on the pizza
- Logical-mathematical intelligence:** deducing the food items to ask about in the pizza partner activity
- Interpersonal intelligence:** making the pizza train (if this is done as a whole class); inventing the name of the pizza; preparing the class menu and role play
- Intrapersonal intelligence:** reflecting on what you want on your pizza
- Naturalist intelligence:** (as possible follow up) investigating, observing and categorising what goes on a pizza in terms of food groups (meat and fish, fruit and vegetable, cereals and dairy) and things that grow.

In conclusion, there are numerous benefits to using action rhymes and games in our classes and some of the main ones I have found in my own teaching experience are scattered around this article! Through action rhymes and games we breathe life and meaning into the lines of the well-known Chinese proverb: 'I listen and I remember' - especially when there's rhythm, it involves an element of play and I'm invited to think; 'I do and I understand' - and I focus, I concentrate, I pay attention, I'm involved and I want to participate. As teachers of children, what more could we ask!

References
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Carol Read is co-author of *English Club*, *Wonderland*, *Wonderworld*, *Here's Robby!* and *Robby Rabbit*, all published by Macmillan Heinemann ELT