

Pondering pedagogy...

Early Level Pedagogy in Practice Pamphlet Series

Developing communication and language: Sound, Rhythm and Rhyme

“Literacy is rooted in being able to discriminate between similar sounds, where they come from and how they are made, with increasing awareness. Phonological awareness refers to the ability to hear sounds” (Mallett, 2005:243 in Bruce & Spratt, 2011:54) How do you support the development of sound, rhythm and rhyme in your setting?

Developing communication and language



‘From the first moments of life babies engage in communication through sight, touch and sound. Even before a child is born a mother responds to their child’s movements in utero with sounds of delight and touch. The child in the womb first learns to recognise their mother’s voice and begins to hear sounds from the environment they will soon be part of.’

Realising the Ambition (2020:70)

‘A baby’s eye contact, gesture and vocalisations such as gurgling or giggling speak a thousand words for the non-verbal child. Such communication marks the first steps in a lifetime of social and emotional communicative development. Spoken language development forms only part of this social and emotional communication. The role of gesture and movement continues to be of significance in fully understanding human communication throughout life.

We need to co-create safe spaces with children to talk, sing, rhyme and play with sounds, vocabulary and print. Role modelling language and building vocabulary to make sense of the world is vital for all young children. The amount and quality of language that children are exposed to is crucial to their progress. The journey begins with noticing and listening to sounds and conversations around them.’
Realising the Ambition (2020:70)

The beginnings of the sounds of language: Listening, looking and moving

- Listening is the beginning of phonological awareness.
- In babies and very young children, listening can be supported by quiet environments without background music or TV.

- Babies have a natural tendency to look at faces. They respond by copying mouth movements and tracking movement.
- Eye contact with young children is essential, and also allowing time for them to look away to self-regulate.
- Grabbing is a reflex that a baby is born with, but by three months old they will actively reach out to grasp objects. This changes the eye focus and helps develop eye movements.
- Fixating and tracking are important for later reading and writing.
- The vestibular system controls our balance and spatial awareness and this underpins communication and cognitive development. Young children need lots of opportunities to move before their vestibular system is well enough developed to enable them to sit still for any length of time. Therefore, songs and rhymes that are interactive and involve acting out or moving in time to the rhythm or beat helps support children's ability to focus.

Phonological Awareness

Phonological awareness is the awareness of the sounds in spoken words and the ability to manipulate these sounds. The ability to hear sounds and to discriminate between them a key factor in understanding language as being made up of distinct words. It is the foundation for learning to read and is an important and reliable predictor of later reading ability. Phonological awareness refers to sounds not letters, it is spoken not written. Reading stories, singing songs and reciting rhymes are a critical part of children's developing phonological awareness. Many practitioners will quite naturally draw children's attention to the awareness and detection of rhyme or of hearing syllables but there are many other aspects that can be supported.

Although presented here in a linear developmental order, children will continue to refine earlier skills whilst learning later skills.



Listening and Attention

The ability to focus on a specific sound or activity.

It takes time for children to develop the ability to focus their attention.

When they are very young, children's early attention can be fleeting, and they are easily distracted. As they grow, they begin to focus on a self-chosen activity but find distractions difficult to ignore. Eventually children develop the ability to respond to questions and focus on a task at the same time.

Auditory Discrimination

The ability to recognise differences between sounds, including quite small differences.

A child who has trouble with auditory discrimination may have difficulty telling the difference between words such as "sister" and "sitter" or "cat" and "cot."

Overall, the child can't distinguish between the slight differences in the sounds of words. In order to discriminate, children also need to be able to understand the concept of same/different.

Visual and Auditory Memory

The ability to remember and process the information that we see and hear.

Visual memory involves the ability to recall information that has been presented visually. Auditory memory involves the ability to remember and process the information that we hear. It is essential if a child is to comprehend the spoken word. Being able to remember a sequence of speech sounds is



essential for children as they learn to read and spell. In order to blend the word c-a-t, each letter sound must be kept in the child's memory long enough to be combined and then interpreted as a word. Auditory memory is also essential in enabling children to follow routines and instructions, when this is needed. 5-6 year olds who can recall three or more digits and sentences of eight or more words are considered to have adequate short-term auditory memory skills.

Word Boundaries

The ability to hear where one word ends, and another begins.

When we listen to a new language for the first time, it can be very difficult to identify where words start and end. This is the same for young children who are hearing lots of new and unfamiliar words, often spoken quickly. Slowing down speech and including lots of rhythm and rhyme can help children identify the individual words.

Rhyme Awareness and Detection

The ability to hear the same sound in the last syllable of two or more words.

Identifying rhyme is an important skill and builds upon children's auditory discrimination. Can children identify which two of three words rhyme? Being able to tell whether the ending of a word is the same or different is an important skill to develop.

Syllable blending (from adult production)

The ability to hear separate syllables and put them together to form a word.

Syllable blending directly supports later reading where children will blend the smallest parts of the language which we call phonemes. Syllables are larger units of language which form the beats in words eg spi-der, win-dow, bu-tter-fly.

Syllable Detection

The ability to hear the number of syllables or 'beats' in a word.

This skill is closely linked with syllable blending. Children need lots of opportunities to hear words broken down into syllables. Clapping or jumping on each syllable can help children to feel and count them.

Rhyme Production

The ability to hear a word and think of another word which rhymes

Again, this skill is developing the ability to hear different sounds in words. Knowing that the rhyme is the sound of the last syllable and being able to blend syllables helps children produce new rhymes eg fl-oat and b-oat, r-ight and k-ite. Rhyme production is a tricky skill, so children need lots of opportunities to play with the language during song and rhyme times.

Onset – rime

Onset is the initial consonant or consonant blend and rime is the vowel and the following letters.

Being able to distinguish the onset and rime, helps children to connect word families which are groups of words that have a common feature. For example c/at, h/at, s/at or m/ash, d/ash, s/ash. This skill will help children decode words when reading and support them to spell words when writing.

Phoneme Discrimination

A phoneme is the smallest unit of speech that carries meaning. In English there are 44 unique sounds or phonemes. These are the vowels and consonants and are represented by the 26 letters of the alphabet. The ability to hear, distinguish, recognise and manipulate sounds within words is critical to reading success.

Alliteration Detection

The ability to identify words beginning with the same sound.

It is important that children understand the concepts of beginning, sound, same and different when exploring alliteration. Alliteration is easiest for children to achieve from copying an adult.

Phoneme Blending

The ability to hear the individual sounds in a word, put the sounds together and say the word that is made.

Phoneme Segmentation

The ability to break a word up into its individual sounds.

Note: *Phonological awareness and phonics are not the same but many of the skills overlap.*

- *Phonological awareness includes the awareness of speech sounds, syllables and rhymes.*
- *Phonics is the mapping of speech sounds (phonemes) to letters or letter patterns (graphemes).*

Songs & Rhymes

Research has shown that babies respond to the beat and rhythm of language even before they are born. They are in tune with their mother's heartbeat from an early stage, so a steady beat and the rhythm of songs and rhymes can be very soothing for them.

Songs and rhymes generally have a higher pitch that catches a baby's attention better than regular speech. We also tend to use a slower pace and lots of repetition which makes it easier for children to hear the individual sounds that make up words.

Even while having fun, children's brains are working hard. When you share a song or rhyme with a child, they are learning lots of the building blocks for communication. You will be making eye contact, creating opportunities for turn-taking, helping them to listen and pay attention, and of course, understand language too.

Rhyming helps children start to work out how sounds are put together to create words, which helps with speech development and with reading as a child gets older.

Rhythm can help children hear the syllable structure of words as well as separating words in sentences.

Lots of the best rhymes have actions too. These are useful for us all when trying to remember the words, but also encourage children's motor skills and coordination.

In this two minute film, poet and children's author Joseph Coelho shares some ideas about [Why children love rhythm and rhyme](#).



Choosing suitable songs



Singing to and with children is extremely important but many adults are not confident about singing and believe that they cannot sing. Young children are not judging the quality of your voice but are experiencing the emotional connection with you through singing whether it be fun and exciting or soothing and calm. If you do not feel confident, then use good quality recordings, such as those found in the [Bookbug Song and Rhyme Library](#) to support singing in your setting.

Be cautious about singing along to cartoon type videos as these can be very appealing for children but can quickly become a passive activity and detract from the social aspects of singing together, including eye contact, emotional expression and movement.

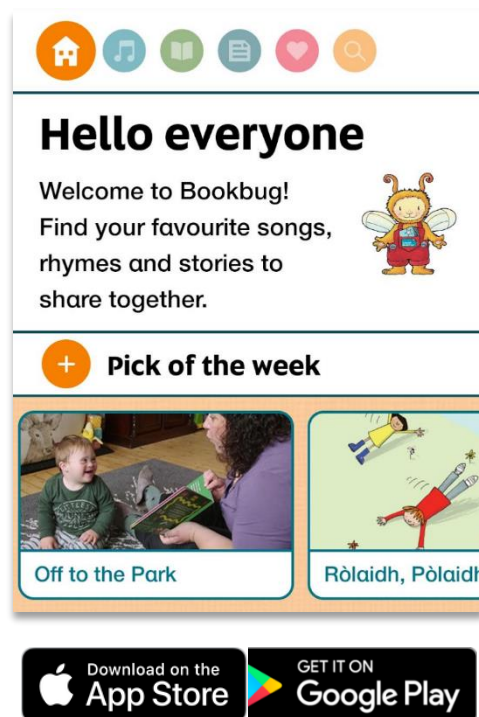
Young children's voices are still developing and have a limited range of around 6 notes from middle C to the A above. Adults tend to sing in a lower range than is comfortable for children, and often start songs too low for them to sing successfully. Be aware that pop songs and songs from musicals, which often have large ranges and big pitch jumps, may not be suitable. A good example of a song that fits within a young child's range of notes and with comfortable jumps between notes would be [Rain, Rain, Go Away](#). Lots of simple nursery rhymes follow a similar pattern.

Choosing suitable rhymes

There are many rhymes that we might think of as traditional nursery rhymes, however many families and some practitioners may not be familiar with them. A resource such as the [Bookbug App](#) can support practitioners and families to increase their repertoire of rhymes to use with children.

Although it can be tempting to stick with rhymes that you know, it is important to think carefully when you are planning about why you are choosing particular rhymes. A wide range of poems and rhymes will also support the development of wider language and vocabulary.

- Are you using a range of rhymes to develop specific aspects of phonological awareness, for example contrasting sounds at the beginning of words, alliteration, different rhythms and of course a variety of rhyming words?
- Are you including rhymes and rhyming poems that link with the seasons or with children's interests, helping them to develop new vocabulary in interesting contexts?



What are the key features of high quality provision for sound, rhythm and rhyme?

Interactions

'I learn about being me through the way you and others interact with me, look at me, speak to me, treat me and care for me.'

Realising the Ambition, 2020:26



**Realising the ambition:
Being Me**

National practice guidance
for early years in Scotland

Developing close and loving relationships

Singing can be a particularly important way of developing close and loving interactions with babies, toddlers and young children. Finding time to be still, to sing lullabies or use sounds to soothe and comfort, should be a key aspect of practice. The musicality of the human voice encourages more sustained eye gaze and alertness and it is important to spend time face to face, making eye contact and connecting responsively.



Developing communication and language

Children learn language through their interactions with responsive adults who listen, model, turn take and join in with enjoyment and encouragement. Playing with the sounds of the language, copying rhythms, singing songs and reciting rhymes are some of the most important interactions we have with children.

Supporting children's emotional development

Human beings respond on an emotional level to music and rhythm and this is vital to human development. Music and

songs can make us feel happy, sad, calm, excited and a whole range of other emotions. Singing and saying rhymes together, helps children to feel connected to others and gives them a sense of belonging.



Experiences

Singing and rhymes should be part of the daily routine of your setting. It is important to plan specific song and rhyme times, but it is also important to weave singing throughout your day. Whatever you are doing, you can always find a song or rhyme to support it.

Song signifiers

Song signifiers are linked to a routine or activity and sung before and during it. They are used within a total communication approach to help children understand their daily routines and what is happening next. Although song signifiers were developed to support children with communication needs, all children can benefit from using them. You can find out more at the following link. [Oaklands School Song Signifiers](#)

Types of songs and rhymes

Tina Bruce and Jenny Spratt (2011) identified a physical progression of songs and rhymes

1. Lullabies (often used when rocking or soothing a child)
2. Rhymes/songs that use the whole hand
3. Rhymes/songs that use the fingers
4. Crossing the midline (songs and rhymes that encourage hand movement across the body)
5. Rhymes/songs that use the whole body
6. Rhymes/songs that use the whole body and introduce games/movement

Hand and finger songs and rhymes link sound, sight and movement. They require significant concentration. They bring together a co-ordination of words, sounds and hand/eye movements.

Action songs help the co-ordination of sound, vision and movement. They involve the whole body and develop the vestibular system.

Through songs and rhymes, children are learning about syllabification, rhyming chunks, alliteration etc in a very enjoyable way which makes it much easier for children to grasp the concepts involved than trying to teach phonological strategies in isolation.

A core of specially selected songs, nursery rhymes and other rhymes/poems should be used which support rhythm, rhyme, alliteration and initial sounds.



Spaces

- Children need opportunities to work with the sounds of the language, both indoors and out.
- Listening to sounds in different spaces helps children discriminate the sounds around them.
- Provide resources that children can use to make and explore sounds, such as musical instruments, loose parts, different materials such as wood, plastic, metal etc.
- Create comfortable places indoors and out where children can come together to sing.
- Song and rhyme bags containing linked resources can support children to memorise vocabulary and act out the song or rhyme.



Self-Evaluation

It is important to self-evaluate your provision on an ongoing basis so that you can be sure that you are meeting the needs of all the children in your setting.

Some questions to consider:

- ⇒ Are practitioners using vocal tone, volume, pitch and gesture to convey meaning?
- ⇒ What opportunities are there for children to listen to different sounds across the provision, both inside and out? Are these opportunities free from unnecessary disruptions?
- ⇒ Do children have lots of opportunities to repeat songs and rhymes that have been introduced?
- ⇒ How are practitioners using songs and rhymes to enhance their relationships with children and support their varying needs?
- ⇒ Is there a shared understanding of how children develop phonological skills and are there opportunities to have quality conversations about children's phonological awareness and how to support next steps?
- ⇒ Are practitioners considering the choice of songs and rhymes in their planning?
- ⇒ Do you see evidence of these learning experiences through documentation?
- ⇒ Are there opportunities for children to develop phonological skills through effective home learning links?

References

This pamphlet is based on the work of Tina Bruce and Jenny Spratt. It also draws on the SEIC Early Literacy Learning and Development in the Early Years documents used in Edinburgh, East Lothian, Fife, Midlothian and Scottish Borders, The Scottish Book Trust and the Highland Literacy programme.

Bruce, T. and Spratt, J., 2011, Essentials of Literacy from 0-7: A whole-child approach to communication, language and literacy. 2nd Edition. London: Sage.

Highland Literacy <https://highlandliteracy.com/emerging-literacy/phonological-awareness/>

Realising the Ambition: Being me, 2020. Education Scotland. Accessed at <https://education.gov.scot/resources/realising-the-ambition/>

Scottish Book Trust <https://www.scottishbooktrust.com/>

Acknowledgements

This early level pedagogy in practice pamphlet was created in collaboration with Education Scotland the South East Regional Improvement Collaborative and practitioners and officers from City of Edinburgh, East Lothian, Fife, Midlothian and Scottish Borders councils.



SOUTH EAST IMPROVEMENT COLLABORATIVE
Working together, empowering all, improving outcomes