LEARNING THROUGH PLAY

LITERACY IN THE PLAYGROUND

November 2009

Why are playground chants and rhymes important for the development of literacy skills?

A Trip Down Memory Lane...

LETS KEEP THE GAMES ALIVE!

BY THE BOOK CHOOK

SAVE THE GAMES!

Recently, I became concerned that some playground games, particularly the skipping and clapping chants and rhymes, are not as prevalent as they used to be. I figured there are many kids who would enjoy them if they had access to them, so I put out a call to some friends in the blogosphere for favourite playground games, and was delighted to find that many people remember them clearly, and with fresh enjoyment. Then, to celebrate The Book Chook blog's first birthday, I made this booklet as my gift to your children.

WHEN KIDS GET TOGETHER, THEY PLAY.

Some games involve language, others don't, but all games are important. Play is children's work. By playing real-life games, kids learn about co-operation, about sharing and taking turns, about following rules, all the while being outside in the fresh air. Chanting the rhymes used for clapping and skipping games means kids are internalizing language, particularly rhythm and rhyme. This helps all their communication skills: reading, writing, talking, and listening.

Read on, to take a trip down memory lane with these great skipping, clapping and singing games. I hope you'll share them with all the kids you know, not only for literacy's sake, but so they can join in the FUN too!
CLAPPING GAMES

Clapping and skipping games are important, both for literacy and music education. The bonus is, kids get physical activity while they're playing. Skipping has obvious aerobic benefits, but if you've ever seen children get up to speed in clapping games, you'll know these do too!

A SIMPLE CLAPPING GAME

Probably one of the easiest clapping games to learn is My Mother Said. It may also be one of the oldest. Australian storyteller, Helen Evans, says her mother played it in the early 1900s as a skipping game.

"The chant is called while two kids turn the rope and other children run in to skip one at a time. The group chants 'My mother said that I never should play with the gypsies in the wood. If I did she would say naughty girl to disobey. Disobey 1 Disobey 2 Disobey, disobey, disobey You.' Then the rope is turned as fast as possible while kids count the number of peppars skipped."

A basic clap pattern can be put to similar words. You need to stand opposite and facing your partner.

My (clap own hands together)
Mother (clap your right hand against partner's right hand)
Said (clap own hands together)
that (clap left hand against partner's left)
I (clap your own hands together)
ever (clap right against their right hand)
should (clap your own hands together)
play (clap left against partner's left hand)
with (clap your own hands together)
the (clap your right hand against their right)
gypsies (clap your own hands together)
in (clap left hand against partner's left hand)
the (clap your right hand against partner's right hand)
wood (clap your own hands together)

Keep to the same pattern for "If I did, she would say, naughty girl to disobey."

Try speeding up once you know the clapping pattern and the rhyme. Try changing the clap - clap your own shoulders with crossed arms, for instance, or kick your leg up behind you and clap your shoe.

Adding variations once you know the basic moves makes clapping games more creative, and even more fun.

Clapping makes us more aware of syllables in words. A syllable is a chunk of a word, a place where we break it up when we're pronouncing it, or trying to read or spell it. Disobey has three syllables: dis + o + bey. You can tap syllables, clap them, or even skip them if you want.

Good skippers make good spellers!

~ The Book Chook

The same rhymes are sometimes used for both clapping and skipping. My Mother Said is an easy one to start with, then you can try going really fast, or clapping in different ways.
One of Terry Doherty's (*The Reading Tub*) favourite clapping games is Miss Mary Mack. Here are the words and the pattern.

MISS MARY MACK

Miss (clap your own hands together)  
Mar (cross your arms in front of your chest)  
-ree (clap your own hands together)  
Mack, Mack, Mack (clap both your hands on both your partner's hands three times)

Miss Mary Mack Mack Mack  
All dressed in black, black, black  
With silver buttons, buttons, buttons  
All down her back, back, back.

She asked her mother, mother, mother  
For 50 cents, cents, cents  
To see the elephants, elephants, elephants  
Jump over the fence, fence, fence.

They jumped so high, high, high  
They reached the sky, sky, sky  
And they didn't come back, back, back  
'Til the 4th of July, ly, ly!

Pippa (aged 7) loves to play this with her friends at recess and lunchtime, but with extra words, and a slightly different pattern:

She went upstairs, stairs, stairs  
And bumped her head, head, head  
and now she's dead.

Pattern: Both friends cross hands over their own chest on Miss,  
slap own knees for 'Mar',  
clap own hands together on 'ree',  
clap opposite hand to friend's one on each 'Mack', then clap own hands together between each Mack (but not after the last Mack).  
Repeat these cross, slap, clap actions for every line.

Here's a *Book Chook* favourite. Well, when I say favourite, it's one of those chants that sticks to your brain like glue once you know it. There are many clap patterns you can do. The best idea is start with a simple one, and make it more complicated when you're ready. Simple: clap your own hands together twice, clap both your partner's hands together twice, and repeat, for each line  
Don't forget the actions!

DOWN DOWN BABY

Down down baby, down by the roller coaster  
Sweet sweet baby, I don't wanna let you go  
Shimmy shimmy cocoa pop, shimmy shimmy pow  
Shimmy shimmy cocoa pop, shimmy shimmy wow  
Grandma grandma sick in bed, she called the doctor and the doctor said:  
Let's get the rhythm of the head, Ding Dong, (move your head from left to right)  
We've got the rhythm of the head, Ding Dong (move your head from left to right)  
Let's get the rhythm of the hands, (clap clap)  
We've got the rhythm of the hands (clap clap)  
Let's get the rhythm of the feet, (stamp stamp)  
We've got the rhythm of the feet, (stamp stamp)  
Let's get the rhythm of the hot dog, (shrug shoulders and open mouth wide)  
We've got the rhythm of the hot dog (shrug shoulders and open mouth wide)  
Put it all together and what do you get?  
(ding dong, clap, clap, stamp stamp, hot dog)  
Put it all backwards and what do you get?  
(hot dog, stamp stamp, clap clap, ding dong)

Lots of rhymes can be used for skipping AND clapping. Why not experiment with a verse you know?

*Can you skip and clap to Teddy Bear?*

- Teddy bear, Teddy Bear  
- Turn around,  
- Teddy bear, Teddy bear,  
- Touch the ground  
- Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear,  
- Show your shoe,  
- Teddy bear, Teddy bear,  
- That will do

Under the Bamboo

Here's a favourite of Australian author, Claire Saxby. With a pattern of clapping which included clapping your own hands together and also clapping with another person in a variety of ways, you'd sing a song:

Under the bamboo  
under the tree boom boom  
true love for me  
my darling true love for me boom boom  
when we get married  
we'll raise a family  
a girl for you  
and a boy for me  
how happy we'll be.
Still More Clapping Games

A SAILOR WENT TO SEA

Here's another one that's nice to do with a group.

A sailor went to sea, sea, sea
To see what he could see, see, see
But all that he could see, see, see
Was the bottom of the deep blue
Sea, sea, sea

A sailor went to chop, chop, chop
To see what he could chop, chop, chop
But all that he could chop, chop, chop
Was the bottom of the deep blue
Chop, chop, chop

A sailor went to knee, knee, knee
To see what he could knee, knee, knee
But all that he could knee, knee, knee
Was the bottom of the deep blue
Knee, knee, knee

A sailor went to toe, toe, toe
To see what he could toe, toe, toe
But all that he could toe, toe, toe
Was the bottom of the deep blue
Toe, toe, toe

A sailor went to Timbuktu,
To see what he could Timbuktu
But all that he could Timbuktu
Was the bottom of the deep blue Timbuktu

Here's the pattern:
A (nothing, or make your own)
sai (clap your own thighs)
lor (clap your own hands)
went (click your fingers)
to (clap your own hands)
sea,sea,sea (clap both your hands with your partners, three times)
Repeat.

FOUR WHITE HORSES

I'm not even going to attempt to describe the pattern for this next one. It's for four people who are ready for a challenge. The best way to learn the movements is to watch this YouTube video.

Four white horses, on the river,
Hey, hey, hey, up tomorrow,
Up tomorrow is a rainy day.
Come on up to the shallow bay,
Shallow bay is a ripe banana,
Up tomorrow is a rainy day.

For those who'd like an even more complicated pattern, try Slide on Youtube, and see if you can create a chant for it.

FISH

Two friends stand facing each other. Hold your elbows at the sides with arms out in front and palms of own hands together making a 'fish'. Swipe your 'fish' from side to side, smacking into the other person's fish as you go, while you say 'one' (one way) 'two' (the other way) 'three' (back again) and then clap your own hands together as you say 'together'.

The chant to go with it:

One (swipe your fish along other person's fish)
Two (swipe it back)
Three (and back again)
Together (clap your own hands together)
Up (both hold your hands up as in 'this is a stickup' to slap each other's hands as you say 'up')
Together (clap own hands together)
Down (slap partners hands down long - hands hang by sides and then turn palms to face partner and slap them like that)
Together (clap own hands together)
Backs (Back at chest level, turn your palms of your hands to be facing you and you smack the back of your hands against the back of your friend's hands)
Fronts (turn palms to face friend's, and slap them again)
Knees (each slaps both hands on own knees)
Together (clap own hands together)
Let's do it again!

[Start from beginning again, usually faster and faster each time!]

Chants like these change from person to person, school to school, and country to country, so there are hundreds of variations. That is the nature of folk rhymes. It's fun to tweak them and create your own, adding more lines and movements.
SKIPPING GAMES

Skipping can be done alone with a one person rope, but these are all games for a group, which must be at least three people, and a rope that's long enough for your group.

One of the simplest ones to start young kids on is this one:

**Bluebells**
Cockleshells
Easy, easy, over.
(Repeat)

Two people hold the rope and rock it gently back and forth, about ankle height, while the person in the middle jumps up to miss it. On over, they turn the rope and the person does a proper skip.

Once you get good at jumping over the rope, you start to play games like Mississippi, where each person runs in, does one skip on the beat, and runs out. With a long line of skippers, you keep going until someone misses, when they take an end and turn the rope.

**MISSISSIPPI**
UP the MississIPPi if you MISS a loop, you're OUT.

**ALL IN TOGETHER GIRLS**
All in together, girls,
How do you like the weather, girls?
January, February, March,...
Two people turn the rope. Everyone skips together, then run out one at a time on each month.

**DONALD DUCK**
Donald Duck
Went to France
To teach the ladies
How to dance (normal jumps for first four lines)
First he did the wiggle-woggles (a bit like the twist)
Then he did the kicks (high kicks)
Then he did the twirly-whirlies (twirling around)
Then he did the splits (a legs wide jump that stops the rope under one foot.)

**K.I.S.S.I.N.G**
Susie and Henry
Sitting in a tree
K-i-s-s-i-n-g
First comes love
Then comes marriage
Then comes (another name) with a baby carriage

When the Book Chook went to school, skipping was mostly a girl's game. When it was our turn for K-I-S-S-I-N-G, we would nominate a boy's name as soon as we ran in. A new person would run in, while everyone said the last line of the chant, and the first person would run out.

**CINDERELLA**
Cinderella, dressed in yella
Went upstairs to see her fellah,
How many kisses did she get?
One...two...three...

Each skipper runs in and skips to the beat of the rhyme. When you come to the part with counting, the rope turners turn fast (peppers), until the skipper misses. The number she ends on will be the number of kisses she will get!

Who said skipping wasn’t romantic?
MORE SKIPPING GAMES

Rebecca Newman, editor of Alphabet Soup magazine, sent in this next one.

BUMPER CAR

"The first jumper waits for the rope to get up a good rhythm, and then runs in to jump while everyone chants:

Bumper car, bumper car, number 28
Went around the corner
And he slammed on the brakes, but the brakes didn't work!
So he went around the corner
And he slammed on the brakes, but the brakes didn't work!
So he went etc

The jumper remains 'in' until he messes up the rope and then he retires to the end of the queue and the next jumper steps up. Because everyone is impatient for a turn, the waiting queue is usually good for 'ahhh' or 'ohhh' every time the jumper manages another run around and back into the rope. I can't remember anyone monopolizing their turn for the whole of the lunch break ..."

AND THE GAMES DON'T STOP THERE...

Singing games are wonderful for children's musical education, and they have a great spin-off for literacy too.

Here's a lovely singing game from Farida Dowler, from Saints and Spinners blog:

WE ARE THREE WANDERING TRAVELERS

The group forms a circle. Three children "travel" outside of the circle, walking around it as everyone sings:

We are three wandering travelers
Out in the wind and the rain
We saw your light, shining so bright,
Tapped on your window pane, saying,
"Let us come in, let us come in,
Into your house we pray.
Let us come in, let us come in,
Please do not turn us away."
NO!

Repeat two more times. However, on the third time, respond with "YES!"

The three children go inside the circle and everyone sings:

You may come in, you may come in,
Into our house we pray.
You may come in, you may come in,
We will not turn you away.
YES!"

Kids are hard-wired to enjoy play. The motivational factor involved in games with accompanying chants, means that children will repeat them many times. This allows language to become internalized.
Kids all over the world play games when they get together. They skip, jump, laugh, sing and dance while they play. Some of the games they play are different; some are very similar.

If you’re interested in discovering games and songs from different countries, visit Mama Lisa’s World. This website is a treasure trove of delights, many of which have audio files so you can hear the music too.

Here are some games that children play in the UK. An internet search, and a trip to the library will yield more.

Kim Chatel from Chatel Village sent me a great song with actions. Could anyone do this and not laugh?

Singing in the Rain
(Sung to the tune of Singing in the Rain.)
I’m singing in the rain
Just singing in the rain
What a glorious feeling
I’m happy again.
Thumbs up!
Pato-pat, Pato-pat, Pato-up-pat-TA!

Kim says, "Repeat the verse 6 times. Line 6 changes each time. Begin standing up. When you get to line 6, act out the body action (ie: stick both thumbs up). Start with the thumbs up. Keep your thumbs up throughout the next verse then add elbows back. Accumulate the body actions until the end when you’re so twisted you can barely sing or move. Very funny! Here is the list of body actions for line 6 or you can add your own.
Thumbs up
Elbows back
Knees together
Butt out
Head down
Tongue out"

Kim sent another song, a French Canadian one about a little cow with sore feet.

Un! Deux! Trois! Quatre!
Ma petite vache a mal aux pattes!
Tirons la par la queue!
Elle sera bien mieux!
Dans un jour ou deux.

It seems to be a little counting song. So many playground games start with counting-in rhymes, and what about all those songs to practise counting, too? But perhaps that’s a project for another day!

I hope you’ve enjoyed this mini book of playground games that promote literacy. Literacy in the Playground grew out of posts I wrote on The Book Chook blog about how children’s games are important for the development of many skills. This booklet and those posts were only made possible by the generosity of Book Chook friends across the blogosphere. Thank you all for racking your brains and remembering these loved chants, rhymes and songs from your childhood. You’re welcome to print a copy of Literacy in the Playground. Please share it with all the children you know, so we can keep these games alive!

THE BOOK CHOOK

Thanks also to the members of Flickr who made images available under Creative Commons so I could use them to make this text attractive!