Good Songs for Early Years...

...and good things to do with them

Compiled by Cathryn Dew

Things to remember when choosing songs:

**Tessitura:** most Early Years children will have a vocal range of around D (above middle C) to the B above that. Keep most of your songs within this range, especially those you are expecting children to sing.

**Intervals:** if you are expecting children to join in, choose songs without wide or awkward leaps. Choose several songs that make use of falling minor thirds (soh – mi).

**Decide what your song is for:** young children often concentrate on one thing – they will often either do the actions or sing the melody. If you are working on pitch matching, keep actions minimal and songs simple. If you are working on pulse, go for actions that you can do to the pulse.

Teaching songs

**My turn/your turn:** demonstrate the song first (‘my turn’) then invite children to join in (‘your turn’). When the children are singing, try not to join in too often yourself, so that they really feel that it is their turn to sing. This helps develop listening skills, and helps you to hear how the children are getting on.

‘Off we go’: sing this on the starting pitch, at the starting tempo. It brings everyone in together on the right pitch and at the same tempo with minimal ‘fuss’.

**Don’t point out mistakes:** simply say ‘my turn again’ and model the song correctly.

**Praise good participation:** try to say what a child has done well – i.e. moved in time to the pulse, used his/her singing voice, matched a pitch.

Planning a session

**Balance originality with familiarity:** children look forward to their favourite songs and sing them confidently. You might get bored with them, but they will benefit from sessions that introduce new songs around a framework of familiar songs.

**Include variety:** make sure that you don’t expect toddlers to sit still for long periods of time. Alternate groups of ‘up and about’ songs with sitting down songs. When working with babies, it is a good idea to plan your session in sections: e.g. welcome songs, tickling songs, bouncing songs, up and about songs, songs with instruments, lullabies. Grown-ups are less keen on getting up and down too often!
**Remember your grown-ups:** adults attending sessions with their children could easily feel ‘at sea’ if all the songs you choose are new to them. It’s always a good idea to include some universally well-known songs in your sessions to build the confidence of the adults as well as the children.

**Timing:** allow approximately 2 minutes for each song in your planning (some will take less time than this, some will take longer). For a 30-minute session, you will need about 15 songs (with one or two in reserve).

**Don’t worry if children don’t join in:** many children like to listen for weeks and weeks before they join in with a group. You may find, however, that they are singing all the songs at home.

**Have fun:** include some songs and games that are really good fun, even if chaos sometimes ensues!

### Developing musical concepts and skills

**Voice finding:** play games such as ‘Have you brought your whispering voice’ and sing songs that combine singing voices with speaking/whispering voice (e.g. ‘Five little monkeys sitting in a tree’, ‘Little Sally Saucer’). Don’t forget about the thinking voice. Try to build this into songs and rhymes.

**Pitch matching:** ‘off we go’ is vital here. Encouraging children to sing alone also helps their pitch matching. Use puppets to encourage this. Children will often sing to a puppet before they feel confident singing to an adult. Use ‘hello’ songs and games such as ‘Doggie doggie’ to encourage children to sing alone.

**Higher/lower:** sing songs and play games that relate pitch to parts of the body (‘Chest, chest, knee, toe’, ‘There’s a spider on my toe’) or songs that have ‘up and down’ actions, like ‘Jack in a box’ or ‘The golden corn’. ‘Buttercup farm’ is also an excellent song to learn about higher and lower.

**Pulse:** Children feel the pulse before they internalise it. Encourage children to move to the pulse, and to play instruments to the pulse. Actions that involve left and right (marching, waving) help with keeping a steady pulse. Use a scrunchie and lycra to help children feel the pulse from others. Encourage carers to tap the pulse on the baby’s/child’s body while singing songs. Introduce songs with different metres (simple 2, 3, 4 and compound time). Songs and rhymes such as ‘Clocks’ and ‘Fishes’ explore the way the pulse can be divided into smaller units. Sing songs in the ‘thinking voice’ and see if everyone can keep the pulse.

**Faster and slower:** Sing songs at different tempi to explore this concept. Good songs for this are ‘fly, fly, fly’, ‘Nee nah’. With babies you can sing bouncing songs at different tempi (eg. ‘Horsie, horsie’).

**Rhythm:** Make a distinction between pulse and rhythm by tapping the pulse on your knees and clapping the rhythm, or tapping the rhythm on rhythm sticks. Use rhymes such as ‘One two three four, Mary at the cottage door’, and practise tapping the rhythm of the words and the pulse.

**Timbre:** Play games with instruments to explore their timbre. Play instruments hidden from view in boxes/bags and ask children to identify what kind of sound they make. Give children opportunities to play instruments on their own (‘Listen, listen, here I come’). Try to let children experiment with instruments in free play time.

**Louder/quieter:** Experiment with dynamics by playing instruments louder and quieter (‘Can you play your rhythm sticks’).
Action songs

La La

Walk and Stop

Stretch up high

Make up lots of actions to do in time to the pulse.

Roll a ball to different children in the group as you sing the song.
Tap or clap to the song. Insert children’s names: ‘Good day, good day to Isaac’. With older children, you can explore the two different metres in the melody.

**Songs and rhymes exploring pulse, rhythm and metre**

**Obwisana**

Tap sticks in time to the pulse, or tap the floor then the sticks together to emphasise the metre.

**Row, folks, row!**

A good song to sing with the scrunchie. Pull the scrunchie out and in to the pulse.
Can you play your rhythm sticks?

Can you play your rhythm sticks? Tap, tap, tap. Can you play them just like this?

Tap, tap, tap. Can you make a quiet sound?

Can you tap them really loud? Can you play your rhythm sticks?

Tap, tap, tap. Can you play them just like this? Tap, tap, tap.

Can you play them really slow? Now as fast as you can go.

Can you play your rhythm sticks? Tap, tap, tap.

Old Mr Woodpecker

Old Mister Woodpecker sitting in a tree,

old Mister Woodpecker tapping merrily.

Sing the song in singing voices. Then sing in ‘thinking voice’ and tap the rhythm with sticks.
Clocks

Sing the song and ask the children to listen and use rhythm sticks to tap the rhythms of the different ‘ticks’ and ‘tocks’. Tap the floor on the boings – use big gestures to keep in time! The tessitura of this song is too wide for most young children to sing comfortably.

Fishes

Little fishes swim along,
Flipper flapper, flipper flapper.
Bigger fishes sing this song,
Swish, swash, swish, swash.
After them there comes a shark
Snap! Snap!
And the great big whale goes
Blow!

Tap knees, clap hands and do actions to emphasise the different rhythms in the rhyme.

Bananas

Bananas, bananas, clap, clap, clap,
Bananas, bananas, flap, flap, flap,
Bananas, bananas, click, click, click,
Bananas, bananas, flick, flick, flick,
Bananas, bananas, bump, bump, bump,
Bananas, bananas, jump, jump, jump.

Chant the rhyme and do the actions.
Scrunchie and lycra songs

Three Teddies

Bounce toys on the lycra sheet – when you move it in time to the pulse, you can ‘see’ the pulse as the teddies bounce.

Up and down

Move the scrunchie or the lycra according to the actions in time to the pulse. This is a good song for exploring faster and slower – it naturally seems to get faster!

Where oh where?

Encourage children to hide under the lycra. Grown-ups hold the lycra and look under on the word ‘Boo!’
Here we go zudio

Walk round in a circle holding the scrunchie for the first ‘zudio’ section.
Walk in and out during ‘into the middle’ and ‘step back, Sally’.
Stand still and move the scrunchie in and out and to the sides in the last section.

Songs to explore pitch

Buttercup farm

This song can be found in Silly Aunt Sally by Jan Holdstock. It is a really good song to illustrate higher and lower.
This version of the song shows how you can slide the pitch up a semitone between each verse as the spider moves up the body. Sing a low verse when the spider is on the floor. This version of the song is best for listening/tickling – the low verses will be too low for children to sing. Miss out the ‘floor’ verse, or keep all the verses on the same pitch if you are inviting the children to join in singing the song.
Golden corn

Start curled up small. ‘Grow tall’ by the word ‘high’. Sway left and right, then curl up small as the music descends. With babies, you can also use a floaty scarf: lift it high for the first 2 bars, wave it back and forth for the second two, and let it fall to the ground for the last two.

Bouncing songs

These are especially good to sing to babies and younger toddlers. Encourage carers to bounce the children on their knees in time with the pulse.

Donkey riding

Were you ever off Cape Horn,
Where’s it’s always fine and warm?
See the lion and the unicorn
Riding on a donkey.

Were you ever in Cardiff Bay?
Where the folks all shout ‘hooray’
Here comes John with three month’s pay
Riding on a donkey.
A great bouncing song for babies. Make up new rhymes for ages up to 5.

**Little Walter Wagtail**

Little Walter Wagtail sat on a pole  
He wagged his tail and he wagged his tail  
And fell down a hole

**Tickling songs and rhymes**

**Here is a tree**

Here is a tree with leaves so green  
Here are the apples that hang between  
When the wind blows, the apples all fall  
And here is a basket to gather them all

**Little mouse**

Creeping out his little house, comes a little tiny mouse.  
Over hill and over dale, tickle NAME with his tail!
A hedgehog is very prickly
Sing this to the tune of ‘One finger and thumb keep moving’

A hedgehog is very prickly
A hedgehog is very prickly
A hedgehog is very prickly
He couldn’t be anything else

A frog is very jumpy, A worm is very wiggly, A spider is very tickly, A baby is very cuddly.

Dem bones
Sing the different verses of the spiritual while tickling the part of the body you are singing about.

Up and about...

As I was walking down the street

Carer carrying their babies can walk around the room and ‘meet’ friends. Jig off to another friend in the compound-time section.

Up like a rocket

Up like a rocket, down like the rain
Backwards and forwards like a choo choo train
Backwards and forwards like a choo choo train

This is also a good rhyme to do with the scrunchie.
Here we go on our ponies

Here we go on our ponies, our ponies, our ponies.

Here we go on our ponies, now woah, woah, woah. Stop a minute just to say,

'How do you do this sunny day?'. Here we go on our ponies, our ponies, our ponies. Here we go on our ponies, now woah, woah, woah.

Carers can carry their babies round the room and stop to meet different 'friends'. Older children can gallop around and stop each time you sing 'woah, woah, woah', possible shaking hands for the 'how do you do' section.

Jump Jim Joe

Jump, jump, jump Jim Joe! Nod your head and shake your head and tap your toe. Round, round, round you go, and you find yourself a partner and you jump Jim Joe.

This is quite a hard song to sing (the minor 7th is hard to pitch), so it is best as a listening/action game for older children or for carers to sing with their babies. Follow the words for the actions!
Songs with instruments

Here is a box

This is a song for the leader to sing when exploring timbre. Hide instruments in a box. Sing the minor part of the song and play the instrument (hidden from view) ask children to tell you what kind of instrument you have played. Bring the instrument out during the major part of the song.

Lullabies

Allunde (East African)

The first section of this can be sung as a call and response song. (The carers in your group can sing the response during the sustained notes.)
Black Sheep (American)

Hush little baby

Hush little baby, don’t say a word, Papa’s gonna buy you a mocking bird.
And if that mocking bird don’t sing, Papa’s gonna buy you a diamond ring.
And if that diamond ring is brass, Papa’s gonna buy you a looking glass.
And if that looking glass gets broke, Papa’s gonna buy you a billy goat.
And if that billy goat won’t pull, Papa’s gonna buy you a cart and bull.
And if that cart and bull falls over, Papa’s gonna buy you a dog named Rover.
And if that dog named Rover won’t bark, Papa’s gonna buy you a horse and cart.
And if that horse and cart falls down, you’ll still be the cutest little baby in town.
Hari Cuckoo (from India)

It is lovely to mark the phrases of this song with floaty scarves. Lie babies on their backs. Hold two corners of the scarf and lift it up when you sing each ‘Hari’. Let the scarf float down over the babies’ faces as you sing each phrase.

Simple gifts (American Shaker song)
Stars shining

Sing other verses: gradually counting up to nine.

Lavender’s blue

When I am king, dilly dilly, you shall be queen.

Call up your men, dilly dilly,
Set them to work,
Some to the plough, dilly dilly,
Some to the cart.

Some to the barn, dilly dilly,
Some to cut corn,
While you and I, dilly dilly,
Keep ourselves warm.

This is a good song to include in your repertoire, as it is one of the very few children’s songs in a metre of three.

Welcome song

Hello

Sing this at the beginning and the end of sessions (Hello/Goodbye). Include mummies, daddies, etc. as well as the children.
Good Books

*Melody Monkey’s Marvellous Music Box* (Music4U)

*Into Music* (Voices Foundation)

*Singing Games and Rhymes for Tiny Tots* and *Singing Games and Rhymes for Early Years* (Lucinda Geoghegan – National Youth Choir of Scotland)

*Lively Time Playsongs, Playsongs, Sleepytime Playsongs* (Sheena Robers)

*Bright Sparks* and other books by Steve Grocott ([http://www.dronesmusic.net/page.php?pageid=childrens](http://www.dronesmusic.net/page.php?pageid=childrens))