

With rhyme and reason

by Susan Ramsay

Eighteen-month-old Liam squirmed in his dad's lap at the library's storytime. Liam had been straining to use his feet to reach another toddler in the group. His dad tickled Liam gently. Liam giggled and wriggled. And then Liam heard it, adults and children singing his favourite poem?.

?The itsy bitsy spider went up the water spout.

Down came the rain and washed the spider out.

Out came the sun and dried up all the rain

And the itsy bitsy spider climbed up the spout again.?

Liam stilled. Even though the song was sung slowly, Liam was not yet able to sing the words. He could, however, chime in with the actions.

Little Liam raised his hands like two giant spiders and then let them fall to the ground like water-logged arachnids whooshed down a water spout.

?Gen,? Liam shouted. ?You want the song again?? asked his dad.

For Liam, and young children everywhere, rhymes set to music, or rhymes acted out as finger plays or shared as bouncing or tickle rhymes are highly engaging. This is great news for children's literacy learning. Poetry helps children pay attention to the rhythms and ending sounds in words. Awareness to the syllables and sounds inside words is critical to understanding letter-sound connections. It's the first step in making sense of how the code of print works. Children who don't develop this awareness have difficulty learning to read and write.

Like adults, children typically focus on the meaning of words when they listen and speak rather than on the sounds inside words.

Listening closely to how words are constructed does not come naturally to children. Sharing poems and rhyming books, singing songs and lullabies are valuable activities that help tune young children's ears to hear when words end with the same sound. Tongue twisters focus children's attention on beginning sounds.

?She sells sea shells by the sea shore? has been a popular tongue twister for generations. Children playfully say it as quickly as they can without even realizing they are developing emergent literacy skills.

As parents and educators we help preschoolers and young school-age children when we draw their attention to words that rhyme.

After sharing ?Itsy Bitsy Spider,? for example, we can say something like, ?Hey, ?spout' and ?out' sound almost the same. They rhyme! I'll bet we can think of other words that rhyme with ?out.'? Your poetic preschooler may create rhymes using nonsense words. If he or she does, recognize that this demonstrates that your child truly understands how rhymes work. Your child might end up being the next Dr. Seuss!

Liam and his dad led another round of ?Itsy Bitsy Spider.? Then the group shifted to ?Twinkle Twinkle Little Star.? Little Liam brushed against his dad's whiskers as he lifted his chubby arms high, his fingers moving more like flags than twinkling stars; but his eyes were sparkling like diamonds.