

Especially for parents of young children! 

Toddler Fingerplays and Action Rhymes

 Rhymes and Sound Awareness

Toddlers find it fun and exciting to explore the world of language while moving their fingers, arms, and bodies. Fingerplays and action rhymes can help toddlers build word skills and add to the number of words they know and use. These important early literacy activities spice up language learning with fun!

What is the practice?

Fingerplays and action rhymes are very brief stories—often with rhymes—that are paired with finger or body motions to tell the story. Fingerplays and action rhymes help toddlers learn about rhyming words and poetry. They get toddlers to listen, speak, and pair words with actions.

What does the practice look like?

Every time your toddler says or sings a rhyme and uses her fingers, hands, or body to “act it out,” she’s playing a fingerplay or action rhyme. *The Eensy-Weensy Spider* is an example of a fingerplay.



How do you do the practice?

Enjoy fingerplays and action rhymes often with your toddler. He'll look forward to these times with you, playing with language and moving his body. Take advantage of everyday moments to enjoy fingerplays. You can play them while waiting for a table at a restaurant, watching a brother's soccer game, or playing with friends who come to visit. You can find ideas on the Internet by searching **fingerplays** and **action rhymes**. You can also have great fun inventing your own!

- Fingerplays and action rhymes can be about any subject that interests your toddler (dolls, animals, firefighters, food, etc.). The sillier and more fun they seem to your toddler, the more she will want to do them again and again.
- If the fingerplay or action rhyme is a new one, teach it with pleasure. It doesn't matter if you get it “right”—your enjoyment will inspire your child!
- Repeat the fingerplay or action rhyme slowly. Help your toddler make the finger or hand motions.
- After a couple of times leading the fingerplay or action rhyme, ask your toddler to join in if she has not already started saying the words.
- Let your toddler lead the fingerplay or action rhyme as much as possible, even if she makes mistakes. Let her lead, and watch how proud she is!
- Trying new fingerplays or action rhymes is fun for your toddler, but don't forget the old favorites. Repeated play is important for learning. Be sure to keep playing familiar fingerplays or action rhymes along with new ones.
- Encourage your toddler to try fingerplays and action rhymes. Smile and comment on her successes. Your participation and interest will go a long way in keeping your toddler involved.

How do you know the practice worked?

- Does your toddler do fingerplays or action rhymes more often?
- Is your toddler enjoying doing fingerplays or action rhymes?
- Does your toddler try to make up her own fingerplays or action rhymes?

More introducing fingerplays and action rhymes

Eensy-Weensy Spider

At about 18 months, Sophia had never done a fingerplay. Knowing that Sophia was always waving her arms, Mom decided to teach one. As Sophia waved her arms, Mom took her into her lap. She snuggled Sophia and placed her arm around her. Mom began to sing *Eensy-Weensy Spider* and move Sophia's hands to make the motions. After she finished, she waited to see Sophia's reaction; Sophia smiled up at her mom and moved her arms. Mom began the song again, doing the motions with Sophia's hands. By the third time through, Sophia was trying to do the motions on her own. She showed clearly how much she enjoyed it and wanted to continue playing.

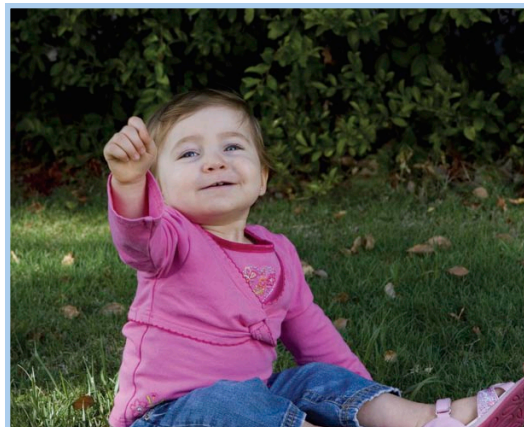


Action-Rhyme 'Rowing'

Maya, 24 months of age, is a powerhouse of energy. Maya's mom decided that doing an action rhyme like **Row, Row, Row Your Boat** would be something "Miss Energy" would enjoy. She asked Maya to sit facing her, on her lap, so that they could hold hands. Mom showed Maya how to lean forward as she pulled Maya forward and how to lean back and pull her mom toward her. After they did the motion a few times, Maya's mom began to sing *Row, Row, Row Your Boat* in time to their back-and-forth rocking. When they finished Maya wanted to do it again and again and again!

'There was a little turtle...'

Kara is a toddler who has a hard time sitting still while listening to books or songs. Her mom knows how much Kara loves her pet turtle. She finds a fingerplay about a turtle on the Internet (*There Was a Little Turtle Who Lived in a Box*). She recites it to Kara every day while Kara feeds or plays with her pet. She even changes the words to include the turtle's name. Once Kara is familiar with the rhyme, she begins trying the motions. Kara loves pretending to "snap" at fleas and mosquitoes with her fingers. Soon she can recite the rhyme. Along with her mom, she does the motions. Sometimes she even stresses the rhyming words at the end of each line!



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Movin' and Groovin' Nursery Rhymes

 Rhymes and Sound Awareness

Exploring the world of language while getting to move their bodies is great fun for most toddlers. Action rhymes—rhymes paired with body movements—give toddlers opportunities to learn new words and phrases while matching them with physical movements.

What is the practice?

The chants and body movements of action rhymes promote the development of speech and listening skills. Young toddlers often engage in action rhymes with a parent or other children.



What does the practice look like?

Action rhymes are short rhymes—either sung or spoken—that are matched with body movement to tell a story. A toddler singing *Ring Around the Rosies* while walking in a circle with big brother and sister and then falling down at the phrase “We all fall down” is an example of an action rhyme. You can find more action rhymes that help toddlers build word skills by using the term **action rhymes** to search the Web. To help you make up your own action rhymes, search with the term **rhyming words** for fun ideas.

How do you do the practice?

The practice guide *Fingerplays All the Way* offers some suggestions about how to introduce action rhymes to your toddler. Using action rhymes about topics of interest to your child is an important starting point. The following are a few examples of action rhymes your toddler might enjoy:

Little, Bigger, Biggest

A little ball, *(Make a ball with finger and thumb)*

A bigger ball, *(Make a ball with two hands)*

And a great big ball. *(Make a ball with arms)*

Now help me count them.

One, Two, Three! *(Repeat gestures for each size)*

Row Your Boat

Row, row, row your boat

Gently down the stream.

Merrily, Merrily, Merrily, Merrily,

Life is but a dream.

(Sitting on the floor with your child, hold his or her hands and rock backward and forward)

Stretching

When I stretch up, I feel so tall. *(Reach high)*

When I bend down, I feel so small. *(Bend over)*

Taller, Taller, Taller, Taller. *(Reach up high)*

Smaller, Smaller, Smaller, Smaller.

(Get low on the floor)

Into a tiny ball.

Ring Around the Rosies

Ring around the rosies.

A pocket full of posies. *(Hold hands and go around in a circle for the first two lines)*

Ashes, ashes, we all fall down! *(Fall to the ground)*

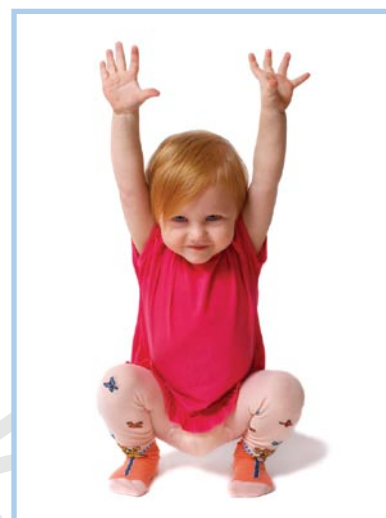
How do you know the practice worked?

- Does your toddler participate more in action rhymes?
- Is your toddler smiling and laughing while doing the action rhyme?
- Does your toddler try to change or make up new action rhymes?

Take a look at more action rhymes for toddlers

Fun with Rhyming

Two-year-old Sadie always enjoys jumping and running around, so action rhymes are fun for her. She and her dad do the motions together and take turns being the leader. Dad starts with "Stand up tall" and they both stretch up high; "Get down small" and they drop to the floor in a ball. Then Sadie takes a turn and calls, "Run to the hall!" They both take off running to the hall. The back-and-forth directions continue with words rhyming with *ball*, like *call*, *hall*, *small*, *tall*, *fall*, *crawl*, and *wall*. Sadie loves playing the game and begins to make up nonsense words that rhyme.



Calming Action Rhymes

Sometimes going to bed isn't easy. Peter's dad has found that calming action rhymes help his 30-month-old toddler settle down, so he makes up one for bed time. Dad says, "Time for bed, time for bed," and Peter crawls onto the bed. "Fluff up your pillow," and he pushes on his pillow; "Lay down your head," down goes the head; "Pull up the blanket," he pulls up the cover; "Tuck in tight," Dad makes sure the covers are up; "Close your eyes and sleep all night!" Dad knows Peter enjoys the rhymes, actions, and settling effect of the routine because he asks for it every night.

It's a Stretch!

Raza, a toddler with moderate motor impairment, loves to sing and dance to his favorite children's records. When "Heads, Shoulders, Knees and Toes" comes on, Raza loves listening to the rhymes and trying to touch the correct body parts. Big brother Sahil stands behind him and helps move Raza's arms to touch the right parts at the right time. Sometimes they both get lost going too fast, which makes them laugh. Sometimes Sahil tries to get Raza to do the motions wrong, and he cheers when Raza catches the mistake. They both sing along with the song, and Raza is able to move more easily as his muscles strengthen and stretch.



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Toddler Rhymes and Rhythm

 Rhymes and Sound Awareness

Nursery rhymes help toddlers become aware of the rhythms and rhymes of language. This handout suggests ways to use old “Mother Goose” rhymes and new rhymes you invent yourself to help your toddler become familiar with the sounds of letters and words.

What is the practice?

This guide includes rhyming activities to help toddlers learn to focus on sounds. Such activities help toddlers recognize that the change of just one letter sound can create a rhyming word with a new meaning, as in **cat** to **hat**. Combining rhyming words to make a silly poem is a fun activity for preschoolers.

What does the practice look like?

Young children start to see how sounds and words are connected when they hear words with identical or similar endings repeated in fun rhymes. Simple rhymes created for young children are often called *nursery rhymes*. “Hickory, dickory dock / A mouse ran up the clock....” is an example of a well-known nursery rhyme.



How do you do the practice?

Everyday life presents different opportunities for playing rhyming games. Repeating, singing, or making up rhymes can become part of many ordinary routines. Search the Internet for **nursery rhymes** or **rhymes for toddlers** or look for children's poetry and nursery rhyme books at the library. You will find all sorts of fun poems to pair with everyday activities (bath time, working in the garden, etc.) and occasions (birthdays and holidays).

- Identify rhymes about things your toddler is interested in or enjoys. For example, if your child likes animals, “Hey diddle diddle, the cat and the fiddle...” might be a good choice. The more your child enjoys the content of the rhyme, the more likely she will say the rhyme with you.
- Rhymes can happen anywhere. You can make them up as you walk down the street (for example, “Step one, step two, look at my shoe”). You and your toddler can make up or repeat rhymes during daily activities, like “Rub a dub, dub, three men in a tub” during baths.
- Don't worry about getting the rhymes “right.” Young children simply enjoy the sounds they are making. The sillier the rhymes are the better!
- As your toddler gets used to saying rhymes with you, let her pick or start the rhyme she wants to do next. Let your child make up a rhyme all alone or with a little help from you. Remember, it is the fun of rhyming that motivates her to continue rhyming, not whether the rhyme makes sense.
- Praise your toddler's efforts to say rhymes with you and to make up rhymes.

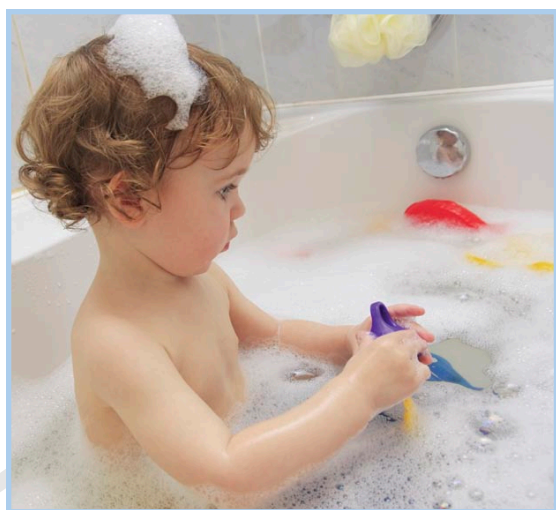
How do you know the practice worked?

- Is your toddler saying rhymes with you?
- Does your toddler smile or laugh when rhyming?
- Does your toddler want to make up new rhymes?

Take a look at more rhymes and rhythm

Walkin' and Rhymin'

Taking a walk through the mall with his mom is one of 27-month-old Damian's favorite activities. While walking along, his mom often begins a silly rhyme: "One, two, buckle my shoe." Damian repeats it while looking up and smiling at his mom. Now his mom says, "One, two, buckle my shoe; three, four, close the door," followed by Damian's repeating the two lines. As they continue to add lines, "Five, six, pick up sticks; seven, eight, lay them straight; nine, ten, a big fat hen," Damian sings out the words in unison with his mom.



Rub-a-dub-dub!

Taking a bath is something 22-month-old Anna enjoys. But sometimes it is hard to stop playing with her favorite toys and get in the tub. Anna's dad helps with the transition by using a silly rhyme to let her know it is time for a bath. Dad says, "Rub-a-dub-dub, three friends in a tub, and who do you think they be? Anna, the baker, and the candlestick maker, put them in all three!" He scoops up Anna and off they go together singing and laughing "Rub-a-dub-dub."

Rhythmic Learning

Rhyming is also about rhythm. Dylan, a 2-year-old, has moderate hearing loss. Dylan's mom uses her favorite rhymes with her son and adds movement to help him feel the rhythm in time with the words. Dylan loves the rhymes when his mom rocks him back and forth to the rhythm or helps him clap his hands to the rhythm as she holds him in her lap and chants their favorite rhymes.



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Fingerplays All the Way

 Rhymes and Sound Awareness

Exploring the world of language is fun when fingerplays are a toddler's learning tools. Fingerplays let young children enjoy exploring language in ways that build word skills and have them use new words. Both are important early literacy skills.

What is the practice?

Fingerplays are very brief stories—often with rhymes—that use finger movements to help tell the story. Fingerplays introduce rhyming and poetry to young children. They provide fun opportunities to listen and speak. And they encourage children to match words with physical actions.

What does the practice look like?

When your toddler recites or sings a rhyme and uses her fingers, hands, or arms to “act it out,” she’s doing a fingerplay. Singing and doing the motions to *Eensy-Weensy Spider* is an example of a fingerplay. You can find many fun fingerplays to enjoy with your toddler by searching on the Web for **fingerplays** or **preschool fingerplays**. Librarians can help you borrow good books of fingerplays, lap games, and other fun literacy activities for toddlers.

How do you do the practice?

Enjoy fingerplays again and again, offering your toddler the opportunity to have fun playing with words and body movements. Do fingerplays together while you’re waiting in the grocery line, preparing for bed, or watching a big sister’s soccer practice. Fingerplays give a squirming toddler the opportunity to become “active” while he needs to sit and wait.

- Fingerplays and action rhymes can be about any subject that interests your toddler (animals, trucks, food, and more). The sillier and more fun they are, the more your toddler will enjoy trying to say them over and over again.
- If the fingerplay is new to your toddler, teach it with excitement. It doesn’t matter if you get it “right.” Your interest will capture your toddler’s attention.

Bunny Puppet

Here is a bunny, with ears so funny. (**Raise two fingers**)
And here is a hole in the ground. (**Make hole with other hand**)
At the first sound she hears, she pricks up her ears, (**Straighten fingers**)
And pops right into the ground. (**Put fingers in hole**)

Homes

A nest is a home for a bird. (**Cup hands to form a nest**)
A hive is a home for a bee. (**Turn cupped hands over**)
A hole is a home for a rabbit. (**Make a hole with hands**)
And a house is a home for me. (**Make roof with peaked hands**)

Where Is Thumbkin?

(**Start with hands behind back**)

Where is Thumbkin? Where is Thumbkin?

Here I am. (**Bring right hand to front, with thumb up**)

Here I am. (**Bring left hand to front, with thumb up**)

How are you this morning?

Very well, I thank you. (**Wiggle thumbs as if they’re ‘talking’ together**)

Run away. (**Hide right hand behind back**)

Run away. (**Hide left hand behind back**)

(Repeat rhyme with each finger: Pointer, Tall Man, Ring Man, and Pinkie.)



How do you know the practice worked?

- Does your toddler do fingerplays or action rhymes more often?
- Is your toddler enjoying the fingerplays or action rhymes?
- Does your toddler try to make up his own fingerplays or action rhymes?

Take a look at more fun with fingerplays

In Motion

While waiting to check out at the market, Louisa's mom often uses a fingerplay to keep her 20-month-old from getting restless. Since Louisa likes rhymes, Mom starts playing *Bunny Puppet*. Louisa quickly joins in saying the words and trying to straighten out her fingers for the rabbit's ears. Mom helps with the motions, but since Louisa knows all the words, she doesn't say them. Mom knows Louisa enjoys this because, while Mom is paying for the groceries, Louisa is still doing the fingerplay.

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Where Is Thumbkin?

Many evenings, 2½-year-old Vincent and his mom spend time together playing in the family room. Sometimes they read a book or talk about who they saw during the day. Vincent always wants to do fingerplays. He loves their special version of *Where Is Thumbkin?* They each hide just one hand. They sing, "Where is Thumbkin? Where is Thumbkin?" followed by "Here I am! Here I am!" They each bring out their hand and wave their thumbs at each other. Vincent giggles with delight as they finish the rhyme.

I Can Do It, Too!

It's hard for John to get his fingers to do all the motions for fingerplays, but he likes to try. John's mom simplifies the finger motions. For example, in *Eensy-Weensy Spider*, instead of touching each finger together, John and his mom just touch their hands together as they raise their arms. They bring down their arms when they say, "Down came the rain," and swing their arms in front of them when they say "and washed the spider out." With "Out came the sun and dried up all the rain," they lift their curved arms high. Again, they touch their hands together as they repeat, "The eensy-weensy spider climbed up the spout again!"



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Sound Play

Rhymes and Sound Awareness

Toddlers are beginning to discover the many uses of language and to explore what sounds get what kinds of responses from people around them. Helping toddlers develop their language skills by participating in their verbal play increases their awareness of language and helps encourage them to practice speaking.

What is the practice?

Most toddlers naturally play with language by repeating words, phrases, or songs over and over, and by making up nonsense words. You can help your toddler with this part of language development by joining in his play and encouraging him to pay attention to the sounds he is making. Research shows that toddlers whose caregivers respond enthusiastically to early attempts at word play develop language skills more quickly and easily than toddlers who don't have these opportunities.



What does the practice look like?

A toddler asking incessant 'why' questions, singing the first line of *Dragon Tales* over and over, or making up nonsense names for her stuffed animals are all examples of children at play with language. As a parent, you can join in by answering questions, asking some of your own, singing along, and pointing out which silly-sounding names rhyme or sound alike.

How do you do the practice?

There are many daily opportunities for you to encourage your toddler's verbal play. Follow your child's lead with anything she wants to 'talk' about.

- Join your child in singing familiar songs from books, TV, movies, or day care. Encourage your child to experiment by making up different words, especially using your child's name and the names of friends, pets, or favorite activities.
- Introduce your toddler to the idea of rhyming by reading and reciting with her nursery rhymes, and encourage her to listen to the sounds. These are good to recite and play with while driving in the car, because you can use the sights around you (cars, favorite stores, people walking, trees) to think of other words to rhyme.
- Play games about the sounds things make, asking "What does the cow say?" or "What does that truck say?" Encourage your child to use his imagination to think about the way things sound. For example, a toddler might think a very large truck would make a deep, loud sound, but a spider would make a much smaller sound. These kinds of games help your child get used to paying attention both to sounds in words and sounds that aren't words, and understanding the difference between them.
- Have fun! Learning to talk is a complicated process, and children develop all the skills over time in their own ways. Your willingness to be silly with your child as he begins to play with words and sounds goes a long way to increasing his interest in talking and paying attention to language.

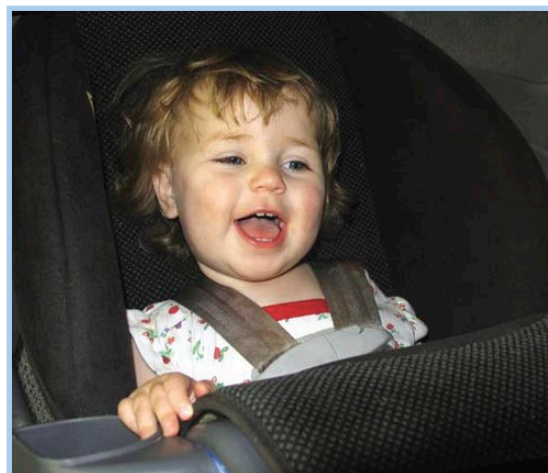
How do you know the practice worked?

- Does your child try to engage you and others in conversation or word play?
- Is your child eager to sing along with you, and with familiar songs on the radio or TV?
- Is your child showing more understanding of how people communicate with words?

Take a look at more verbal play with toddlers

Songs on the Go!

Nora, 2½ years old, is in her car seat on the way to the store with her dad. She is singing and talking to herself about everything they pass. "Sing *Old McDonald*, Daddy," she says. "Okay, you help me," Dad responds, and starts to sing. Then he pauses and asks, "What animal first?" "Cow!" Nora says, and chimes in on the mooing and other animal sounds. When they run out of animal ideas, her dad adds a verse: "...and on that farm they had a—Nora! What would a Nora say?" She laughs and calls out, "Ice cream!" "Okay, let's sing that," Dad says, and they sing verses with the names of friends and family members, with Nora supplying the words or sounds she thinks they would say, practicing using a range of sounds, words, and expressions.



Rhyme Time

Two-year-old Milo and his mom are together feeding animals in their barn. Touching the woolly head of a lamb, Milo says, "Lamb!" "That's right," his mom says. "This is our new lamb. Can you think of other words that sound like *lamb*?" Milo hesitates. "Think of your favorite book," his mom suggests. "*Green Eggs and...*" "Ham!" Milo says. "Right! Hear how they sound the same? *Lamb* and *ham*." "Lamb, ham, fam, bam ..." Milo says. "They all sound the same," his mom says. "How about *ram*, like a daddy sheep?" They take turns coming up with more rhyming words. Milo's mom isn't worried that some of the sounds aren't real words; Milo is practicing how to play with and use sounds, and the more comfortable he gets with this the more words he will learn in the long run.



Loud/Soft, Fast/Slow

John, a toddler with Down syndrome, is seated on his dad's lap, pretending to drive the family car. "Here we go," his dad says, "Vroom... There's a truck. What do we say to Mr. Truck?" "Vroom, vroom" John says, holding on to the steering wheel. "What? Mr. Truck can't hear you," says Dad. "Can you say that louder?" "Vroom!" John makes his car yell. "Oops, too loud. Can you do it softer?" Dad whispers. John whispers, "Vroom." They play with the sounds of the car, trying out louder and softer as well as fast sounds—pretending they're race car drivers—and slow sounds for heading up a hill. This play allows John to practice using his voice and sounds, and using words by speaking for his car.



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Fun and Games with Sounds

Rhymes and Sound Awareness

One skill a child needs in order to read is an understanding of how sounds go together to form different words. This handout includes early word games that help toddlers see how sounds form words—an important building block for later reading.

What is the practice?

Help toddlers develop an early understanding of how sounds go together to form words by playing sound and word games. These fun activities help toddlers see the connections between various sounds and the words they can make.



What does the practice look like?

Playing with sounds (**ma-ma** and **da-da**) to make “new” words or silly sounds helps your toddler understand that letters represent different sounds that can be combined into words. Your toddler learns that these sounds can be put together in various ways to create new words. It’s an important early step toward reading.

How do you do the practice?

Opportunities to learn about sounds in words occur during ordinary activities like changing clothes or taking a bath.

- Think about the things your child likes to say and do. Often young children have a word or sound that they say again and again just because it’s fun. For example, some toddlers love to make animal sounds such as *baa*, *meow*, or *woof*. Other children may like to make up silly names for their pets, dolls, or family members. Catch your toddler’s attention by repeating the sounds he likes to say. Then change the first letter to make a new silly word: *Baa-baa* becomes *la-la*.
- Word play can happen on the spur of the moment as part of your toddler’s everyday routines. For example, if while taking a bath or riding in the car your toddler begins to make a sound, you can repeat the sound and encourage him to say it back to you. When it’s your turn, change the sound a little bit and ask your toddler if he can say it too. Encourage your toddler to repeat the sound you made or say a new one. Show your enjoyment as the game continues.
- As your toddler’s speech strengthens, begin to put words together in short sentences with the same sound. For example, “Did the doggie dig?” Laugh about the funny sound of “doggie dig” and ask your toddler to repeat the phrase.
- Show your toddler that he did well by smiling and commenting on his efforts. A little encouragement will keep your toddler playing the game longer, but be sure to stop when he tires of the game.

How do you know the practice worked?

- Is your toddler starting to “play” with individual sounds or words?
- Does your toddler seem pleased when he is trying to make or copy your sounds?
- Has your toddler shown interest in trying new sounds and words?

Take a look at more fun with sound

Word Fun on Wheels

Riding in a car is often a great opportunity for Maya and her mother to play word games. While riding along, 18-month-old Maya begins making sounds like *ba-ba-ba*. Her mom, following Maya's lead, repeats Maya's *ba-ba-ba* and adds her own *pa-pa-pa*. She asks Maya if she can say *ba-ba-ba* and *pa-pa-pa*. Maya loves playing *ba-ba-ba* and will repeat the sounds to get her mom to do it some more.



Rhyming Game

Nathan's dad plays a word game with him that includes lots of movement because 28-month-old Nathan loves to move. They call their game *Drop/Hop*. First, Nathan's dad teaches him to hop up and down when he says "Hop," to drop to the floor when he says "Drop," to put his hand on his head when he says "Top," and to clap his hands when he says "Pop." When they play their *Drop/Hop* game, Nathan's dad asks who should be the leader first. Nathan usually wants to be first. He tells his dad to drop and they both fall on the ground. Then his dad tells him to hop and they do. They continue to play back and forth until they both get tired.

Word and Sound Play

Jenna, a toddler with a mild hearing impairment, loves to play a game with her dad while swinging in the back yard. Her dad picks a word Jenna says, and says it in different ways: loud, soft, slow (stretching the sounds out long), fast (putting the syllables together quickly), and singing. Each time, Jenna repeats the word the same way her dad said it. Often Jenna will say another word and they play with that word the same way, with Jenna taking the lead. Jenna loves the word game on the swing, and it helps her listen to and tell the difference between sounds.

