



learning & development

3 RHYTHM

Over the course of eight articles **Maria Kay** highlights the close relationship between music and literacy in the early years, and suggests simple activities to help you develop children's skills...

In this article I want to examine how developing a sense of rhythm can help to improve children's reading and writing skills. Usha Goswami, a professor of cognitive developmental neuroscience at Cambridge, has found the perception of rhythm to be important to literacy. She has undertaken research specifically with dyslexic children. This was presented on BBC Four's 'Growing Children' in 2012. In the programme she stressed the importance of rhythmic language activities in preschool to support language development. These include nursery rhymes, songs, language games, stepping, clapping, action rhymes and large motor movement.

Rhythm and syllables

Words can be divided into syllables - chunks of sound. For example, the word, 'ex-am-ple' has three syllables. The ability to 'chunk' words in this way is an important skill that helps us to break down words into simple units when we are reading or spelling.

The rhythm in a song often reflects the syllables in the lyrics. Examine the rhyme below, 'Can You Hear the Falling Rain', and you'll be able to see how the syllables in words are given a note each. For example, 'falling' is one word but it has two syllables and it is sung on two notes. Helping children to identify syllables by highlighting them through music is an effective method of helping children to break down words. Adding movement too, to highlight the syllables, adds further emphasis. Hence, marching, clapping, dancing and playing instruments help to embed vital literacy skills.

Musical activities

Can You Hear The Falling Rain?

Can you hear the falling rain?
Listen here it comes again.
Down the river, down the lane,
Tapping on the window pane.

Tap the beat and then tap the rhythm to compare them. When you tap the beat, only tap where indicated by the dots. When tapping the rhythm, tap where indicated by the bricks.

Cobbler cobbler

The rhyme 'Cobbler Cobbler' can be used in the same way too. See if you can identify the beat and the rhythm...

*Cobbler, cobbler, mend my shoe,
Get it done by half past two
'Cos my toe is peeping through,
Cobbler, cobbler mend my shoe.*

To emphasise the rhythm use claves (sticks), clap your hands or tap on a drum. If you use a drum you can vary the sounds of the rain falling, flowing down a river, on a road or on a window.

This rhyme can also be used as a basis for discussion about rain and the sound it makes as it hits different surfaces or flows in a river. You could compare this to the sound of the crashing waves of the sea or water from a tap.

It's raining, it's pouring

On the same 'rain' theme recite this traditional rhyme - it is usually performed as a chant (more singsong than a spoken rhyme, yet not quite a song). The circles indicate the beat of this rhyme and the lines, the rhythm (also reflects the syllables in each word).

It's raining, it's pouring
● ●
The old man is snoring
● ●
He went to bed and banged his head
● ●
Now he can't get up in the morning!
● ●

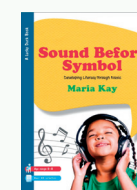
It's raining, it's pouring
— — — — —
The old man is snoring
— — — — —
He went to bed and banged his head
— — — — —
Now he can't get up in the morning!
— — — — —

Syllable activity

Here's another activity that will help identify syllables. Pass a beater around the children in turn; you hold a drum. Ask the children a question such as, "What did you have for breakfast?" The children have to reply and beat out the syllables on the drum as they speak. For example, cere-al = three beats (syllables); toast and jam = three beats (syllables).

I have found that some children who have difficulty with spelling have not learned to tap rhythms. Even older children can benefit from tapping out the rhythms in words. It helps to break the words down into smaller, more manageable units that are easier to read and spell. The ability to pay careful attention to the sounds within words is vitally important to proficiency in literacy.

The next article in this series offers suggestions to help children to pay attention to variations in pitch.



Maria Kay is the author of *Sound Before Symbol: Developing Literacy through Music*, published by SAGE. To receive 20% off RRP, quote discount code UK14EM04 when ordering on

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