
The Importance of Nursery Rhymes, Songs, and Verses

~ Jerilyn Burke

The dictionary defines a nursery rhyme as a *simple traditional song or poem for children*. The definition is short and sweet, but the value of these little gems is immense. It is well understood that there can be deeper meanings to these poems, including archetypal powers of the characters represented, but these symbolic layers are for another discussion. Instead, we will touch upon the question of why. Why are nursery rhymes so important, beyond their arcane meanings?

Through my own research and work with children, I have discovered that there are deeper aspects to the music and verses we share with them. More than just a beautiful addition to our daily lives, each type of song, rhyme, or gesture connects to a particular aspect of a child's development and experience. As Sharifa Oppenheimer once wrote to me: "Transition songs help the child navigate movement through time (hence their predictability), whereas fingerplays and gesture games help the child navigate body-awareness and movement through space (sense of self and environment)."

Seasonal songs connect the child's sensory experiences to the rhythms of the year, supporting their sense of self and connection to their environment. Nursery rhymes, too, allow us to navigate the development of humanity through time, in a form that is both timeless and predictable. These are powerful tools for nourishing the young child on many levels.

Through nursery rhymes, children learn...

Language Development

- Expands vocabulary and introduces nuances of onomatopoeia and alliteration
- Strengthens articulation, voice modulation, and clear enunciation
- Teaches pitch, volume, inflection, and the rhythm of language
- Encourages effortless pronunciation through playful repetition

Cognitive Development

- Nurtures memory skills and inner imagery
- Introduces sequencing—beginning, middle, end—to support reading comprehension
- Builds recognition of math concepts such as number patterns, size, and weight

- Deepens understanding of vocabulary through dramatization with whole-body or hand-and-finger movements

Social and Emotional Development

- Strengthens bonds between caregiver and child through shared interaction
- Encourages positive physical touch, such as clapping rhymes and finger plays
- Supports empathy and humor by recognizing and expressing emotions in characters
- Connects children to the past through the historical nature of traditional rhymes

Years ago, at a lecture I attended on the theme of "How Storytelling and Puppetry Support Children's Language Development," Suzanne Down shed light on the extraordinary beginnings of the consonants, a principal quality of nursery rhymes. Down, director of Juniper Tree Puppets and a former Kindergarten teacher, also happens to be trained in eurythmy, an art of etheric movement. She explained that developing language is more than developing speech; it is developing the body. Etheric formative forces are active in human speech, and sounds help shape the child's whole being.

I hope this understanding inspires you to use music, song, and verse with confidence, regardless of how you think you may sound. When you are truly present and bring joy into your voice, the children will benefit, and so will you. ♦

Jerilyn Burke received her formal training in Waldorf Early Childhood pedagogy through LifeWays North America and the Rudolf Steiner Centre Toronto. She is a mother of two teens and a tween, and together with her husband, Chris, she delights in exploring anthroposophy and discovering the golden threads that connect the insights of thinkers past and present. Jerilyn is a faculty member of LifeWays North America and teaches kindergarten at The Waldorf School of Princeton.