

Playtime for Baby and You

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Facebook and Twitter are buzzing with the news. Your newborn has arrived safely. You hear your new baby cry for attention, tiny arms waving without control. What could early literacy possibly have to do with an infant who is not yet ready to speak or write?

Research shows that babies respond to rhymes and stories before they are even born! Studies by Anthony DeCasper from the University of North Carolina demonstrate that babies *in utero* are already learning. DeCasper asked mothers during their last six weeks of pregnancy to read from Dr Seuss's *The Cat in the Hat* twice a day to their unborn babies. Within a few hours of birth, DeCasper gave these babies soothers to suck that were connected to tape recorded stories read by their mothers. Depending on how hard and how fast these babies sucked, the soothers responded like channel changers enabling the babies to choose which tape recorded story they preferred to hear. After a few trials these babies invariably chose to listen to their mother reading *The Cat in the Hat* rather than an unfamiliar story.

So what does this mean? Can newborns really understand the plot of *The Cat in the Hat*? While the meaning of words would be impossible to learn in the womb, babies' brains have a predisposition to notice patterns. Babies attend to sound patterns of rhythm and rhyming from the moment their hearing mechanisms are developed. Dr. Seuss books are filled with bouncy, rhyming phrases. Frequent and regular exposure to *The Cat in the Hat* taught the babies in this experiment to recognize specific patterns of rhythm and rhyme. Rhythm and rhyme are valuable tools for helping babies to hear speech patterns, and eventually to understand how those patterns relate to print.

Tickle and bouncing rhymes help babies and toddlers learn through their senses of sound, sight and touch, as well as through movement. The gentle touch of tickle rhymes is perfect for newborns. As babies gain muscle strength and control in their neck, torso and limbs, bouncing rhymes are both fun and full of learning opportunities. Here is a tickle rhyme to get you started:

Round and Round the Garden

Round and round the garden,
Goes the teddy bear.

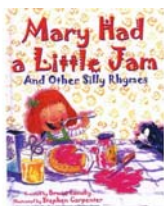
(Run your index finger around your baby's palm or baby's tummy.)

One step, two steps,

('Walk' your fingers up your baby's arm or chest.)

Tickle you under there.

(Tickle your baby under the arm.)



Not sure you want to bounce or sway your baby to traditional nursery rhymes and lullabies – ones in which babies fall from treetops when the wind blows? Look for rhymes by Bruce Lansky. *Mary Had A Little Jam* is just one of his collections that takes traditional rhymes and turns them into gentler, silly rhymes that both you and your baby will enjoy.