

Being with Babies: Getting Group Singing and Rhyming Right

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In my conversations and work with baby room educators over the last 15 years, I have seen first-hand how **slowing down can transform interactions with babies**. Both babies and the adults caring for them seem to flourish when the pace is slower and daily experiences are predictable.

This chimes with the research of Professor Sam Wass and colleagues (2021), whose work on young children's sensory environments is helping us to understand just how important **pace, predictability and repetition** may be for babies' developing brains.

Singing and rhyming with babies can provide exactly this kind of predictable, repeated experience. It can be playful, joyful and great fun – while also creating opportunities for babies to listen, anticipate, join in and connect with the adults around them.

A win-win!

But when we are singing and rhyming with a group of babies, how do we know that we are getting it right for them? How do we make sure that our singing is genuinely *with* babies, rather than simply something we are doing *to* them?

In this blog, I will draw on my observations and direct experience of singing and rhyming with groups of babies and their carers, alongside relevant research evidence, to explore some simple ways to:

- **improve the quality of singing and rhyming experiences** for babies in group care; and
- **recognise whether the experience is working for the babies** – and what they might be communicating to us through their responses.

What can we do to help – and what does this look and sound like in practice?

1) Slow down the pace of the singing and match words with actions

Singing along to a recorded track can often mean singing at a very fast pace. Whilst this might capture a baby's attention – they may turn towards the sound and become still as they

listen – Wass and Goldenberg (2025) describe this kind of response as ‘**attention capture**’, and explain how this is different from ‘**attention control**’.

When we slow the pace of our singing right down and repeat songs, phrases and key words, I have noticed that babies seem much more able to follow what is happening and begin to take part.

In short, **slowing down and repeating gives babies more time to listen, concentrate, anticipate and begin to understand** – all important ingredients for early language development.

For example:

Wind the bobbin up – slowly winding your two hands round and round in front of you.

Wind the bobbin up. Pull, pull – making the pulling action slowly and deliberately.

Clap, clap, clap – clapping three times and matching each clap precisely to the word ‘**clap**’.

The aim isn't to make the singing dull or lifeless. Quite the opposite. We can still be playful and expressive – but we give babies **time to see, hear and experience what we are doing**.

2) Build in pauses

Pauses are another simple but powerful way of slowing things down.

For example:

Point to the ceilinnnnnnnnnggggg...

Slowly move your arm and finger upwards, looking towards the ceiling – **and then pause**.

Point to the flooooooooooor...

Slowly move your arm and finger downwards towards the floor.

And STOP!

Bang the floor with your hand and stop singing on the word ‘**stop**’.

Then wait before continuing.

I have noticed that when we slow down the singing, stretch out an important word and then **pause**, babies seem much more able to follow and engage with the song. Some may begin to join in too – pointing their own finger towards the ceiling, the window or the door as they make connections between the words, actions and what they can see around them.

Sometimes a pause is naturally built into a song. Simple peekaboo songs are a lovely example. You might use chiffon scarves so that everyone can hide, or support babies to cover their heads, and then wait...

BOO!

The pause creates a moment of anticipation. Babies have time to wonder what is coming next – and that little moment of waiting can be part of the fun. Sheena Roberts' *Play Songs* collection has some lovely examples of this.

3) Repeat known songs

This might mean singing the same song two or three times when you notice that the babies are responding positively to it, before moving on to something different. It also means returning to the same songs and rhymes each day, week and term, giving babies the opportunity to become increasingly familiar with the repertoire.

As babies become familiar with a song, they can begin to anticipate what is coming next. They may recognise a particular word, action, tune or pause – and gradually begin to show us that they know what comes next.

4) Plan and prepare

Planning the songs and rhymes you are going to sing can help create a clear and predictable experience for babies.

I have found that keeping two familiar songs before introducing a new one can work well. This means that there is enough repetition for babies to become familiar with the songs, whilst still allowing some space for novelty and exploration.

Creating this kind of **predictable environment and provision – including familiar songs and rhymes** – reflects the work of Wass and colleagues on the importance of predictability and repetition in young children's sensory environments. It can also provide a helpful foundation for the more interactive approaches to shared reading that the Education Endowment Foundation's evidence review shows can support language development as children get older.

How will we know if these recommendations are working?

If we are getting singing and rhyming right for babies, we are likely to see them **enjoying this part of their day** and hear educators speaking positively about this part of their daily practice.

In 15 years of supporting baby rooms and working directly alongside baby room educators, I have seen babies turn or move towards adults who are singing and rhyming, with bright eyes and a stillness in their bodies as they listen and take in the experience.

But it isn't just about listening and concentrating in a passive way.

We can intentionally create opportunities for babies to take part.

For example, if we pause after the countdown in a familiar song such as *Zoom to the Moon*, babies may show us that they are ready to **blast off**. They might lean forward, smile, laugh, gurgle, move their body or arms upwards, or make an enthusiastic vocalisation.

These non-verbal responses can be signs of deep involvement and engagement. They are ways in which babies can communicate with us: **“I know what is coming. I'm ready!”**

When the song is over, we can ask them if they would like to sing it again – and then wait.

Give them some time to think.

Give them some time to respond.

And be ready to listen to whatever they tell us.

Know when to stop.

“You are not ready to blast off,” says key person Sasha to her key baby Pedro.

Pedro is arching his back and pulling away from her. Sasha has paused, waiting for him to tell her when he is ready to be swooped into the air for *“blast off.”*

But Pedro is communicating something different.

So, because Sasha is tuned into his non-verbal communication, she lowers him gently back down onto the floor.

“Not ready to blast off today,” she says to him. *“That's OK.”*

This is an important part of getting singing and rhyming right for babies.

Babies may pull their bodies away, turn away, shake their heads, crawl away, put their hands over their ears or focus their attention elsewhere.

Of course, **one behaviour doesn't always tell us exactly what a baby is feeling or thinking**. Instead, these are invitations for us to pause, observe and wonder: *What might this baby be communicating to me right now?*

This links beautifully back to our first blog and the importance of **mind-mindedness** – tuning into babies' experiences and being curious about what they might be feeling, thinking or communicating through their behaviour.

Educators like Sasha can provide a high-quality singing and rhyming experience not simply by knowing lots of songs, but by being **sensitive to whether a baby is ready to engage – and equally sensitive when they are not**.

Sometimes a baby may be tired, hungry, overwhelmed, distracted or simply interested in something else. At other times, they may want to join in but in a different way.

This might mean changing the song, lowering the volume, slowing down, offering the experience from further away, allowing the baby to watch rather than join in, or simply coming back to singing and rhyming at another point in the day.

If we tune in and respond to babies both when they are ready to take part and when they are telling us they are not, then we are much more likely to be **getting it right for babies**.

References

Education Endowment Foundation. Interactive Reading evidence summary. Available at educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/early-years/evidence-store/communication-and-language/interactive-reading

Wass S. et al. (2021) Physiological stress, sustained attention, emotion regulation and cognitive engagement in 12-month old infants from urban environments. *Developmental Psychology*, 57(8), 1179

Wass, S. and Goldenberg, G. (2025) *Take Action on Distraction: The definitive guide to improving attention and focus in the Early Years and Key Stage One*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing

Additional Reading/Resources

Play Songs by Sheena Roberts - <https://www.playsongs.co.uk/product-page/playsongs>

Wass, S., Goldenberg, G. and Ellory, M. 'Too Much Too Soon', *Nursery World*, Vol. 4, 2026, pp. 16–17.