

Choosing and Adapting Developmentally Appropriate Songs

Excerpted from “Developmentally Appropriate Song and Chant Repertoire” workshop

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Following are some guidelines to help in choosing developmentally appropriate songs:

LYRICS: In order to enable children to participate as accurately as is developmentally appropriate:

Choose songs and chants with lots of repetition. (“*If you’re happy and you know it, clap your hands...*” repeats the same phrases within the verse as well as from verse to verse, with substitutions; “*Old MacDonald*” repeats the same phrases from verse to verse with substitutions. Call-and-response songs and songs where participants echo also are forms of repetition.)

Avoid songs and chants that don’t use much repetition. Even if the chorus repeats, young children wouldn’t be expected to join accurately in a sequence of verses that don’t repeat words and phrases predictably.

TEMPO/RHYTHM: In order to enable children to participate as accurately as is developmentally appropriate:

Choose songs/chants that can be paced slowly AND engagingly for very young children (about 60 beats per minute). In general, older children will keep up with a faster pace. Watch them; if they aren’t imitating accurately once the song/chant is familiar, slow down.

Avoid songs/chants that have complex rhythm patterns, such as syncopation, that may be in the way of accurate involvement.

MELODY: Try using your classroom xylophone or other tonal instrument to test song melodies. In order to enable children to sing as accurately as is developmentally appropriate:

Choose songs with small intervals between notes in the melody. (In the phrase “*Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star,*” notice the small melody interval between each word.)

Avoid songs with big intervals between notes in the melody. (In “*Somewhere over the rainbow...*” notice the big leap in “*Somewhere.*”)

Choose songs in which the melody notes repeat. (In the phrase “*Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star,*” notice that the melody notes *within each word* are the same. In “*Rain, rain, go away, come again some other day,*” there is a two-note melody pattern that repeats over and over.)

Avoid songs in which the notes in the melody change quickly. (In “*Somewhere over the rainbow...*” notice that every syllable is a different note in “*over the rainbow.*”)

Choose songs with a 5-note range as much as possible (Ex. *do-re-mi-fa-sol* or *mi-fa-sol-la-ti*, etc.) (“*Rain, rain*” is: *sol mi, sol-sol mi, sol-sol mi la sol-sol mi*. On your classroom xylophone: G E, G-G E, G-G E A G-G E.)

Avoid songs with a wide range between the highest and lowest notes in the song. (In “*Somewhere over the rainbow...*” notice that there is a full octave – eight notes – from the low and high notes in the word “*Somewhere.*”)

Examples of Best Song Characteristics for Age/Stage

Let’s look at some of the songs sung most commonly in the U.S. with young children and analyze them.

0- to 18-Months Song/Chant Characteristics:

One of baby’s favorites is certainly:

“Peek-a-boo – I see you!”

The characteristics of “peek-a-boo” serve as good guidelines for songs and chants for this age/stage:

- It’s very short – the phrases are short, and there are only two of them.
- Vowel sounds are repeated: peek/see, boo/you.
- The same two short lines are repeated over and over as the baby continues to be interested in the game.
- The content of the lyric and the skills required for the associated game are developmentally appropriate.
- We tend to emphasize steady beat in our chanting/singing of the lyric.
- We tend to chant/sing using distinct, dramatic (and possibly consistent) variations in pitch (but we don’t expect the child to duplicate this accurately).

18- to 36- Months Song/Chant Characteristics:

What are a toddler’s favorite songs?

Often: “Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes” and “The Wheels on the Bus”

*Head, shoulders, knees and toes,
knees and toes*

*Head, shoulders, knees and toes,
knees and toes*

*Eyes and ears and
mouth and nose*

*Head, shoulders, knees and toes,
knees and toes*

The wheels on the bus go

‘round and ‘round

‘round and ‘round

‘round and ‘round

The wheels on the bus go

‘round and ‘round

All through the town

The characteristics of “Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes” and “The Wheels on the Bus” serve as good guidelines for songs and chants for this age/stage:

- Songs are longer than before.
- Melodies are simple.
- Words and lines are repeated.
- There is a lot of rhyming.
- Content is of direct interest to toddler in her/his stage of identifying things, and skills in the common games are developmentally appropriate.
- Song may be repeated with substitutions.

3- to 5-Year-Olds Song/Chant Characteristics:

Songs most often cited for this age group are “Twinkle, Twinkle,” “ABC,” “Old MacDonald,” and “Jingle Bells.” What are characteristics of these songs?

*Twinkle, twinkle little star
How I wonder what you are
Up above the world so high
Like a diamond in the sky
Twinkle, twinkle little star
How I wonder what you are.*

*ABCD
EFG
HIJK
LMNOP
QRS
TUV
WX
Y and Z*

*Now I know my ABCs
Next time won't you sing with me?*

*Old MacDonald had a farm –
ee-I-ee-I-Oh
And on this farm he had a (name animal) –
ee-I-ee-I-Oh
With a (animal sound – animal sound) here
And a (animal sound – animal sound) there
Here a (animal sound)
There a (animal sound)
Everywhere a (animal sound – animal sound)
Old McDonald has a farm –
ee-I-ee-I-Oh
(Repeat, substituting different animals.)*

The characteristics of “Twinkle, Twinkle,” “ABC,” and “Old MacDonald” serve as good guidelines for songs and chants for this age/stage:

- Songs may be longer (10-12 lines)
- Melodies may be less simple and somewhat less repetitive – though repetition is still desirable.
- Repetition of phrases, although fewer repetitions are workable.
- Repetition of sounds (rhyming, alliterations, imitation of sounds)
- Content is related to what preschoolers are learning – names of letters, names of animals, and other things about their environment.