

# Playing with Little Ones

by Marty Layne

Play is one of the joys of parenting. It's fun and it's also a vital part of your baby's development. More and more research proves what grandmothers throughout time have observed, a baby that is sung to, talked to, played with and held is a happier baby, toddler, child.

So just how do you play with little ones? One of the ways is with song. You may not remember many songs from your own childhood. One song that you may remember is *Row, Row, Row Your Boat*. This song has a lot of possibilities. You can sing it at a fairly brisk pace such as in time with your steps as you're walking down the street.

*Row, Row, Row Your Boat* can also be slowed way down and become a lullaby. If you actually think about the words, this makes sense. Try singing this song slowly as though it were a slow dance.

Row, row, row your boat  
Gently down the stream  
Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily  
Life is but a dream



Keep in mind that when you are singing or playing with a baby or a toddler, you may need to repeat the activity many times. In many communities, music classes for parents and babies are available as well as library programs that can refresh your memory of songs, provide you with new ones, and offer you an opportunity to meet other parents.

Totally switching tempos, bouncy lap rides are a great way to help a baby when they have gas or to entertain a toddler or young child. There are lots of bouncy rhymes around. One of my favourites is one I made up when my children were little. Hold your baby on your lap across both legs as you say the words:

**Here come the farmer's horses Clippity clop, clippity clop**

(Slow bounce going from one leg to the other in rhythm with the words)

**Here come the little ponies Trit trot, trit trot**

(Now you move your legs a little bit faster)

**Here come the race horses, Giddey-up, giddey-up, giddey-up**

Holding tightly to the child's hands, move your legs together at a gallop

**Here come the bucking broncos, Whoa, whoa, whoa**

Lift your legs up high and then down holding the child firmly so that they feel as though they are riding on a bucking bronco

This is a good game to play when you're sitting in a chair. Children as old as 8 to 10 still love being bounced to a rhyme like this. It's a great leg workout!

Fingerplays are also fun. It may take quite a few years before your baby is able to make the motions, but I have had babies in my classes who understand what to do in some of the fingerplays. One baby especially enjoyed Johnny Whoops and stretched out his when his mom said, "Let's do Johnny Whoops."

Here is the rhyme:  
Johnny, Johnny, Johnny, Johnny  
Whoops, Johnny, Whoops, Johnny,  
Johnny, Johnny, Johnny

Below are step by step instructions. It takes much longer to explain than to do.

1. Start by touching the tip of your baby's little finger (pinkie). Say either Johnny or the child's name. Move to the next finger
2. Touch the tip of your baby's ring finger. Say either Johnny or the child's name.
3. Touch the tip of your baby's middle finger. Say either Johnny or the child's name.
4. Touch the tip of your baby's index finger. Say either Johnny or the child's name.
5. Slide down the index finger and up the thumb while saying "whoops."
6. Touch the tip of your baby's thumb. Say either Johnny or the child's name.
7. Slide down the thumb and up the index finger while saying "whoops."
8. Touch the tip of your index finger. Say either Johnny or the child's name.
9. Touch the tip of your baby's middle finger. Say either Johnny or the child's name.
10. Touch the tip of your baby's ring finger. Say either Johnny or the child's name.
11. Touch the tip of your baby's little finger (pinkie). Say either Johnny or the child's name.

Here's another fingerplay involving your baby's body that's pretty self-explanatory:

Baby Peek-a-boo  
Touch your ears, pat your nose  
Touch your little baby toes  
Hide your eyes (cover either your eyes or your baby's eyes)  
Where are you?  
Baby's playing peek-a-boo! (uncover eyes)

It's important to remember that little ones like to listen to or have you do any fingerplay with them again, and again, and again. One little two year old boy in one of my classes really loved the fingerplay "Here is a box." His mom told me he did it over and over in the car. It made him so happy to be able to do all of the motions.

Here Is A Box

Here is a box;  
Make a box with one fist lightly clenched.  
Put on the lid.  
Use the other hand for a lid.  
I wonder whatever inside is hid?  
Peep under the lid.  
Why, it's a (cow) without any doubt.  
Poke one finger out of the fist.  
Open the box and let it come out! (Moo)  
Open fist. Make the appropriate noise for whatever animal or thing was named.  
(Make up something to put in the box that makes a distinctive noise.)

Clapping in rhythm to a rhyme is another fun way to introduce your child to both the language of poetry and the rhythm of music. This is a poem I've frequently used in my classes for clapping:

Happiness by A. A. Milne, *When We Were Very Young*

John had great big waterproof boots on.  
John had a great big waterproof hat.  
John had a great big waterproof mackintosh.  
"And that,," said John, "is that!"

I'll end with this fingerplay which entertains babies from about 6 months to toddlers of 2-3 years old. When I've used this rhyme in a class, everybody smiles! Often toddlers will want to do the motions on their mom's or dad's body as well as on their own.

Tommy Thumbs up and Tommy Thumbs down

Have your thumbs out and tuck the other fingers in and do as the words suggest.  
Tommy Thumbs is dancing all around the town  
Dance your hands around with thumbs up  
Dance them on your shoulders, dance them on your head  
Gentle dance your thumbs on shoulders and then the head  
Dance them on your knees and tuck them into bed.  
Gently dance on knees and then tuck the thumbs in to the hands to make a fist.

Start on the next finger:

Peter Pointer up and Peter Pointer Down ....etc.

Lilly Longer up and Lilly Longer down ....etc.

Shiny Ringman up and Shiny Ringman down ....etc.

Little Pinky up and Little Pinky down ....etc.

So what does all of this play accomplish? It gives your baby exposure to language – the sounds of language, the rhythm of language, vocabulary, and the idea of language. A game like Baby Peek-aboo gives your child exposure to how certain words lead to certain actions. It helps a child begin to understand sequence and cause and effect. Fingerplays, rhymes and songs also give you a repertoire of things to do when you're in a car or waiting in a grocery line to keep your baby happy. And most important of all, it builds a positive relationship between you and your child. Small beginnings of touching your baby's fingers and playing "Johnny Whoops" leads to your baby knowing that being with mom or dad is fun, interesting and comforting. We build relationships with our children one small bit at a time. Engaging in play doesn't involve anything other than your voice and your hands. It's very cost effective and I promise you it will lead to laughter and smiles.

Enjoy!

Resources

Librarians and libraries are such a wonderful resource for finding suitable books to read to your baby as well as collections of fingerplays and songs.

CDs:

[\*Brighten the Day – songs to celebrate the seasons – Marty Layne\*](#)

Singable Songs for the Very Young -Raffi

[Marty Layne](#) is the mother of four adult children who learned at home. She's a former infant massage instructor and developed and taught a program for babies and their moms, dads, or other caretakers called Games to Play With a Baby. She's written two books for adults: [Learning At Home: A Mother's Guide To Homeschooling](#) and [Games to Play with Little Ones](#) and one for children: [The Happy Snow Friends Counting Book](#), and recorded a music CD for families [Brighten the Day – songs to celebrate the seasons.](#)