Poetry and rhymes make a valuable contribution to all aspects of language and literacy learning. They are an important part of our literary canon and can be both a source of enjoyment and learning. There is a wealth of worthwhile material that will appeal to young children. In the early years at preschool and school, educators aim to provide many and varied opportunities for children to ‘actively’ use, engage with, and share the enjoyment of language and texts in a range of ways (DEEWR, 2009, p. 41).

Why incorporate poetry and rhymes?
Poetry and rhymes strengthen children’s oral and written language abilities and enhance knowledge, understandings and skills in the three interrelated strands of Language, Literature and Literacy in the Australian Curriculum: English (ACARA, 2011). They can promote active involvement in ways that build children’s understandings of concepts, creative thinking and the inquiry processes essential for lifelong learning. Young children are readily motivated as they gradually build the competencies that underpin speaking, listening, reading, writing and viewing. Poetry and rhymes:

- help develop the ability to memorise, sequence, move to or replicate sound patterns
- provide opportunities to develop clear articulation, phonological awareness and alphabet knowledge
- enhance listening skills and oral comprehension
- expand vocabulary by exposing children to new words as well as literary language they may not hear in everyday talk
- promote expressive language skills as children discuss responses and share ideas
- are multisensory as they touch our minds and hearts and enrich the imaginative landscape.

Despite the many special qualities of poetry and what it offers, research reveals that children are exposed to a limited range of poems (Gamble, 2013; Short, Lynch-Brown & Tomlinson, 2014). In the early years, as a result of pressures for accountability, it’s easy to take a utilitarian approach with a one-size-fits-all program driving content. However, there are many engaging and enjoyable ways to help early literacy learners achieve syllabus outcomes and make learning a highly pleasurable experience.

How?
As a teacher, your role is critically important. Using the window of opportunity for building early literacy skills requires planned, purposeful, playful and responsive teaching. You can:

- provide learning opportunities and enjoyment through the use of humorous and imaginative poetry and rhymes that capture children’s attention
- share words ‘that taste good – that tickle the tongue, tease the ear, create images in the mind’s eye …’ (Machado, 2010, p. 361). If children are to hear, use and appreciate the power and beauty of language, they need multiple opportunities to hear and use rich language.
- ask questions that encourage thinking, talking and furthering children’s understanding.

Experiences with poetry and rhyme can be intentionally embedded across the day. As well as incorporating them as part of group language sessions, they can be an integral part of daily routines or introduced incidentally as events occur: Who has seen the wind (Rossetti) as children go outside on a windy day; Hopping song as a transition signal or Jelly belly shakes (see Milne, 2010) as a settling rhyme. Sometimes a local event or a link to personal experience may be the inspiration to share a poem.

A good example was the Wild Rhino Conservation Project by Taronga Zoo, in early 2014, a drawcard for young and old. The rhino above was one of a herd of 125 painted sculptures placed throughout Sydney and its suburbs. ‘Is this rhino lost?’ A link might be made to I’ve lost my hippopotamus by Jack Prelutsky (2012).
Verses like Spike Milligan’s *A thousand hairy savages* work well as chants. Children can chant with you while walking the beat to another spot in the room. To add an extra challenge, try reciting it as a round.

*A thousand hairy savages*

*Sit*ting down to lunch
*Gobble, gobble, glup, glup,*
*Munch, munch, munch!*

This verse presents an opportunity to talk about words. ‘Sometimes we *eat* our food; sometimes we *gobble*! Can you think of some other words for *eat*?’

**Tuning in to sounds: Phonological awareness**

Developing awareness of beat and sensitivity to sound is one of the key skills that underpins successful literacy learning. Becoming aware that spoken language can be divided into smaller and smaller parts is a gradual process. There are different levels of difficulty in developing sensitivity to sound, moving from an awareness of:

- **words** (breaking down the continuous flow of sound in oral language)
- **clapping beats of a word** (syllables)
- **distinguishing words that rhyme** (end with the same sound pattern)
- **making up new rhyming words**
- **alliteration** (identifying words that start with the same sound), and **assonance** (similar vowel sounds repeated in the stressed syllable of a word)
- the most complex task of manipulating individual sounds in words (phonemic awareness).

Many children gradually develop these skills as preschoolers and then continue to refine their abilities as they learn to read and write. A rich and varied language environment with encouragement to listen to and play with words underpins this growth. Explicit, but meaningful opportunities to develop awareness are essential!

**Innovations, which use the structure of poems or rhymes that children know well, provide amusing opportunities to practise these different levels of awareness.**

I've lost my hippopotamus,  
The situation's weird.  
One minute she was next to me,  
Then *poof!* she disappeared.  
It's hard to lose a hippo,  
For a hippo's truly huge –  
I'm sensing something fishy,  
Some unsavoury subterfuge.

I've searched and searched with no success,  
I've yet to find a clue  
To her status or location,  
I'm unsure of what to do.  
If you spot a hippopotamus  
Where usually there's none,  
Please let me know, the odds are good  
You've found my missing one.  
(Prelutsky, 2012, p. 7)

Poems like this show poetry’s potential for expressing ideas and feelings in amusing and imaginative ways.

**What: Some practical strategies to support learning**

**Beat and rhythm**

Children are drawn to the rhythmic patterns of poetry. When they hear and speak rhymes, it’s impossible to avoid feeling the beat and rhythmic patterns. As well, chanting rhymes develops speech as mouth and tongue muscles are exercised. Dynamics can be explored – saying rhymes softly, loudly, with crescendo, increasing or decreasing pace and encouraging children to experiment with their voices to vary pitch.

Patterns and rhythm can be highlighted through movement or body percussion. Claps, knee pats, stamping feet or moving in a particular way, encourage children to be attentive and know when to add sounds, when to move and when to be still.

**Hickory dickory mouse,**  
A mouse is finding a house.  
He tries a hat, it feels too flat;  
**Hickory dickory mouse.**

**Hickory dickory mouse,**  
A mouse is finding a house.  
He tries a pot, it feels too hot;  
**Hickory dickory mouse.**  
**Hickory dickory mouse,**
A mouse is finding a house. He tries a shoe, yes, that will do; Hickory dickory mouse. (Nicholls, 2012, p. 38)

Children can suggest other homes to reinforce the concept of rhyme (stuff/rough, yard/hard).

In addition to rhyme, alliteration and assonance can be explored. Poems might be selected to focus on hearing salient or beginning sounds or to develop the skill of listening for, and generating words with similar sounds. After providing some examples, children can suggest their own alliterative words or phrases.

With frequent and engaging experiences sharing poetry, children gradually move from implicit to explicit understanding. They learn first to recognise and then produce words that end or begin in the same way. A final step is to use appropriate metalanguage to explain their choices.

Building alphabet knowledge
Children delight in silly rhymes.

Pp
Pussy cat, pussy cat, where have you been?
Under the waves in a submarine,
Pussy cat, pussy cat what did you see?
A wobbly jellyfish goggling at me.

You can talk explicitly about letters and sounds, such as the /s/ sound in ‘sister’.

My Sister
My sister’s remarkably light,
She can float to a fabulous height.
It’s a troublesome thing,
But we tie her with string,
And we use her instead of a kite.
(Mahey in Yolen & Fusek Peters, 2010, p. 40)

‘Listen when I say sister. What’s the first sound you hear? Can you think of some other words that start with the /s/ sound?’

For those who are developing familiarity with letter names, you can ask: ‘What letter will I write?’

Together with the children, you can try making your own alphabet book with favourite poems.

Fostering oral language and comprehension
Although code-related skills, such as those discussed above, are critical for early literacy learners, vocabulary, discourse skills and background knowledge set the stage for learning to read and are essential for robust comprehension. This latter set of skills should be developed simultaneously with code-related skills. Wasik and Hindman (2013) maintain children need opportunities to use the language they hear and to voice their thoughts. Through meaningful discussion children expand their vocabulary and refine understanding of word meanings. Grammar – knowing how words go together to form phrases and sentences – is also learned through exposure to interesting language and interaction with others. Poetry offers abundant opportunities to hear, respond to and explicitly discuss rich and sophisticated language. Oral language and comprehension can be nurtured through carefully crafted questioning.

Planning questioning
Initially, you can motivate reluctant talkers and encourage careful listening for information that is ‘right there’. ‘Listen, tell me the name of an animal you heard?’ Or,
‘Where does the poet tell us the crow is?’

Animal Voices Can you …

Purr like a cat in the sun?
Squeak like a mouse on the run?
Grunt like a pig in a sty?
Tweet like a bird in the sky?
Baa like a sheep in a pen?
Cluck like an egg-laying hen?
Buzz like a bumble bee?
Chomp like a horse with a carrot?
Shriek like a red and green parrot?
(Donaldson & Sharratt, 2004, p. 6)
Comprehension requires understanding not only of literal information, but also the ability to think beyond the words in the text; to listen for clues and read ‘between the lines’ in order to generate inferences.

**The meal**
Timothy Tomkins had turnips and tea.
The turnips were tiny,  
He ate at least three. 
And then, for dessert  
He had onions and ice.  

He liked that so much that he ordered it twice.  
He had two cups of ketchup,  
A prune and a pickle.  
‘Delicious,’ said Timothy.  
‘Well worth a nickel.’  
He folded his napkin  
And hastened to add,  

‘It’s one of the loveliest breakfasts I’ve had.’  
(Karla Kuskin as cited in Prelutsky, 1986, p. 68)

'I've lost my hippopotamus.' New York, NY: Greenwillow Books.

Illustration by Marc Brown, from *Read-Aloud Rhymes for the Very Young* by Jack Prelutsky.

‘Do you think Timothy Tomkins liked his breakfast? How do you know?’ Or, ‘Do you think Timothy’s Mum would think he had a healthy breakfast? Why (or why not)?’

Even very young children can begin to analyse, explain and compare. They add to information in the text by using what they already know, with text-to-life or text-to-text connections.

**So, realise the potential of poetry!**
The more poems and rhymes children know, the more ideas they have to think about. They learn different ways of saying things and new ways of looking at things. They learn how words can paint pictures and create vivid mental images.

**Cat Kisses**

Sandpaper kisses on a cheek or a chin –  
that is the way for a day to begin!  

Sandpaper kisses – a cuddle, a purr.  
I have an alarm clock that’s covered with fur.  
(Katz, as cited in Yolen & Fusek Peters, 2010, p. 32)

References


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